

Shab-e-Barat on February 3

UNB, Dhaka

Muslims in Bangladesh will observe Shab-e-Barat on the night of February 3 as the Sha'ban moon was not sighted yesterday.

As the moon was not sighted, the month of Sha'ban will begin on January 21.

The decision was taken at a meeting of the National Moon Sighting Committee held at the Islamic Foundation's Baitul Mukarram office in the evening, with Religious Affairs Ministry Secretary Kamal Uddin in the chair.

The announcement was made after analysing data collected from the district administrations, the Islamic Foundation, the Bangladesh Meteorological Department and the Space Research and Remote Sensing Institute.

Shab-e-Barat is observed on the 15th night of the Arabic month of Sha'ban.

Muslims offer special prayers, recite the Holy Quran and take part in other religious rituals on Shab-e-Barat.



Ballot boxes are being dispatched to regional election offices in various districts across the country ahead of the February 12 national election, which is just weeks away. The photo was taken outside the Election Commission headquarters in the capital's Agargaon yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Bias claims by rivals put EC

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"The EC is under some pressure. Ensuring law and order during the campaign period will be a major challenge for us," said one official.

The poll body is scheduled to meet with representatives of all political parties today to provide a detailed explanation of postal ballot procedures and the overall voting process.

BNP MISLEADING VOTERS: JAMAAT

Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday, Jamaat Assistant Secretary General and head of its central publicity department Ahsanul Mahboob Zubair said, "The point is that we are not seeing the kind of neutral behaviour we expect from the Election Commission.

Within the commission itself, there are certain officials who seem to be leaning towards one particular party, giving them some advantage."

Earlier, after meeting the chief adviser on Sunday, Jamaat Nayeb-e-Ameer Syed Abdullah Mohammad Taher said the party informed Prof Yunus that the conduct of some SPs and DCs at the field level appeared to be "biased".

"We said we have no objection if anyone is given enhanced security or protocol. But as one of the major parties, the ameer of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami must also be treated equally," he said.

Taher also accused BNP activists of deceiving voters by distributing "so-called family cards and farmer cards door to door".

EC BIASED: NCP

During the meeting with Yunus yesterday, NCP Convener Nahid Islam drew his attention to several election-related issues and urged the government to take a proactive role in the scheduled time in violation of the electoral code.

He claimed that sections of top EC officials, returning officers, assistant returning officers, superintendents of police and other officials in some constituencies were working in favour of "one party".

He also accused the EC of engaging in questionable conduct on several issues, with the postal ballots for expatriate Bangladeshis being the most prominent and unresolved one.

Fakhrul further alleged that Jamaat activists were collecting copies of national identity cards, bKash numbers and mobile numbers from households. "This breaches privacy and is a criminal offence," he said.

He also claimed that in several Dhaka constituencies, a party had resorted to unethical tactics by transferring large numbers of voters from other parts of the country to ensure victory for its nominated candidates.

US very excited

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"The US is very excited about the upcoming national election. It is satisfied with the environment and believes Bangladesh is moving towards a good process..." he said while addressing a press briefing.

Humayun said the meeting discussed ways to improve Bangladesh-United States bilateral relations, particularly in trade and investment. He added, "The US would remain an important development partner for Bangladesh."

Humayun also said Tarique and the US ambassador discussed the Rohingya issue.

"They discussed how the Rohingya issue could be resolved in the future through a multilateral process. The issue was described as a matter of national security and one of the top priorities, with emphasis on seeking multilateral support."

The meeting also covered development cooperation, ways to strengthen bilateral relations, trade and investment, as well as vocational and technical education, he added.

Meanwhile, a delegation of European Union countries also met Tarique Rahman. The delegation was led by European Union Ambassador to Bangladesh Michael Miller.

Ambassadors of Germany, France, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, and Italy were also present at the meeting.

Responding to a question regarding the EU meeting, Humayun said, "In the next election, people will

get the opportunity to vote after 17 years. Many ambassadors have never seen a democratic election. Through a transparent and accountable election, Bangladesh will come out of its dark past of the last 15 years and move towards a new horizon."

Earlier, Canadian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Ajit Singh met Tarique Rahman and BNP leaders, where they discussed progress towards a peaceful and inclusive democratic transition through the upcoming election.

High Commissioner Singh underscored Canada's desire to work with the interim government and the next elected government to build on the momentum created by economic, financial, judicial, and labour reforms, to deepen bilateral relations, and to create a better future for people in both countries.

Canada has been a longstanding advocate for free, fair, inclusive, and participatory elections in Bangladesh, the High Commission on its official page.

In the last 12 days, Tarique met Swiss Ambassador Reto Renggli, Brazilian Ambassador Paulo Fernando Dias Feres, Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Pranay Verma, Germany's Ambassador Rüdiger Lotz, Australian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Susan Riley, Pakistani High Commissioner to Bangladesh Imran Haider, and Chinese Ambassador in Dhaka Yao Wen, among others.

photographs on posters, billboards and festsos, which are clear violations of the code of conduct.

"When campaigning was prohibited, the entire Dhaka city and the country were flooded with posters of a party chairperson returning home," he said.

Asif further claimed that on Sunday, during the disposal of appeals, the commission legalised the candidacies of dual citizens in violation of several existing laws, including constitutional provisions and the RPO.

EC MUST ACT: EXPERTS

Election experts Abdul Alim and Jesmin Tuli said the commission should investigate specific allegations without any delay to remove confusion.

"But I haven't heard that the Election Commission is conducting any inquiry or investigation into these allegations. If there are specific complaints, the commission should immediately state whether it has taken action, or whether the allegation is true or false. In that case, people would understand that it is indeed taking measures," said Tuli, a former senior EC official.

Alim, also a political analyst, said parties usually make allegations of bias and violation of rules before polls to keep pressure on the authorities.

"However, we did not see allegations and counter-allegations being taken to the EC or the chief adviser, and simultaneous protests in front of the commission after the election schedule was announced under caretaker or interim governments in the past," he said.

He warned that if the situation continues, especially with official campaigning set to begin in just two days, it will become increasingly difficult to control.

"That's why the EC must investigate the allegations and take stern action. The findings must be shared with the public to show where wrongdoing has occurred," he said.

Election Commissioner Abdur Rahaman Masud, when contacted yesterday, said the allegations of bias and the absence of a level playing field were part of political strategies.

"We are not biased towards anyone. We are committed to holding free, fair and acceptable elections," he said.

Trump links threat

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The Norwegian Nobel Committee annoyed Trump by awarding the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize not to him but to Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado. She gave her medal last week to Trump during a White House meeting, though the Nobel Committee said the prize cannot be transferred, shared or revoked.

In his message, Trump also repeated his accusation that Denmark cannot protect Greenland from Russia or China.

"... and why do they have a 'right of ownership' anyway?" he wrote, adding: "The World is not secure unless we have Complete and Total Control of Greenland."

Trump vowed on Saturday to implement a wave of increasing tariffs from February 1 on EU members Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Finland, along with Britain and Norway, until the US is allowed to buy Greenland.

EU leaders will discuss options at an emergency summit in Brussels on Thursday. One option is a package of tariffs on 93 billion euros (\$108 billion) of US imports that could automatically kick in on February 6 after a six-month suspension.

Another option is the "Anti-Coercion Instrument" (ACI), which has never yet been used and which could limit access to public tenders, investments or banking activity or restrict trade in services, in which the US has a surplus with the bloc, including in digital services.

The EU said it was continuing to engage "at all levels" with the US but said the use of its ACI was not off the table.

Next govt must tackle poverty

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centre stage in political manifestos ahead of the February election.

Economists argue that without a roadmap for redistributive justice and job creation, the widening economic divide threatens to undermine social stability.

Since the 1980s, Bangladesh has been a model for poverty reduction, but post-pandemic economic shocks and high inflation have reversed these gains.

According to new estimates by the Power and Participation Research Centre, the poverty rate climbed to 27.93 percent in mid 2025 from 18.7 percent in 2022.

Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), described the trend as "very worrying".

While short-term financial support is necessary for vulnerable groups like Mahbubur's family, it is not a cure. Sustainable reduction, he argued, requires job creation in trade, exports, and small businesses rather than temporary stopgaps.

The crisis is not limited to job losses; it also plagues the employed, driving skilled workers out of the formal sector.

Harun Or Rashid, who completed higher secondary education, abandoned his job as a security guard at a commercial bank because the Tk 12,000 monthly salary could not sustain his family of six, including his mother and three children.

Harun now drives a battery-run rickshaw in Dhaka's Muzga and Motijheel areas, earning approximately Tk 30,000 per month. While the job switch has allowed him to survive, he lamented that he has no other option.

He added that he would be much happier if there were viable opportunities in the formal sector.

Harun's dilemma reinforces the argument made by Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka office, who emphasised that political parties must focus on the quality of employment.

Zahid Hussain warned that safety nets are not a sustainable long term solution and that the next elected government must focus on job creation and wages.

This requires a clear outline for export diversification, as the economy remains dangerously over-reliant on

the apparel sector.

While the garment industry generates over \$40 billion annually, data from the Export Promotion Bureau reveals that no other sector fetches more than \$1 billion. Concurrently, the investment climate has cooled, with central bank data showing private sector credit growth slowed to 6.58 percent in November from 7.66 percent a year earlier.

To address the immediate liquidity crisis facing families like Harun's and Mahbubur's, Towfiqul Islam Khan, additional research director of the CPD, has proposed a "universal minimum income" scheme.

Towfiqul proposed a monthly cash support initiative for families living below the poverty line, designed to be rolled out in phases.

The government should initially

this expenditure is necessary to prevent vulnerable groups from falling further behind due to job insecurity and limited access to credit.

Mustafizur Rahman of CPD advocated for higher direct taxation to fund increased allocations for health, education, and social safety nets.

He warned that simply promising to reduce poverty would not suffice without a concrete plan, adding that tackling corruption is an economic imperative as poor governance directly exacerbates inequality.

Despite the consensus on necessary reforms, there is widespread scepticism regarding political will. Anu Muhammed, an economist and former chair of Jahangirnagar University's economics department, observed that while manifestos often feature lofty rhetoric, implementation rarely follows.

EXPERT SUGGESTIONS FOR NEXT GOVT

1 Prioritise job creation with decent wages

2 Introduce universal minimum income scheme

3 Improve access to affordable credit for youth, the poor

4 Reform labour market to protect informal workers

5 Diversify exports beyond garment sector

6 Strengthen governance, raise progressive taxation

7 Stabilise prices, control inflation

bring 28 lakh families in 11 poverty-prone districts under the scheme, followed by 80 lakh families in 36 districts, and eventually 1.47 crore families nationwide, according to his proposal.

Towfiqul also suggested a "credit card" for financially disadvantaged young people, offering interest free and collateral free loans of up to Tk 100,000 to foster self-employment, alongside medical benefits of the same value for families.

Implementing these comprehensive measures will cost approximately Tk 120,000 crore, equivalent to 2 percent of the country's GDP. He argues that

While manifestos may include commitments to poverty reduction and addressing inequality, the real issue is the extent to which these priorities are reflected in concrete action, he said.

"To truly give importance to these two issues, Bangladesh would need a fundamental shift across all policy areas. Whether it is education policy, energy policy or employment policy, such decisions must be made by the government itself -- not by the World Bank or the IMF," he said.

Without effective home-grown policies, the hopes of workers like Mahbubur and Harun may remain unfulfilled.

Vote 'yes' to build a new Bangladesh

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opportunity to establish democracy, justice, and human rights.

"Vote 'Yes' to build the state according to your expectations. By choosing 'Yes,' you open the door to creating a new Bangladesh. Cast your vote, encourage others to do the same, bring them to the polling stations, and help transform the country," he said.

Prof Yunus explained that the referendum, scheduled for February 12 alongside the national election, is intended to secure public consent for the July Charter, a reform framework formulated with consensus from all political parties.

"To this end, several reforms have already been undertaken. For more profound and far-reaching reforms, we have formulated the July Charter based on the consensus of all political parties in the country," Prof Yunus said.

He said a 'Yes' vote in the referendum means the government and the opposition will work together to form a caretaker government and an Election Commission.

A 'Yes' vote also means that the government won't be able to amend the constitution at will, he added.

He said a person will not be able to serve as prime minister for more than a maximum of 10 years, and the judiciary will function independently.

Bid to stage 2008-style polls will fail

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loan defaulters without taking action against them.

Referring to show-cause notices issued to him and NCP Chief Coordinator Nasiruddin Patwary, contesting from Dhaka-11 and Dhaka-9 respectively, over alleged violations of the electoral code of conduct.

He said that during his referendum campaign, he used only his image without party symbols. "Yet the EC served us show-cause notices, indicating it has taken a stand against the referendum and discouraged campaigning," he alleged.

Nahid further accused BNP leaders of exploiting the death of former prime minister and BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia

to campaign under the guise of mourning meetings and blanket distribution, while the EC "looked the other way".

"If there is a plan to make the election unfair, occupy polling stations, politicise the administration, or pressure the Election Commission, the people will not accept it. The youth of Bangladesh will not accept it," he warned.

Nahid said they expected the Election Commission not to bow to pressure from any party or force, warning that if it did, they would be compelled to take a stand against such actions.