

## Why are chemical warehouses still near residential areas?

Enforce laws, expedite relocation

It is unacceptable that yet another chemical warehouse fire has led to deaths, this time claiming at least 16 individuals working in a garment factory next to the warehouse in Mirpur. Just a few weeks ago, on September 22, four firefighters died after receiving severe burn injuries while extinguishing the blaze at a warehouse in Sahara Market of Tongi, Gazipur.

What has come out of this horrific incident is the level of negligence and disregard for human lives. The owners of the warehouse and garment washing unit did not install the minimum fire safety measures; they must be held accountable by law.

There seem to be several factors that led to so many deaths. The victims died after inhaling the toxic gas from the chemical explosion. According to a fire service official, the rooftop exit was locked with two padlocks, so even if people could go to the top floor, they would not have been able to get to the rooftop. Neither the garment factory unit nor the chemical warehouse had any fire safety licence, fire safety plan, or proper fire protection measures. Thus, all routes to escape were blocked. In fact, according to the Fire Service and Civil Defence, the chemical warehouse was operating illegally and was served notice of eviction several times.

But of course, the most crucial question is why was that chemical warehouse in that area in the first place? There are numerous factories in the narrow lanes of the area, most of which work on subcontracts, so they do not fall under any formal body. According to the Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD) department, there are many chemical warehouses in the city storing explosive chemicals, often illegally and in densely populated areas. We have laws that bar commercial organisations, including factories and chemical warehouses, from being housed in residential buildings or areas. The Fire Prevention and Control Act, 2003, mandates all chemical factories and warehouses to obtain a licence from FSCD, but many such establishments operate without one. Thus, despite having laws and regulations to prevent such disasters, they are rarely enforced.

Soon after the June 2010 fire that claimed 126 lives in Nimgoli, the government initiated four projects to relocate the chemical, plastic, printing, and electronics industries from Old Dhaka. But three of them remain incomplete mainly due to red tape and bottlenecks in land acquisition.

The present government must take immediate steps to prevent future disasters. Existing laws must be strictly enforced against factories or warehouses operating without licences or lacking minimal safety standards. Meanwhile, the relocation plans must be implemented on an urgent basis. The small Shyampur project that is already complete must be revived and owners of chemical warehouses and factories must be convinced to relocate. Also, authorities must ensure that relocation of chemical warehouses to the chemical industrial park in Munshiganj is completed by the expected timeline which is December 2025. Another project in Munshiganj to relocate 300 plastic factories from old Dhaka that requires land acquisition must also be accelerated. These basic safety measures must be put in place so we do not lose precious lives in preventable fire disasters.

## Indiscriminate use of antibiotics must stop

Authorities must enforce regulations, improve healthcare access

We are deeply concerned by the alarming levels of antibiotic resistance reported in the country. According to a recent WHO report, some critical antibiotics in the country face resistance rates ranging from 79 to 97 percent, underscoring a worsening level of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). Resistance levels of some of these drugs are among the highest in South-East Asia, including India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Health experts warn that these rising AMR rates can lead to more severe illnesses, prolonged hospital stays, increased treatment failures, greater surgical and medical risks, and ultimately higher mortality. Without urgent action, this crisis could spiral out of control, driving up treatment costs, overburdening healthcare systems, and reducing productivity.

According to the WHO, AMR occurs when bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites no longer respond to antimicrobial medicines, making infections harder or impossible to treat and increasing the risk of disease spread, severe illness, disability, and death. An earlier icddr,b AMR study that monitored ICU patients from July 2023 to January 2024, found similar alarming results, yet those have largely failed to prompt any decisive action from health authorities.

The misuse of antibiotics in the country has been quite widespread, with those being readily available at pharmacies without prescriptions. Although the Drug and Cosmetic Act, 2023, strictly prohibits the sale of antibiotics without prescriptions, enforcement remains weak. More worryingly, over-prescription by doctors has exacerbated the problem. Other contributing factors include patients not completing their antibiotic courses, overuse of antibiotics in livestock and fish farming, poor infection control in hospitals, and inadequate hygiene and sanitation.

The crisis also exposes our healthcare inequalities, as patients from low-income backgrounds, unable to access proper medical care, often rely on unprescribed antibiotics from local pharmacies.

When healthcare is neither affordable nor accessible, misuse of medicines becomes inevitable. To tackle this crisis, authorities must strengthen antibiotic regulations and standardise surveillance methods with rigorous monitoring. Authorities should also ensure transparency between pharmaceutical companies and doctors, curb profit-driven prescribing, and promote diagnostic testing to ensure appropriate antibiotic use. Ultimately, a holistic approach is essential—one that improves healthcare infrastructure, enhances patient education, and enforces stronger regulations.

# EDITORIAL

## Whom will the AL supporters vote for?



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In the upcoming national elections, even if Awami League (AL) does not contest as a participant, it will very likely haunt the entire exercise. It is an irony of democracy—or perhaps its peculiar beauty—that although the party did everything to undermine democracy in Bangladesh, one cannot ignore the sheer weight of its followers for the sake of democracy itself. The most pressing question, therefore, is: how will AL supporters shape the forthcoming elections?

Before delving into possible answers, let us first assess the likelihood of the AL joining the elections. Given the ban on its activities, the suspension of its registration, and the removal of its election symbol—the boat—from the Election Commission's list, the party is effectively out of the electoral game.

Moreover, the latest amendment to the International Crimes (Tribunal) Act, 1973, which renders any person formally charged with crimes against humanity at the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) ineligible to contest elections, has further shrunk the legal space for the party's leadership. AL's high command is also unlikely to participate in any election under the Dr Yunus-led government. Either way, AL supporters will not have the opportunity to vote for their party.

to boycott the elections, believing that the absence of their "large" voter base from the polling booths would render the turnout less credible, both nationally and internationally. Many AL supporters may also choose to abstain from voting even without a formal directive from the party.

One also cannot rule out the possibility of the party resorting to violent means to intimidate voters and keep them away from the polls, or employing other machinations to disrupt the entire electoral process even before the vote.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

### Finally, being devoid of other options, the votes of AL supporters will be up for grabs by the very parties they have long detested.

So, what choices remain for them? The AL leaders and activists have yet to come to terms with the July uprising that ended their 15 and a half-year authoritarian rule. That is why they seem to show no remorse for what they have done; rather, many remain in a vindictive mood. Their offline and online activities related to the elections suggest that disrupting the polls is high on their agenda.

This disruption could take several forms. AL might urge its supporters

to boycott the elections, believing that the absence of their "large" voter base from the polling booths would render the turnout less credible, both nationally and internationally. Many AL supporters may also choose to abstain from voting even without a formal directive from the party.

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an alternative leadership. Moreover, how AL supporters would receive such a formation remains an open question.

Another possibility is that the AL could try to re-emerge through its old allies, whose activities have not yet been officially banned. The most prominent among them is the Jatiya Party. There is speculation that AL supporters across the country will rally behind Jatiya Party candidates, some of whom could turn out to be shadow AL members. However, this scenario has found little support from either the AL or Jatiya Party leadership. The latter, moreover, remains deeply divided by internal factions.

Meanwhile, parties such as Jamaat, the NCP, and Gono Odhikar Parishad have been pressing the interim government to ban the activities of the Jatiya Party and exclude it from

the electoral race, citing the very possibility of such collaboration.

A different interpretation of their motives, however, also exists. It suggests that by removing the Jatiya Party, these parties would not only eliminate a key competitor in the upcoming election but also attempt to capture seats in North Bengal—a region traditionally regarded as the Jatiya Party's stronghold.

Finally, being devoid of other options, the votes of AL supporters will be up for grabs by the very parties they have long detested. Ironically, the main contenders in the upcoming elections—the BNP, Jamaat, and the NCP—although fierce haters of the AL as a party, are actively trying to attract its supporters to their camp.

BNP's message for them is simple: it pledges to create an inclusive political environment, and leave the Awami League's fate in the hands of the people. The party also stresses that it upholds the spirit of the Liberation War and secularism—values that continue to matter to many AL supporters. Jamaat, on the other hand, is attempting to win them over by offering security, claiming that since August 5, AL activists have faced harassment primarily from BNP supporters.

Some analysts place Jamaat ahead of the BNP in this race to court AL voters, arguing that the traditional hostility between the BNP and AL makes it easier for Jamaat to appeal to AL supporters. They also point out that, unlike the BNP—which already has a large support base and limited incentives to offer to political converts—Jamaat, as a revitalised but still emerging political force, is hungrier for new recruits. Several recent surveys showing an increase in Jamaat's popularity, as well as the results of Duchs and Juchs elections, in which Shibir made a triumphant comeback, are interpreted as evidence of this shifting dynamic. Adding to this is the fact that many younger AL supporters may not be as emotionally attached to the narratives of the Liberation War as their predecessors are or were.

Amidst all the despair, a flicker of hope still remains for AL supporters in the growing international pressure to make the upcoming election "inclusive." If that also fails, we may witness what the interim government calls a "historic election," but for reasons unrelated to what it means by this—an election in which a large segment of voters, though disenfranchised, will still have shaped its outcome.

## The case for increasing women's parliamentary participation



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Globally, and in Bangladesh, the struggle for women to secure seats in parliament has only become tougher. The 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, convened by the United Nations with more than 17,000 participants, set a goal of 30 percent representation of women in political decision-making. Many countries adopted this in various forms: some required political parties to nominate women for leadership roles, others reserved seats, or supported female candidates.

Yet, progress remains uneven. Only a few nations—such as New Zealand, Rwanda, Mexico, and Venezuela—have made sustained advances towards parity. For most UN member states, even achieving 30 percent remains an uphill battle.

After the July 2024 uprising and the end of an autocratic rule in Bangladesh, many hoped for a new era of inclusive politics. While patriarchal attitudes might take time to dismantle, there was an expectation that political parties would lead by example. That hope is yet to be fulfilled.

Despite five decades of independence and the visible leadership of women during the July-August movement, women continue

to face barriers. The same tired claims persist: that "politics is dirty," that women lack the "muscle" or "money" to contest elections, and that power belongs to those who control wealth and intimidation. Money, goons, and guns remain normalised in politics, sidelining competence, integrity, and performance.

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us, "Representation has two meanings: it means speaking about, and it also means re-presenting." When women are excluded from political institutions, their realities remain unspoken and are misrepresented by those claiming to speak for them. The absence of women's voices in parliament means half the population is denied the power to define national priorities and shape the laws that govern their lives.

Social conditioning that normalises women's exclusion provides convenient excuses for political leaders. They claim that "there are no competent women candidates," as if competence can emerge without opportunity or mentorship. But how many women have been trained or promoted within party structures over the past fifty years? Why were they not organised as a political constituency

when women's votes have repeatedly shaped elections? This neglect reflects a systemic undervaluation of women's economic and social contributions.

Women in leadership and decision-making roles are essential for ensuring gender justice and equality. Research by the UN and the World Bank shows that countries with more women in parliament tend to enact progressive social policies, prioritise health and education, and reduce corruption.

Women leaders bring diverse perspectives, empathy, and community insight—qualities vital for effective governance. Their inclusion is not charity; it is a democratic necessity. In that context, Dr BR Ambedkar noted that the progress of a community must be measured by the degree of progress that women have achieved. By that measure, Bangladesh still has far to go.

Rwanda, with 63.75 percent of the seats in parliament held by women, has enacted laws ensuring equal inheritance rights, combating gender-based violence, and expanding healthcare. In New Zealand, women's political participation has driven climate action and family-friendly labour reforms. Studies by UN Women show that parliaments with more female members tend to pass more inclusive budgets, particularly in education, healthcare, and child welfare.

Even in Bangladesh, women parliamentarians have championed issues such as the prevention of child marriage, maternal health, domestic violence, and women's entrepreneurship. Their presence changes priorities. When a woman stands for us, she speaks of food,

safety, and education—not just roads and contracts. Women constitute 51 percent of Bangladesh's population, and even more if we include girl children. The country's economy also depends heavily on the ready-made garments sector, which is largely powered by women. Added to this are the remittances sent by women migrant workers, who send 70 to 80 percent of their incomes back home.

When women are in power, they bring life-affirming values to politics—care, conservation, and community, as noted by Vandana Shiva. Thus, these values are urgently needed as Bangladesh seeks to rebuild democracy, restore trust, and pursue sustainable growth.

Political parties are not merely vehicles of power; they are the custodians of democracy. The Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, mandates that political parties allocate at least 33 percent of all committee positions to women within a set time frame. Yet, till this date, this target remains unmet. While women's participation as voters and campaigners has grown, their presence in party leadership, nomination boards, and winnable seats has not. The Election Commission can only demand compliance reports, but real change requires political will.

If political parties wish to rebuild public trust after years of disillusionment, they must begin by honouring their commitments. Following the RPO is not merely a legal obligation; it is a moral test of democracy itself, and empowering women through representation is the foundation of a just and modern Bangladesh.