

# Election legitimacy and the absence of Awami League



David Bergman is a journalist who has written about Bangladesh for many years. His X handle is @TheDavidBergman.

DAVID BERGMAN

Apart from Bangladeshis' understandable preoccupation right now with the question of who will win the election—BNP or Jamaat-e-Islami—there are two further common points of contention that people are asking about the February 12 vote.

First, will there be any manipulation of votes, as has occurred to varying degrees in every election in Bangladesh, or will the result genuinely reflect how people voted? Second, a question few are willing to ask within Bangladesh itself, but which is raised more openly outside the country: can an election be considered fair and legitimate in the absence of the Awami League?

This article is primarily concerned with the second question, although a brief comment on the issue of electoral manipulation is warranted. There is little doubt that nefarious actors exist—at both local and national levels—within both major party blocs, as well as within the administration and the security forces, who, if given the opportunity, may seek to tilt the electoral process in favour of one side or the other.

While the government insists that this will be the cleanest election in the country's history, it remains uncertain whether sufficient safeguards and scrutiny are in place—within the Election Commission, among observers, or in the media—to prevent rigging. Ultimately, this is something that can only be judged on the day itself and in subsequent reporting. That said, it seems likely that any manipulation, should it occur, will be relatively limited in scope.

However, even assuming that there is no rigging, or no substantive rigging, there remains the question of whether the election can be described as "fair" or legitimate in the absence of the Awami League.

In principle, any genuinely fair election should allow the participation of all political parties, and throughout Bangladesh's history, the Awami League has consistently been either

the most popular or the second most popular party. Even now, were it permitted to contest the election, the Awami League would almost certainly win a number of seats, though it would not get close to securing a victory. Its participation would nonetheless likely have a decisive impact on the overall result, shaping which of the other parties emerged on top and potentially allowing the Awami League to hold the balance of power. In short, an election that included the Awami League would look markedly different from the one scheduled to take place in just over a week's time.

It is this line of reasoning that underpins the Awami League's claim that its exclusion from the election is wholly unjustifiable and renders the result illegitimate.

In advancing this argument, however, the Awami League ignores the context in which the decision to exclude it was taken. That context is the party's role in supporting—and in key respects, facilitating—the government's response to the July 2024 protests during which, as per detailed mapping of the killings cited by the International Truth and Justice Project, over 800 individuals were confirmed to have been killed by law enforcement authorities. This is not a peripheral issue. It is the central reason why the party now finds itself outside the electoral process. This context is not merely ignored by the Awami League but is also often minimised or omitted by journalists and others sympathetic to the party's current predicament.

The question is whether this is enough to justify the Awami League's exclusion.

One way to approach this question is through a thought experiment: to consider how such events would be viewed, and what political consequences would likely follow, if they occurred in another democratic country, however unlikely that may seem.

Imagine, then, that something similar happened in Britain.

The prime minister, Keir Starmer, orders

the police and security forces to use lethal force against protesters. Over the course of several weeks, hundreds of people are killed and thousands seriously injured. Almost all Labour ministers, MPs, and senior party figures either publicly support the policy, remain silent, or conspicuously fail to criticise it. Starmer and other senior figures actively encourage local Labour constituency parties to mobilise in support of law enforcement. In

any other liberal democratic country—would the country's political establishment allow the Labour Party to contest the next general election? It is extremely difficult to imagine that it would. The party would be widely regarded as having crossed fundamental democratic red lines and would not be allowed to contest. Only once the party had established an alternative leadership would you imagine the party being allowed to contest an election.

thousands, of the party's members without supporting evidence.

These excesses are real, troubling, and must be acknowledged. But one need not accept the exaggerated claims or support the legal steps taken against the party to recognise the force of the more limited argument for why the Awami League, in its current form, should not be permitted to contest this election. Put differently, even allowing for exaggeration and abuse by its opponents, the core justification for the party's exclusion remains intact. On that basis, an election held without the Awami League cannot be dismissed as illegitimate.

That said, Awami League's exclusion is not cost-free. It distorts the electoral landscape in significant ways. A substantial portion of the electorate—long-standing Awami League supporters—are effectively disenfranchised, forced either to vote for parties they do not support or to abstain altogether. This reality cannot be wished away. Even if the party's exclusion from the election is justified, its total absence is not healthy for the country. It benefits only the Awami League's political opponents, not Bangladesh's democratic development.

For this reason, one does not need to support the party to recognise that serious efforts should be made in the coming years to enable the emergence of a renewed Awami League: a party grounded in its historic commitments to 1971, secularism, and social liberalism, but led by a new leadership that has clearly and credibly broken with those directly responsible for the July killings. But a return to normal democratic competition will require the party to undertake its own process of accountability, reckoning, and reform. And it must be encouraged, as well as pressured, to do so.

If such a process is to be possible, the next elected government will have a crucial role to play. It must move away from some of the most damaging practices of the interim period, including the banning of Awami League's party activities and the use of mass arrests and prolonged detention of its members without evidence. Only prosecutions supported by credible and sufficient evidence should proceed; all those currently detained without such evidence should be released. Those within the party who want to create a reformed Awami League cannot begin the difficult work of reckoning while a boot remains on the party's neck.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

some areas, Labour activists take to the streets in support of the security forces; some carry firearms and shoot at protesters.

When the UK army refuses to shoot on protesters, Starmer and a significant portion of the Labour leadership flee the country, taking refuge in France. The United Nations dispatches a fact-finding mission to the UK, which issues a report concluding that in support of the government, "violent elements associated with" the Labour Party systematically engaged in serious human rights violations, including "hundreds of extrajudicial killings." Yet, over the following year and a half, neither Starmer nor any senior Labour figure, whether abroad or at home, acknowledges the party or government's culpability; leaked recordings even suggest that Starmer, who remains leader of the Labour Party, is encouraging, from France, party activists inside the UK to continue using violence.

If this were to happen in the UK—or in

If such conduct would justify excluding the Labour Party from an election in the UK, it is difficult to argue that Bangladesh's authorities are now acting unreasonably in reaching the same conclusion with respect to the Awami League. There are circumstances in which the exclusion of a major political party from an election does not undermine the election's legitimacy, but instead represents a response to conduct that has placed that party, at least temporarily, outside the bounds of democratic legitimacy. The Awami League's response to the July uprising is one such circumstance.

It is true that Bangladesh has no shortage of highly partisan opponents of the Awami League who, for their own political purposes, exaggerate the extent to which the entire party—at national, district, and local levels—was complicit in the July killings. This overreach is reflected in the criminalising of Awami League activities and the arrest and imprisonment of hundreds, perhaps

# Better care for ovarian cancer is possible, and long overdue



Rafe Sadnan Adel is a board director of the World Ovarian Cancer Coalition.

RAFE SADNAN ADEL

Bangladesh has made notable progress in public health over the past decades. Maternal mortality has declined, immunisation coverage has expanded, and community-based health delivery has saved millions of lives. Yet, behind these gains lies a disease that continues to expose the structural weaknesses of our health system: ovarian cancer.

Findings from the Bangladesh cohort of Every Woman Study, a multi-country observational study across 22 low-and-middle-income countries, offer a sobering account of what Bangladeshi women endure from the first symptoms of ovarian cancer to life during and after treatment.

The findings do not point to indifference. They reveal women who recognise that something is wrong, families who exhaust every possible resource to keep loved ones alive, and clinicians doing their best within significant constraints. At the same time, the evidence exposes persistent gaps in awareness, diagnosis, financial protection, and psychosocial care—gaps that cost women time, dignity and, too often, survival.

Nearly half of the women interviewed for the Every Woman Study had never heard of ovarian cancer before their diagnosis. Even among those with some awareness, only a small fraction understood how the disease typically develops. Knowledge of genetic risk was even rarer, with most women unaware that a family history of cancer could increase their own risk. This matters because ovarian cancer rarely presents with clear warning signs. Its symptoms—persistent

bloating, abdominal or pelvic pain, difficulty eating, urinary urgency—are common, easily dismissed, and often normalised. In Bangladesh, almost all women experienced symptoms before diagnosis, but without awareness, these signs were frequently ignored until the disease had progressed.

This lack of awareness reflects deeper social realities. Almost one-third of the women had no formal education and more than half lived in households with below-average income. For many, access to health information was constrained by literacy levels, geography, and digital exclusion. Awareness efforts that rely primarily on urban, online, or technical messaging will continue to miss those most at risk. What is needed is community-based, culturally grounded communication that reaches women where they live and in language they understand.

The study also challenged the assumption that late diagnosis is driven by reluctance to seek care. Most women reported feeling concerned about their symptoms, and nearly nine in 10 consulted a healthcare professional, often within weeks. The failure occurs after the first consultation. Many women visited doctors repeatedly, sometimes up to 10 times, before receiving a diagnosis. This pattern points to missed opportunities within the health system, particularly at the primary and secondary care levels, where symptoms are not consistently recognised as potentially malignant and referrals are delayed.

This is not a matter of individual blame but of systemic preparedness. Ovarian cancer may be relatively less

common, but this does not justify repeated misdiagnosis. Evidence from the study highlights the need for continuing medical education, clearer symptom-recognition protocols, and stronger referral pathways so that a patient's concern is met with timely investigation.

Additionally, diagnostic access further compounds these delays. While abdominal ultrasound and CA125 blood tests were commonly used, access to transvaginal ultrasound, an important diagnostic tool, was strikingly low. Genetic testing after diagnosis was almost nonexistent. These services exist in Bangladesh, but availability does not equal accessibility. Women in Bangladesh reported some of the longest travel times among all countries in the study, with many travelling more than five hours to reach a hospital. For women already weakened by illness, distance becomes yet another barrier.

Once diagnosed, treatment outcomes reveal both strengths and vulnerabilities. Treatment generally begins quickly and surgical outcomes are comparable to global standards, reflecting the skill and commitment of oncology teams. However, this clinical capacity is undermined by overwhelming financial burden. More than 90 percent of women relied on family members to pay for care and most reported severe financial impact from treatment costs, diagnostic tests, travel, and accommodation. Bangladesh stood out in the study for its heavy reliance on crowdfunding and NGO support—clear indicators that families are pushed beyond their limits in the absence of adequate financial protection.

World Cancer Day (observed on February 4) is a good opportunity to remember that cancer is not a short-term crisis. Yet, health financing in Bangladesh continues to treat it as one. Without structured support, families are forced into debt, asset sales, or dependence on charity. Financial protection must be recognised as a central pillar of cancer care, not an afterthought.

Equally concerning are the findings on emotional and mental health. Fear—of death, recurrence, and treatment failure—was widespread. Most women needed emotional

wanted more information about their disease and treatment but many lacked internet access or did not use it for obtaining health-related information. Women expressed a

stronger investment in early detection. These demands need to be translated into concrete policy actions, such as, national awareness initiatives, continuing medical education, expanded diagnostic services, financial protection mechanisms, integrated mental healthcare, and patient-centred information systems. None of these ideas are radical; all are achievable and long overdue.

Ovarian cancer in Bangladesh ultimately poses a moral question. The women whose experiences inform this evidence travelled long distances, endured repeated consultations, exhausted family savings, and relied on loved ones and strangers alike to survive. They did their part. The responsibility now lies with policymakers and the health system to act. Early diagnosis, equitable access, financial protection, and emotional support are not optional—they are the minimum standards of dignified, rights-based care that Bangladeshi women deserve.

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support at diagnosis and during treatment, yet almost none were offered professional psychological care. Families provided comfort and practical help, but that alone cannot replace trained mental health services. Cancer is not only a physical illness; it is an emotional and psychological rupture. When mental health needs are ignored, quality of life suffers and recovery becomes harder.

Access to information mirrors these challenges. Nearly all women

clear preference for hospitals and healthcare professionals as their primary sources of information. They want clear, trustworthy guidance in Bangla, delivered throughout their cancer journey—from diagnosis to survivorship or palliative care.

When asked what should change, almost every woman interviewed for the study believed the government could do more. Their priorities were clear: free or affordable access to treatment and diagnostic tests, and

বাংলাদেশ ইনস্টিটিউট অব ইন্টারন্যাশনাল এন্ড স্ট্র্যাটেজিক স্টাডিজ (বিআইআইএসএস)

১/৪৬, পুরাতন এলিফ্যান্ট রোড, রমনা, ঢাকা-১০০০।

**ইন্টারন্যাশনাল নিয়োগ বিজ্ঞপ্তি**

১। বাংলাদেশ ইনস্টিটিউট অব ইন্টারন্যাশনাল এন্ড স্ট্র্যাটেজিক স্টাডিজ (বিআইআইএসএস)-এ ইন্টারন্যাশনাল নিয়োগের জন্য বাংলাদেশী নাগরিকদের নিকট হতে আবেদনপত্র আহ্বান করা যাচ্ছে:

ক্রমিক	পদের নাম, সংখ্যা ও ভাতা	মেয়াদকাল	বিষয়সমূহ	আবেদনকারীর যোগ্যতা
ক।	পদের নামঃ ইন্টারন্যাশনাল ইন্টারন্যাশনাল চলাকালীন মাসিক ১০,০০০/- (দশ হাজার) টাকা হারে 'ইন্টারন্যাশনাল জাতীয়' প্রদান করা হবে। 'ইন্টারন্যাশনাল জাতীয়' ব্যতীত অন্য কোনো ভাতা/সুবিধা প্রদান করা হবে না।	ইন্টারন্যাশনাল-এর মেয়াদকাল সর্বনিম্ন ০৩ (তিন) মাস এবং পরবর্তীতে বিবেচনা সাপেক্ষে ০৬ (ছয়) মাস পর্যন্ত হতে পারবে যা সংশ্লিষ্ট কর্তৃপক্ষ নির্ধারণ করবে।	আন্তর্জাতিক সম্পর্ক, রাষ্ট্রবিজ্ঞান, অর্থনীতি, নিস এন্ড কমিউনিটি স্টাডিজ, উইমেন এন্ড গেন্ডার স্টাডিজ, ইতিহাস, আন্তর্জাতিক আইন, ভূগোল, উন্নয়ন অধ্যয়ন, সামাজিক বিজ্ঞান, পরিবেশ বিজ্ঞান।	ক। প্রার্থীকে বাংলাদেশের নাগরিক হতে হবে। খ। আবেদনকারীর শিক্ষাপত্র যোগ্যতা ও অভিজ্ঞতা বিআইআইএসএস সংশ্লিষ্ট গবেষণা ও কার্যপরিধির সঙ্গে সংশ্লিষ্ট হতে হবে। গ। প্রার্থীকে কমপক্ষে স্নাতক/সমমানের ডিগ্রিধারী হতে হবে (অকর্ডার প্রার্থীসহ) ঘ। স্নাতক/স্নাতকোত্তর/সমমানের ডিগ্রি অর্জনের ০২ (দুই) বছরের মধ্যে আবেদন করতে হবে; এবং ঙ। একবার প্রার্থী শুধু একবার বিআইআইএসএস-এ ইন্টারন্যাশনাল নিয়োগের পরবে।

২। আবেদনপত্রের সাথে আবশ্যিকভাবে নিম্নলিখিত কাগজপত্রসমূহ সংযুক্ত করতে হবেঃ

(ক) সর্বশেষ শিক্ষাপ্রতিষ্ঠান হতে তার মৌলিক যোগ্যতা ও অন্যান্য গুণাবলির বর্ণনা সংবলিত প্রত্যয়ন;  
(খ) স্নাতক/স্নাতকোত্তর/সমমান পরীক্ষার উত্তীর্ণের সনদ, অথবা উক্ত পূর্ণ পরীক্ষাসমূহে অবতীর্ণ হওয়ার প্রত্যয়ন (যথাযথ কর্তৃপক্ষ কর্তৃক) পত্রের কপি;  
(গ) জাতীয় পরিচয়পত্র (NID)-এর কপি ও ০২ কপি পাসপোর্ট সাইজের ছবি।  
(ঘ) কোনো আবেদনকারী অন্য কোনো কর্মে নিয়োজিত থাকলে নিয়োগকারী কর্তৃপক্ষের অনাপত্তি সনদ দাখিল করতে হবে।

৩। আগামী ১৫ ফেব্রুয়ারি ২০২৫ তারিখের মধ্যে **মহাপরিচালক, বিআইআইএসএস** বরাবর আবেদনপত্র ও জীবনকৃত্য (CV) পৌঁছেতে হবে।

৪। প্রাথমিকভাবে বাছাইকৃত প্রার্থীদের লিখিত ও মৌখিক পরীক্ষার অংশগ্রহণের জন্য এসএসএস/ফোন কল-এর মাধ্যমে অবহিত করা হবে।

উপ-পরিচালক (প্রশাসন)

GD-242

বাংলাদেশ ইনস্টিটিউট অব ইন্টারন্যাশনাল এন্ড স্ট্র্যাটেজিক স্টাডিজ