

Indian diplomats' families

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shoving during the earlier elections and nothing more than that has happened this time."

Asked about the foreign ministry's statement after deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina's speech at a public event in New Delhi inciting her party loyalists and the general public to carry out acts of terror aimed at derailing the upcoming general elections, he said that there is apprehension that attempts may be made to create conflict.

"The others may be able to explain the day-to-day details better. But we believe that if any danger or conflict occurs, it would not be normal, because those participating in the election are showing sufficient restraint in their activities. Therefore, any disorder is more likely to be caused by those who are not participating or are unable to

participate in the election."

Asked if visa processing at the Bangladesh missions in India have been suspended, he responded in the positive. "We will reopen it when the time comes. For the next eight to ten days, it is better not to reopen it."

All election observers coming from abroad will face some level of scrutiny but the government wants as many observers and journalists as possible.

"If anyone tries to come under the guise of election observation for some other purpose, the home ministry, along with the missions, will examine that. We want transparency. We have no reason to prevent journalists from coming."

Asked about Bangladesh's decision to issue passports to 69,000 Rohingyas, he said: "Due to our failures, many Rohingyas obtained Bangladeshi passports years ago

-- handwritten passports, with many allegations of corruption. The situation now is that Saudi Arabia is insisting that those who already hold Bangladeshi passports be formally documented. We tried not to do this, but due to other national interests, we finally decided to issue passports."

A passport does not mean citizenship, he said.

Any country can issue a passport to a non-citizen for specific purposes and there are many examples worldwide.

On the agreement between Bangladesh and China on setting up drone manufacturing plant, he said if Bangladesh decides in its own interest to set up a factory or industry with another country's cooperation, it will do so independently.

"What others think does not matter."

Rebels giving BNP run for its money

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"When we receive information, we verify it and then act. Those who refuse to follow party decisions will face consequences," he added.

KEY RACES

After dissolving the Bangladesh Jatiya Dal and joining BNP, Syed Ehsanul Huda is contesting in Kishoreganj-5, where expelled central BNP member and Bajitpur upazila BNP president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Iqbal is his main competitor.

In Dhaka 7, BNP candidate Hamidur Rahman is running alongside Ishaq Sarkar, a former organising secretary of the Jubo Dal central committee.

In Dhaka 14, BNP-nominated candidate Sanjida Islam Tulce is facing Syed Abu Bakar Siddique Shaju, who has been expelled as convener of the party's Darus Salam thana unit.

In Noakhali 2, BNP candidate and adviser to the party chairperson Zainul Abidin Faroque is in the race with Kazi Mofizur Rahman, a member of BNP's central executive committee.

In Munshiganj-1, BNP nominee Sheikh Abdullah is facing former upazila chairman Momin Ali, while in Munshiganj 3, Kamruzzaman Ratan, social welfare affairs secretary of the party's central committee, is contesting alongside expelled leader and former district BNP convener Mohiuddin Ahmed.

In Sunamganj 3, BNP candidate Kaiser Ahmed is running against Anwar Hossain, a former district BNP vice-president contesting independently. In Sunamganj 4, BNP nominee Nurul Islam is competing with Dewan Zainul Zakerin, another former district BNP vice-president.

Party sources said there are six BNP rebel candidates across four constituencies in Brahmanbaria, while Mymensingh district has seven rebel candidates in its 11 seats.

In Mymensingh 2, the party's candidate and North District unit Joint Convener Motahar Hossain Talukder is facing former BNP lawmaker Shah Shahid Sarwar, while

in Mymensingh 11, Bhaluka upazila BNP candidate Fakhruddin Ahmed is being challenged by upazila BNP Joint Convener Muhammad Morshed Alam.

Rebel candidates have also emerged as major contenders in seats the BNP has left for alliance partners.

In Dhaka 12, Revolutionary Workers Party President Saiful Haque is contesting alongside expelled BNP leader Saiful Alam Nirob, former convener of Dhaka North city BNP.

In Patuakhali 3, the BNP has left the seat for Gono Odhikar Parishad President Nurul Haque, while Hasan Mamun, a former president of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal's Dhaka University unit and member of BNP's National Executive Committee, is also contesting.

The BNP has also left Brahmanbaria 2 for Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Vice-President Maulana Junayed Al Habib, though expelled BNP leader Rumeen Farhana remains in the race.

Speaking to this newspaper yesterday, a BNP Standing Committee member admitted the failure to rein in rebel candidates, many of whom have emerged as main rivals of party nominees.

"But these rebels are also from the BNP. If they win, the party may take a softer stance toward them," he added, seeking anonymity.

ANGER AMONG GRASSROOTS

In the last seven days alone, the BNP has expelled more than six dozen grassroots leaders accused of campaigning for rebel candidates, sparking anger and dissatisfaction at the local level.

Several expelled leaders said they continue to work for rebel candidates despite disciplinary action, acknowledging that this is hurting BNP's nominated contenders.

They alleged that the party high command ignored grassroots opinions during the nomination process, failed to consult local leaders, and sidelined long-time activists.

Moniruzzaman Monir, general secretary of Bajitpur upazila BNP in Kishoreganj was among 17 leaders who were expelled on Monday. He

Unfamiliar ballots for voters

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vote for now?

That uncertainty has been sharpened by an unexpected development. Jamaat-e-Islami, contesting this seat with serious intent, has nominated a Hindu candidate, Krishna Nandi.

The irony is hard to miss: an Islamist party fielding a Hindu in a Hindu-majority constituency. The move has startled voters and forced conversations that would have been unthinkable in previous elections.

At Botunia Bazar, beside the erosion-prone Sugandha River, I stopped at a small clothing shop where a group of locals had gathered. The scene was unremarkable: folded shirts, a couple of worn-out wooden benches for customers, and an ageing ceiling fan. The conversation, however, was anything but.

Present were Debashish Chakravarty, the local priest; Dibendu Roy, the shop owner; Nihar Ranjan Roy, a trader; Seema Sarkar, a tailor; and Harunur Rashid Gazi, a Muslim trader whose brother chairs the local Hindu-majority union parishad.

They did not hide their confusion. "We always voted Awami League -- this is hundred percent true," Dibendu Roy told me without hesitation. "Now there is no boat symbol. It's confusing, at least for me." Others nodded.

So who would they vote for? Dibendu paused before answering, "We are trying to choose someone who at least believes in the spirit of 1971," he said carefully. "We have to vote. So we are looking for an alternative."

That brought Krishna Nandi into the conversation. Could a Hindu candidate carrying Jamaat's symbol be that alternative?

Seema Sarkar struggled to respond and eventually looked away.

Nihar Ranjan Roy spoke instead. Many here, he said, were unsettled not only by Jamaat's politics but by the candidate himself. "We don't know him. He is not from this constituency. Suddenly he appears asking for our

votes."

Notably, Krishna Nandi is from Dumuria (Khulna 5).

Debashish Chakravarty, the priest, took a more analytical view. "This is Jamaat's political strategy," he said. "They think a Hindu candidate will bring more votes here." Whether that calculation will work remains an open question.

What struck me repeatedly was how often religion itself was downplayed. "People outside may think this area votes by religion," Nihar Ranjan Roy said, "but here we don't." Hindus and Muslims live in peace, he insisted, attend each other's festivals and social functions. "Disputes exist, but they are personal, not communal."

Harunur Rashid Gazi pointed to living proof. His brother, a Muslim, has twice been elected chairman of Botunia union, where Hindus make up about 60 percent of the population. No one around the shop disputed that.

Taken this into account, BNP candidate Amir Ejaz Khan has intensified his grassroots campaign in Khulna-1 (Dakop-Batiaghata). He has entered the race for the fourth time and is also from Batiaghata.

I asked about an issue often discussed elsewhere: the fear among Hindus since Sheikh Hasina's fall. None of them said they had experienced insecurity. "Nothing happened here," Dibendu Roy said. The land his shop stands on, he added, belongs to a Muslim.

Debashish Chakravarty, however, spoke of a different anxiety. "The fear is coming from outside," he said. "From Indian social media." He described constant online campaigns portraying Hindus in Bangladesh as unsafe and in need of "rescue".

"That propaganda scares people more than reality," he said.

As I moved around Dakop and Batiaghata, it became clear that communal tension is not part of the local political memory. The deeper fracture lies between voters and

politics itself. When the conversation turned to election promises, cynicism surfaced quickly. "They sing many songs now because they are on stage," Dibendu said, "but after the polls, they disappear."

What people wanted instead was concrete: stopping erosion along the Sugandha River, stronger embankments, and protection from floods. These mattered far more than promises of cards, loans or allowances.

A few kilometres away, in Khuna village by the Bhadra River, those priorities felt even starker. I sat with three women, Shabana Begum, Rokhsana Parveen and Mafia Begum, outside a modest riverbank home belonging to Ibrahim Sheikh. All said they would vote. Why? "A new raja will come," Shabana said simply. "We have to vote."

What would they want from the new king? They laughed. "Whether it helps me or not, a new raja must be made," Mafia Begum said. None could name a single election pledge. What they spoke about instead was water. "In two months, there will be no water," Rokhsana said. "Even the river dries up. Sometimes we can't cook, can't use the toilet." They have raised the issue for years, without result.

Back in Botunia, another contrast emerged. Some men spoke with surprising clarity about a proposed referendum on political reform.

Harunur Rashid Gazi listed issues he believed should appear on a yes-no ballot: balancing power between the prime minister and president, and ensuring opposition representation in parliament.

In Khuna, however, the very idea of a referendum remained a mystery. No one had explained it to them.

As I left Dakop-Batiaghata, the picture felt clear yet uneasy. Here, the February 12 election is not driven by excitement or allegiance. This is a constituency without communal fear, but full of political uncertainty.

(Shakeel Anwar is a former BBC journalist)

Body of 3-yr-old

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Assistant Superintendent of Police (Rangunia Circle) Balayat Hossain said, "Upon receiving the news, five units of fire service, along with police, rushed to the scene. A team of army also joined rescue efforts around 7:30pm."

Abdul Mannan, deputy director of Chattogram fire service, told The Daily Star at 8:00pm, "It appears that a very narrow pit, about 25-30 feet deep, was dug several years ago for a government project. I do not know why it was not filled up afterwards. We dug another pit adjacent to it to rescue the boy within a short time."

A video circulating on Facebook shows locals trying to rescue the child using bamboo poles. In the video, a young man can be seen asking the child to hold on to the bamboo.

The child's uncle, Shah Alam, said in a Facebook live video that Misbah fell into the pit while playing with other children and had managed to hold on to a bamboo stick for more than an hour.

A similar incident took place on December 10 last year in Rajshahi.

Two-year-old Sajid fell into an abandoned 30-foot-deep tube-well pit in Tanore. His body was recovered nearly 32 hours later, highlighting the dangers posed by unattended deep pits.

Indian parliament

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Reading out the reference for Khaleda Zia, he said, "I refer with profound sorrow to the passing away of Begum Khaleda Zia, former prime minister of Bangladesh and chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party."

Khaleda passed away on December 30, 2025.

"She was the first woman prime minister of Bangladesh and served in the office three times between 1991 and 2006. She also served as the leader of the opposition from 1996 to 2001. Khaleda Zia made important contributions to the development of Bangladesh and to Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations," the chairman said.

"The house joins the beloved family, the government and the people of Bangladesh in mourning the passing away of her excellency Begum Khaleda Zia," Radhakrishnan said.

ICT sector key

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the institutional arrangements we create," he said.

Highlighting a generational shift, he observed that children today interact with technology almost instinctively, while older generations are increasingly unable to guide the young -- not out of ill intent, but because their minds function differently.

He added that this outdated mindset persists in Bangladesh's ICT sector and stressed the need for true digital governance to deliver government services directly to citizens. "People should not come to the government; government services should go to them," he said, adding that such a system could significantly reduce corruption.

Speaking about the student-led July uprising, Yunus said these youths, if given the opportunity, could not only lead Bangladesh but also assume leadership roles globally.

"Today's youth are the most powerful generation in human history -- globally connected and technologically empowered," he said, adding, "Yet our society fails to recognise and harness this power... if we let them go, they will soar like kites."

Recalling the 2024 uprising when internet services were shut down, the chief adviser noted that the incident revealed how deeply technology is tied to the lives of young people. The shutdown sparked nationwide anger and upheaval, contributing to the fall of an "otherwise powerful government," he said.

Warning that technology can amplify both strengths and weaknesses, Yunus said Bangladesh has "become famous for forgery," which damages the country's reputation. Citing an example of an individual who used forged certificates to work as a doctor abroad, he urged the nation to move away from such practices.

"The people of this country have immense talent," he said, urging them to avoid using it for harmful or unethical purposes. "Let us make up our minds to eliminate fraud, implement realistic policies, and build a pro-people system of governance," he added, expressing concern over the misuse of technology to produce fake documents.

Earlier, he launched the website and logo of the Bangladesh Innovation Challenge, a platform designed to accelerate innovative initiatives among school and college students.

Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser for Posts, Telecommunications, and ICT Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb attended as a special guest, with ICT Division Secretary Shish Haider Chowdhury in the chair. BHTPA Managing Director Md Mamunur Rashid Bhuiyan and BCS President Mohammad Zahirul Islam delivered the welcome address.

Shooting team cleared

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the cricket team's tour was turned down on security grounds, he said the government was treating the two matters as separate cases.

"Only a shooter and a coach are travelling there. The competition venue is fully secured, and the involvement of general spectators is very limited. We have also been assured by the hosts that there is no security threat," Mahbub told The Daily Star yesterday.

He also informed that Sports Adviser Asif Nazrul had spoken with Bangladesh Shooting Sport Federation general secretary Ferdows Ara Khanom before giving the green signal for issuing the government order.

Earlier in the day, National Sports Council (NSC) Director (Sports)

Mohammad Aminul Ahsan said they were optimistic about receiving the GO, as all required documents had already been forwarded to the Ministry of Youth and Sports.

"We are considering two things. First, shooting is an indoor sport with limited spectators, unlike cricket, which is played in large venues before large crowds, so there is minimal security concern. Second, we want to promote friendship through sports," he said.

While Robiul, being an employee of the defence forces, only requires a GO to travel to India, Sharmin will need to apply for a visa.

The championships will mark Robiul's first international appearance since the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. He has been training since January 4 under Sharmin's guidance.

Brawl over front-row seats

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However, supporters of the BNP and Jamaat candidates got into an altercation over front-row seats, triggering the clash.

Of the injured, 45 were taken to the Jhenaigati Upazila Health Complex, where 25 were admitted and 20 received primary treatment, said doctor Arup Saha.

Another 20 injured were admitted to Sherpur General Hospital, confirmed medical assistant Md Yasin Hossain. Several motorcycles and more than 100 chairs were vandalised during the clash, witnesses said.

In a Facebook post, Nuruzzaman alleged that BNP supporters, after arriving late, attacked Jamaat supporters with "local weapons" following an argument and scuffle over front-row seats. He claimed more than 50 Jamaat supporters were injured.

BNP candidate Mahmudul Haque Rubel made counter-allegations, blaming Jamaat activists for the violence.

In a Facebook post, he claimed Jamaat carried out the attack to create chaos, leaving around 50 BNP leaders and activists injured.

Sherpur Superintendent of Police Md Kamrul Islam said security personnel brought the situation under control and that additional law enforcers have been deployed to prevent further violence.

No case had been filed in connection with the incident as of filing of this report at 1:40am today.

Meanwhile, BNP suspended its 41-member Sherpur district convening committee following the clash.

In a press release issued in the evening, BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said the

committee, led by Convener Sirajul Islam and Member Secretary ABM Mamunur Rashid Palash, had been suspended until further notice.

Protesting the death of Rezaul, students of Dhaka University and Jagannath University brought out separate processions on their campuses in the wee hours of today.

At Dhaka University, a group of students marched campus streets. Several Ducus leaders, including Vice President Md Abu Shadik Kayem, took part.

At Jagannath University, around 100 students brought out a procession from the main gate around 12:45am today and marched campus streets chanting slogans against the BNP.

Meanwhile, in Bhola, Islami Andolan Bangladesh (IAB) alleged that three of its activists were injured in an attack by Jamaat supporters in Charlesson Municipality yesterday.

IAB's Bhola-4 candidate Kamal Uddin's daughter, Maria Kamal, made the allegation at a press conference at the Charlesson Upazila Press Club, saying she and her followers were attacked while campaigning in Ward-6 of the municipality around 9:30am.

In a statement, Jamaat's upazila unit denied the allegation, calling it "false and motivated".

Contacted, Jamaat upazila unit Ameer Mir Sharif Hossain said there was a scuffle between the two groups and claimed a Jamaat activist was injured.

No complaint has yet been filed in this connection, said Charlesson UNO Md Lokman Hossain.

[Our Mymensingh and Barishal correspondents contributed to this report]

Media freedom hinges

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intervention there will be," he said.

Criticising research that does not study positive examples of such institutions, he said, "Why don't you study The Daily Star and Prothom Alo? You should also find some good examples so people understand that even in this environment, it is possible to build good institutions."

Referring to his experience, he said, "In 35 years, we may have made mistakes, but we have never intentionally done bad journalism. We never intentionally wrote against anyone and never published anything without evidence."

Emphasising the role of editors and owners, he said independent editors are not always on the best of terms with the owners.

"If you have an independent editor, the character of a media organisation changes immediately. An editor must be able to stand against the government and against the owner and say, 'I will not let the government harm my staff.' We got full cooperation from our owners."

"If an editor tells the owner, 'Fire me first, but I will not let my staff be harmed,' a lot will change," he said, adding that The Daily Star and Prothom Alo established the institution of the independent editor.

Giving an example, he said, "For 27 or 28 years, we have given business awards, but we have never given a business award to the owners of The Daily Star because of a conflict of interest."

He said over 500 licensed newspapers exist in Dhaka, many without financial strength, offices, or the capacity to employ journalists, showing their purpose is different.

"If journalist unions are publicly politically divided, how do you expect readers to have faith in you?"

On self-regulation, he said, "Journalists can have personal political beliefs, but they cannot use them in their profession... Owners must also commit that they will not use media politically and must give editors freedom of operation."

Anam also said that for self-regulation, the Editors' Council and the Newspaper Owners Association of Bangladesh (Noab) were taking joint initiatives on separate codes of conduct for editors and owners.

Noab President AK Azad criticised the caretaker government for arrests under the anti-terrorism law.

"Police are picking up some innocent people from home and demanding huge sums of money. Those who can pay are released from the police station, and those who cannot are sent to jail under the anti-terrorism law," he said.

"They [government] know that their term lasts only until February 12. So why are they afraid? Why have they crippled the judiciary?"

"The current caretaker government has no political agenda. Yet why are they not delivering justice, and why are innocent people being sent to jail?"

Speaking about state-sponsored oppression of journalists, Azad said, "Those who were in power before and

those currently in power have the same character. There is no guarantee that future governments will be better."

The Noab president said ethical journalism will not be possible if the state system is not corrected and we do not speak out against it.

Kamal Ahmed, chief of the Media Reform Commission, said that without accountability and transparency, the media can never regain the trust of readers and viewers.

He criticised the government's plan to create separate commissions for broadcast and other media, which he said could create confusion.

"The government is rushing into its final stage. A broadcast commission is being formed while the existing licensing powers remain with BTRC. You can be certain that there will be overlaps and conflicts."

"And a media commission is planned while keeping the Press Council. Then, who will handle conflicts related to journalism, the Press Council or the media commission? This overlapping will unnecessarily increase complexity."

"On social media, he said, "... Bots and misinformation create the impression of popularity or public opinion. That is dangerous."

Sara Hossain, honorary executive director of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), called for documenting past harassment of the media to understand "where we need to work more".

"A mechanism is necessary to guide who the good and bad actors are. Those who do not comply should be held accountable," she said.

Sajjad Sharif, executive editor of Prothom Alo, said although journalism is essential for democracy, it is challenging in our country.

"The media must follow internal rules. There is no alternative. We must adopt editorial policies, transparency, and accountability to gain the trust of readers and viewers," he said.

SM Rezwan Ul Alam, associate professor of political science and sociology at North South University, said that if internal governance, internal communication, and internal strategic communication systems are not in place, the recommendations made by the Media Reform Commission will not be implemented.

Fahim Ahmed, CEO of Jamuna Television, said that a regulatory system will be effective only when journalists receive the minimum benefits they deserve.

MRDI Executive Director Hasibur Rahman moderated the event. Syed Samiul Basher Anik, manager of programme at MRDI, presented a policy paper on self-regulation of the media.

Among others, Rezwanaul Haque, chief editor of Maasranga Television and president of the Broadcast Journalist Centre; Susan Vize, head of the office and UNESCO Representative to Bangladesh; Reaz Ahmad, editor of Dhaka Tribune; and Shahed Mohammad Ali, editor of the daily Samakal, also spoke at the event.