



Workers play Ludo on a mobile phone as a gas supply cut halted operations at a CNG filling station on Rokeya Sarani in the capital's Sempara yesterday.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

## Nalchity, where Hadi’s memory meets ballot box

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Since Hadi was fatally shot on December 12, police have guarded his family home around the clock. No family member lives here now, citing security concerns. Yet the physical absence of the family has only amplified Hadi’s symbolic presence. To many young supporters, he represents courage and an uncompromising demand for justice, equity and national sovereignty.

I came to Nalchity ahead of Bangladesh’s February 12 elections to see whether that symbolism translated into political impact in the place where Hadi was born and raised – and whether his slogans still resonated among voters here.

The answer was far from straightforward.

At the Nalchity launch ghat on the Bishkhali River, barely half a kilometre from Hadi’s home, a group of local men were absorbed in a game of carrom. They all knew Hadi personally. One of them, Hasan, said they had been childhood friends. “We used to swim together in the Bishkhali,” he said. “I didn’t know he had become so famous. He never mentioned it. He was very modest.”

That sentiment was echoed by others nearby, including close neighbours of the Hadi family. None said they had realised at the time that he had become a national political figure. Still, all expressed pride that he was from Nalchity. Many now watch his speeches and videos on social media, encountering a version of Hadi that feels larger than the boy they once knew.

Sitting at a small convenience shop

by the ghat, Mohammad Shaheen, a neighbour of the Hadi family, recalled seeing Hadi about a month before his assassination. “I noticed on Facebook that he was preparing to contest elections in Dhaka,” Shaheen said. “I asked why not from Nalchity. He said he lived in Dhaka.”

Why did Shaheen think Hadi stood out among thousands of July movement activists? He paused before replying. “Nobody criticised Hasina the way he did.”

Hadi frequently spoke of uprooting corruption and oppression and replacing them with insaaf (justice). Would that ever happen? Shaheen looked uncertain. “That depends on politicians,” he said.

Nearby, Idris, an engine-boat driver, joined in. “In July 2024, we wanted the country to change,” he said. “Didn’t we? The country needs to change.”

I asked whether Hadi’s calls for justice, equity and freedom from oppression would influence how they voted, and what kind of candidate they were looking for. The carrom board fell silent. After a moment, Hasan spoke again. “We will choose someone who works for the country.”

Was there such a candidate in their constituency? After another pause, someone said quietly, “No. There is none like that.”

Still, everyone insisted they would vote. “Our vote should not go to waste,” one man said, lining up a shot. “Voting is our right.”

They were also aware that a referendum on the July charter would be held on February 12 alongside the parliamentary elections. But none

could clearly explain what the charter proposed, or how the referendum outcome might affect their lives. “We are trying to understand,” one man said. “But we are not finding any answers yet.”

This uncertainty has surfaced repeatedly during my travels over the past week. Despite the referendum being framed as a cornerstone of post-Hasina reform, aimed at curbing executive power and preventing a return to authoritarian rule, candidates have said little about it on the campaign trail. The silence, particularly among BNP candidates, has left many rural and semi-urban voters adrift on an issue they are expected to decide.

A mile away from the launch ghat, in Uttamabad Abashon Palli, a government settlement for landless families, Hadi’s name barely came up.

For China Begum, Masuda and Sonia Akhter – wives of rickshaw pullers and day labourers – the election is about something far more immediate: relief from rising prices and the hope of steadier days ahead.

None of the candidates had yet visited the settlement to seek votes. If they did, Masuda said, she would ask for just one thing – a concrete road, raised high enough to remain usable during the monsoon floods that regularly submerge the muddy paths through the area.

Here, the language of justice, sovereignty and constitutional reform feels distant. What matters is whether daily life becomes a little less precarious.(Shakeel Anwar is a former BBC journalist)

## Next govt faces ‘clouded outlook’

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IMF-supported programme reached \$798 million in January, taking fiscal year-to-date purchases to about \$4 billion.

This inflow, alongside improvements in the current account, has helped strengthen financial buffers. Gross international reserves rose to \$32.62 billion as of January 18.

Even so, the IMF urged the next administration to commit to “greater exchange rate flexibility” and the “full and consistent implementation” of the new exchange rate regime.

Any failure to do so, it said, remains a major risk that could trigger renewed foreign exchange market imbalances and instability.

Inflation, while easing from double-digit peaks, is expected to remain high. Annual average inflation is projected at 8.9 percent in FY26 before falling to around 6 percent in FY27, provided there is no premature loosening of policy or further supply-side shocks.

Bangladesh is implementing a \$5.5 billion IMF loan programme, which was launched with \$4.7 billion in January 2023 and later expanded by \$800 million in 2025. The programme aims to bolster foreign exchange reserves, reduce inflation and support climate resilience.

But the IMF warned that stability

depends on the “new administration’s full ownership of the programme,” which will be tested by “stubbornly high inflation” and a banking sector marked by “weak governance”.

The “unresolved banking issues would restrict credit, suppress investment and dampen growth,” the IMF said. It also flagged the risks of further emergency support to fragile lenders.

“Significant additional liquidity support to weak banks – assumed to avert a loss of confidence – would compress short-term interest rates, raise exchange rate risk premium and fuel capital outflows, triggering significant and rapid depreciation and inflation,” the report said.

The IMF called for an “urgent need for a credible banking sector reform strategy”, arguing the authorities should move away from the “unsecured liquidity injections” and “regulatory forbearance” of the past. It recommended asset quality reviews of lenders.

External conditions add further risks. The IMF highlighted a potential decline in international aid and escalating trade measures as high-probability threats that could worsen public finances and erode foreign market share, particularly for garments, Bangladesh’s main export sector.

Beyond near-term stabilisation, the IMF said the country faces deeper structural constraints, including the “limited capacity” of industry to absorb the growing number of graduates. With youth unemployment a factor in recent unrest, the IMF argued that “comprehensive structural reforms” were increasingly unavoidable.

Fiscal policy, meanwhile, offers little room to respond. “Persistently weak revenue and large subsidies would squeeze public capital and social outlays,” the IMF said.

The tax-to-GDP ratio fell sharply in FY25, leaving Bangladesh with one of the weakest revenue collection performances in the region. The IMF noted the fiscal deficit was contained largely by curbing capital and social spending, effectively balancing the books by cutting investment needed to sustain long-term growth.

To reverse that pattern, the IMF recommended “ambitious fiscal reforms” to simplify the tax system, reduce non-essential expenditure and cut subsidies, especially in the energy sector.

“Creating fiscal space,” the report said, “is essential for development spending to sustain job-friendly growth and support the banking sector cleanup”.

## 26 hurt in pre-polls clashes in Bhola, Cumilla

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officer Dr KM Rezwanul Islam said, “A total of 14 injured people came to the hospital. Of them, 11 were released after primary treatment, two are admitted, and one was referred to Bhola General Hospital in critical condition.”

On information, police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control. However, none of the parties has filed any complaint yet, said Borhanuddin Police Station officer-in-charge Moniruzzaman.

Contacted, Borhanuddin upazila nirbahi officer Manoranjan Barman, also the assistant returning officer, said law enforcers have been deployed in the area and both parties have been asked to submit written complaints.

In Cumilla’s Chauddagram upazila, at least 12 people were

injured as BNP and Jamaat activists clashed in the Hatbair village area.

Witnesses said some Jamaat activists were returning home from a rally of party Ameer Shafiqur Rahman at the HJ Government Pilot High School ground when they faced off with BNP men and got into a clash around 1:00pm.

Upazila unit Jamaat secretary Md Belal Hossain and upazila unit BNP general secretary Shah Alam traded allegations over the incident.

Contacted, Chauddagram Upazila Health Complex doctor Asaduzzaman Nur said 12 injured people from both sides received treatment at the hospital.

On information, law enforcers went to the spot, brought the situation under control, and detained eight people over the incident, said

Chauddagram upazila nirbahi officer and assistant returning officer Md Nurul Amin.

Chauddagram Police Station officer-in-charge Abu Mahmud Mohammad said no complaint has been filed yet.

Meanwhile, in Sherpur, a murder case was filed on Friday night over the death of Jamaat leader Rezaul Karim, 42, in a clash between BNP and Jamaat activists on Wednesday.

Rezaul’s wife, Marjia Begum, filed the case with Jhenaigati Police Station, accusing 231 named and some 400-500 unnamed people, said Sherpur Superintendent of Police Md Kamrul Islam.

[Our correspondents from Barishal, Cumilla and Mymensingh contributed to this report]

## Avoid use of lethal weapons

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26 BGB), Narayanganj (62 BGB) and Gazipur (63 BGB) will cover nine districts and four city corporations, spanning 51 constituencies. A total of 134 platoons will operate from 42 temporary base camps, supported by specialised K-9 dog squad units for search and screening operations.

Col Ehsan said BGB is strictly following directives issued by the government and the Election Commission and will remain politically neutral to ensure a level playing field for all candidates. Regular patrols and intelligence surveillance are being conducted in close coordination with other law enforcement agencies so that voters can cast their ballots in a fear-free

environment.

To enhance transparency and operational efficiency, BGB members will use body-worn cameras, night-vision devices, metal detectors, armoured personnel carriers, and modern communication and signalling equipment during election duties. Special monitoring cells have also been set up at battalion and sector headquarters to oversee the situation round the clock, the media wing said.

BGB personnel have received specialised election-related training at various levels to enable them to respond professionally to any situation that may arise during the polls.

Addressing security concerns, Col

Ehsan said no specific threats have been identified so far. “Following the directive of our director general, BGB will not use any lethal weapons while maintaining law and order during the election,” he said.

For emergency response, Rapid Action Teams, Quick Response Forces and BGB helicopter units will remain on standby throughout the election period and will be able to reach any incident site within a short time if required, the media wing added.

On polling day, BGB members will conduct patrols, set up checkpoints at key locations, and carry out vehicle and individual searches to prevent sabotage or attempts to destabilise the election environment.

## Be wary of vote theft and ballot stuffing

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“The election result must not be manipulated like in 2008,” he added. Referring to allegations that voters’ personal information is being collected by campaigners, he said, “Those who can delve in such unethical acts before the election – given the chance, they can even sell the country.”

“They are sending different people, especially to women, to collect NID numbers and bKash numbers, and to confuse them in different ways.”

If any such incidents occur, women in particular should remain cautious, he added.

The BNP chief further said voters must cast their ballots at their respective polling centres, but stressed the need to ensure that the person voting there is genuinely registered at that centre.

Highlighting pledges, Tarique said that if his party is voted to power, it will take initiatives to export Tangail sarees, a UNESCO-recognised national heritage, and pineapples from the region; build a barrage on the Jamuna to boost river-based trade and commerce; and set up factories to revive the jute industry.

Following a rally and meeting with district leaders in Bogura, Tarique and his wife Zubaida Rahman first went to Sirajganj and then Tangail.

On his way to Sirajganj, he addressed roadside rallies in Shahjahanpur and Dhunat intersections, seeking votes.

During his travel till Tangail, party activists lined both sides of the highways at various points

throughout the day, carrying party flags and placards bearing images of BNP candidates.

Many stood on road islands, overpasses, and rooftops of nearby buildings in an effort to catch a glimpse of the BNP chairman.

As the red-and-green bus, carrying Tarique and Zubaida, approached the Tangail rally, supporters rushed onto the road and stood in front of the convoy to greet him.

At the rally, Tarique called on all to put the moment to proper use “so that no one can again come and take away the people’s right to vote, or take away the people’s right to speak.”

Recalling elections under fascist rule, he said people, especially women, would be standing in long lines that would not even move towards the polling centres. “Half an hour would pass, one hour would pass, one and a half hours would pass – but the lines would stay in the same place. From far away it looked nice – such a big line, so many people voting! You must be careful about this.”

“Just voting and leaving is not enough.... You must ensure your vote does not go elsewhere. Stuffing empty ballots cannot be allowed.... We saw the ‘ballot box magic in 2008’....”

Tarique said the February 12 election could change people’s fate if the “right candidates” are elected, adding that just as people from all political backgrounds took to the streets on August 5, all eligible voters must similarly come out to polling centres on the 12th.

“If we cannot sustain the change

that came with August 5, meaning if we fail to establish a strong foundation of democracy by voting on the 12th – the democracy we are trying to build, the democracy that will ensure good governance and people’s rights, and change people’s fate, will be obstructed again.”

He added that if the country cannot be rebuilt, the people will suffer the most.

Speaking at the Sirajganj rally, held earlier in the BSCIC Industrial Park, he said that if the BNP comes to power, it will take steps to export products from the handloom industries of Sirajganj and Pabna.

“Farmers will be issued ‘Farmer Cards’ and families will receive ‘Family Cards’. Vocational institutes will be set up to create jobs, stipends will be provided to imams, muezzins and other religious leaders, and roads and educational institutions will be renovated.”

Tarique also said that those who try to mislead people ahead of the national election should be called “gupto” (roughly translating to “hidden” in English). “Because we have not seen them for the last 16 years. They were secretly involved with those who fled on August 5.”

He said the BNP is the only experienced party capable of running the country properly and taking it forward.

Following the Tangail rally, Tarique and Zubaida returned to their Gulshan residence in the capital. (Our Pabna and Bogura correspondents contributed to the report.)

## ‘A neighbouring country conspiring over elections’

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The anti-fascist movement aims to establish a state based on justice, where people’s rights are protected and accountability in governance is ensured.

The upcoming election is not an isolated or sudden event, but a continuation of the July uprising that paved the way for a democratic electoral process, he said.

If the 11-party alliance comes to power, ensuring justice for the July

massacre and the killing of Sharif Osman Bin Hadi would be among the government’s top priorities, Nahid added.

On the same day, speaking at the Jamaat-e-Islami-led alliance’s “March for Daripalla” programme at Rahim Uddin Degree College in Adamdighi upazila of Bogura, NCP Spokesman Asif Mahmud said that if the BNP seeks to rehabilitate the Awami League, it would once again

fall into a trap and push Bangladesh into a vulnerable situation.

The people of the country had suffered for a long time due to the earlier decision to bring Sheikh Hasina back into politics.

According to him, the Awami League established BAKSAL and curtailed people’s rights.

Allowing the party to return to politics would mean giving fascism a new opportunity, he added.

## France tightens infant formula rules after toxin scare

AFP, Paris

France plans to impose stricter limits on the acceptable level of a toxin called cereulide in infant formula after potentially contaminated products were recalled over 60 countries.

The infant formula industry has been rocked in recent weeks by several firms recalling batches that could be contaminated with cereulide, which can cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhoea.

“Protecting the health of infants is the top priority for health authorities,” the French agriculture ministry said late Friday.

The new threshold will be 0.014 micrograms of cereulide per kilogram of body weight, compared to 0.03 micrograms per kilogram of body weight, it said.

“France has chosen to anticipate new scientific recommendations,” the ministry added.