

Shafiqur invites Tarique to live public debate

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman yesterday invited BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman to take part in a live public discussion to present their respective political visions and election manifestos before the nation.

In a post on his verified Facebook page around 8:00pm, Shafiqur said political legitimacy in Bangladesh could only be secured through a free and fair election.

"Legitimacy comes only from a free and fair election. Without fairness and trust, no outcome can win the people's confidence.

"After the July uprising, we owe it to our young people to show that politics can be civil and non-confrontational," the post said.

The Jamaat ameer proposed that both leaders appear together before the media and the public to demonstrate a style of politics that is open to criticism, accountable, and transparent.

Citing Tarique's recently unveiled political plan, he invited the BNP chairman to share a public platform for a live discussion where both sides would present their election manifestos and allow citizens to make their own judgment.

"Let us begin a new chapter for Bangladesh, where we all commit to respecting the will of the people," Shafiqur said. BNP has yet to respond publicly to the proposal.



An Inqilab Moncho activist holds up a sign demanding a UN-led neutral investigation into the killing of former spokesperson Sharif Osman Bin Hadi. The demand sparked clashes yesterday when protesters staging a sit-in on Minto Road tried to break through a police barricade and march towards the chief adviser's residence, Jamuna.

PHOTOS: MEHEDI HASAN

IAB chief vows minority safety

BSS, Dhaka

Islami Andolan Bangladesh (IAB) Ameer Mufti Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim, also known as Charmonai Pir, yesterday said his party has been working to ensure the safety of minority communities across the country following the August 5 uprising.

Addressing an election rally in Barguna's Amtali municipality, he called on voters to support his party's "Hat Pakha" (hand fan) electoral symbol in the February 12 elections.

"Many have spoken of building a golden Bangladesh, green Bangladesh or digital Bangladesh. Without such slogans, we will work to bring smiles to the faces of 18 crore people. In Sha Allah."

Expressing optimism about the electoral prospects in Barguna-1, the IAB leader said his confidence grew through discussions with locals, party leaders and activists.

He urged party activists to continue election activities peacefully and cautioned against any attempt to create violence or disrupt the polling process.

Reiterating his party's stance, he assured minority communities, including Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists, that they remain safe under his party's leadership in Charmonai.

Speaking at the rally, IAB's Barguna-1 candidate Maulana Mahmudul Hossain Waliullah said he aims to serve the people, not rule them. He pledged to prioritise sustainable development, education, employment, healthcare, and management of flooding and river erosion in the district.

The rally was attended by senior IAB leaders, including presidium members Prof Ashraf Ali Akon, Prof Mahbubur Rahman, and Central Assistant Publicity and Dawah Secretary Maulana KM Shariatullah and other local leaders.

BNP promises a govt answerable directly to citizens

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Dhaka. In previous elections – the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth – manifestos were announced by Khaleda Zia.

Presided over by Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, the event was attended by representatives of 38 countries, teachers, senior journalists, and civil society members.

"This manifesto is not merely an electoral pledge; it is a declaration of a new social and state contract with the citizens of Bangladesh," Tarique said after a nearly two-hour presentation, six days before the national election.

He said BNP's governance philosophy will centre on upholding the fundamental mottoes of the Liberation War: equality, human dignity, and social justice.

"The BNP believes not in revenge, but in a politics of justice and humanity. The rights of the people, not power, are at the core of our politics. Production, not plunder; rights, not fear; fairness, not discrimination – these are the principles that will guide the governance of the state," he added.

Tarique said, "All the plans and programmes I have presented today will not be possible unless we address three issues – corruption, rule of law, and accountability. Whoever forms the government, if these three issues are not addressed, we will never succeed." He added that BNP, if elected, would give the highest priority to these issues.

The manifesto stressed human values and dignity. "No form of black law in the name of rule of law will be acceptable. The Special Powers Act of 1974 will be repealed," it said. It also committed to justice for crimes against humanity during the fascist era, including the July uprising.

According to the manifesto, a list of martyrs of the Liberation War, the 1990 movement, and the 2024 mass uprising will be compiled under state initiative and accorded proper recognition. Freedom fighter allowances will be increased in line with inflation. A Truth and Healing Commission will focus on victims of human rights violations, ensuring compensation and bringing perpetrators to justice.

It pledged to implement the July National Charter signed on October 17, 2025 with highest priority.

The party also committed to create the post of vice president, balance power between the president and prime minister, and ensure judicial independence.

"My family, my mother, and I were the worst victims of the judiciary during the fascist regime. Having experienced it personally, if BNP is voted to power, I will ensure judicial independence," Tarique said, adding that a Judicial Reform Commission will be formed to reform the justice system.

According to the manifesto, a person may serve as prime minister for a maximum of 10 years, regardless of previous terms. A PM may also serve as party chief.

It also pledged to introduce a 100-member upper chamber in parliament to assist governance while keeping the Constitution unitary. Of the two deputy speakers in both chambers, one will be nominated by members outside the ruling party.

It promised to reform the Constitution and pledged to re-establish a neutral caretaker government during elections.

Under the constitutional reform, article 70 of the constitution will be amended to ensure MPs can express their opinions freely on all matters, except votes of confidence, money bills, and others national security

issues.

The manifesto said BNP's goal is to transform Bangladesh into a modern, democratic, upper middle-income country, where a one trillion dollar annual national GDP economy will be built by 2034. Efforts will be made to raise foreign direct investment from 0.45 percent to 2.5 percent of GDP.

The party also pledged that national interest and state security will be the highest priority in concluding international treaties.

According to the manifesto, BNP will take strict measures to curb corruption and improve law and order. An independent inquiry commission will investigate officials accused of state-sponsored terror during the July uprising and probe vote-rigging and corruption.

Guided by faith in Almighty Allah and the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) model of just governance, BNP's guiding principle will be justice, it said, adding that the party will work to build a Bangladesh based on fairness ("insaf").

In ensuring religious freedom and harmony, BNP said that based on the fundamental principle "religion is personal, the state is for all," every religious person will enjoy full rights to practise their own religion.

"No one will be allowed to hurt any citizen's religious beliefs. People of different religions and every group, clan, and community in the country will celebrate their respective religions and religious festivals without hindrance or worry," it said.

In foreign policy, BNP will treat other nations as friends, not masters, prioritising sovereignty, national interests, security, and the welfare of its people. Bilateral and multilateral relations will be based on equality, fairness, pragmatism, and mutual interest.

Tarique pledged to keep the armed forces out of political controversies to protect their integrity.

"Defence is part of foreign policy. We want the armed forces free from all controversies and politicisation," he said, adding that BNP plans to build a self-reliant "Made in Bangladesh" defence industry to meet their needs.

He also reiterated the party's commitment to the One Rank, One Pension (OROP) policy for retired military personnel, aiming to enhance veterans' welfare.

"If entrusted with responsibility by the people, BNP will build a Bangladesh where the dignity of the vote is upheld, no one is above the law, and every citizen can proudly say – Bangladesh before all," he said.

The "Family Card" will provide Tk 2,500 monthly in cash or essential commodities to low-income families. The "Farmer's Card" will ensure fair prices, subsidies, loans, insurance, and state-managed markets.

Healthcare reforms include the recruitment of 100,000 health workers nationwide. It promised to increase health sector funding to 5 percent of GDP and introduce an E-health card to reduce unnecessary costs.

It also pledged to form an education reform commission, allocate 5 percent of GDP to education, provide free school uniforms, introduce skill- and value-based education with technology support, and implement a midday meal programme.

To build a service-oriented civil administration, BNP will form an Administrative Reform Commission and swiftly appoint over five lakh government employees.

Environmental commitments include excavating and re-excavating 20,000 km of rivers and canals, planting 250 million trees over five years, and introducing modern waste

management through public-private partnerships.

BNP plans to expand the digital economy and global connectivity via international payment systems, regional e-commerce hubs, and promoting exports of "Made in Bangladesh" products.

According to the manifesto, the party aims to create 200,000 jobs in five key areas – cybersecurity, BPO, AI data, semiconductors and Industry 4.0 – by rapidly activating the ICT sector and indirectly create another 800,000 jobs through freelancing and content creators.

By strongly promoting innovation and ICT service exports, the contribution of the ICT sector to the country's GDP will be raised to 5-10 percent, it read.

Major reforms in revenue mobilisation aim to raise the tax-to-GDP ratio to 15 percent by 2035.

Rail will be revitalised as the backbone of national transport through electrification, double tracks, and an integrated network including metro, elevated, and commuter lines. High-speed trains will link Dhaka to major cities.

Regional connectivity will be strengthened through Myanmar and the Dhaka-Kunming route with public-private partnerships and smart monitoring. By 2034, Bangladesh will be transformed into one of the leading aviation hubs in South and Southeast Asia, according to the manifesto.

BNP also pledged to improve Dhaka's traffic management, transport systems, air quality, and women's safety. The manifesto includes satellite towns, a monorail alongside the metro, ring roads and waterways, electric vehicles, regulated rickshaws, shared parking, women-only buses, smart traffic systems, expanded CCTV coverage, and a Metropolitan Transport Authority.

BNP will make the Securities and Exchange Commission independent, form a Capital Market Reform Commission, and investigate 15 years of share market irregularities. In banking, it pledged to return depositors' money from liquidated Islamic banks and establish an Economic Reform Commission for financial stability and economic justice.

The party, in the manifesto, said that it aims to develop the creative economy to 1.5 percent of GDP, creating 500,000 jobs; prioritise the blue economy; and ensure fast, reliable internet nationwide.

To promote arts, culture, media, and social harmony, BNP pledged to discourage anti-national cultural practices, promote democratic values, restore morality through education, religion, and social movements, and reform curricula and media to build a humane and inclusive society.

Press freedom will be ensured by reviewing the Digital Security Act, preventing attacks on media outlets, withdrawing politically motivated cases, ensuring justice for tortured and murdered journalists, and establishing an independent media regulator similar to the UK's Ofcom. Measures will be taken to curb fake news and hate speech, protect journalists' welfare, and end political bias in advertisement allocation.

BNP also pledged to protect ethnic and cultural diversity, reassess the 1997 Peace Accord, and strengthen religious freedom and welfare for all faiths.

As per the manifesto, power generation capacity is targeted to reach 35,000 MW by 2030 with transparent contracts.

At a bamboo tea stall

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minister, so I will vote," she said, likely referring to a new member of parliament for the district.

When I asked what she wanted from the new leader, she struggled to find the words in Bangla. After a long pause, she said softly, "We want to live in safety and security." I asked whether she felt unsafe now. "Yes, but..." she hesitated.

She referred to an incident less than a year ago when influential Bangalee traders attempted to take control of a large stretch of forest land belonging to their village, known locally as a para. The dispute escalated before being defused, but the fear remains. "We want to live in peace," she said, repeating the phrase.

The anxiety Omenu struggled to articulate stems from a longer, bloodier history that continues to shape life in the hills. For residents of Bandarban, security is not an abstract concept, but a daily presence, embodied in checkpoints, patrols, and the unspoken rules of movement.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts were engulfed in armed conflict for nearly two decades before a peace accord was signed in 1997, formally ending hostilities between the state and indigenous insurgent groups. The accord raised hopes of demilitarisation and political autonomy, but these expectations were only partially met. Credible estimates suggest that between 35,000 and 40,000 army personnel remain stationed across the three hill districts, alongside thousands of auxiliary force members.

While large-scale insurgency has subsided, violence has never disappeared entirely. In Bandarban, the brief emergence of the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) in 2022 – marked by armed attacks and extortion – rekindled long-suppressed fears of instability. Although the authorities say the situation is under control, the episode prompted renewed security operations and restrictions on movement in remote upazilas such as Thanchi, Ruma, and Alikadam, reinforcing the sense that peace in the hills remains conditional.

It is against this backdrop that hill communities are approaching the February 12 election, cautiously, with

limited expectations of transformation.

Inside Hangsama village, I spoke with Nisemo Marma, the village head, known locally as the karbari, and Saimung Marma, a young resident. Nisemo's three children are educated; two now work in government service, including one in the police. When I raised sensitive issues such as relations with settlers, the security force's presence, and freedom of movement, he responded with care.

"We want to live in peace and prosperity," the soft-spoken elderly man said. While he did not complain about daily life, he spoke emotionally about restrictions. "There are checks," he said. "We want total equality."

Security checks apply to everyone, especially in remote, security-sensitive areas. On my way from Cox's Bazar to Bandarban town, my vehicle was stopped at a checkpoint, where soldiers asked who I was and why I was travelling to the hills. Such stops are routine, revealing how deeply a security presence has become part of everyday life.

Politically, Bandarban has long been dominated by the Awami League's Bir Bahadur Singh, who has won nearly every election since 1991. With the Awami League absent from this election, many hill residents appear to be shifting their support to BNP candidate Sachin Pru. Saimung Marma told me he was working for the BNP campaign.

When I asked what he hoped would change if his party won, he said he wanted a government "that ensures there is no disparity between people in the hills and the plains." Pressed on where he saw disparity, he paused. "Maybe my village is okay," he said, "but there are worries – camps, oppression, rape. These must stop."

My next stop was Lulain Headman Para, another Marma village. Near a primary school established in 1959, I spoke at a tea stall with Monjur-e-Marma, a jhum farmer. He was candid about the election. "No matter who comes to power, I don't care if they give us anything or not," he said. "We just want to live a normal and peaceful life in the hills."

Others sitting nearby nodded in agreement. When I asked whether they were not living in peace now, he replied, "We are okay now. We can do jhum, but

we want it to sustain. We don't know how BNP or Jamaat will rule. I am not sure."

Joining us was Chin Shimo Marma, a Union Parishad member and jhum farmer who also owns a mango orchard. He told me about his efforts to explain the July charter and referendum issues to villagers in the Marma language. Party politics, he said, has limited traction here. "What we want is a guarantee that what we grow here, we can take our produce to Bandarban town and sell it safely and securely."

No one at the tea stall contradicted him.

Anxieties in Bandarban are not confined to Indigenous communities alone. For many Bangalee settlers – now the demographic majority in the district – the hills also represent a place of constraint and uncertainty.

In Notun Para, a Bangalee settler neighbourhood near the Sangu River, I met Ali Hossain, who arrived in Bandarban as a child in 1988, at the height of the insurgency. His family had migrated from the coastal district of Patuakhali, driven by poverty and river erosion.

"It was about survival," he said. "There was no work back home." Today, he said, life is more stable and relations with Indigenous neighbours are generally calm. Still, he spoke of inequality. "In the plains, we can buy land freely," he said. "Here we need certificates from the raja. Is that equality?"

Hossain plans to vote on February 12, but his expectations are low. "What can you expect from politicians?" he asked. "Whoever comes to power becomes selfish. Nothing really changes for common people."

In Bandarban, the election is less about promises than about unresolved histories – of land taken and land restricted, of security imposed and security denied. Indigenous villagers speak of peace with caution, shaped by memories of violence and displacement. Bangalee settlers express their own sense of inequality and political fatigue.

For many here, voting is not an act of faith in politics, but a quiet assertion of presence – an insistence that life in the hills, with all its anxieties and aspirations, still deserves to be counted.

Young candidates

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number – are contesting the national election for the first time.

"The July uprising was led mainly by youths, who proved that they could indeed take charge. Many youths have received party tickets, as their contributions were recognised," said election expert Abdul Alim, also a member of the now-defunct Electoral Reform Commission.

The data show that the average age of candidates has also dropped significantly since 2008 – a period when the political arena was dominated by senior and veteran figures. The average age now stands at 51.8 years, compared with 72.01 years in the 2008 election.

Among the new parties, the National Citizen Party (NCP), formed by frontline organisers of the July uprising, is taking part in a national election for the first time.

The party has nominated 32 candidates, and 19 of them are aged between 25 and 34, accounting for nearly 60 percent of its slate. Seven more NCP candidates are between 35 and 44, and only two are above 45.

Similarly, Gono Odhikar Parishad, founded by former Ducusu vice president Nurul Huq Nur, is contesting 90 seats for the first time. Of its candidates, 32 are aged between 25 and 34 (35.5 percent) and 28 are aged 35-44 (31.1 percent).

These figures stand in sharp contrast

percent). The Jatiya Party fielded 192 candidates, of whom six are aged 25-34 and 26 are aged 35-44.

Referring to the mass uprising, Sk Tawfique M Haque, a professor at North South University, said that youths stepped in when the country's conventional political leadership failed to bring about change.

"Political parties seem to have taken this into consideration. This is reflected in the growing focus on young leadership in Bangladesh," said Tawfique, also the director of the South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance.

With around four crore young voters in Bangladesh, many believe that their votes will be a decisive factor, he said.

PARTY	AGE-WISE NUMBER OF CANDIDATES				
	25-34 YEARS	35-44 YEARS	45-54 YEARS	55-65 YEARS	65+ YEARS
BNP	2	10	51	115	108
Jamaat	3	29	70	67	50
Islami Andolan Bangladesh	23	69	93	36	20
Jatiya Party	6	26	55	62	30
National Citizen Party (NCP)	19	7	1	1	0
Gono Odhikar Parishad	32	28	14	7	4

to those of the old parties. Data from the Election Commission and the IIB show that the BNP has fielded 288 candidates, but only two of them are aged 25-34 (0.7 percent), while 10 fall within the 35-44 age group (3.5 percent).

Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami nominated 224 candidates, of whom only three are aged 25-34 (1.3 percent) and 29 are aged 35-44 (12.9 percent).

Islami Andolon Bangladesh named 253 candidates, with 23 aged 25-34 (9.1 percent) and 69 aged 35-44 (27.3 percent).

"Especially in urban areas, young voters may prefer candidates closer to their own age, perhaps five or 10 years older. That will matter, but it won't be the sole determining factor."

"In my view, young candidates are more likely to win in cities because the movement was urban-centric, and many of those activists are now voters."

Tawfique also pointed out that large parties cannot change their existing dynamics overnight.