

# The return of 'No Vote' option is long overdue



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With the country set on the path to a national election in February, the Election Commission has reportedly proposed major changes in the draft Representation of the People Order (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, including a "No Vote" option to prevent uncontested elections. As per the draft, if only one candidate remains following the process of scrutiny or withdrawal of candidature, that candidate will have to "contest" against a No Vote option in their constituency. Should No Vote receive more ballots than the candidate, a fresh election schedule will be announced, but if the candidate secures more votes, they will be declared elected.

It may be recalled that the No Vote provision, first introduced ahead of the 2008 election, was scrapped shortly after Awami League came to power in early 2009. On the surface, its likely reintroduction may seem technical or procedural, reflecting the changing times that we are in. In truth, it speaks to something greater—the power of refusal in democracy. Few words are as short yet as powerful as *no*. It is the word of protest, of resistance, of freedom. Jean-Paul Sartre saw in negation the essence of human choice, while Friedrich Hegel treated it as the motor of history. To say *no* is not merely to refuse. It is to claim space, to open the door to change.

Bangladesh's own history shows the power of refusal. In fact, the nation was born out of a collective *no*—no to cultural erasure, no to economic exploitation, no to the theft of a democratic mandate in 1970. At every turning point in our political history, progress has come not from passive acceptance but from active rejection of what was unjust. To deny that right, inside the voting booth no less, would be a betrayal to that democratic spirit.

Unfortunately, elections in our country have often left citizens without choice. Voters are asked to choose among candidates imposed by political parties that often nominate them for reasons other than public service. Voter abstention is also seen as apathy, and spoiled ballots as mischief. But the real problem here is not the voters'; it is that of the parties who are unwilling to honour the public's demand for something better.

The No Vote option gives dissenting voters a voice. It turns frustration into a measurable verdict. A citizen who marks No Vote is not abandoning democracy but affirming it. They are saying: *we believe in this system, but we do not accept these choices*. It is a demand for politics worthy of the people it seeks to represent.

Critics argue that No Vote could be symbolic. After all, the leading candidate still wins. But politics has never been about arithmetic alone. It runs on legitimacy, on the perception that leaders truly embody the people's will. Imagine an election where a quarter of ballots are cast for No Vote. Could any winner then stand before the nation and claim with confidence to speak for the majority? Such a result would be a referendum within the election itself, a mirror held up to a political culture that has too often relied on inertia and entitlement.

Symbols matter because they shape action. A flag is only cloth, yet it can unite a nation. A slogan is only words, yet it can unseat a regime. In the same way, No Vote can unsettle complacency. A significant rejection on the ballot could force parties to rethink how they select candidates, how they write manifestos, and how they connect with



'To say No to the available candidates is not to disrupt the electoral process, but to demand better candidates.' ILLUSTRATION: ANWAR SOHEL

citizens. It could remind them that consent must be earned, not assumed.

At its heart, No Vote is also about dignity. Voting is not merely an act of choice but a declaration of identity. Without the option of refusal, that identity is incomplete. A ballot without No Vote is not a conversation between the rulers and the ruled but a monologue imposed from above. To restore it is to affirm that citizens are sovereign, not ornamental. This recognition is particularly urgent in Bangladesh where voter dignity has too often been compromised. Violence at polling stations, boycotted contests, and doubts about neutrality have frequently eroded public trust. Restoring No Vote will not solve these structural flaws, but it will

reassert that dissent counts as much as consent.

The general public mood as represented in several recent surveys shows a sense of uncertainty, even scepticism, about our democratic transition. Nearly half the respondents in one survey said they were undecided about whom to support in the upcoming polls. These citizens are not indifferent; they are waiting, weighing, searching. For them, No Vote provides a way to remain engaged without pretending that poor choices are acceptable. To ignore this right of refusal is to invite cynicism. Dissent can be debated, engaged, even persuaded. Cynicism cannot. The greatest danger to Bangladesh's democracy is not too much

argument but too little faith. No Vote offers a way to bring the disillusioned back into the democratic fold, to let them express dissatisfaction without abandoning the process itself.

The Election Commission's broader reform package is not insignificant. Abolishing the provision for electronic voting machines (EVMs), expanding the definition of law enforcement agencies to include the armed forces, and expanding the commission's authority are all crucial measures. But none carries the moral and symbolic weight of reviving the No Vote. To say *no* to the available candidates is not to disrupt the electoral process, but to demand better candidates. It is to insist that another politics is possible.

## Ukraine's peace lies in compromise



AN OPEN  
DIALOGUE

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Peace remains elusive in Ukraine. The recent round of meetings between world leaders in Washington, DC, has not moved the needle significantly. Russia's President Vladimir Putin offered potential concessions at a summit with his US counterpart Donald Trump, but Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has yet to indicate any willingness to relinquish the commitments he sought from the

major breakthroughs in the coming days. It is possible that Trump, who calls himself a dealmaker, might manage to pull a rabbit out of the hat and broker a deal. The final outcome depends on bilateral discussions between Putin and Zelenskyy, with Trump present there. One outlandish scenario imagines Trump escorting them to the Hall of Mirrors (Galerie des Glaces) at the Palace of Versailles,

Ukraine needs to forgo NATO membership. European countries can provide security guarantees with or without US involvement. Trump has repeatedly expressed his reservations about further entanglement in European politics. When European leaders rushed to Washington after Zelenskyy's invitation following the Alaska summit, they were briefed on what Ukraine's allies needed to do to reassure Zelenskyy and avert World War III.

When we were in high school,

one of the most common questions in the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination was: "What are the causes of World War II?" If you asked American high school graduates, most would profess ignorance. But my cohort in the 1970s would unanimously reply,

have adamantly opposed NATO enlargement. Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev never hesitated to convey Russia's resolve to keep Ukraine out of NATO and its long-term intentions regarding potential conflicts. Ukraine's leaders have also vacillated in their determination to join NATO.

Trump has indicated a preference for Europe to take the lead in providing security guarantees for Ukraine, with US assistance and coordination, rather than extending NATO's collective defence umbrella (Article 5) to Ukraine.

According to Article 5 of NATO, an armed attack against one member is considered an attack against all. This means that if one NATO member is attacked, all others are obligated to assist, taking necessary action, including armed force, to restore

and maintain security in the North Atlantic area. Russia allowed the Warsaw Pact (NATO's counterpart) to lapse on the assurance that Ukraine would not become a Western military bastion.

More than a decade ago, John J Mearsheimer, the R Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, wrote a prescient analysis of the Ukrainian crisis in *Foreign Affairs*. In his article,

"Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," he foreshadowed every major mistake the Western alliance would make after the Soviet collapse.

Many in the West now recognise that NATO expansion was "the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West," as Mearsheimer wrote. This move

clearly provoked Russian opposition. For Putin, the overthrow of Ukraine's democratically elected, pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych in 2014 was the last straw. The Orange Revolution was the red flag that pushed Russia to initiate its do-or-die plan to forestall NATO expansion.

Where do we stand now? An optimistic assessment suggests a deal could freeze the current front line Donbas—stretching roughly 620 miles from northeastern Ukraine to its Black Sea coast—without Ukraine officially ceding the land on the other side. After that, a bilateral or trilateral summit could work towards a permanent truce, withdrawal of forces, security guarantees for Ukraine, and, akin to the Korean model, a demilitarised zone along a yet-to-be-determined front line.



Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, US President Trump, and other European leaders at the White House on August 18, 2025.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

West before the war began.

To sum up the current stalemate: despite repeated attempts at negotiation, a lasting and comprehensive peace agreement remains difficult to achieve because of the conflicting goals of the warring parties—Russia and Ukraine—as well as those of the US and European countries supporting Ukraine. The next few weeks will reveal whether all these efforts have been in vain.

For readers who have not followed recent developments, a flurry of activity has taken place to bring about a ceasefire, but it is too early to predict the outcome. War, negotiations, and deals are all still on the table. The first step was a meeting in Alaska's Anchorage between Putin and Trump, followed by a gathering of European leaders in Washington, DC.

locking the doors, and throwing away the key.

Many questions arise: who is to blame for this protracted war? Why did the latest peace initiative fail? What must the key players concede to achieve lasting peace? The shortest answer to all these questions is: it depends on whom you ask. Tens of thousands of people have died since Putin sent in the troops in 2022 and started the war, but others share the blame for goading him into invading Ukraine. A lasting peace in the near future appears unlikely. Russia will not sign any agreement unless Ukraine compromises on its territorial integrity and abandons its ambition to join NATO.

President Trump recently posted on his social media platform, Truth Social, that President Zelenskyy could end the war by ceding Crimea and renouncing NATO membership.

"There are many causes..." and then list all the warring countries. The situation in Europe now feels no different.

By all accounts, the historic meeting between Putin and Trump was a positive initiative. The war in Europe might have been averted had former US President Joe Biden not been incapacitated during the final two years of his ill-fated presidency. His advisers kept him away from major negotiations with China and Russia.

Before Biden, various US presidents had respected an unwritten understanding between Russia and the West that Ukraine would not be invited to join NATO. Some analysts argue that the Barack Obama administration underestimated Russia's determination to prevent NATO's further eastward expansion. Since the mid-1990s, Russian leaders

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Sl No.	Tender ID	Name of Work	Last Selling Date & Time	Opening Date & Time
01.	1012584	Package No. EED/JHE/REV/FURNITURE/SHED/2024-25/GD-01: Manufacturing and Supplying of Classroom Furnitures at Elangi Mofiz Uddin Secondary School in Kotchandpur Upazila under Jhenaidah District.	08.09.2025 17:00	09.09.2025 12:00
02.	1012585	Package No. EED/JHE/REV/FURNITURE/SHED/2024-25/GD-02: Manufacturing and Supplying of Classroom Furnitures at Bir Mukti Joddha Abdul Hai College in Shailkupa Upazila under Jhenaidah District.	08.09.2025 17:00	09.09.2025 12:00
03.	1137248	Package No. EED/JHE/REV/SHED/6821/2025-26/PG-01: Manufacturing and Supplying of Classroom Furnitures at Dhawra High School in Shailkupa Upazila under Jhenaidah District.	08.09.2025 17:00	09.09.2025 12:00
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