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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Young voters want credible pledges

Parties must heed their concerns about safety, freedom, jobs

Many have their hopes pinned on the 13th parliamentary election scheduled to be held on February 12. It is a moment Bangladeshis have long been waiting for after three largely questionable and non-participatory elections held under the Awami League government. So, while the interim government and participating political parties must ensure that voters can exercise their rights enthusiastically, without fear or coercion, it is equally important to listen to the concerns and aspirations of voters, particularly the younger ones aged between 18 and 35 who are defined as youth under the National Youth Policy 2017.

Many in this age group will be exercising their right to franchise for the first time. Given the role of young people in the 2024 mass uprising, it is only natural to expect that they will be influencing Bangladesh's post-election trajectory as well. Furthermore, their votes carry significant weight as they account about 40 percent of the total electorate based on Election Commission data. Therefore, the old way of doing electoral politics—simply dumping empty promises into manifestos—is unlikely to work with this increasingly vocal voter population. They are looking for credible, time-bound commitments from political parties.

While talking to this daily, several voters from this age group have placed safety—including an end to mob violence—at the top of their list of demands. They also want manifestos to clearly state political parties' commitment to making the justice system impartial and accountable, ensuring law enforcement agencies are free of political interference, and guaranteeing the security of minority communities. People's freedom to express opposing views without fear is also important to many. Other priorities include jobs, fair recruitment, digital education, better curricula, good governance in the health sector, and closing the "digital divide" in madrasa education. These voters also want the next government to rely more on domestic assets and reduce dependence on imports. Most importantly, they expect the next government to maintain zero tolerance for corruption and all forms of injustice.

As Bangladesh once again transitions into a democratic process, political parties—both those forming the government and those to be in opposition—must remember that these are not mere aspirations. While voters can decide parties' fates through their ballots, this generation also retains the power to hold them accountable, as was evident in July-August 2024. Moreover, they are living in a time of high geopolitical tensions and an unstable global economy. Therefore, it is even more crucial for young people to trust that they can build their future in this country. To do so, they need to first trust political governments to carry out reforms and take initiatives that align with their aspirations and priorities.

That is why political parties, old and new, must move beyond the outdated practice of treating their manifestos as mere promotional leaflets. Instead, they should regard them as binding commitments to fulfil their promises.

Ensure peace in the CHT

Fully implement CHT accord, recognise Indigenous people's rights

It is disappointing that nearly three decades after the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord was signed, the same unresolved issues continue to trouble the region. Speakers at a roundtable discussion held recently in Dhaka reiterated how far justice, dignity, and lasting peace continue to elude the Indigenous communities in the hills. Speakers discussed how the CHT crisis is not a local problem but a national one, which demands strong political will, institutional reform, and genuine engagement with all stakeholders.

Despite successive governments' commitments, the CHT accord is still not fully implemented. This bears serious consequences. Land-grabbing, weak governance, ineffective local administration, and the erosion of trust in law enforcement and the justice system have created a climate where impunity thrives. Recurrence of violence in the region, including the recent incidents in Rangamati and Khagrachhari, continues to serve as grim reminders that unresolved political and historical grievances are placing Indigenous communities in harm's way.

As experts stressed at the roundtable, lasting peace in the CHT is not possible unless Indigenous peoples are recognised as equal citizens whose identity and dignity are respected. Repeated failures to ensure justice in cases involving land-grabbing, attacks, violence against women, etc have further deepened feelings of insecurity among Indigenous communities. Governance gaps, including weak land and resource management, continue to worsen the situation. The Land Commission, in particular, cannot function effectively unless the Indigenous communities' land rights are formally recognised. Experts also cautioned against seeing the CHT issue only as a security issue, saying that real progress requires engaging the security forces in a rights-based dialogue and changing the mindset that shapes policies in the region.

With the national election only weeks away, our political parties should commit to full implementation of the CHT Peace Accord. Whoever forms the next government should clearly outline their plans to implement it. Strengthening land governance, reforming local institutions, ensuring credible investigations into recent violence, and ending the culture of impunity should be a priority for the upcoming administration. Without ensuring these, sustainable peace in the CHT will remain a distant dream.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Space shuttle Challenger explodes

On this day in 1986, US space shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds after lift off from Florida, killing all seven aboard, including a schoolteacher who had been chosen as the first American civilian to travel into space.

Election stakes, coalition battles, and the Awami League question



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ZILLUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh is heading into one of the most consequential elections in its history, not only because it follows the dramatic fall of Sheikh Hasina's government but also because it marks a decisive break from a long-entrenched political order. The February 12 election, therefore, will be more than about choosing a new government; it will be about redrawing the country's political map.

With the Awami League's political activities suspended and its leadership in disarray, millions of AL-leaning voters have been left politically orphaned. For decades, their loyalty was anchored in party identity, local patronage networks, and the memory of the liberation legacy. Now that this anchor is gone, these voters are unlikely to move as a single block. Instead, their behaviour will fragment across constituencies.

In many districts, tactical voting will dominate. AL supporters will likely back the strongest local candidate capable of winning—often a BNP nominee, sometimes a powerful independent, and in a few cases another coalition-aligned figure. The logic will not be ideological so much as practical. Politics in Bangladesh has always been intensely local, and personal networks still matter more than party labels.

In some constituencies, a section of former AL voters may even vote for Jamaat. Where Jamaat candidates have deep community roots or are

may push many into abstention or protest voting.

The net effect is that AL voters will not disappear from the election. They will help decide it—seat by seat, district by district—as a floating, unreliable force.

For Tarique Rahman and the BNP, this election represents a historic opening. But it is also a defining test of leadership. After years in exile and

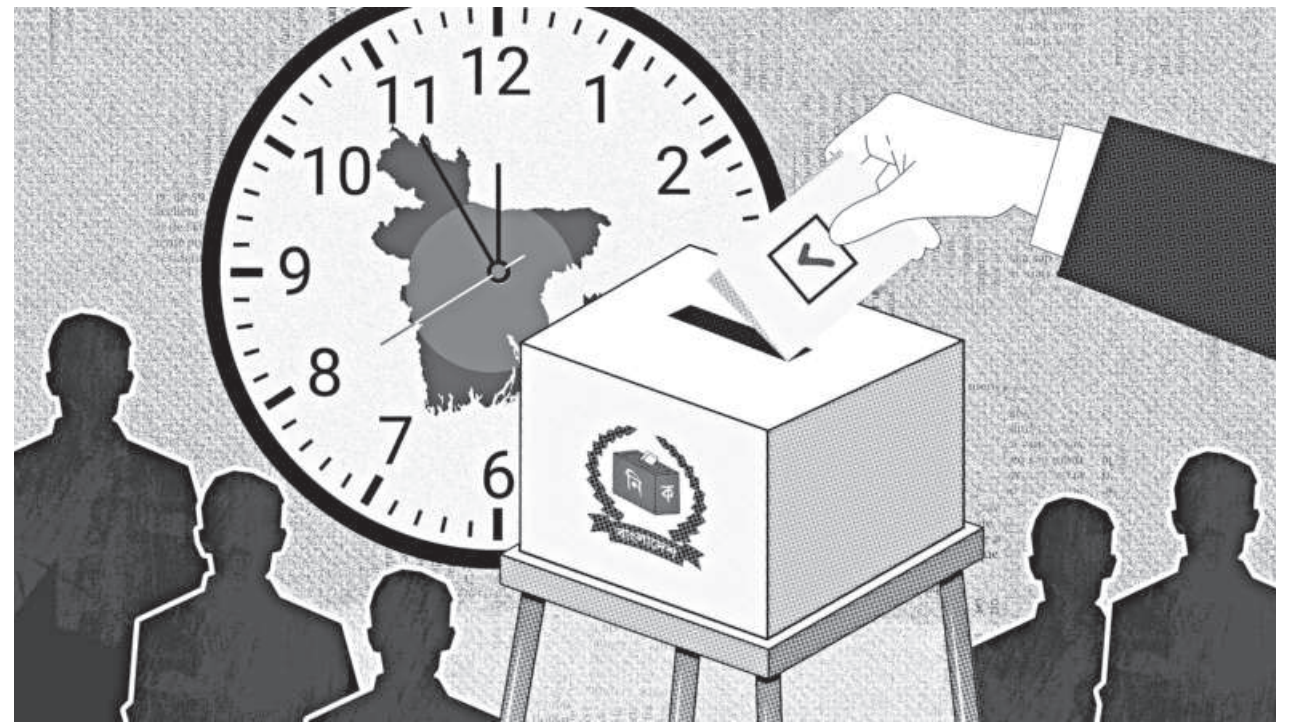
want stability, jobs, and security. The message should be simple: we want your vote, not your old rivalry.

The third and perhaps most delicate challenge is managing the Islamist question. With Jamaat openly positioning itself for influence on that front, BNP faces a strategic dilemma. Cooperation may help in seat arithmetic, but dependence risks alienating liberals, minorities, women voters, and international partners. The next government will need global legitimacy, foreign investment, and diplomatic credibility. That requires clear red lines on rights, the rule of law, and pluralism.

This election's success will be measured not only by who wins but also by how many people vote. Turnout on February 12 will be a direct test of security and trust. The key

openness to a post-election unity or coalition arrangement.

This realignment is most visible on campuses. For more than a decade, Bangladesh Chhatra League, the Awami League's student wing, dominated universities through administrative backing and coercive politics. After the 2024 uprising and the collapse of the AL government, that structure disintegrated. In its place, Islami Chhatra Shibir has emerged as the most organised student force, winning all five recent student union elections at public universities. For years, Shibir operated underground and, according to media reports and student testimonies, embedded many of its cadres inside BCL units to survive political repression. After the uprising, that hidden network surfaced openly



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

This election's success will be measured not only by who wins but also by how many people vote. Turnout on February 12 will be a direct test of security and trust. The key question is not whether Bangladeshis want change—they have already demonstrated that. The question is whether they feel safe or encouraged enough to participate in the process.

perceived as strong challengers to BNP dominance, voters may choose influence over ideology. Others are likely to stay home. Alienation, anger, and a sense of political dispossession

political uncertainty, Tarique seems to be standing at the threshold of power. How he frames his campaign and manages his party will help shape not only BNP's victory prospects but also possibly the legitimacy of the next political order.

His first strategic option is a broad stability-and-inclusion narrative. After years of repression, economic stress, and political upheaval in the country, voters want calm and order. They want a functioning state. BNP's most powerful message is not revenge, but reassurance: that politics will return to institutions, that disputes will be resolved in courts and parliament, not on the streets, and that corruption will not be tolerated.

His second option is winning over orphaned or disgruntled AL voters without embracing the Awami League itself. BNP needs to make it clear that it is not rehabilitating the old order but offering a new political home for ordinary supporters who

question is not whether Bangladeshis want change—they have already demonstrated that. The question is whether they feel safe or encouraged enough to participate in the process.

Rising violence and fears of intimidation, if not properly addressed, could suppress turnout in sensitive districts or create uneven participation across the country. In politically contested areas, fear can be as decisive as persuasion. There are also concerns around election administration, including controversies surrounding expatriate postal voting and perceived administrative bias. In an election this charged and consequential, perception matters almost as much as reality.

Perhaps the most striking development of this election cycle is the return of Jamaat-e-Islami as a central political actor. Once marginalised, Jamaat is now positioning itself as a major power broker and has publicly signalled its

under the Shibir banner.

Jamaat's growth is less about slogans and more about leverage. If it emerges as the second force or coalition pivot, it will shape the character of the next government.

As I indicated earlier, this election is not merely about replacing one party with another. It is about redefining power after the collapse of a long-entrenched authoritarian regime. The Awami League may be politically sidelined, but its voters will impact the outcome. Tarique Rahman may be on the verge of victory, as some suggest, and Jamaat may not win outright. But nothing is written in stone. And whoever wins or loses will be judged not just by the result but also by how responsibly power is claimed, contested, and exercised in the moment that follows.

So, February 12 is more than just an election day. The question of whether Bangladesh can change course is being put to a vote on that day.

Remembering Mark Tully, the trusted chronicler of 1971



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Sir William Mark Tully, well known in the Indian subcontinent as Mark Tully of the BBC, was a friend of Bangladesh. Interested in theology and history in early life, he was the main commentator for the BBC World Service of the Liberation War, which was not only decisive for Bangladesh but also changed the borders of the subcontinent. Alongside the bloody events of 1971, various events in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Myanmar have been known to the world for 30 years through Mark Tully's commentary. On his demise, India's popular media, The Wire, referred to him as a fearless titan of journalism. The BBC referred to him as a "chronicler of modern India". And we Bangladeshis can call him a "trusted chronicler of 1971" for his role during our Liberation War.

Mark Tully was born in Kolkata's Tollygunge in West Bengal in 1935. After completing studies in London, he joined the BBC in 1964. He was the

bureau chief of the New Delhi office for 22 years. During Operation Searchlight on March 25, 1971, Tully was stationed in London. Tully worked to collect information from sources in Kolkata and Delhi to broadcast the truth of the atrocities to the world.

The first report on the genocide committed in Bangladesh was published by Mark Tully's friend, Simon John Dring, a young journalist for The Telegraph. On March 30, the British newspaper published Simon's report titled "Tanks Crush Revolt in Pakistan: 7,000 Slaughtered, Homes Burned." After its publication, all other influential media outlets in the world started publishing reports on our issue. This mounted international pressure on Yahya Khan. To handle the situation, Pakistan invited a group of foreign journalists to visit Dhaka. Mark Tully came to Dhaka in the last week of April 1971 with this group. He arrived on the condition that he should be allowed to work freely. During this

two-week visit, he travelled by road to Rajshahi, witnessing burned villages and evidence of massacres. After this trip, he returned to London via Delhi to continue his reporting, which included an important document of the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

During the visit, he also went to Old Dhaka, which was home to a significant Hindu population. At the time,

Tully remained a man of professional ethics and modesty following the events of 1971. He frequently maintained that he was simply a journalist fulfilling his duty. When he was later formally honoured by the Bangladeshi government for his contributions, he said that he did not feel comfortable with such an honour.

reports were surfacing that the Hindu community was being systematically targeted by the Pakistani military. His first stop was Shakhari Bazar, the site of a brutal massacre. While Tully was documenting the devastation, he was detained by West Pakistani police.

However, he was eventually released with the assistance of a Bangalee officer-in-charge at the police station.

After Mark Tully returned to London, martyred journalist Nizamuddin Ahmed, who worked as a stringer for the BBC, cooperated with him from within Bangladesh. In addition, Tully also gathered firsthand intelligence from the families and contacts of BBC Bangla staff in London. Serving as the primary voice of the BBC World Service during the conflict, his exhaustive work became a monumental contribution to the international understanding of the liberation movement.

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The contribution he made in 1971 is unforgettable. After his death on January 25, 2026, his mortal body may have merged with nature through his cremation at Delhi's Lodhi Estate crematorium, but his work will guide professional journalists for generations to come. He has written several books in his 90-year-long life. Among them, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle* and *No Full Stops in India* are particularly noteworthy.