

Sharsha: waiting for the border to breathe again

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Trade has slowed, travel has shrunk, and uncertainty hangs heavy over border communities. In places like Sharsha, where livelihoods are tightly bound to cross-border movement, diplomacy is not an abstract concept. It is real-life encounters.

Kashipur, a frontier village in Sharsha upazila, lies about an hour's drive from Jashore town. By the time I reached its bazar around midday, the place felt subdued, reflecting its remoteness and unease. At a tin shed tea stall beside a three-wheeler stand, I sat with a shopkeeper, a farmer, a tempo driver and a meat seller, men whose fortunes rise and fall with the border to a large extent.

"What happens at the border affects us in ways people in Dhaka don't understand," said Anisur Rahman, 55, a lifelong resident. He spoke wistfully of a childhood when crossing into Indian villages like Boyra and Kulanandapur was casual, almost instinctive. "We moved freely then. No fear," he said.

That freedom has steadily disappeared, especially after India erected the border fence roughly 25 years ago. Today, even approaching the border pillars feels dangerous. "Farmers are afraid of being shot by the BSF," Anisur said. "Now it is unthinkable to go close."

While villagers in Kashipur may not follow geopolitics, they feel its consequences acutely. Trade, both formal and informal, has slowed, and prices have climbed. Tariqul Islam, a tempo driver, said a tyre that cost Tk 3,200 a year ago now sells for Tk 5,500. Fertiliser prices have risen from around Tk 1,200 to Tk 1,800 a sack.

"This is largely linked to India," he said simply.

Yet views in Kashipur are not uniform. Karimul Sheikh, a farmer and local BNP leader who joined the conversation, was surprisingly unfazed by the strained relationship.

"Let relations be bad for a while," he said with a shrug. "It's better if rice and onions stop coming from India."

His reasoning was bluntly economic. Imported rice, he argued, depresses prices for local farmers. Onion imports, too, have long distorted the market.

"Whenever prices rose, India stopped exports, and prices would skyrocket," he said. "We once bought onions at Tk 200 a kilo. Now, even without imports, you can buy them at Tk 50. Farmers here have started growing onions themselves."

"India doesn't want us anyway," Karimul added. "If one side doesn't want a relationship, what can the other do?"

Asked what he expects from the next government, his answer was modest.

"We want to live in peace," he said. "No government can fulfil everyone's demands. Not even families can."

But one demand was non-negotiable: the vote.

"We couldn't vote for 17 years," he said. "This time we will."

Nowhere is the diplomatic chill more visible than at Benapole, Bangladesh's largest land port and busiest crossing with India. In normal times, thousands of people cross here daily. When I reached around 3:00pm, the area outside the immigration and customs buildings felt eerily empty.

Porters in red shirts sat idle on the pavement. Md Shajahan, one of them, said his earnings have collapsed over the past few months.

"India isn't issuing visas," he said. "Hardly 500 people cross now. Before, it was thousands every day."

Nearby, Md Rafiqul Islam, who runs Shantu Enterprise, a clearing

five or six now operate on a good day.

For Rafiqul, the solution is unmistakably political.

"Nothing will improve without an election," he said. "Whoever wins, an elected government is the only way out."

That sentiment was echoed by Nazrul Islam, a businessman in Benapole, though with sharper language. "We want a Bangladesh where India does not interfere or intimidate," he said. "We in border areas may endure hardship, but we don't want India frowning at us anymore."

Yet the cost of prolonged tension is undeniable. Transport companies, clearing agents, hotels, restaurants and car rental services across Benapole depend on smooth cross-border movement. For them, de-escalation is not ideological. It is existential.

On my way back from Benapole to Jashore, our vehicle was stopped at an army checkpoint. Soldiers were



In Kashipur, a frontier village in Sharsha upazila, many people's fortunes rise and fall with the border.

and forwarding agency next to the immigration office, described the downturn in stark numbers.

"Earlier, 1,200 to 1,400 trucks entered from India every day," he said. "Now it's barely 200 to 250."

The collapse began around eight months ago and has only worsened. With visas suspended, importers cannot even travel to India to negotiate deals.

"Look around," Rafiqul said, gesturing at the empty compound. "There used to be crowds here from morning till night."

Bus services have suffered the same fate. Where dozens of coaches once ran daily between Benapole and Dhaka, only

inspecting nearly every passing car, a visible sign that election-related security preparations are finally underway. For many traders in Benapole, the sight was perhaps quietly reassuring.

In Benapole and Kashipur, politics is not debated through manifestos and speeches. It is measured in border fences, idle porters, empty bus terminals, rising prices and the long wait for normalcy. People here are pinning their hopes on a fair and peaceful election and a transition to an elected government that might finally allow the frontier to breathe again. (Shakeel Anwar is a former BBC journalist)

Insane bounty for bureaucrats

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health budget for the current fiscal year.

The disparity in priorities is glaring: while the health sector fought to secure a nominal increase of just Tk 501 crore – a pittance in real terms – the bureaucracy is eyeing a windfall. The scale of the distortion is equally visible elsewhere: the pay hike is equivalent to almost half (44 percent) of the total Annual Development Programme and would devour a fifth of the government's operating expenditure.

The pay hike is a contradiction in terms for a government committed to a "contractionary" budget. The ADP has already been trimmed by 13.2 percent to lower the deficit.

The verdict from Bangladesh Bank Governor Ahsan H Mansur was unsparring. He told business leaders at an event yesterday that the salary hike would compel the state to borrow heavily from banks. "Is that going to help reduce inflation? No," he said. Taming prices to the desired level, he warned, would remain a distant dream.

The financing options range from the improbable to the disastrous. The National Board of Revenue (NBR) posted 14 percent growth in collection in the first half of the fiscal year, but still missed its target by Tk 46,000 crore.

With the tax-to-GDP ratio languishing at historic lows, a revenue-funded solution seems fanciful – an irony seemingly lost on the pay commission's chief, Zakir Ahmed Khan, who is himself a former chairman of the revenue board.

As Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka

office, points out, financing recurring expenditures through debt is economic heresy.

"Where will the money come from?" he says.

The government cannot print money without fuelling the very inflation it seeks to quash. Foreign agencies do not lend for public sector salaries. And heavy borrowing from the banking sector would crowd out private sector credit growth, which is already subdued at 6.58 percent.

It will further stifle the job creation needed for unemployed graduates.

MK Mujeri, a former director general of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, argues that the economy is simply not ready. The government's debt dependency is already creating risks; adding a permanent trillion taka obligation is reckless. He suggests a dearness allowance would have been a prudent stopgap, rather than a full blown pay commission, which has now raised expectations that the exchequer cannot meet.

There is also the question of equity. Dr Itteharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), brands the proposal as "not implementable."

In a country facing money scarcity, he argues, the burden of bureaucratic enrichment will ultimately fall on the general public through higher inflation and taxes.

The common refrain that higher pay reduces corruption is, in his view, a fallacy.

Historical data suggest the rate

of bribery often rises in tandem with salaries. Unless accompanied by strict asset disclosures – a condition rarely enforced – the hike is merely a "larger bill for the same results."

The spillover effects would be severe. A hike in government pay exerts pressure on the private sector and autonomous institutions to follow suit, creating a wage-price spiral that firms, lacking the government's fiscal immunity, cannot afford.

Belatedly waking up to the fiscal danger, the interim administration has offered an explanation. Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan, the power and energy adviser, told journalists that the commission's report is not binding.

The authority to accept, revise, or bin the proposal, he now insists, rests entirely with the next elected government. The current administration merely facilitated the process to address long-standing demands, he says.

This may be politically astute, but leaves a burden for whoever comes next. The next elected government will have to manage the soaring expectations of a powerful civil service against the hard reality of the treasury.

Zahid Hussain suggests a modest hike weighted towards lower-tier employees might be financeable, but anything resembling the commission's full proposal is a risk. By some estimates, inflation has eroded civil servants' purchasing power by 18.20 percent since the last pay review in 2015. Yet even a modest adjustment to match this, a hike of 25 percent, will add some Tk 25,000 crore to the wage bill.

Eggs hurled at Patwary

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Patwary claimed that students welcomed his team with flowers after they reached the college.

He said a group identifying themselves as former Chhatra Dal leaders then confronted him at the gate and demanded money, which he refused.

He alleged that the situation soon worsened when brick chunks and eggs were thrown at him and his supporters.

Several people were injured in the attack, including a woman who required four stitches to her head, he claimed.

"The police said they were there to protect us, yet our supporters were attacked in front of them," he said.

The NCP leader called on the BNP leadership to expel Abbas, who is Patwary's rival in Dhaka-8, alleging that Abbas's family members and supporters were behind what he described as a planned attack. Nasiruddin also named several individuals who took part in the attack.

This newspaper could not independently verify his or the NCP's claims.

At the briefing, NCP Convener Nahid said he had not come to "play

the victim card" but to issue a warning over the repeated attacks on candidates and campaigners of the II-party "Oikoboddho Bangladesh" alliance.

"If an attack takes place, there will be a counter-attack. If the Election Commission remains silent and if the police remain inactive, then we will do what is necessary from our side."

Nahid spoke of a similar incident a day earlier in Dhaka-18, where their alliance candidate Ariful Islam Adeb and his supporters were allegedly attacked. He also claimed that over the past few days, women campaigners affiliated with the female wing of the Jamaat were attacked in around six to seven districts.

According to him, the incidents showed a pattern of targeting the alliance candidates and campaigners, particularly young candidates and women.

Referring to the throwing of eggs at candidates, which he said occurred in Dhaka-8 and other areas, Nahid said, "If eggs are thrown at candidates of one party, candidates of the other party will face the same fate."

"We don't want such an environment. We want a politics of harmony, having fought the anti-fascist movement

together. But today, one side is using Awami League-style tactics to humiliate its rival candidates."

The NCP leader also alleged that while an alliance was being allowed to campaign freely, often in violation of the electoral code of conduct, candidates and activists of their alliance were being targeted elsewhere. "This has made it clear that there is no level playing field."

He further alleged that since BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman's return home, they have been hearing of a plan which, judging by recent incidents, appears to involve attacking and humiliating candidates of other alliances, obstructing campaigns, pressuring the EC and the media, making the election one-sided, capturing polling centres, and controlling the results.

"If there is such a plan, it will be settled on February 12."

Mahdi Amin, spokesperson for BNP's Central Election Steering Committee, rejected Nahid's claims.

In a Facebook post, he said, linking Tarique's name to any incident without any evidence is a reflection of a fascist culture.

ANFREL deploys

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public confidence in the electoral process, and compliance with the legal framework.

The observers will also monitor election day and post-election processes, including polling operations, vote counting, and the announcement of results.

The mission includes a social media monitoring component, conducted in partnership with The Carter Center, to examine online electoral discourse and the Election Commission's response to election-related content in the digital space.

ANFREL said its methodology is based on internationally recognised principles of election observation and builds on a pre-election assessment mission conducted in Bangladesh in November-December 2025.

ANFREL's observers will take part in a two-day briefing workshop in Dhaka on February 6-7.

The mission will issue an interim report with preliminary findings and immediate recommendations on February 15, accompanied by a press briefing in Dhaka, and publish a comprehensive final report after the mission concludes.

Leadership change

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"There is no alternative to electing honest, just and principle-based leadership. A single vote in favour of Islam means taking one step forward towards building a justice-based state. With every additional vote for the hand fan symbol, the strength of Islam will increase," he said.

At a rally in Delduar, Akhiner Mia, the IAB candidate for Tangail 6, said, "If I am elected MP, the long cherished dreams of this region will be fulfilled. In Sha Allah [God willing], I will not engage in corruption, nor will I allow anyone else to do so."

Mahbubur Rahman, a presidium member of the party, said the core theme of Islami Andolan's manifesto is building a Bangladesh that reflects public aspirations. The manifesto emphasises the supremacy of Shariah, employment for youth, and a job-oriented education system, he added.

Among others, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Maruf, central publicity and dawah secretary of Islami Andolan, and Hossein Ibn Sarwar, central vice president of the party's student wing, also addressed the rallies.

'We seek no conflict, but will defend ourselves'

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"Those who sincerely seek reform will find us by their side. Today, the youth have united against both old and new forms of fascism. Already, students from five public universities have made their stance clear," he said while addressing a rally at the Sathkira Government High School ground in the afternoon.

The Jamaat chief said two votes would be held on February 12 – one in favour of reform through a "yes" ballot and the other for a new Bangladesh.

He told the rally that a "yes" vote meant freedom, while a "no" vote meant slavery. "Entering the booth, voters must first firmly cast 'yes'. If 'yes' wins, Bangladesh wins. Fascism will not return, and the corrupt and extortionists will be buried.

Govt lenience fuelling mobs

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phone calls to mobilise help but it did not arrive in time, Kabir said: "My witness is the Prime Minister's press secretary himself. If the chief adviser's press secretary cannot get help when major media houses are under attack, it means the government allowed this to happen."

Journalism in a democratic society must remain inherently critical of power, said Kabir, also the editor of the daily New Age.

"Press freedom is not for journalists – it is for the people," he said, adding that journalism enables public opinion to exert democratic pressure between elections.

The implementation of the Wage Board was not only the government's responsibility but also that of media owners. He called for transparency and a code of conduct for both journalists and owners.

Media Reform Commission Chief Kamal Ahmed warned that the government's planned Broadcast Commission Ordinance and Media Commission Ordinance could create serious regulatory conflicts due to overlapping authorities.

The television licensing authority already exists under the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). If the BTRC remains and another broadcast commission is formed, there will be constant conflict over whose decision will prevail.

"If the Press Council is kept and a media commission is also formed, there will be the same kind of overlap and conflict," said Ahmed, also the consulting editor of The Daily Star.

Such duplication would undermine reform efforts, he said, adding that the Media Reform Commission had deliberately avoided proposing overlapping powers and instead proposed editorial oversight and grievance mechanisms.

Referring to the government's recent rush to issue ordinances, he said: "This government is at its final stage, and suddenly it has become very active."

The ordinances would still require validation by the next parliament.

"If things are done through patchwork, it can create a dangerous

situation in the future."

He also reiterated that financial insecurity poses a threat to press freedom.

"If journalists are not financially independent, they cannot work independently," he said.

Although the chief adviser talks about 'three zeros', in reality, he sees only emptiness around him, said Zillur Rahman, the president of CGS.

A government representative refused to use the term 'mobs' claiming it would be an insult to the mass uprising, he said, while raising questions about media freedom in such a situation.

"There is no real vote in the country; what exists is referendum campaigning – government campaigning through government offices, with 'Referendum 2026' above 'parliamentary election,'" said Rahman, also the host of the long-running talk show Tritiyu Matra.

Dhaka University Professor SM Shamin Reza stressed the need to identify gaps between media and the public, and address journalist pay, protection laws, Press Council effectiveness and safe work environments.

Robaet Ferdous, a professor at Dhaka University's department of mass communication, emphasised the role of courage and critical thinking in media and democracy.

Ayesha Kabir, head of Prothom Alo English, called for gender inclusivity.

"Women's participation in media must increase to build an equitable state," she added.

Journalists must secure their own independence, as those in power often seek flattery, said Shakhawat Hossain Sayantha, general secretary of political research organisation G9.

He called for vigilance in preventing the spread of misinformation before elections via AI-generated videos and edited photos.

Sajedul Huq Rubel, central committee member of the Communist Party of Bangladesh; Bazlur Rashid Firoz, general secretary of the Socialist Party of Bangladesh; Dhaka Tribune Editor Reaz Ahmad; Senior Journalist Zahid Newaz Khan; and Bangladesh Pratidin Executive Editor AKM Monjurul Islam spoke at the event among others.

But if 'yes' loses, Bangladesh loses. The second vote, for the 'Daripalla' symbol, is the vote for justice."

Addressing the youth at the Khulna rally, the Jamaat ameer commended them for their struggles and sacrifices, saying Jamaat did not want to humiliate young people by offering unemployment allowances. "We want to turn your hands into the hands of skilled workers. Then you yourselves will say that you do not want to sit idle and take unemployment benefits."

Referring to events after August 5, he said Jamaat had assured the nation that regardless of the oppression inflicted upon them, they would remain peaceful and patient. "We promised to act as guardians of people's lives, property and

dignity. We have kept that promise. We will not seize anyone's property, and we will not engage in extortion."

Addressing party activists, he said, "Each of you must protect the voting rights of every man and woman. Voters will cast their votes wherever they choose, but we want to ensure that they reach the ballot box safely."

Shafiqur said Bangladesh did not belong to Muslims alone, although Muslims were the majority. "This country is a garden of flowers where people of other communities live together. No one will be able to look at them with ill intent, and no hand will be raised against them."

[Our correspondents from Khulna, Bagerhat, and Benapole contributed to the report.]

24 hurt in pre-polls clashes in 5 districts

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post in the morning alleging that a BNP female leader had been campaigning for a "No" vote in the referendum, police and locals said.

Calling the post a rumour, local BNP men went to the office of Taher Nazrul, ameer of Jamaat's Naria upazila (west) unit, to inquire about it.

An altercation ensued between the two groups, triggering the clash, witnesses said. The injured later received treatment at Shariatpur Sadar Hospital, said its on-duty doctor Khondoker Rashed Ahmed.

Bhojeshwar union unit Jubo Dal president Mizan Sikder and Naria upazila (west) unit Jamaat's nayebe-ameer Morshed Khan made counter-allegations regarding the incident.

Naria Police Station OC Md Bahar Miah said filing of a case in this connection was underway.

In Narayanganj, at least three people were injured in a clash between BNP and Jamaat activists in the Mollarchar area under Araihaazar upazila yesterday noon.

The clash ensued after tension prevailed between the two groups over allegations of obstructing each other's electoral campaigns, said Md Alauddin, officer-in-charge of Araihaazar Police Station.

Jamaat's Narayanganj-2 candidate Md Elias Mollah alleged that his

female supporters were obstructed by BNP men while campaigning for him in Mollarchar around 12:15pm.

On information, several Jamaat men rushed there, but they came under attack by BNP men, he alleged.

Araihaazar upazila unit BNP president Yusuf Ali Bhuiyan denied the allegations, claiming there was no attack and that Jamaat's candidate was spreading propaganda.

He said a clash occurred over setting up a Jamaat candidate's banners alongside BNP banners.

Assistant Returning Officer Asadur Rahman said Elias Mollah has submitted a written complaint, which remains under investigation.

The injured received treatment at a local health complex. None lodged a complaint with police, OC Alauddin said.

In Sirajganj Sadar upazila, at least six were injured in a clash between BNP and Jamaat men on Monday night.

The incident took place near the Dumur area around 8:00pm during a face-off between both groups' campaign processions, locals said.

BNP district unit general secretary Md Saidur Rahman Bachchu and Jamaat's Sirajganj-2 candidate Jahidul Islam made counter-allegations of provocation over the clash.

The injured received treatment at

Sirajganj 250 Bed General Hospital, said resident medical officer Dr Shimul Talukdar.

No case was filed in this connection till filing of this report yesterday evening, said Sirajganj Sadar OC Md Shahidul Islam.

In Patuakhali, at least three were injured in a clash between supporters of BNP alliance-backed candidate for Patuakhali-3 Nurul Haq Nur and his opponent Hasan Mamun, BNP's rebel candidate who was expelled by the party, on Monday night.

Locals and witnesses said Mamun's supporters at a campaign office in the Paglabazar area under Dashmina upazila came under attack by some 20-25 supporters of Nur, triggering the clash around 8:00pm.

The injured received treatment at Dashmina Upazila Health Complex, said the hospital's doctor Mostafizur Rahman.

Contacted, Nur, also president of Gono Odhikar Parishad, denied the allegations and claimed his supporters were not involved in any such incident.

No case was filed till filing of this report yesterday evening, said Dashmina OC Md Hasnain Parvez.

[Our correspondents from Netrakona, Shariatpur, Narayanganj, Pabna and Patuakhali contributed to the report.]

A party is now echoing the language of a fascist

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surrounding districts by bus and truck, carrying party flags and wearing colourful caps and T-shirts. Small processions, some accompanied by music bands.

"We must stay together, because when we stayed together, we achieved independence. When we stayed together, we removed autocracy. If we stay united in the days ahead as well, then we will surely be able to take Bangladesh towards the future Bangladesh we hope for."

"So, let today's election rally be our pledge that we will turn this Bangladesh into a people's Bangladesh."

At the rally, 24 party candidates placed several demands before him, including the establishment of a university, development of river routes, and modernisation of the railway network.

In reply, Tarique said Mymensingh district hospital would be upgraded and the canals in the area would be re-excavated.

Tarique left Mymensingh at 5:00pm and reached the Bhawal Rajbari Estate in Gazipur around 11:40pm.

As he entered Gazipur, a large number of leaders and activists stood along both sides of the road for about four kilometres to greet him. Because

of the crowd, his vehicle was delayed in reaching the venue.

"Will you allow vote robbery this time?" he asked at the rally.

The attendees replied, "No".

The BNP chief also promised that if the party comes to power, an overpass will be built over the Joydebpur rail crossing, day-care centres will be set up for the children of female workers in garment and other factories, and three canals in the district will be re-excavated.

Tarique was also scheduled to address the last election rally of yesterday in the capital's Uttara. [Our Mymensingh correspondent contributed to this report.]