



Addressing a rally at Thakurgaon Government Boys' High School, BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman pledged to establish agro-based industries in the country's northern region to create employment opportunities for locals. *Right*, Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman, speaking at a rally at the Nabin Chandra grounds in Kulaura, Moulvibazar, said he would upgrade the Sylhet Osmani International Airport. Both photos were taken yesterday.

PHOTOS: STAR

Planning agro industries for north

Tarique says the polls are about rebuilding country

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman yesterday pledged to establish agro-based industries in the country's northern region, including Thakurgaon, Panchagarh and Dinajpur, to create employment opportunities for locals.

He made the remarks while addressing an election rally at Thakurgaon Government Boys' High School ground.

Tarique noted that the northern region -- particularly Thakurgaon, Panchagarh and Dinajpur -- is predominantly agricultural.

"We want to ensure employment for the people of this region so that they can live comfortably through decent jobs," he said.

To this end, he said, the party has decided not only to stand beside farmers and waive agricultural loans but also to promote agro-based industries in the area.

"All industries related to agriculture, including mills and factories, will be established across the northern region so that sustainable employment can be created for the local population."

He said there is a large number of educated youths in the region who remain unemployed, and the party has therefore decided to provide them with training.

"The training may be in agriculture, machinery, or other trades. Our aim is to equip young people with skills and turn them into a competent workforce so that they can secure employment either in their localities or abroad."

Expressing his vision for rebuilding the country, Tarique said, "We have carried out movements and struggles, and now we want to rebuild the nation by taking all people along."

He said the goal is to make the country self-sufficient in food, create employment for the unemployed, and ensure that women are not only educated but also economically empowered.

Addressing the audience, he said these goals can only be achieved with the support of the people, whom he described as the true owners of the country.

SEE PAGE 9 COL 4



54 years on, foreign hands still pull strings

Says IAB ameer

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Ameer of Islami Andolan Bangladesh and Charmonai Pir, Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim, said even after 54 years of independence, foreign agendas were governing the country.

He made the remarks while addressing an election rally of IAB-backed candidate for Patuakhali-1 constituency, Maulana Abul Hasan Bukhari, at Alauddin Shishu Park in Patuakhali town around 11am yesterday.

"The country gained independence 54 years ago through the sacrifices of millions. Many became

SEE PAGE 9 COL 2

Will focus only on reforms, not revenge

Shafiqur tells campaign rally

STAR REPORT

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman yesterday said his party does not believe in revenge politics and pledged to focus on regional development if elected to power.

He made the remarks during rallies in Habiganj, Moulvibazar, and Sylhet held as part of his electoral campaign in the region ahead of the national election scheduled for February 12.

At the Sylhet rally in the Alia Madrasa ground in the afternoon, Shafiqur said Jamaat did not celebrate the fall of the Awami League regime on August 5, 2024, but responded with gratitude towards the almighty.

"In exchange for the freedom, we declared not to take revenge, and we kept our word while many others did not. People will judge them in the court of conscience."

The Jamaat chief said if his party assumes power, it would not tolerate injustices anywhere in the country.

"If we can stop corruption and extortion at the root, it is possible to change the face of the country within five years."

Referring to Sylhet airport, Shafiqur said while the world is advancing, Bangladesh has been lagging behind.

"Sylhet has an international airport, but only in name, not in function. Considering the role of the expatriates, we will transform it into a true international airport, resuming all suspended routes and introducing new international routes."

Shafiqur also pledged to protect the region's rivers -- the Surma and the Kushiara -- which he said are being choked by sediment, polluted with garbage, and encroached upon by grabbers.

"A large portion of the country's food comes from Sunamganj's haor areas. Yet these areas are neglected. Embankments collapse, and crops are destroyed. Those rats [corrupt officials] who swallow embankment funds will no longer get the chance," he said.

Earlier in the morning, the Jamaat ameer addressed the day's first rally at New Field in Habiganj.

At the rally, Shafiqur pledged to modernise tea gardens and

SEE PAGE 9 COL 3

Govt steadies ship, fails to steer change

Say speakers at policy dialogue about steps taken on economy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The interim government succeeded in preventing a deeper economic and geopolitical slide during a highly volatile period, but failed to translate that stability into meaningful institutional reform, transparency and inclusive governance, said speakers at a policy dialogue yesterday.

Economic analyst Mamun Rashid argued that although the interim government inherited an economy on the brink, particularly after the July 2024 uprising, its most visible achievement was halting further deterioration rather than delivering a decisive turnaround.

"The fall was stopped, not reversed," said former banker Mamun Rashid at a virtual discussion titled "Interim Balance Sheet", organised by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC).

The economy in early 2024 was "going nowhere", with macroeconomic indicators under severe stress. The period following the political transition marked a shift from decline to stabilisation, particularly in foreign exchange reserves, remittance inflows and banking discipline.

Reforms in the banking sector such as reconstituting bank boards and initiating forensic audits, particularly in troubled Islamic banks, were the most visible actions of the interim government.

Still, these measures largely reflected "business-as-usual" governance rather than a deeper transformation.

"We did not see the kind of modernisation in economic management that many expected after the movement," he said, adding that conflicts of interest, bureaucratic dominance, and informal influence networks remained largely intact.

SEE PAGE 9 COL 5

BNP, Jamaat gunning for AL strongholds

FROM PAGE 1
The 2018 polls were marred by widespread allegations of ballot-stuffing on the eve of polling day.

Those manipulations left the BNP virtually sidelined. But with the AL off the ballot this time, constituencies once considered its strongholds are suddenly up for grabs, analysts said.

The BNP's main rival now appears to be the Jamaat-led 11-party alliance, said Al Masud Hasanuzzaman, professor of Government and Politics at Jahangirnagar University.

"There is scope for the BNP to win constituencies beyond its traditional bastions. However, its campaign strategies, the personal qualities of its candidates, and the party's overall conduct will be crucial factors. Young voters are expected to play a significant role," he told this newspaper.

The AL traditionally drew roughly 30 percent of the vote in past competitive elections. The big question now is what role its loyal supporters will play. "This remains a subject of speculation," he added.

In May last year, the interim government banned all activities of the AL and its associated organisations over allegations of killings, crimes against humanity, and other grave offences during the July uprising. Consequently, the Election Commission suspended the party's registration.

Bangladesh saw 12 national elections between 1973 and 2024. The AL didn't participate in the lopsided elections of 1988 and February 1996, while

the BNP abstained from the one-sided contests of 1986, 1988, 2014, and 2024. Though the BNP contested the 2018 polls, it alleged that the vote was heavily rigged.

An analysis of data from the Parliament Secretariat and the Election Commission shows that in general elections since 1991, the AL won at least four times in 62 constituencies mainly in Faridpur, Shariatpur, Gopalganj, Bagerhat, Khulna, Bhola, Barishal, Dinajpur, and Mymensingh.

The AL's strongest support base consists of 22 constituencies, which the party won in every general election since 1991 (except for the 1996 election it boycotted).

They include Gopalganj-1, 2, and 3; Madaripur-1 and 2; Shariatpur-2 and 3; Patuakhali-3 and 4; Bagerhat-1; Khulna-1; Faridpur-1; Sunamganj-3; Moulvibazar-4; Dinajpur-5; Sirajganj-1; Jamalpur-3; Kishoreganj-5; Tangail-1; Mymensingh-10; Gazipur-1; and Bandarban.

On the other hand, the BNP won four times or more in at least 33 constituencies (except in the elections it boycotted). Among them are Bogura-6 and 7; Chapainawabganj-1 and 2; Feni-1; Noakhali-1; Naogaon-6; Natore-1; Chhattogram-6; Moulvibazar-4; Manikganj-1; and Dhaka-7.

Election expert Badiul Alam Majumdar said the AL finds itself in a precarious situation for several reasons, primarily because of its shift towards autocracy and kleptocracy. "They denied people their constitutional and

political rights, as well as voting rights," said Badiul, also secretary of Sushashoner Jonno Nagorik.

Hasanuzzaman said the political outlook for the AL looks grim at this moment. "The party's future will depend on the stance of those who will form the government."

WHAT BNP, JAMAAT SAY
Leaders from both parties said they have drawn up plans to win the once AL-dominated constituencies.

BNP insiders said that in addition to their regular campaign activities in the AL strongholds, the party will intensify its door-to-door campaign there.

They noted that voter turnout would be a key factor in these constituencies.

Underscoring the need for a secure and peaceful voting environment, Emran Saleh Prince, senior joint secretary general of the BNP, said, "We will call for strict enforcement of law and order in these constituencies. The administration must act so that voters can cast ballots freely and without obstacles."

When contacted, Jamaat Assistant Secretary General Ahsanul Mahboob Zubair said the alliance candidates are working to win voter trust by tailoring their campaigns to local realities across Bangladesh.

SITUATION ON THE GROUND

All candidates, especially from the BNP and the Jamaat, in Mymensingh-10 (Gafargaon upazila), are trying to woo voters who have traditionally supported the AL in elections. BNP candidate

Mohammad Akhtaruzzaman said they are giving speeches, focusing on harmony, security, and justice to draw the attention of AL voters.

"Since the August 5 changeover, I have been working to restore peace and security in our area. This has had a positive impact on voters..."

He also said that organisational action was taken against some party activists for their alleged involvement in attacks on AL supporters. Those activists have been kept out of the election campaign.

Asked about Jamaat's strategy, Ariful Haque, finance secretary of Jamaat's Gafargaon upazila unit and a member of the election organising body, said, "We hope that AL supporters will cast ballots in our favour... There has been no instance of Jamaat's involvement in attacks on Awami League activists, the filing of cases, or land grabbing."

In Madaripur-1 (Shibchar upazila), Nadira Akter, the BNP candidate, has been holding courtyard meetings with AL leaders, many of whom pledged their support for her in the upcoming polls, said party sources.

At one of the recent meetings, she said, "We must move forward unitedly for Shibchar. Victory for the BNP can be achieved only through unity... In the future, there will be no false cases against anyone in Shibchar. After the election, Awami League leaders and activists will not face harassment."

In the nearby constituency of Madaripur-2, the BNP

candidate, Jahandar Ali Mia, is paying visits to union parishad chairmen and members known as AL supporters to gain their backing, while followers of the Jamaat-led alliance candidate, Maulana Abdus Sobhan from Khilafat Majlis, are meeting AL leaders, according to local sources.

Jahandar said that honest AL activists are going through a difficult time, facing oppression, harassment, and arrests.

"Those AL leaders and activists who practised clean politics deserve protection, and it is our responsibility to stand by them..." he told this newspaper.

When contacted, Sobhan said he has been seeking votes from those AL leaders he considers trustworthy.

In the traditional AL stronghold of Gopalganj-1, the BNP candidate, Selimuzzaman Selim, is encouraging AL supporters to overcome their fears and vote for him, while the Jamaat candidate, Muhammad Abdul Hamid Molla, is assuring AL activists that they won't face harassment solely based on their political identity.

In Gopalganj-3, MM Rezaul Karim, the Jamaat-led alliance candidate, said, "Our efforts are focused on remote areas, villages, and wards, where face-to-face interactions with ordinary citizens are helping build interest in the election."

Meanwhile, the BNP and the Jamaat have adopted varied strategies to win over AL supporters in Faridpur.

BNP campaigners are emphasising that the

party is pro-liberation and therefore deserves the backing of all pro-liberation forces. The Jamaat, on the other hand, is insisting that it neither filed cases against AL activists nor harassed them since the mass uprising.

Several voters said many local AL leaders joined the election campaigns of either the BNP or the Jamaat, citing personal security and political considerations.

This, they said, created confusion among grassroots AL supporters, many of whom now feel that it is better to stay away from polling centres.

Seeking anonymity, a voter from Bhanga upazila said, "Usually, whoever gets the votes of AL supporters wins Faridpur-4. Now that many local [AL] leaders are joining different parties, grassroots supporters may vote at their own discretion."

Election expert Abdul Alim said the AL's influence in its strongholds has weakened but a segment of voters is still loyal to the party.

"That percentage may have declined, but it is undeniably there," he told The Daily Star.

He said the AL voters are likely to be split into several groups. One group may shift towards the parties contesting the polls. Another group -- mainly consisting of hardline supporters -- may refuse to vote.

A third group may look for a "No Vote" option. When they find it absent on the ballot at polling centres, they may stamp multiple boxes to spoil ballots, he added.

Tarique rules out govt with Jamaat

FROM PAGE 1
of the 300 parliamentary seats. The party is contesting 292 constituencies, while its allies are fielding candidates in the remaining seats.

Although Tarique declined to predict a specific figure, he said, "We are confident that we'll have enough to form a government."

Opinion polls have forecast a BNP victory but also suggested a strong challenge from the Jamaat-led alliance, which includes the National Citizen Party, a "Generation Z" party emerging from "youth-led anti-Hasina protests".

New Delhi's decision to shelter Hasina, whom a Dhaka court last year sentenced to death over her role in the crackdown, has strained Bangladesh-India relations and created an opportunity for China to expand its investment and political engagement in the country, according to Reuters.

Asked whether he would shift Dhaka's foreign policy focus from India towards China if elected, Tarique said Bangladesh would prioritise economic growth and employment.

"If we are in government, we need to provide jobs for young people. We need to bring businesses into the country so that jobs can be created and people can have a better life," he told Reuters.

"So, whoever, while protecting the interests and sovereignty of Bangladesh,

offers what is suitable for my people and my country, we will have friendship with them, not with any particular country."

On Hasina's presence in India, Tarique said: "She did commit a crime in the eyes of the law in Bangladesh in 2024. A judgment has been passed, so she must be brought to justice."

On whether Hasina's children would be free to return and participate in politics, he said political engagement should depend on public acceptance.

"If someone is accepted by the people, if people welcome them, then anyone has the right to do politics," he said.

Bangladesh hosts nearly 1.2 million Rohingya Muslim refugees who fled crackdowns in neighbouring Myanmar.

The interim government said last year that it lacked the capacity to allocate additional resources for the refugees, given multiple domestic challenges, and urged the international community to support their repatriation.

Tarique said he supported the return of the Rohingya, but only when conditions in Myanmar were safe.

"We will try to work on the issue so that these people can go back to their own land," he told Reuters. "The situation has to be safe for them to go back there. As long as it is not safe, they are very welcome to stay here."