

A casualty of electoral politics

Political parties fail women as election field remain male-dominated

The statistics on women candidatures, so far, in the upcoming election are deeply disheartening. It is particularly saddening that none of the major political parties appear sufficiently committed to proactively promoting the political empowerment of women. Citing Election Commission data, *Dhaka Tribune* reports that of the 2,582 aspirants who have submitted nomination papers, only 110 are women—amounting to a meagre four percent of the total candidates.

Although the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has nominated the highest number of women so far, after the passing of the party's Chairperson Khaleda Zia—who had been nominated in three constituencies—the number has dropped. The left parties, despite their marginal role in parliamentary politics, nominated women candidates close to BNP's figure. However, almost none of political parties registered with the Election Commission have met the minimum five percent threshold mandated in the July National Charter.

Ironically, the National Citizen Party (NCP)—born out of the July uprising and once at the forefront of advocating the charter as a new political settlement for democratic governance—has now only three women candidates. Even, the fate of these nominations has become uncertain, after NCP's electoral alliance with a Jamaat-e-Islami-led coalition, which may lead to the NCP contesting from fewer constituencies than its original plan. The seat arrangement issue with Jamaat has led several women NCP leaders—who stood at the forefront of the 2024 mass movement that ultimately led to the collapse of Sheikh Hasina's regime—to leave the party.

The number of women candidates among the other parties in the alliance is also negligible. However, the coalition of Islamic parties, including Jamaat-e-Islami, had publicly assured the implementation of the July National Charter if voted to power which reportedly attracted the NCP to the alliance. Yet, with the exception of AB Party, most of these Islamist parties have finalised all-male candidate lists for the February polls. Meanwhile, though Jamaat-e-Islami leaders say that women constitute 35 percent of the party's policymaking bodies, it is puzzling that none of them appear to be aspiring to parliamentary representation.

Even the BNP's number of women candidates falls woefully short of reflecting meaningful participation or advancement of women—either within the party or in national politics. This is particularly striking given that the party was led for over four decades by one of the country's most successful women leaders, Khaleda Zia. The BNP would do well to reassess its approach and actively expand women's representation, especially as several rebel candidates remain in the fray and are reportedly eager to be brought back under the party's fold.

We must not allow a regression in women's empowerment. Of the country's 12.76 crore voters, nearly 6.3 crore are women, and their political representation cannot be confined to quotas alone. The signatories of the July National Charter must also be transparent and honest about their commitment to the pledges they have made.

E-waste management must be prioritised

Weak rules, poor enforcement, and lack of accountability causing problems

Despite the threats that improper handling of hazardous waste, particularly electronic waste (e-waste), poses to human health and the environment, it is concerning to see how governance failures continue to cripple Bangladesh's e-waste management system. The matter has come to light following the unveiling of a new study by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) that examined the current state of e-waste governance and found serious gaps in enforcement, coordination, and accountability.

At the centre of the problem lie the flawed design of the Hazardous Waste (E-waste) Management Rules 2021 as well as their poor implementation, with key agencies such as the ministry of environment, the Department of Environment (DoE), and customs failing to treat this issue as a priority. TIB's study finds that the scope of the rules is limited, and that many targets outlined in them remain unmet. One of the most glaring shortcomings is the continued exclusion of the informal e-waste sector from regulation. Informal collectors, dismantlers, and recyclers, despite operating across the country, remain outside the DoE's monitoring framework even four years after the rules were introduced. The risk of unregulated exposure to toxic substances for workers—especially women, who are disproportionately involved in collecting and sorting e-waste—cannot be overstated.

Moreover, the continued illegal import of e-waste and old electronic equipment, despite explicit bans, points to what TIB has rightly described as “gross negligence” by the relevant authorities. Weak inter-agency coordination, the failure to hold local government institutions accountable, and the absence of reliable and comprehensive data, along with the lack of any clear action plan or technical guidelines, have further compounded the problem. Adding to this is the fact that the rules were formulated without adequate stakeholder consultation, resulting in unrealistic provisions that do not reflect the ground realities.

Given this, TIB has placed a set of key recommendations that deserve proper follow-up. These include amending the 2021 rules to expand the definition of e-waste, particularly by including emerging sectors such as electric vehicles and solar panels. Introducing clear incentives and penalties, forming a national coordination committee for e-waste management, and issuing specific provisions for e-waste export are also essential. Equally important are detailed technical guidelines covering environmental protection and safe handling of hazardous components and disaster-related e-waste, as well as a dedicated Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) framework for all involved, including manufacturers, importers, and marketers. Properly managed e-waste could be an important source of national revenue rather than the hazard it currently is, so the government must take it seriously.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Mars Exploration Rover Spirit lands on Mars

On this day in 2004, the US Mars Exploration Rover Spirit landed on Mars to study the chemical and physical composition of the planet's surface.

Why does a gender wall still exist within our major political parties?



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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A quilting metaphor, unique to our nakshi kantha, aptly describes Bangladesh's politics today. The intricate needlework that underpins the beauty of our nightly wrap-on continues to be a revered tradition, often ignoring the actual individuals who recycle worn-out cloths to infuse it with new vitality. The presence/absence of the women weaver's story in this tapestry is telling of our gendered reality. In theory, half the country is female. They lift trophies in football and cricket, they climb mountains, and they outperform their male peers in classrooms, laboratories, clinics, marketplaces, and factories. Yet, when the time comes to claim spaces of real political power, their role starts becoming scarce. The submission of candidatures by 110 women for the forthcoming election is one such example.

The figure constitutes a little over four percent of the 2,582 candidates for the directly elected seats. Although the number of women contestants increased compared to the 12th parliamentary election—when 92 women out of 1,891 total candidates vied for 300 seats—the percentage remains low. The entrenched gender gap is glaringly obvious, notwithstanding the fact

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that the Election Commission has yet to declare the number of valid candidates. Many of these candidates are running independently without the blessings of mainstream parties. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has more women on their list, but the number may drop following the recent death of its chairperson Khaleda Zia and internal shuffling. While the left-leaning parties seem more inclusive, Jamaat-e-Islami decided not to field any women for general seats. Such an arrangement is a tell-tale sign of a gender wall that exists within major political parties.



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Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

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The delayed election, rather than being merely a period of political stagnation, has paradoxically served as a crucial and illuminating interlude for Bangladesh. Had the interim government, formed on August 8, 2024, acted as a caretaker, conducted elections within 90 days, and then departed, people would have imagined—perhaps unrealistically—that the interim administration could have solved many of the country's problems. Instead, this extended timeframe has allowed for a deeper, more sobering examination of the nation's political landscape, resulting in unexpected clarity. The delay provided the necessary time for several pervasive national myths to be confronted by the hard light of reality.

For instance, many believed that Nobel Peace Prize-winning economist Dr Muhammad Yunus's leadership would usher in an era of unparalleled peace, explosive economic growth, and abundant foreign investment. This past year and a half allowed that idealised

The provision of 50 reserved parliamentary seats allows the parties to claim formal representation of women, but they are never given the equivalence of direct electoral wins to serve the constituencies. While, the country has already achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education, political leadership roles do not reflect the value of female capital. Women also remain under-represented in executive positions. Most women are employed in low-paid, informal, or precarious jobs. For over three decades, we took pride in the fact that two powerful women



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

shared the political sceptres, but their struggles reflect the wider political realities of South Asia. They achieved power through dynastic politics and political crisis and emerged as unifying factors within their parties. Today, a void in the political field can be felt due to the absence of Sheikh Hasina, who fled the country after her ousting in 2024 and the demise of Khaleda Zia just ahead of the 2026 elections. The vacuum and the consequent marginalisation of female candidates in the next election remind us how much women's political representation has relied on exceptional individuals rather than systemic inclusion.

The vigorous presence of women in the past pro-democracy movements proved that many of the women leaders are parliament-ready. From anti-dictatorship struggles in the 1980s to the 2024 Monsoon Uprising, women participated in the politics as activists, media influencers, and organisers. Why the political parties do not capitalise on their

street capital remains a mystery.

We have seen female members resign from the National Citizen Party (NCP), protesting the party's alliances with Islamist parties. Yet, these were literally avant-garde women (advanced guards in infantry terms) facing the first round of attacks during the uprising. Some of them returned from abroad to join the movement, leaving behind their prospective careers. Not only that, but the decision by the NCP to merge with a Jamaat-led alliance came so late that most of the women leaders did not have enough response time to float as independent candidates. This incident is another instance of the electoral glass ceiling. Women are staged where politics is messy and unmediated by elite gatekeepers, but they are forced to take a backseat where nominations are controlled by party hierarchies.

To further exacerbate the situation, some parties are advocating for reduced work hours for women. This

when women are made MPs, the party does not expect an intellectual contribution from their reserved MP. They demand loyalty to forward party policies. If somehow women leaders step forward with credentials equal to or surpassing men's, their competitiveness is often trimmed through character assassination or slandering. Social norms impose pressure on these candidates to conform to societal expectations. Political parties' unwillingness to invest in women candidates further confirms this phenomenon.

Virginia Woolf has long warned that a woman can only create a room of her own when she has a financial support base. Female space is not a male gift. Running a political campaign requires financial capital. Women, due to their lack of access to capital or financial networks, seldom have the solvency to vie for a public post.

Last week, millions showed up at the funeral of Khaleda Zia. The respect that she garnered was extraordinary in the context of broader female political exclusion. Her rise to prominence stemmed from unique circumstances. The absence of a gradual institutional path for women in politics further underscores this uniqueness. It is a shame that in the past 55 years, we have failed to create a healthy democratic ecosystem that routinely produces and places women leaders.

The next government should recognise this void as an opportunity and undertake true structural reforms in this area. Otherwise, the next generation of women leaders will continue to face the same barriers. We need to go beyond the same routine of rhetorical affirmations of gender equality and the well-rehearsed practice of shrinking the female role in public offices.

Also, the parties participating in the election must clarify women's representation in their electoral manifestos. We are tired of cosmetic solutions that either glorify women as angels or portray them as monsters. It's time we implement affirmative actions for institutional quotas in general seats. There have to be public or party-level financing provisions to reduce economic barriers for women candidates. Women's wings within the party need to be nurtured to create leadership pipelines and decision-making authority. And above all, there have to be educational campaigns that reshape public perceptions of political leadership and normalise women's participation in formal politics. Women are instrumental in creating our social fabric. It's high time we acknowledge their significant role in not only telling but also creating stories.

Despite their contribution to female education and female participation in the economy and politics to some extent, Bangladeshi women are under-represented in direct electoral politics. They are not allowed to look past platitudes and into the political culture and structural obstacles that perpetuate exclusion.

The gatekeeper within the party and their patronage networks ensure that the political structure remains male-dominated. Candidate lists are chosen through internal elite bargaining, keeping familial ties in mind. Even

The long wait for elections has been an illuminating interlude



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image to be scrutinised leading to a more nuanced and realistic public assessment, dispelling the notion of a singular, messianic alternative. Similarly, the public's once-fervent enthusiasm for certain student leaders, seen as pure-hearted and symbolising hope, has been tempered. Their direct and indirect involvement in power dynamics during this period revealed that they, too, are not immune to the corrupting influence of authority or the temptation of authoritarian behaviour, often displaying a surprising lack of deep political wisdom. The delay granted the nation time for this necessary disillusionment.

Furthermore, the extended period acted as a relentless unmasking agent for Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami. The actions of some of its leaders—targeting cultural institutions and independent media outlets—over these months clarified its fundamental opposition to progressive ideals, indigenous culture, and women's freedom for the

educated and conscious class, cutting through previous ambiguities. For the BNP, this was not a swift return to power but a gruelling “time test,” oscillating between proximity to and distance from authority. This protracted process may have instilled a necessary moment of reckoning, a forced contemplation of public accountability that might shape any

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future governance. It also gave the public an invaluable, prolonged study of the incumbent administration and the state machinery.

Within the government itself, the delay humbled certain narratives. Advisers who hailed from prominent NGO backgrounds, once prolific

critics of state incapacity and lack of transparency from the outside, found their grand, idealistic rhetoric colliding with the immense complexities of actually running a country. Their once-loud proclamations were inevitably moderated by the weight of executive responsibility. Moreover, the widespread hope that, if enough time were given to this administration, it would implement transformative structural reforms to make Bangladesh a model of accountability remains far-fetched. The public can now move beyond the illusion that this administration held a unique key to systemic perfection. Finally, the very functionality of the state over this contentious period challenged the persistent narrative of great dependence on a single foreign ally, proving the nation's operational resilience.

While the political waiting has been arduous, it has functioned as an unscheduled but intense national tutorial. It has stripped away layers of political fantasy, forcing a clearer, if more demanding, view of the actors and dynamics at play. There is undoubtedly more to observe as the story unfolds. But this interval has provided a sobering education, ensuring that the next chapter begins not with wistful illusions, but with eyes more open to the intricate and often unforgiving realities of power and governance.