

## A peaceful start to electioneering

EC must enforce the rules impartially to ensure a credible election

The peaceful beginning of the campaign for the 13th parliamentary election is an encouraging sign, particularly given our troubled electoral history. The first two days of electioneering passed without major violence or disorder, with political parties and candidates launching rallies, door-to-door outreach, and digital campaigns. After years of one-sided polls and widespread public disillusionment, this election represents the first truly competitive contest in more than a decade.

Candidates from major parties—BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, NCP, Islami Andolan, Ganotantrik Juktajfront, and others—visited voters, held rallies, and announced their platforms. The Election Commission has urged strict adherence to the electoral code of conduct. Yet, reports from the very first day of campaigning point to multiple breaches of the rules. Despite a landmark legal reform banning all types of posters, they have already appeared in some areas. Similarly, while only biodegradable materials are permitted for banners and festoons, non-degradable materials such as plastic and polythene are being used openly in the capital and elsewhere. Loudspeaker campaigning, though regulated by strict time limits, has also raised questions about compliance. Individually, these may appear to be minor breaches, but collectively they signal a lack of discipline—and, more importantly, a lack of deterrence.

Muscle power and money have long played a prominent role in our politics. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) reports that this election will feature the highest-ever number of candidates with assets exceeding Tk 1 crore, including 27 aspirants declaring movable and immovable assets of Tk 100 crore or more. The EC must rigorously examine affidavit disclosures, verify any inconsistencies, and coordinate with oversight bodies to ensure that wealth and influence do not undermine the democratic process.

As political competition is intense, accusations and counter-accusations are already emerging. As election expert Badiul Alam Majumdar has rightly noted, some level of tension is normal, but it must never spill over into violence or systematic unfairness. Preventing that outcome requires an EC willing to act decisively. Responsibility, however, does not rest with the EC alone; political parties must also refrain from unfair practices, respect environmental and legal rules for campaigning, and focus on engaging voters. The administration and law enforcement agencies, too, must perform their duties impartially and professionally.

This election offers a chance to restore credibility to the country's electoral system. The EC must act with courage and impartiality to ensure that. Political parties must compete honourably, and candidates must respect both the letter and the spirit of the law. Only by doing so can we ensure that February 12 delivers a truly free, fair and credible election.

## Repair and return Harin Ghata's glory

Authorities must ensure routine maintenance of facilities in eco-parks

The deterioration of the Harin Ghata eco-park in Barguna due to neglect and lack of routine maintenance is disheartening. The park, home to a larger breed of spotted deer compared to those seen in the Sundarbans, was developed into an eco-tourism site in 2015 by the environment ministry. It used to feature walking trails, resting shades, a rest house, a watchtower, shaded huts, and public washrooms. The area once attracted many tourists, with revenues reaching as much as Tk 1.2 lakh in 2024 from park ticket sales. But now, most of the sheds and washrooms lie in ruin, and many of the slabs of the 950-metre trail that leads to four beautiful, secluded beaches—Laldia, Ruhita, Padma and Char Lathimara—are either missing or broken in places. As a result, most tourists cannot access the beaches. Even climbing the five-storey watchtower has become a challenge because of the unsafe stairs.

The park is a reminder of our culture of developing infrastructure and then allowing it to descend into ruin. While our fervour is impressive when it comes to raising or allocating funds during the development stage of a project, it somehow vanishes when it comes to maintaining the facilities. The Harin Ghata eco-park faced a similar fate. Much of its facilities were damaged by Cyclone Remal in May 2024. One and a half years later, the level of damage remains the same as the authorities have not yet taken any steps to carry out the necessary repairs. This implies that they have little interest in earning revenues or augmenting the tourist appeal of the park. Otherwise, how could they not repair and at least make the washrooms functional in a more than 3000-acre eco-park?

Bangladesh does not have a shortage of scenic places that can be leveraged for generating revenue through tourism. What we lack is the willingness and sincerity of public officials responsible for preserving and maintaining the facilities needed to make these natural sites, like the Harin Ghata eco-park, accessible to the public. If we want to attract tourists to this country, making and broadcasting promotional videos is not enough. Authorities must repair and routinely maintain the facilities that make places of tourist interest comfortable for visitors.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

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# EDITORIAL



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AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

The termination of two teachers of the University of Asia South Pacific (UAP), under pressure from groups of former and current students, on allegations of "Islamophobia" and being sympathisers of the ousted regime, is part of a disturbing trend. Teachers have been forced to resign, physically assaulted and mentally abused online with the administration failing to stand by them.

On December 18, Assistant Professor Layeqa Bashir and Associate Professor ASM Mohsin of the Department of Basic Sciences and Humanities at the UAP were terminated. The university administration's reason in the notice was "the prevailing situation resulting from student protests."

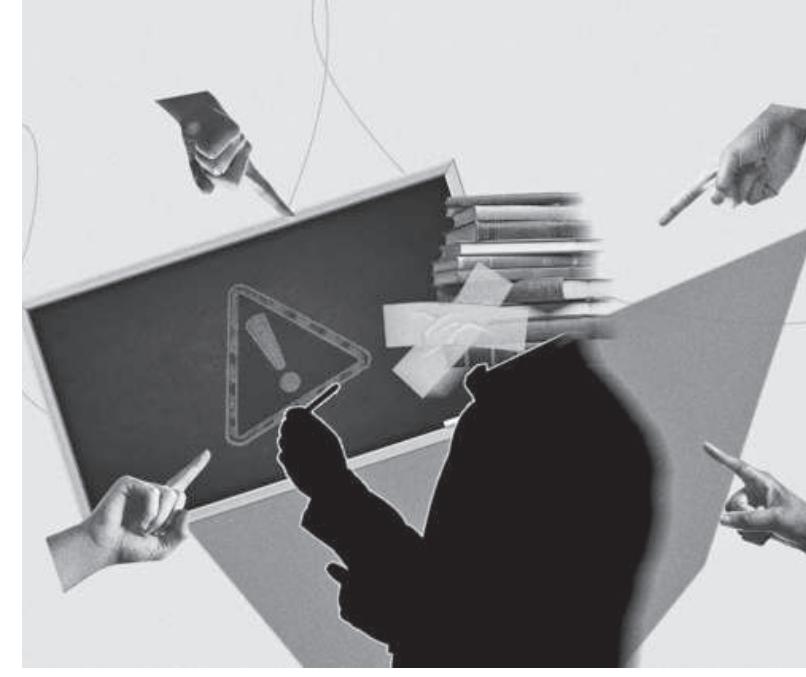
This happened without any institutional process. Instead, Prof Layeqa was first asked to resign and when she protested the move, an investigation committee was formed that invited complaints against her. Layeqa told *The Daily Star* that if she held anti-religion views, this would have been noted during semester evaluations. Instead, she alleged that complaints were invited from the entire student body after the committee was formed. But even before the investigation report was submitted and without giving any chance for her to respond, the university administration decided to terminate her along with Prof Mohsin.

According to reports, it all started on December 10 over Layeqa's Facebook post where she objected to face-covering while having no issues with other aspects of purdah. This was in the context of the murder of a mother and daughter in Mohammadpur where the murderer, a domestic worker, had covered her face and worn one of the victim's clothes to escape undetected. Layeqa had added the story at the bottom of her post.

Although the post had been set to be visible only to her friends, screenshots were leaked which led to an eruption online of demands for her termination. A week later, she apologised for any hurt feelings from her post, saying the remarks

were personal and written from the standpoint of personal security following the Mohammadpur double murder. She apologised if anyone was hurt by her post and said it had no connection to her workplace. But this did not assuage the students and the protests continued, with the protesters demanding the termination of Prof Mohsin for not taking any action against Prof Layeqa. According to Prof Mohsin,

Such vicious attacks on academic freedom and freedom of speech



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

he was terminated without any written complaint being made against him and with no inquiry committee formed. He was also not given any opportunity to respond.

At a press conference, one of the students demanded that teachers of other universities with the same mindset be identified and expelled. We all know how such incendiary comments can lead to dangerous situations.

What is most disturbing is that the UAP administration, instead of waiting for a full report of the investigation, announced the termination of both. Their lack of

spell disaster for universities. How will teachers teach subjects like anthropology, English literature or psychology if they are in fear that some students may interpret their lectures or comments as being anti-religion? A university is a place where ideas and views are exchanged and generated. This requires a sense of freedom that is unique and sacred. It is also the basis of debate and critical thinking. During the AL regime especially, the public universities were plagued by the violence and bullying perpetrated by the Chhatra League cadres and their cohorts. Anyone who did not bow down to them or expressed

opinions against the regime and its cronies could be targeted. Private universities, however, were more or less spared of this.

Not anymore. Now, after an uprising that promised to do away with such repression, it is back with a vengeance, only the actors are different. Groups claiming to uphold Islamic values (and some affiliated with political parties) have become emboldened and have decided to "cleanse" the universities of those they have tagged as anti-Islamic or "agents of the AL."

There have been some who have expressed their outrage at Prof Layeqa Bashir's arbitrary termination and expressed solidarity with her. The University Teachers' Network has condemned the UAP's arbitrary termination of the teachers without due process and stated that the teachers should be reinstated. A member of the network has aptly called it an assault on the academic freedom of all universities. Women's rights organisation Naripokkho has also protested the termination of Prof Layeqa and the weaponisation of "hurting religious sentiments" to harass, torture and even kill people.

On face value, these incidents seem to be part of a widespread campaign to target anyone who does not appear to conform to certain ideologies. In the name of righteousness or safeguarding religion, certain groups—some politically affiliated—are carrying out this campaign, first by casting aspersions or even abuse on social media and then gathering enough people to create a mob and get the job done. For educational institutions, this is particularly dangerous as it aims to censor and control teachers, students, curriculum, and even campus environment.

Unless university administrations treat these cases with professionalism and fairness, these incidents will keep happening. Few teachers will want to risk termination, harassment or physical assault while trying to make students learn, which may compel them to leave out important parts of the curriculum and lead to constant self-censorship. This is a debilitating chokehold on intellectual development. Ultimately, it will be the students who will pay the price of this rabid intolerance of diverse opinions even when they are fact-based. For university education that is meant to enlighten minds through deeper knowledge and exposure to the unfamiliar and unconventional, these attacks on academic freedom will be nothing less than catastrophic.

## Is Bangladesh's most vital vote not getting enough attention?



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ZAKIR KIBRIA

A curious drama is unfolding as Bangladesh approaches a historic double-header on February 12: a parliamentary election and a constitutional referendum. One is hailed as vital for the nation. The other asks citizens to approve or reject the July National Charter, a document proposing over 80 foundational reforms with a "Yes" or "No." We are so focused on the roar of the electoral battle that we risk missing the constitutional equations that will rewrite the nation's rulebook for generations to come.

What exactly is on this coloured ballot? The charter isn't minor tinkering. A "Yes" vote instructs the next parliament to enact a new political architecture, including reinstating a non-partisan caretaker government for elections, creating a 100-member upper house of parliament, and implementing 30 specific reforms—from prime ministerial term limits to judicial independence—binding on future governments. It's a generational choice presented in the simplest binary term.

Yet, for a nation of over 12.7 crore registered voters, this monumental decision arrives shrouded in technical complexity and overshadowed by the electoral frenzy. As one young voter recently confessed, the issues still feel distant, the details obscure. How did a vote of such constitutional gravity become the subplot in the story?

The plot twist lies in the role of the stage managers. The interim government, tasked with neutrally overseeing both the polls, has become the most powerful campaigner for a "Yes" outcome in the referendum. It has launched a large-scale, statewide effort, coordinating across all ministries and even mobilising private banks and NGOs. Its message is unequivocal: vote "Yes" to implement all reforms; vote "No" and gain nothing.

Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser Ali Riaz defends this, arguing that the government emerged from a popular uprising with a mandate for reform and sees "no legal restriction" on its campaigning. He frames the referendum as a safeguard against fascist rule. All advisers have publicly urged people to support reforms by voting "Yes."

However, this blurs a fundamental democratic line. As constitutional expert Shahdeen Malik has warned, this "clearly illegal and unethical" behaviour constitutes direct government interference. Imagine a football referee not just enforcing rules but sprinting alongside one team, cheering them on. The entity meant to guarantee a fair debate has become its most powerful protagonist, steering public discourse towards a pre-approved answer.

This is where we encounter the architecture of a "foretold consensus." French philosopher Jacques Rancière

argued that politics is fundamentally about the "distribution of the sensible"—what a society decides is visible, sayable, and debatable. Our current moment is a potent example. By declaring the upcoming election the singular, all-important event, our public narrative performs a powerful act of curation. It makes one democratic act hyper-visible and

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History offers a cautionary note. Bangladesh's past referendums live in two distinct memories. In 1977 and 1985, under authoritarian rulers, they produced suspiciously overwhelming "Yes" votes (98.9 percent and 94.5 percent, respectively) to legitimise power. The 1991 referendum was different, a consensus-driven exercise that restored parliamentary democracy. The 2026 referendum occupies a troubling grey zone. It is not the uncontested plebiscite of 1977 and 1985. However, the active steering by the interim government also distinguishes it from the consensus model of 1991. When the state campaigns for a specific result, the process risks becoming less about deliberative choice and more about the administration of a foretold conclusion.

The path forward is not to diminish the election's importance but to expand our democratic sensibility. A healthy democracy can hold two crucial conversations at once. We must be able to ask, openly and constructively: can a complex charter of over 80 reforms be meaningfully decided by a single binary choice without deeper public engagement and control? Does a government-run campaign for one side strengthen or weaken the long-term legitimacy of the outcome?

As voters prepare to receive two ballots—one white, one coloured—on February 12, the story of Bangladesh's democratic revival will not be written by a single vote, but by the conversation we choose to have about both. Let us celebrate the return of electoral competition, but let us also turn up the volume on the referendum, pull it from the shadows of foregone conclusions, and subject its monumental proposals to the light of relentless, curious and respectful public debate. Only then can we move beyond a chronicle of foretold consensus and start writing a truly democratic script.

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