What the SANEM poll reveals and what it does not

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The South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM), in collaboration with ActionAid Bangladesh, recently released a survey that focuses on the youth's perception of jobs, education, and the changing political scenario post-July 2024. Although the survey has a clearly defined scope, the results of the poll are being widely misinterpreted in the media, particularly the fact that the poll does *not* tell us anything about the voting intentions of the youth!

SANEM sampled 2000 youth in the age group of 15-35 years with an urban-rural distribution of roughly 50:50. Male to female distribution is roughly 54 percent to 46 percent. SANEM sampled two districts per division and two upazilas per district. This means they sampled 16 districts and 32 upazilas. The presentation provided by SANEM does not tell us about the distribution of samples in the districts and upazilas. It was an in-person survey. Every fifth household was sampled.

We need to unpack certain aspects of SANEM's methodology before explaining how much of this survey can be used to explain whom the youth will vote for if an election were to take place now. The scope of SANEM's survey is beyond the youth's electoral preference. However, as the media has primarily picked up on the electoral preference and a fair degree of misinterpretation is going on, it is important to bring a few points to light.

First, the methodology does not explain whether a ward or a village in the selected upazila was chosen as a primary sampling unit (PSU). It is important to know how many houses were sampled per ward or village, as there is a group effect. We assume that the samples from a ward generally tend to behave similarly due to homogeneity in socio-economic aspects.

Second, there is no explanation of how the 16 districts and the 32 upazilas were selected. The list signals that it was purposively decided. Most of these districts that were selected generally tilted between BNP and Awami League. There is a possibility that the constituencies that fell under the PSUs, drawn by the survey, are either pro-BNP or pro-Awami League. As such, the survey results might not have fully grasped the youth's perception regarding the influence of religion-based politics. A much larger sample size with nationwide coverage will be required to capture all types of constituencies in a fully randomised scenario. Therefore, it is necessary to understand whether the upazilas were randomly or purposively selected and the rationale behind their selection.

Third, we need to know how the total sample of 2000 was derived, at what confidence interval, and how it was distributed among the district and the upazila. At the very least, the sample size does not seem to be proportionally distributed according to the population of the targeted respondents (youth aged 15–35). The margin of error of the key statistics provided in this survey is also unknown. SANEM may publish a full report, with answers to all these queries. But for now, we are left in the dark.

Now comes the most significant question that took centre stage in the media. SANEM intended to capture the "youth's view on the upcoming election." Of the respondents, 76.78 percent said they will vote, 4.14 percent said they will not vote, and 13.98 percent are not yet registered voters. While it is remarkable that almost 77 percent are willing to vote, around 77 percent of the respondents said they do not follow national politics closely. Of them, 20 percent said they do not follow national politics at all, 17 percent said they do not follow it closely, and 39 percent said they follow occasionally. It thus appears that there is enthusiasm to vote, but not much awareness about the unfolding political scenario. Is it not a core finding of this study that, despite July being termed as the youth uprising, the youth of the country is apathetic towards politics? The media has completely ignored this finding.

Also, around 14 percent or 280 respondents are not yet registered to vote. If we discount this, 1720 respondents surveyed should have been asked whom they would vote for. Note these aspects of the poll: (i) it does not ask respondents whom they would vote for in the next election; (ii) it does not restrict the question to the 77 percent who expressed willingness to vote in the next election; and (iii) and of the total respondents 1935 people responded to the question regarding vote, which is about 97 percent. Does it then mean even those who are not eligible to vote have also responded? Also, why should those who said they will not vote in the next election respond to the question about voting share in the election?

This brings us to the most important aspect of this study that most of the media and political analysts missed. The survey did not ask "whom will you vote for, if an election happened now?" The survey question was "what percentage of the vote (out of 100 percent) will each of the political parties get in the upcoming election?"

Clearly, this response does *not* reveal whom a respondent will vote for! Rather, it asks respondents to predict the vote distribution in the next election.

The prediction made by all surveyed respondents has been averaged, and based on that BNP will get 38.76 percent of the total vote, Jamaat-e-Islami will get 21.45 percent of the total vote, NCP 15.84 percent, Awami League (if allowed to participate) 15.02 percent, other religion-based parties will have 4.59 percent, Jatiya party will have 3.77 percent and the rest 0.57 percent.

Again, we do not know the underlying distribution of the respondents' predictions. Did most of the respondents think BNP would get around 39 percent? Or was there a very diverse array of predictions? We do not know!

Assuming that the youth surveyed are truly representative of the broader population, what this survey claims to have discovered is youth's (aged 15-35) prediction about the voting distribution in the upcoming election. This does not reveal young people's voting preferences.

The survey, however, imparts a message, notwithstanding the methodological limitations described above. The poll shows that young people think NCP will perform strongly as a young party in the next election. It also shows that they believe Awami League still holds considerable strength.

Post July 2024, Bangladesh has entered a new era. The series of opinion poll surveys, such as this one by SANEM and ActionAid Bangladesh and the one previously done by Innovision and the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, are positive signs. They usher in the possibility of data-driven decision making. These are early days for large-scale opinion research in Bangladesh, and the methodologies will evolve. While that happens, the media and the political analysts must be careful in analysing the poll results and the methodology. Otherwise, as it has happened in the case of SANEM polls, the results will be misinterpreted.

FILE PHOTO: **PALASH KHAN**

The July-August uprising was led by the youth, yet SANEM survey reveals many are apathetic towards the country's politics.

The tariff turbulence is hitting Southeast Asia

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The tariff upsurge initiated by US President Donald Trump, notably against China, has been viewed as a protectionist strategy to safeguard American jobs and trade deficits. Like a stone thrown into a pond, the US tariffs have sent ripple effects far beyond the borders of the US. The economies of the Global South are the most affected, including many countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, with emerging markets, export dependencies, and developing infrastructures. The tariff turbulence, created due to the imposition of high tariffs by Donald Trump on China, has disrupted the economic stability and development trajectories of countries in ASEAN. These economies are not bystanders in global trade tensions; they are intensely involved in global pricing and the global value chain. Nevertheless, Southeast Asian economies are now being squeezed by Chinese exports on one hand and US tariffs on the other. Chinese goods that were originally targeted for the US markets now have to find new markets because of the US imposition of high tariffs on Chinese exports. And the obvious markets are in Southeast Asia. Therefore, when titans clash, the tariff turbulence hits ASEAN.

According to an article co-authored by former Indonesian Minister of Trade Mari Pangestu, Southeast Asia is about to be hit by a tsunami of cheap Chinese goods. A high influx of Chinese goods into the Indonesian market will adversely affect the job market as well as the manufacturing industries of Indonesia. China has a massive comparative advantage in textile manufacturing industries due to its substantial technological command, which makes it almost impossible for Indonesian textile industries to compete with China. For instance, the dumping of cheap Chinese fabric in Indonesia is often cited as one of the main reasons behind the decline and subsequent closure of Indonesian textile giant Sritex on March 1. Thus, Indonesia faces the biggest challenge in its domestic market from the dumping of Chinese goods.

US tariffs on Chinese goods will also have a hostile impact on Malaysia's solar panel manufacturing industry. Although the US was initially a stronghold of solar module manufacturing, things changed in 2010 when China acquired a comparative advantage, leading to the shutdown of many US solar panel manufacturing plants. The Biden administration has tried to support this industry through subsidies and announced tariffs on solar panel imports from Southeast Asia of up to 271 percent, citing anti-dumping and anti-subsidy grounds. These tariffs have been increased further under the Trump administration. As a result, many of China's leading solar manufacturing companies are closing or cutting back the operations of their plants in Malaysia. China has also announced the shutdown of solar panel manufacturing operations in Thailand and Vietnam. Experts say that Chinese exports have already put some Malaysian industries out of operation, and US tariffs will have a further detrimental impact. Some of the tariff exemptions can partially protect semiconductors, which are Malaysia's largest export category to the US. Nonetheless, new tariffs will still negatively impact many other Malaysian industries such as furniture, textiles, rubber, plastics, etc.

According to Chinese customs data, China's largest export market in 2023 was ASEAN, with an annual value of $523.7 billion. Since the Chinese economy is not growing as fast, China needs to increase its exports and investment in ASEAN. However, rising Chinese exports are exerting significant pressure on ASEAN's domestic manufacturers. Thus, the relationship between China and ASEAN is becoming more complex.

Southeast Asian countries are also experiencing high imports of various low-cost Chinese products through Chinese e-commerce giants such as Temu, Shein, and apps like Lazada, owned by Alibaba, which compete extensively with local manufacturers. The range of Chinese commodities that Malaysian consumers can buy has been growing. Apart from the consequences of US tariffs on China, challenges such as overcapacity of Chinese manufacturers, the slowdown of the Chinese economy, and reduced consumer spending in ASEAN have led to increased exports of Chinese products to significant parts of Southeast Asian markets.

To address this situation, Indonesia, ASEAN's largest economy, is strengthening its anti-dumping legislation. Moreover, the Indonesian government is looking to impose duties of up to 200 percent on Chinese imports. It has already banned e-commerce firm Temu over fears that its small enterprises could be destroyed. Meanwhile, Temu suspended operations in Vietnam in December 2024, amid a crackdown on e-commerce platforms. In Thailand, 58 products, including steel and furniture, have been identified as targets for anti-circumvention duty. To manage low-cost imports and protect local manufacturers, Thailand introduced a seven percent VAT on imported goods below $40. This has led to a 20 percent reduction in imports in this category, particularly from China.

In 2024, the US overtook China as Southeast Asia's largest export market. However, access to US markets is under greater threat under the current Trump administration. US decisions may give global companies more reasons to increase investment in Southeast Asia due to their stable and growing domestic markets, increasing income per capita, and business-friendly atmosphere towards all parties. According to World Bank and IMF projections, ASEAN as a whole is likely to grow faster than China over the next three years due to its growing economies. Moreover, ASEAN economies have attracted Chinese overseas investment for a variety of reasons, including proximity, FTAs, historical relations, and Chinese support regarding new technology, capital, and trading partnership. Despite the advantages, a high influx of Chinese goods into the Southeast Asian market will heavily affect local manufacturers, resulting in large-scale job losses and the shutdown of local infant industries, leading to trade friction with China. Therefore, with pressure from both superpowers (the US and China), should Southeast Asia be optimistic about its economic growth in 2025?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Dance unit
5 Disinfectant's targets
10 Salon worker
12 Clarifying words
13 Brighten
14 Singer Ronstadt
15 Suffer
16 Frying mess
18 Shred
20 Really impress
21 Son of Seth
23 Young man
24 Mint product
26 Effortless
28 Take in
29 Cut
31 Maximum amount
32 Player at the plate
36 Serving aid
39 According to
40 Blender speed
41 Matt of movies
43 Borders
44 Sacked out
45 Monopoly cards
46 Midmonth day

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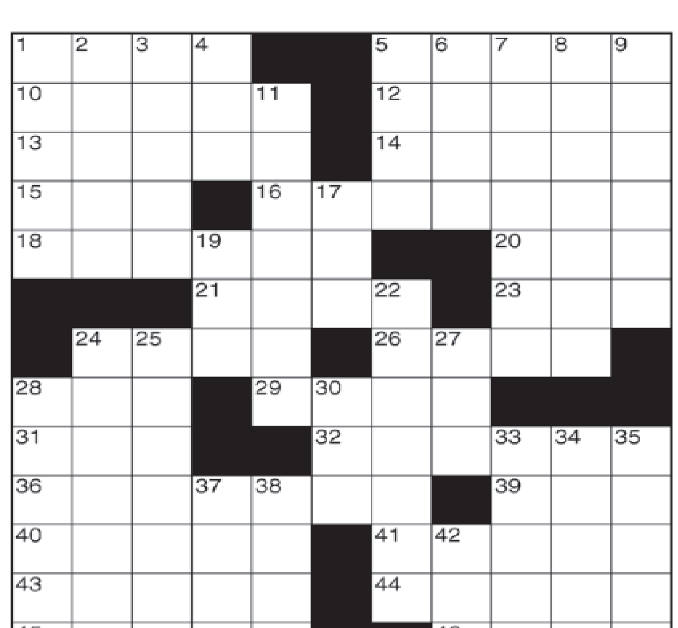
1 Work byproduct
2 Shire of "Rocky"
3 Glorify
4 Parrot or puppy
5 Arizona river
6 Throw off
7 Some tuxes
8 Stepped aside
9 Caught
11 Bristles at
17 Old hand
19 Kayo count
22 "Folly" (Alaska)
24 Conspire
25 Blow up
27 Six-legged worker
28 Put a limit on
30 Presidential nickname
33 Broken
34 Skip the ceremony
35 Talks crazily
37 Prepared to drive
38 Hardy heroine
42 Clay, later



7-6

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	A	V	A	G	E		A	F	A	R
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