

Voters need assurance of safety, not denial of facts

Visible action needed to address electoral violence

With only a week left for the election, the collection and analysis of intelligence reports to identify vulnerable constituencies and polling centres have not only become crucial but urgent. Thirteen constituencies have already been identified as highly risky, and media reports suggest law enforcers are conducting similar exercises to identify high-risk polling centres across districts. As the police continue these drills and assess the broader security landscape, we must emphasise that deploying extra forces around polling centres solely on election day is insufficient.

Several incidents of political violence, which turned fatal, have occurred recently. Last week, a Jamaat activist from Sherpur succumbed to his injuries after clashes with BNP activists over an issue as seating arrangement at a programme organised by the local administration. According to Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), between September 2024 and January 2026, at least 195 people were killed and 11,229 were injured due to political violence. Of these deaths, at least five occurred in election-related violence since the date of the 13th parliamentary election was announced on December 11, 2025. The report also documented 970 injuries from 162 election violence-related incidents, including clashes, attacks, vandalism, and arson involving rival candidates and their supporters. A report published in this daily earlier this week quoted police headquarters reports about 57 clashes in 50 constituencies since the announcement of the polls schedule. Of these clashes, 25 occurred between the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, eight within the BNP, another eight between the BNP and independent candidates, and three between the BNP and the National Citizen Party.

Besides, recent campaign rhetoric among the major political parties has taken on an increasingly hostile tone. Allegations of printing false seals, planning to "hijack people's votes" are also rife. Thus, the possibility of pre-election and election-day clashes cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, law enforcement agencies must also be prepared to manage post-election clashes. In the past, communities that voted for a particular party/candidate would often come under attack. This issue must be taken into special consideration this year so that the promise of a new pluralistic and democratic Bangladesh is not stained in the aftermath of this much-awaited national election.

In this context, the home adviser's claim that "there is no mob violence" and that "violence is impossible during the election" will do little to ease voters' apprehension about the February 12 polls. What is needed is visible action, not just by law enforcers, but also by the Election Commission. Monitoring and punitive action must be enforced uniformly against all parties for any violation, major or minor, to set a clear example. Political parties must also show restraint and rein in disruptive elements to ensure voters can exercise their choice freely and without fear. If this election is to be historic, the process and its aftermath both must be violence-free.

Policy consistency a must in primary education

There is no alternative to continuous assessment

The decision to reintroduce examinations in classes one and two, barely two years after they were scrapped under the new curriculum, once again exposes the lack of coherence and long-term thinking in our education policymaking. At a time when the focus should be on improving learning outcomes and strengthening classroom practices, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education has chosen to reverse its assessment policy, which will significantly impact young children.

Under the revised guidelines, exams will make up half of the assessment in class one and two for textbook-based subjects, alongside continuous assessment. This directly contradicts the reasoning behind scrapping exams in 2023, when policymakers acknowledged that exam-based learning places undue pressure on six- and seven-year-old children and does little to support meaningful learning. Changing that decision so quickly reflects the government's policy instability, which is an enduring problem in our education sector.

Educationists believe that there is no alternative to continuous assessment in primary education. Recent data on the quality of primary education reinforces their view. The National Student Assessment 2022 found that over 60 percent of third graders and 70 percent of fifth graders lack grade-level proficiency in mathematics. In Bangla, around half of the students in these grades are similarly behind. Experts attribute this to overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching methods, poor student-teacher interaction, and a shortage of resources. The findings emphasise that reintroducing examinations will not improve learning unless the fundamental weaknesses in teaching and classroom support are addressed.

At present, children are not being properly taught in classrooms, and continuous assessment is not being implemented effectively, according to experts. Many teachers are also unaware of how continuous assessment should be carried out. Yet, this failure is now being passed on to students in the name of terminal exams. Educationists argue that learning should be based on each child's ability, with a much stronger emphasis on continuous assessment.

Reintroducing exams in the earliest grades, without addressing systemic flaws, will only create confusion and undermine trust in reform efforts. What the sector needs is sustained investment in teacher training, smaller class sizes to allow meaningful student-teacher interaction, stronger classroom support, and careful monitoring of learning processes. Remedial assistance must be made available for struggling students, and assessment policies must be stable and evidence-based, focusing on foundational skills. Only with consistency, investment, and child-centred policies can we hope to improve our primary education.

Politicians must be open to accepting electoral defeats

Discard the mindset that 'the election is only fair if I win'



THE THIRD VIEW
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MAHFUZ ANAM

Three things mark the distinctiveness of the upcoming national election: the resurgence of Jamaat-e-Islami, the rise of Tarique Rahman as a central personality of present-day politics, and something that was unthinkable before August 2024—the sidelining of Awami League from the present election.

Ever since its role in our Liberation War, in which it opposed the birth of Bangladesh and assisted the Pakistan Army in committing genocide and al Badr and al Shams in killing our intellectuals, Jamaat's presence in the country's politics has been a deeply controversial matter. The fact that it never apologised for its role and never sought forgiveness from the people of Bangladesh remains something that made its acceptability nearly impossible. Its latest position, as expressed by its chief, Dr Shafiqur Rahman, is that "if we have committed any mistake since 1947 (the year of birth of Pakistan, which Jamaat, led by its founder Abul A'la Maududi, had opposed) till date, we apologise for it." The party's refusal to refer to the events of 1971 and apologise for opposing our independence struggle and acting against the ordinary and freedom-loving people remains most tragic.

However, in spite of its past, Jamaat today is a significant presence in the upcoming election. Opinion polls show that it is likely to emerge as the second biggest party in the next parliament. How did it navigate through such a shameful legacy and emerge with such a strength?

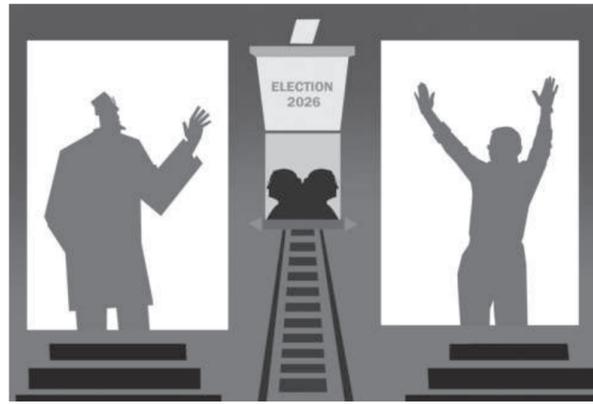
The most important reason is its use of the rising consciousness of Muslim identity among the majority of Bangladeshis, and Jamaat positioning itself to be the most authentic representative of that. The utter failure of the two centrist parties—Awami League (AL) in particular and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to some extent—to make a deep, lasting impact of nationalistic and secular politics in voters' minds created the space for Jamaat's resurgence. Together, these two parties were in power since 1991, and their performance only distanced the people from them. The corrupt, exploitative, and oppressive role of the Awami League during its 15-plus years of rule that ended in August 2024—a party whose legitimacy and appeal centred around its role in 1971—greatly opened up further space for Jamaat to strengthen its position in our politics.

Jamaat's ideological consistency in the use of religion, its organisational ability, and the commitment of its grassroots workers have contributed immensely to its present strength. The way its student activists penetrated Chhatra League over the years, and assumed its second-tier leadership roles in some cases, shows the effectiveness of the party's long-term planning and organisational ability. Shibir's (Jamaat's student wing) victory in the student union elections at five public universities that took place recently is evidence of how successful their efforts have been. It is also reported that Jamaat's grassroots

female members have been quite active and effective in their home-to-home campaigning for the party.

In this connection, Jamaat's electoral ally National Citizen Party (NCP) also deserves a mention. A party that emerged from the July uprising, NCP entered electoral politics with huge expectations but then found itself aligning with the Jamaat-led bloc in a decision that could be consequential for the party's future, both immediate and distant.

The second unique aspect of this election is the rise of Tarique Rahman. He was the heir apparent from the start, but his phenomenal rise is something quite stunning. The way he kept his party operational from London for so many years while his mother was incarcerated speaks volumes of his ability to use modern communication facilities to keep a political party motivated and, more importantly, disciplined. He was well-known for his connection with local



VISUAL: BIPOLO CHAKROBORTY

him a central factor in Bangladesh's current electoral politics. So far, he has conducted himself with dignity and maturity. His speeches have been restrained and future-oriented. His detailed enunciation of what he plans to do if elected to power contrasts well with the rhetorical speeches of others.

Whether he has been able to organise his party well to campaign effectively or not will be clear after the polls. But so far, he has successfully filled in the shoes of his late mother, whose janaza stood out as the most striking evidence of the love and respect she enjoyed and the sympathy that he has the possibility of inheriting.

The third feature of the upcoming election is the prevention of Awami League from participating in it. The party has not been banned, but its activities are. How could a party that has played such an important role in the birth of Bangladesh and has been a part of it for the last 55 years become so vulnerable as to be sidelined in such

from history: that while we are highly enthusiastic about elections, we are terribly reluctant about accepting their results when we lose. The losers are of two categories: individuals who fail to win, and the party that fails to win enough parliamentary seats to form the next government. It is the last category that usually questions the polls and destabilises the transition. We have seen it in all past elections, even under the caretaker system. As we summarised the tendency in a previous article, an election is only free and fair if we win but rigged if we lose! This tendency is something we must move away from. It is our ardent hope and genuine expectation that the result will be accepted with grace and dignity. If there are fact-based grounds for questioning, do so as per the rules laid down by the Election Commission. Do not create unnecessary chaos and disruptions. The country needs to move on urgently and peacefully.

Here's to a free, fair, and peaceful election.

Can the next government tame the bureaucracy?



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As Bangladesh approaches the pivotal February 12 election, a singular, urgent demand resonates from tea stalls to boardrooms: the dismantling of a bureaucratic apparatus that has strangled national progress for decades. The 2024 uprising was never merely about changing faces in parliament; it was also a revolt against a labyrinthine administrative system that treats citizens as supplicants rather than stakeholders.

In a recent address, Law, Justice and Parliamentary Adviser Asif Nazrul said that bureaucrats in Bangladesh are "inherently resistant to reform." Recently, a proposal was made to increase government employee compensation by over Tk 1 lakh crore. This comes at a time when the national budget sits below Tk 8 lakh crore, and the broader economy grapples with job losses, a banking crisis, and stagnant

exports.

To honour the mandate of the people, the administration must move beyond "gradual" change. Reformers are calling for five systemic shifts. The Public Service (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, must be enforced. Officials who obstruct service or solicit bribes should face summary removal rather than the departmental proceedings that historically act as a shield for corruption. The new government must establish citizen review boards with real power to terminate bureaucrats who fail performance standards.

Moreover, human gatekeepers are the primary source of "informal fees." While moving land registration, business licensing, tax filing, and permit approvals online are works in progress, the process must be adopted fully and flawlessly. When human

interaction is unavoidable, it must be recorded and auditable.

Five-year renewable contracts should be introduced for all positions above the entry level, with renewal contingent on measurable performance metrics: processing times, citizen satisfaction scores, and audit results. Furthermore, a regular system for "lateral entry" from the private sector is essential to inject modern expertise into a closed system.

Starting a business currently requires a marathon through trade, environmental, fire, and tax departments, each guarded by separate departments that refuse coordination. A unified one-stop centre for some cases appears to be on the cards of the interim government; a legally mandated 15-day approval window is no longer a luxury—it is a necessity.

The upcoming government must establish sting operations and anonymous reporting systems with financial rewards for exposing bribery demands. More importantly, the need for bribes must be removed by setting clear, published timelines for every government process. If an application exceeds the timeline, automatic approval should be granted, and the responsible officials should be suspended pending investigation.

a crucial political event as an election?

Awami League's present debacle has many contributing factors, including extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances, but mainly owes to its brutal killings in the streets of Dhaka and the rest of the country during the last six weeks of its rule. One incident illustrates it all. How could a young university student like Abu Sayed, completely unarmed, standing alone on a street away from other protesters, without posing any threat to anybody, let alone the police who were standing far away, be shot to death? Sheikh Hasina and her government lost everything—the people, credibility, and acceptability—and revealed the mindset of a vicious oppressor. This was further proven by the fact that instead of expressing regret and taking action against the perpetrators, the government fiddled, more than once, with the autopsy report and tried to justify its actions. Then followed the weeks of the killing of demonstrators, which created the ground for banning AL's activities.

Which party AL voters will tilt towards on February 12 will perhaps have a decisive impact on the outcome of the polls.

There is, of course, an additional feature of this election: the eclipsing of Jatiya Party, which dominated politics under Gen HM Ershad up to 1990, and had the third place in all the elections since then.

Elections are always central to a country's democratic march forward. But this year, the polls are far more crucial because Bangladesh urgently needs to restart its journey of stability, predictability, ending mobocracy, getting the direly needed investment, and public safety and security. All of these are expected to start with the installation of an elected parliament, accountable government, competent policymakers, and clarity of a vision as to where we are going.

We conclude with a warning drawn from history: that while we are highly enthusiastic about elections, we are terribly reluctant about accepting their results when we lose. The losers are of two categories: individuals who fail to win, and the party that fails to win enough parliamentary seats to form the next government. It is the last category that usually questions the polls and destabilises the transition. We have seen it in all past elections, even under the caretaker system. As we summarised the tendency in a previous article, an election is only free and fair if we win but rigged if we lose! This tendency is something we must move away from. It is our ardent hope and genuine expectation that the result will be accepted with grace and dignity. If there are fact-based grounds for questioning, do so as per the rules laid down by the Election Commission. Do not create unnecessary chaos and disruptions. The country needs to move on urgently and peacefully.

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