

Chattogram shooting is a bad omen

With polls fast approaching, we must strive to prevent political violence

The attack on a political event in Chattogram, which left one man dead and a BNP leader wounded, is a chilling warning that the biggest challenge in the coming weeks will be to maintain an atmosphere of peace and stability ahead of the planned election in February. For that to happen, all political actors and the government must make a genuine commitment to curbing the violence that too often taints the nation's political landscape.

The brazen assault occurred while BNP's nominated candidate for the Chattogram-8 constituency, Ershad Ullah, and his supporters were distributing leaflets in the port city's Purbo Bayezid area. According to initial reports, seven to eight armed assailants arrived in a microbus, opened fire, and fled the scene. Police were quick to assert that the BNP leader was not the target but was struck by a stray bullet. They concluded that the actual target was the deceased, Sarwar Babla, a man with an extensive criminal record. The official version described the attack as the outcome of an ongoing gang feud rather than political violence.

But that is hardly any comfort. The fact that a known criminal was present at a voter outreach event is itself alarming. Reports confirm that Sarwar had been in and out of jail on charges including possession of an AK-47 rifle. Once an associate of a notorious crime boss, he later formed his own gang, waging turf wars over extortion and other illicit activities. This was not his first brush with violence, of course. Just months earlier, Sarwar narrowly escaped an ambush that killed two of his companions. The latest episode, playing out in the shadow of a political campaign, illustrates a terrifying blurring of lines between crimes and politics.

The Chief Adviser's Office has condemned the attack, promising a swift investigation and reaffirming that "violence and intimidation have no place in our political or social life." Yet history shows a darker trend: political parties across the spectrum have too often relied on unsavoury figures to supply muscle and mobilise voters. Such alliances erode public trust and undermine the integrity of elections. That practice must end.

Now, a credible investigation must go beyond apprehending the gunmen to examine why a man facing multiple criminal cases was present at a political event. Also, it is time to confront the nexus between local politicians and criminal syndicates that allows such figures to thrive. With the election fast approaching, the responsibility lies with all parties to renounce violent enforcers. For their part, law enforcement agencies must act as neutral guardians of peace.

No illegal surveillance should be allowed

Draft law forbidding unlawful interception a welcome first step

With the growth of modern technologies, countries have been increasingly tempted by the use of surveillance tools to monitor or intercept communications. The situation in Bangladesh has been no different, especially during the authoritarian rule of Awami League. As per a report by The Daily Star, between 2016 and 2024, the National Telecommunications Monitoring Centre (NTMC), police, and Rab collectively purchased surveillance equipment worth over Tk 1,382 crore. The legality of using such equipment has always been a hotly debated topic, and the risks in countries like Bangladesh, with poor safeguards and rights records, are particularly dire.

Against this backdrop, the interim government's drafting of a new ordinance to penalise unauthorised surveillance and abolish all pre-existing interception platforms, including the NTMC, marks a major shift. If approved, the Bangladesh Telecommunications Ordinance 2025 will not only criminalise unlawful interception—with prison terms of up to 10 years for perpetrators—but also place all "lawful interception" under a Central Lawful Interception Platform (CLIP), which can only act on behalf of authorised agencies based on court directives or orders issued by an Independent Oversight Council. We welcome this initiative. For a country reeling from years of arbitrary surveillance, this is a necessary first step towards restoring trust and protecting citizens' rights.

That said, we must recognise that laws alone cannot change a system. Previously, when surveillance was used to target dissidents, journalists, and activists, it happened not because laws permitted it, but because there was impunity, lack of oversight, and a political culture that saw citizens as subjects to be controlled. We must not repeat this. The new law must not become another statute that looks good on paper but fails in practice.

For it to be effective, meaningful institutional constraints as well as constant parliamentary oversight are crucial. The draft ordinance proposes that the five-member Independent Oversight Council be formed by representatives nominated by the president, prime minister, and parliament speaker each, along with two retired judges. But unless parliament—including opposition voices at the relevant parliamentary standing committee—exercises constant oversight, and unless the judiciary performs the role envisaged for it in the ordinance, the oversight structure risks becoming ceremonial. We urge civil society groups to closely study the draft and ensure there are no loopholes that can allow any state actor or agency to exploit the CLIP and conduct clandestine surveillance.

We must also safeguard against weaponisation of "national security" as a catch-all justification. Necessity, proportionality, legality, and accountability must be treated as binding principles. The authorities, present and future, must ensure that any surveillance is treated as an exception, not the norm, and is always conducted within the legal framework and by preserving the rights, privacy, and dignity of citizens.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Disputed US presidential election

On this day in 2000, the US presidential election ended in a statistical tie between Democrat Al Gore and Republican George W. Bush, only to be settled on December 12 by the US Supreme Court after a bitter legal dispute.

LESSONS FROM MAMDANI'S MAGIC

Put voters back at the centre of our politics

No compromise on holding the elections on time



Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

Forget other issues and challenges, Zohran Mamdani's election as mayor of New York City proves the supremacy of the "will" of voters. He was opposed by every organised power imaginable in New York. But he was supported by "people's power," which is the only power democracy is supposed to recognise. If the official election machinery is uninfluenced, then voters can defeat all other powers in a democracy. President Trump was publicly opposed to him, so were the Republican Party and even Democratic Party high-ups (Clinton supported Mamdani's opponent), and the elite class in general, who poured in billions to oppose Mamdani, yet the voters won. Democracy prevailed. Most importantly, it broke the sense of powerlessness of the poor, the inferiority complex of the middle class, and the psychological barrier of the disempowered—that the elite can never be defeated. Nothing could have boosted the US's image as a democracy more than this.

This election has greatly strengthened our belief in elections, the power of unity among voters, and a new faith in public wisdom. A majority of New Yorkers shattered everything that the current political trend in the US stands for. Of course, Mamdani was a great speaker, and he ran a superb campaign. But the crux of it was that he sensed the public pulse and articulated it effectively, so that the voters developed trust in him. All of this would have amounted to nothing if voters did not have the courage, determination, and energy to express their views by casting their votes in record numbers.

Our election may not be similar to Mamdani's in terms of upsetting the ruling class, but it is a similar moment for us in terms of returning to democracy. Once again, we hope we are at the doorstep of a lively parliament where government and ruling party can be held accountable, where bureaucracy will once again not be the "masters" but the "public servants," as they were recruited to be, and police will enforce the law and not be "above the law" unlike before, when they have enjoyed perpetual impunity regardless of what they did. In my view, one word encompasses everything that we expect and hope from this election: establishing accountability. Our election—hopefully a free and fair one—is coming to us after 17

There is the lack of trust between political parties. Each believes that whatever is being promised before the election will not be honoured after victory. It is for this simple reason that NCP and Jamaat are insisting on a referendum, although its practicality and legality have raised many questions. The reason is simple: lack of trust in BNP's promises. It is true for all other parties as well.

long years, and for that many years, and also before it, we did not have accountability.

There is much to learn from the NYC mayoral election, even if some may say the two contexts are very different, one being in the US and the other in Bangladesh. The differences are ornamental; the similarity, in terms of holding power to account, is fundamental. And the lesson is how to touch the hearts and minds of voters, gain their trust, energise them to

work for you. There were over 50,000 volunteers, mostly young, working for Mamdani. The voters believed in him so deeply that they were willing to take all the risks that conventional wisdom would have warned them against, but they did not shy away.

Will Bangladeshi voters have that chance? The challenge is not only to appeal to them but to empower them, to give them the confidence that they matter. Mamdani explained the strategy of his campaign: while politicians usually go to voters, telling them about their plans and how implementing them would benefit the public, he, instead, went and asked what they wanted. "All said they wanted New York City to become affordable for them. So, we built our campaign around how to bring down the cost of living in the city," said Mamdani. In our case, do our politicians ever ask voters what they need or want? Will they do so this time?

After eight months of the National Consensus Commission's (NCC) dialogue, we expected a much stronger consensus among all political parties to hold a free and fair election. We did not expect them to put conditions and couple them with threats. How can anybody say that if our demands are not accepted, then there cannot be any



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

election? What sort of respect for voters does that show? It is disappointing to see that Sheikh Hasina may have left, but our basic political culture of imposing partisan agenda on the people has not changed. To the best of our knowledge, there has not been a single attempt by any political party to conduct any opinion survey to find out what our people want.

So much time, energy and resources have been spent in bringing various political parties together, taking them through an organised process of discussion, and trying to bring out their collective thoughts—all to build political consensus on fundamental issues. While that was very good indeed, no effort was made to gauge the views and expectations of the voters. Voters are never at the core of our election process; in fact, they are hardly given any importance.

Take, for example, how much money and time we have spent on finalising the July National Charter, but how little effort has been made to make the general people aware of its contents. Originally, there were 84 recommendations. Now the plan is to focus on 48 of them that deal with reforming the constitution and hold a referendum on those. Don't the public have a right to know what these recommendations are, what they mean, what their implications are, and how they may affect their lives? It is our view that voters below a certain level of education, such as farmers, day-labourers, rickshaw-pullers, street hawkers, vendors, small shop owners, many factory workers, domestic help, etc—numbering in the crores—would

most likely know very little about what the July National Charter contains. With so little public knowledge, how can we conduct a referendum on such a crucial and complex document that deals with constitutional reforms? Would that be ethically and morally correct? Would such a referendum give us any authentic view of the public position on this document?

Whatever may be the impediments,

within the big parties. How the rivalries at the grassroots level will play out as the election date nears is a constant source of anxiety in holding a free and fair election.

The sad fact is that, at this final stage, we have no consensus yet on the future direction of the nation. After eight months of discussions, the government was forced to ask the political parties to come to some final

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the most important task before the whole nation—and one that we must pledge to implement with all our sincerity and energy—is to hold the highly anticipated national election that the country desperately needs, within the time frame announced by the chief adviser.

The term "interim government" is self-explanatory. Whatever its time frame, it is a transitory authority. Bangladesh's global relations, though greatly benefitted by Prof Yunus's personal popularity and prestige, cannot assume normalcy till an elected government is in place. Media report shows that domestic private investment sank to a five-year low in

common position within one week for the electoral process to move forward. We hope the appeal is honoured.

As we understand, the issue for Jamaat and NCP is proportional representation at the Upper House. We think it is a reasonable demand, which will make the functioning of the Upper House more effective. After all, the latter cannot be made a rubber stamp of the Lower House. It will be, if BNP's wish prevails. We think BNP should see the merit of the alternative.

Jamaat and NCP, on the other hand, should accept BNP's suggestion that coalition members be allowed to use the symbol of the umbrella party.

This may not be the best option. However, dissenting parties should accept it as a compromise. Though a gazette notification has already been issued, there's enough time for it to be amended if a political consensus can be reached.

As for the date of the referendum, the solution seems to already exist: do it on the same day as the national polls, as suggested by BNP. Though we strongly feel that holding the referendum as referred to above will not be fair to the voters, who do not know much about its contents, still, to remove the impediments for holding the election, NCP and Jamaat should accept the proposal. The logistics of holding it on a separate day are humongous and expensive. It is like doubling the expense, and the logistics will be impossible to manage.

Thus, we see a high possibility of a convergence of views among the three main parties.

Concluding, as we began, with the inspirational example of Mamdani's election in New York City—show the voters the respect they deserve and give them a chance to have their wishes fulfilled. Bring them to the centre of chalking out the future of Bangladesh. Let us end the culture of imposing our own wishes on voters.

Our plea is that all political parties, especially the three prominent ones, must put aside their differences and place national interest above everything else, and join hands to hold the election in February 2026. We need to stop going in circles and move forward.