



CYBER MERCENARIES go into overdrive

Fake 'haha' reactions attack political opponents as polls near

STAR REPORT

On December 20, 2025, a female student activist at Dhaka University shared a screenshot of a Facebook post that called for violence against a fellow activist. Alarmed, she wrote: "Getting seriously worried about... [name withheld] bhai's well-being. Your views do not need to align with his in order to be concerned for his safety, especially in these dire times. If you recognise this person in the screenshot, or have any way to reach him, please step forward and take legal action."



than Bangla or English, and lacked profile photos or personal details. Among them were accounts such as Kokou Khelios from Togo and Olivier Randrianjaka from Madagascar -- names and listed locations with no plausible connection to the post. An investigation by The Daily Star has found that such accounts do not land on a Bangladeshi student's post by coincidence. They are bot profiles that can be easily purchased online to attack opponents or fabricate support. As part of this investigation, The Daily Star bought nearly 30,000 reactions across nine meme posts,

Experts warn that this kind of bot activities poses a serious risk ahead of the election, as it is often deployed to manufacture perceptions that are far from reality. It also violates Meta's policies. Facebook's Community Standards prohibit any artificial amplification of engagement, explicitly banning fake accounts, automated activity, or coordinated click farm operations to inflate reactions, followers, or shares. "We do not allow attempting to or successfully selling, buying, or exchanging for engagement, such as likes, shares, views, follows, clicks, use of specific hashtags, etc.," the standards state. Yet the influence operations

Shab-e-Barat tonight

BSS, Dhaka

The holy Shab-e-Barat, the night of fortune, will be observed throughout the country tonight with due religious fervour.

On this occasion, Islamic Foundation has planned programmes at the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque. It will hold waz (religious sermons), doamahfil, special prayers, recitation from the holy Quran and Hamd-Naat at the mosque in the evening.

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'Don't let anyone exploit delays in vote count'

Tarique slams Jamaat ameer for alleged use of offensive language about working women

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman yesterday urged voters to remain vigilant during the vote-counting process, warning against any attempts to delay the counting or manipulate the results. Addressing an election rally at the Sports Park in Jashore town, he alleged that a political party seeking to confine women to their homes was conspiring to make the election controversial. "We are hearing new stories that vote counting will take much longer this time. The people of this country may not have been able to vote for the last decade, but that does not mean they lack experience. They voted in 1991, 1996 and 2001. The people of Bangladesh know how long vote counting takes," he said. Earlier, at a rally in Khulna -- his first there in 22 years -- Tarique criticised a

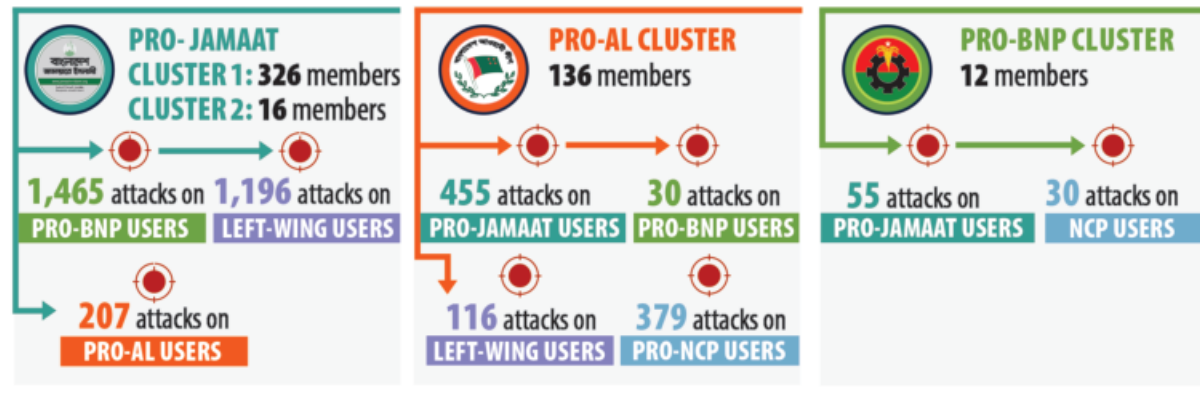


Jamaat leader over alleged controversial remarks about women, referring to a post from the verified X account of Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman. "Just two days ago, a leader of a political party used a word about working women, our mothers and sisters, that I feel ashamed to repeat here," he said. Tarique said that amid nationwide

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HOLIDAY NOTICE
The Daily Star offices will remain closed today on the occasion of Shab-e-Barat. Therefore, the newspaper will not be published tomorrow. Our website will keep you updated 24/7.

ATTACKS ON POLITICAL OPPONENTS



ATTACKS ON MEDIA



the post drew over 10,000 reactions -- 8,500 of them "haha," signalling mockery rather than concern. While social media users agreeing or disagreeing with a post may react with "like," "love," or "haha", a closer look at these 8,500 "haha" reactions revealed that one in every five came from suspicious profiles. Many usernames appeared foreign, written in scripts other

using five dummy Facebook profiles and sourcing them from four separate "click farms" over two days. Many of the same profiles delivering fake reactions for our posts were also active across the pages of dozens of political actors and at least six candidates running in the February 12 election -- supporting one side or trolling the

network uncovered in this investigation suggests that Meta's detection systems are failing to catch them. Meta did not respond to requests for comment sent via email. **THE DIGITAL MOB** The Daily Star analysed "haha" and other reactions across 263 Facebook

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July deniers will get 'red card' in polls

Says Jamaat chief, vows to expose those behind his 'X account hack'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman yesterday warned that voters would show a "red card" in the February 12 national elections to those who fail to recognise the spirit of the 2024 mass uprising. "The nation today stands on the foundation of the '24 movement. Therefore, those who do not recognise '24 will be shown a red card in '26," he said while addressing a campaign rally at the Padua High School ground in Lohagara, Chattogram. Shafiqur said the spirit of the "July revolution" must guide the country's future governance, adding that the 11-party alliance seeks victory not for itself alone, but for the country's 180 million people. The Jamaat chief, who attended a series of rallies in Cox's Bazar, Maheshkhali, Sitakunda, and Chattogram city, also urged voters to cast "yes" vote in the referendum, calling it a crucial step to dismantle the remnants of autocracy.



"The first vote on February 12 will be for 'yes' in the referendum to uphold the July charter," he said at a rally in Maheshkhali. Describing a "yes" vote as Azadi (freedom) and a "no" vote as Golami (slavery), Shafiqur said those who had previously remained silent were now being "compelled" to support the "yes" campaign. However, he stressed that their public statements should reflect their true convictions. "Those who take a stand against

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Vote for the ideology, not for alliances

Says IAB ameer

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Brahmanbaria

Ameer of Islami Andolan Bangladesh Multi Syed Rezaul Karim yesterday urged voters to use their voting power to bring real change, saying the country has failed to achieve peace or true liberation under the existing political system since independence. "The conventional democratic system has failed to deliver peace or freedom over the past 54 years," he said, urging voters to prioritise political ideology over alliances in the upcoming national election. Addressing an election rally at the Pilot High School ground in Nabinagar upazila of Brahmanbaria around 4:00pm, Rezaul Karim said, "We are taking risks

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AUG 2024-DEC 2025

158 killed in 600 incidents of political violence

TIB report shows BNP linked to majority of cases, warns violence may continue beyond polling day

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 600 incidents of political violence, resulting in the deaths of 158 political activists, were reported across the country between August 2024 and December 2025, according to a report by Transparency International Bangladesh. The report said 7,082 people were injured during the violent incidents, the majority of which were linked to the BNP -- 550 incidents, accounting for 91.7 percent of the total. The Awami League was involved in 124 incidents (20.7 percent), while Jamaat-e-Islami was linked to 7.7 percent and the National Citizen Party to 1.2 percent.

At least 15 political leaders and activists were killed within 36 days of the announcement of the election schedule on December 11, the report shows. The report titled "Justice, State Reform and Election after the Fall of Authoritarianism: Expectations and Reality", was unveiled at the TIB office in the capital's Dhanmondi yesterday. As of November 19, 2025, 1,785 cases, including 837 murder cases, related to crimes against humanity during the July uprising have been filed nationwide. Of those, 663 cases have been filed against deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina, 453 of which are murder cases. The report said charge sheets have been submitted in only 106 cases, including 31 murder cases, indicating slow progress in investigations.

AT A GLANCE

- 1,785 cases filed nationwide centring the July uprising, 663 cases against Hasina
- Mob violence threatens the February 12 elections
- Media under pressure, ordinances restrict freedom
- Judicial politicisation hinders the progress of democratic reforms

So far, 128 former ministers and members of parliament from the Awami League government have been arrested in connection with the cases. The report also revealed that 761 cases have been filed against 1,168 serving and former police officials for crimes against humanity during uprising. Among them, 61 have been arrested. At the International Crimes Tribunal, 450 complaints have so far been lodged -- 45 have been taken into cognisance. These cases involve 209 accused, with 84 arrests made. Currently, 12 cases against 105 accused are under trial at the ICT.

TIB said many accused individuals have fled the country, with allegations that members of the military, law enforcement and local political leaders directly or indirectly facilitated their escape. The watchdog expressed serious concern over the indiscriminate filing of cases following the uprising, with the report estimating that around 150,000 people across the country have been accused. It cited widespread allegations of "case trade", retaliatory filings, political harassment and extortion, including threats of inclusion or promises of exclusion in cases. In many instances, the report said, law enforcement agencies accepted cases without proper investigation due to pressure. TIB also raised concerns about the competence and

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Yunus govt's record uneven

Reports Crisis Group, praises July charter, economic steps, criticises weak policing, mob violence

STAR REPORT

As Bangladesh's interim government approaches the end of its tenure, the International Crisis Group has taken stock of its record since the ouster of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024. In a report published yesterday, the Brussels-based think tank mentions that the interim administration led by Nobel laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus has drawn praise for pulling the economy back from the brink, reviving the International Crimes Tribunal to address past human



rights abuses, and drafting the July charter -- a set of 84 reform proposals aimed at curbing prime ministerial powers, strengthening parliamentary oversight, and reducing partisan influence over judicial appointments. "Together with the central bank, the government introduced banking reforms and awarded port contracts to foreign operators to ease logistical bottlenecks." Yet its record is uneven, notes Crisis Group, stating that "security sector reform has largely stalled, with a distrust of police after years of

politicisation; mob violence has risen; while agencies such as the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) remain unreformed." Recommendations from the women's affairs and media reform commissions were sidelined, the report also says, citing possible reasons as "either due to resistance from conservative groups or a lack of political will." Referencing critics, Crisis Group points to arguments that the interim government has failed to live up to its lofty ambitions and that it pursued vendettas against the Awami League while being too accommodating

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