

Tarique slams ‘ticket to heaven’ pledge

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Taking the stage at 12:28pm, the BNP chief spoke for 23 minutes, addressing a range of issues, including the oppression and torture of his party's leaders and activists during the Awami League's 16 years in power, enforced disappearances, the country's fragile economy, looting, and the need to reform the state structure.

He also outlined future plans, including the introduction of family, farmers' and health cards; large-scale canal excavation, with 20,000 kilometres to be dug nationwide; employment generation; and measures prioritising farmers, women, and environmental protection.

Tarique said that if the party is voted to power, the country would be governed in accordance with the righteousness of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Referring to the enforced disappearance of BNP leader Ilias Ali and the deaths of 13 people in Sylhet during the July uprising, he said, "Through the sacrifice of these lives, we began the journey to claim our rights, but a vested group has already started conspiring against it, and the conspiracy has not stopped inside the country either."

"On August 5, 2024, the people of Bangladesh proved that if they remain united, they can resist any conspiracy."

At one point during his speech, he called a person from the crowd onto the stage and asked, "What do you all believe? Who is the owner of the Holy Kaaba? Who is the owner of the world? Who owns the heaven? Who owns the sun and the stars?"

To each question, the man responded with "Allah".

Tarique then continued, "You all bore witness that the owner of hell is Allah, the owner of heaven is Allah, the owner of the Kaaba is Allah. Brother, does anyone else have the power to give away what is owned by Allah? No one does. So, before the election, one party is telling you 'We'll give you this, we'll give you that, we'll give you a ticket' ... is that not so?"

"If they speak of things that are

not owned by humans -- isn't that shirk?"

Tarique further said the country was liberated in 1971 at the cost of millions of lives, and the people know who played what role during the Liberation War.

"We saw who played a role in the martyrdom of hundreds and thousands of our brothers, in destroying the honour of hundreds of thousands of our mothers and sisters. The people of Bangladesh already know them."

"Brothers and sisters, [we must unite and stand] against such 'Kufri' [acts or beliefs considered disbelief in Islam], such thoughtlessness and such lies. We need to stay with our 'take back Bangladesh!'"

He said the people have freed the country from autocracy and the next task is to establish the people's rights. "Not just the right to vote or speak, but the right to self-reliance. Our goal is to ensure that every person can feed and clothe themselves, so that everyone can move safely -- that is how we will 'take back Bangladesh!'"

He added that the BNP does not only want voting rights or freedom of speech, but also aims to make people economically self-reliant.

Tarique spoke at the second rally at Ainpur playground in Moulvibazar's Sherpur at 3:00pm.

Once again, without naming Jamaat, he reiterated his accusation against a certain party of misleading voters. "They are now going to the homes of innocent mothers and sisters and selling 'tickets to Jannah!'"

At a rally in Habiganj, he said, "Let me share another update about the conspiracy to engineer the election -- their people are going door to door, collecting NID and mobile numbers. Have you heard about this?"

"They say they will establish the rule of honest people. They are collecting bKash numbers and phone numbers, saying they will send money -- this is their plan."

Addressing a Brahmanbaria rally at 10:30pm, Tarique urged voters to wake up early, attend Fajr prayers and go to the nearest polling stations.

He began his address at

Kishoreganj's Bhairab rally around 12:15am today. Urging votes for the BNP, he warned the people to stay vigilant against those who halted the voting process for the past 15 years.

THE PROMISES MADE

In his Moulvibazar speech, the BNP chairman said employment opportunities would increase across the country if his party was voted to power. "Training and language education would be provided to help young people become skilled and secure better jobs."

He added that in the around 130 tea gardens in the district, the workers, particularly women, are living in difficult conditions and earning inadequate wages. "We want to provide family cards to these workers. Through the cards, we will offer either food assistance or cash support so that they can manage their households properly."

He added that besides tea workers, families of day labourers and farmers would also receive family cards.

Tarique also said farmers, through the "farmers' card", would be provided with necessary facilities, while also mentioning plans to introduce honorariums for imams and muezzins.

He said Moulvibazar stands as clear evidence of official neglect, as the previous government failed to ensure even basic healthcare facilities in the region. "Residents are still forced to travel to Sylhet or Dhaka for treatment, risking time, money and lives."

"Medical colleges and healthcare institutions will be established on a priority basis in neglected areas."

In his speech in Brahmanbaria, he said his party will prioritise road construction, the development of educational institutions and employment.

As of the filing of this report at 1:00am, Tarique was scheduled for two more rallies -- one in Narsingdi and another in Narayanganj.

He is scheduled to address a rally at the capital's Bhasantek BRP field at 6:00pm today, marking the second day of his election campaign.

(Our Sylhet correspondents Dwoha Chowdhury and Mintu Deshwara contributed to this report.)

Sharmin Academy founding principal, manager sued

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Earlier, police said they had spoken to the child's family, who initially did not agree to file a case, citing security concerns.

The CCTV footage, dated January 18 at 12:51pm, shows a woman dragging a child dressed in a school uniform into an office room. She first slaps the child. A man who was already present in the room then joins in, grabbing the child by the throat at times and pressing his mouth shut at others.

The man is seen holding a stapler. The child is sometimes crying and at other times writhing in distress. The woman holds the child by the hands to restrain him. At one point, when the child spits on the woman's sari, the man presses the child's head against the spot and shakes it several times.

While the child is seen crying in fear, the woman is seen smiling and laughing.

The footage, which went viral on Wednesday, was shared on Facebook by Advocate Saleh Uddin, who described it as a "sample" of



how children are punished at the institution.

Saleh later filed another case with the court of Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Ripon Hossain against Sharmin and Pabitra under Section 323 of the Penal Code, said Rifat Rahman, a lawyer for the

Record crore-rich candidates in race

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Speaking to this newspaper, Tauhidul, who also led the research team, said their findings are based on the analysis of affidavits submitted by 2,288 candidates who were initially declared valid by the Election Commission.

With many of them later pulling out, a total of 1,981 candidates now remain in the race.

The watchdog reported that 1,696 candidates are contesting a national election for the first time.

Of the valid candidates, 560 declared movable or liquid assets worth Tk 1 crore or more. The number was 273 in the 2008 election and has steadily risen to 547 by 2024.

Seven of the 10 candidates with the highest movable assets are from the BNP, while three are independents.

BNP's candidate from Chapainawabganj-2, Aminul Islam, declared the highest movable assets, totalling Tk 599 crore.

Twenty-seven candidates reported movable and immovable assets worth Tk 100 crore or more, including 18 from the BNP and nine independents.

A total of 891 MP aspirants declared movable and immovable assets worth Tk 1 crore or more.

TIB found that 76 percent of candidates hold at least an undergraduate degree -- the highest share to date.

Although the number of candidates who identify as businesspeople fell slightly, they still make up almost half (48 percent) of those in the race, while career politicians account for less than two percent.

Iftekharuzzaman said this fact is a reflection of money's role in politics.

Islamist party nominees now account for over one-third of the valid candidates, marking their strongest presence since 2008.

Asked to comment on this sharp rise, Iftekharuzzaman said, "Muscle power and money have long been prominent elements in politics, and now religion has also become a factor, which gives us something to reflect on."

Meanwhile, women make up only four percent of parliamentary contenders, the lowest representation since 2014. Twenty-four female candidates are contesting from the BNP-led alliance, while only six are from the Jamaat-led combine.

On women's lower representation, Iftekharuzzaman pointed out that that about 10 percent of independents are female -- challenging political parties' claim that there are not enough qualified female contenders.

The watchdog noted that while indebted candidates are at their lowest share in five elections, 25 percent still carry loans or liabilities totalling Tk 18,868 crore -- the highest to date.

A total of 59.41 percent of BNP candidates have loans, while the figures stand at 32.79 percent for independents, 26.97 percent for the Jatiya Party, 25 percent for the Communist Party of Bangladesh, and 22.26 percent for Jamaat-e-Islami.

Several MP aspirants possess more than 50 acres of land, in violation of existing law. A total of 530 candidates, or 22.66 percent, currently face lawsuits. The average age of candidates is 51 years -- the lowest since 2008, when it stood at 72.

Replying to a question, Iftekharuzzaman said he hopes that the Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission and National Board of Revenue will find discrepancies in the affidavits of the candidates and take action accordingly.

IAB promises justice, equal opportunities

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the campaign, carrying the party's electoral symbol, the hand fan.

During the campaign, leaflets were distributed among the public, and the candidate interacted with people from different walks of life.

Many greeted Faizul and

exchanged views with him, while party activists sought prayers and support.

Campaign activities were also conducted in different areas of the city, including Sadar Road and the Launch Ghat areas.

According to party sources, Islami Andolan Bangladesh has fielded

complainant.

Speaking to the daily Prothom Alo yesterday at the Paltan Police Station, the boy's mother said, "My child is still traumatised. Even in sleep, he suddenly screams, 'Don't stitch my mouth shut.' He also keeps saying, 'I won't go to school anymore.' He is so afraid that we might send him back to school that he doesn't even want to stay with us. He has gone to his maternal grandparents' home."

The child's father said that within just one week of enrolling in the school's pre-play class, his son became a victim of such inhumane abuse. After watching the video, they were left stunned. Their son repeatedly said, "The uncle said if I tell at home, he will slit my throat. He will stitch my mouth shut."

According to a 2011 Supreme Court judgment, corporal punishment in schools violates children's constitutional rights. A Ministry of Education circular banned corporal punishment in schools that year.

Won't indulge in graft

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extortion, land grabbing, filing false cases, corruption, terrorism, killing people by throwing stones or by running them over with vehicles -- only they, I hope, will be able to present the people with a better Bangladesh in the days ahead."

In a veiled reference to the BNP, Shafiqur also said extortion in the name of "tax" would no longer be allowed.

Pointing to the BNP's promise to distribute family cards, he said, "We are not making any such promises. Can a family's problems be solved with Tk 2,000?"

He also questioned the source of funds for such programmes.

"Where will the money come from? ... This is not anyone's personal money; it is taxpayers' money. But there is also an unofficial tax," he said.

"From every grocery shop, from street vendors, even from brothers or sisters begging by the roadside,

money is being collected. We do not want that money to go to anyone. Not only that, we will stop this altogether, Insha'Allah [God willing]."

Highlighting Jamaat's stance against corruption, he said, "We have declared that we will not take donations, nor will we allow anyone else to take them, Insha'Allah. We will not engage in corruption, and we will not allow anyone else to do so either."

Shafiqur also pledged to build an inclusive Bangladesh.

"We want to build a Bangladesh that belongs to children; to young men and women; to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians; and to workers, farmers, and professionals from all walks of life."

At the rally, National Citizen Party Convener Nahid Islam called on the Election Commission to act neutrally to ensure a fair election.

"There must be the same code of conduct for all parties. No

discrimination will be accepted," he said, adding that they were focusing on the election.

"Do not force us to wage a movement," he warned.

Nahid said, "After the mass uprising, we entered politics with hope and aspirations to build a new Bangladesh. In that process, we have largely failed and many tasks remain unfinished. Insha'Allah, in this election, the 10-party alliance will win by a large margin and complete those unfinished tasks."

Without naming the BNP, he added, "We hear about family cards, farmer cards. Cards should be given so people benefit. But will these cards really reach the intended recipients? Will people not have to pay a bribe of Tk 1,000 to receive a Tk 2,000 card?"

At the end of the rally, the Jamaat ameer handed out balance-scale symbols to party candidates and presented a balance-scale bearing a water-lily emblem to Nahid Islam.

NCP's only goal is to win

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given special privileges. Even before the official campaign started, they had been campaigning nonetheless. To remain neutral, the commission must behave impartially," he said.

Despite what he described as challenges, Nahid reaffirmed the party's commitment to remain in the race.

As part of the day's activities, NCP Chief Coordinator and Dhaka-8 candidate Nasiruddin Patwary said, party leaders visited the graves of the three national leaders, organised a parade, and held a march for justice in the capital.

After the prayers, Nahid and other candidates for Dhaka constituencies marched to the National Press Club.

Nahid, who is contesting from Dhaka-II, said the election marks Bangladesh's return to the ballot after 16 years.

"During this period, people were denied their right to vote. We are reclaiming that right today, honouring the sacrifices of thousands of martyrs. This time, we will vote 'yes' for reform. We aim to win and implement our promises of structural and constitutional change within parliament," he said.

In the afternoon, Nahid joined the election campaign of the Jamaat-led 10-party alliance at Mirpur-10 Adarsha High School field.

At the event, Jamaat Ameer Shafiqur Rahman handed over the joint electoral symbol, Dari Palla-Shapla Koli, to Nahid and urged Dhaka-II voters to support him by voting for the symbol of justice.

Nahid described Shafiqur as a courageous leader and recalled the persecution and imprisonment he faced in the anti-government movement during the Awami League's tenure.

Criticising BNP's pledge to introduce Family Cards if elected, Nahid said, "We want the cards to reach the real beneficiaries. But will they? If a Tk 2,000 card requires Tk 1,000 as a bribe, what is the advantage?"

"If bribery and extortion are not eliminated, these benefits will never reach the people. On the one hand, the party [BNP] promises to distribute cards, but on the other, it is trying to bring loan defaulters into parliament. If the intention is truly to serve the people, no loan defaulter should be nominated."

Israel strikes four Syria-Lebanon border crossings

REUTERS
Israel launched strikes on four border crossings on the Syria-Lebanon border on Wednesday evening, saying "they were used by the Iran-backed group Hezbollah to smuggle weapons".

Israel and Lebanon agreed to a US-brokered ceasefire in 2024, ending more than a year of fighting between Israel and Hezbollah that culminated in Israeli strikes that severely weakened the group. Since then, both sides have traded accusations of violations.

Lebanon has faced growing pressure from the US and Israel to disarm Hezbollah, and its leaders fear that Israel could dramatically escalate strikes across the battered country to push Lebanon's leaders to confiscate Hezbollah's arsenal more quickly.

Another Israeli strike on the southern Lebanese village of Qennarit wounded 19 people, the Lebanese health ministry said.

The Israeli military had issued a warning on Wednesday to residents of certain buildings in the southern Lebanese villages of Qennarit, Kfour and Jarjoua ahead of planned strikes on what was described as Hezbollah infrastructure.

No scope to send team to India: Asif Nazrul

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its citizens when traveling to another country, there is no scope for any other considerations," he added.

Earlier on Wednesday, ICC formally rejected BCB's request to relocate Bangladesh's T20 World Cup matches from India over security concerns after an online meeting attended by directors from all Full Members, two Associate Member directors, ICC chairman Jay Shah and other ICC officials.

According to online reports, ICC had set a one-day deadline for BCB to confer with the government and decide whether they would send their team to India for the event. If not, Scotland was likely to replace them in the tournament, set to begin on February 7 in India and Sri Lanka.

Yesterday, for the first time, the players were invited for a discussion with the sports adviser.

Asif Nazrul said the meeting was held to convey to the players why the government has decided not to send the team to India and reiterated that gravity of Bangladesh's security concerns.

"This concern is not based on any abstract or hypothetical idea; rather, it stems from a real incident in which the Indian cricket board bowed down to the pressures from fundamentalists, and barred one of our top players [Mustafizur Rahman] from India," Asif Nazrul said.

Mustafizur was left out by Indian

Premier League (IPL) franchise Kolkata Knight Riders on January 3 under the directives of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), seemingly under pressure from right-wing politicians and religious leaders.

The very next day, BCB sent a letter to ICC requesting relocation.

In an ICC statement released on Wednesday, ICC claimed there was "no threat" to the Bangladesh contingent according to its security assessments and also labelled Mustafizur's incident "a single, isolated and unrelated development" in a domestic league.

But Asif Nazrul did not agree.

"That country could not provide security to one of our players. The Indian cricket board is effectively an extended part of that government. They were unable or reluctant to provide security for one of our players under pressure from fundamentalists.

"Since then, there have been no significant changes in India that would assure us that a similar fundamentalist outburst won't happen again. How can we be convinced that after failing to provide security to Mustafizur, India would be able to do it for our cricketers, journalists and spectators."

The adviser also criticised the ICC for overlooking this incident in their communications with BCB and also pointed out the lack of communication from India's end.

"ICC made no attempts to convince us about this. Rather than speaking

about the real incident, ICC discussed its standard security procedures. ICC took no real stance about our specific grievance.

"Even from the Indian government's end, there was no attempt to convince us that the Mustafizur incident was an isolated incidence, or that they are sorry for it, or are taking some steps for our spectators, journalists and cricketers. No such communications were made, there was no attempt to convince us."

BCB president Aminul Islam Bulbul, who represented Bangladesh in the ICC meeting, described how they tried to convince the ICC and said the board will carry on trying till the end.

"Last year's February, when a country [India] refused to compete in the Champions Trophy [in Pakistan] owing to security concerns, and when they conveyed their government's decision to the ICC, it provided a neutral venue for them. Their team stayed in the same hotel, played all their matches at the same venue for the entire Champions Trophy. It was a privilege," Aminul said.

"We gave it as a reference, we said as the hybrid model was introduced due to security concerns and the government's reluctance, we took that line of discussion and tried to convince the ICC. But they rejected our request."

"We will keep on trying. We have not given up yet, we will communicate with them again today," he added.