

Reform key to curbing custodial deaths

Ensuring proper care, addressing overcrowding must be a priority

Official figures on deaths in prison custody over the last three years reveal the deplorable state of our jails. As per data from the Prisons Directorate, 270 inmates died in 2025, 261 in 2024, and 290 in 2023. The majority of these deaths occurred while inmates were receiving treatment at hospitals, but a significant number also died en route to hospitals—111 in 2025, 120 in 2024, and 101 in 2023. In addition, deaths by suicide over these three years numbered four, one, and two, respectively.

These statistics clearly indicate that whether under a politically elected government that turned authoritarian or a non-political interim administration, no meaningful reforms have been carried out to reduce deaths in prison custody. A report published in this daily points at the shortage of round-the-clock doctors and nurses. Of the 75 prisons across the country, only two have full-time doctors, while most are served by part-time doctors from the civil surgeons' office. At least 15 prisons do not even have nurses; trained guards perform that role instead. Moreover, only 27 prisons have ambulances, which explains the high number of inmate deaths occurring en route to medical facilities with doctors.

Former Water Resources Minister and Awami League MP, Ramesh Chandra Sen, 84, died under similar circumstances this Saturday. He was at Dinajpur District Jail when he fell ill, and by the time he was taken to Dinajpur Medical College Hospital, about seven kilometres away, the attending doctors declared him dead. His relatives alleged that he had not received proper treatment during his detention at the facility since August 17, 2024. Similar allegations were raised by the relatives of Awami League leaders and activists in the past. In fact, after the fall of Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024, at least 31 AL men died in prison custody, according to data collected by *The Daily Star*.

The prisons have been overcrowded for quite some time now. The Operation Devil Hunt, launched on February 8, 2025, alone led to at least 86,000 arrests, as per a recent Human Rights Watch report. The large-scale arrests have only worsened the already overcrowded conditions in our prisons. The situation has been compounded by the low-quality food often provided there. What's more, autopsies are sometimes not carried out following inmate deaths, and investigations are rarely initiated, even when demanded. For example, last year rights activists called for a judicial probe into the deaths of three Bawm men at Chattogram Central Jail, but to date, the government has taken no action.

No large-scale changes from the interim government can be expected at this stage, with only a few days remaining in its tenure. However, the next government has the opportunity and responsibility to implement genuine prison reform, including making prisons more humane, being transparent and accountable regarding custodial deaths, and putting an end to arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention without trial.

Save Baikka Beel before it is too late

Sanctuary status means little without enforcement

The steady degradation of Baikka Beel, despite its designation as a protected sanctuary, is deeply frustrating. Although the wetland was declared off-limits to the public a year ago to allow it to recover, picnicking, fishing, bird hunting, and littering continue almost unabated. Situated in Sreemangal's Hail Haor region, the beel has long been recognised for its ecological importance. Each year, migratory birds arrive before winter and remain until late March, with some species reportedly making it their permanent home. Yet, the wetland is quietly slipping towards ecological collapse.

Nearly a third of the wetland has already been lost to siltation, while persistent poaching and habitat degradation have caused a sharp decline in bird populations. Bird census data since 2008 show how a once-successful conservation effort has fallen into neglect. Fish theft has also become rampant in this designated fish sanctuary. Night-time fishing continues, often by large armed groups, outnumbering the few guards tasked with protecting the wetland. With fish stocks dwindling, birds are losing a vital food source.

While legal and institutional frameworks exist, they are rarely enforced. Bird hunting, for example, is a punishable offence under the Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, yet enforcement remains weak. The management committee formed to protect the beel also lacks manpower, limiting its effectiveness. On top of this, the absence of sustained public awareness has allowed illegal practices to continue with little resistance.

The situation in Baikka Beel is not an isolated incident. Across the country, forests, wetlands, hills, and rivers are facing alarming environmental degradation. Rapid urbanisation, unplanned infrastructure projects, illegal logging, hill cutting, and overfishing are destroying ecosystems that once supported rich biodiversity. Wetlands and haors are shrinking. Deforestation and habitat loss are forcing wildlife into human settlements, threatening species survival. As in Baikka Beel, weak enforcement of existing laws, poor coordination among agencies, and growing human pressure continue to accelerate ecological decline nationwide. This must stop.

We hope the next government will show a genuine commitment to protecting our environment. Baikka Beel, Hakaluki Haor, and all such wetlands must be safeguarded from constant human greed. To preserve Baikka Beel, authorities must immediately strengthen law enforcement, increase manpower, ensure better coordination between relevant agencies, and invest in community awareness programmes. Without decisive action, Baikka Beel could join the long list of natural habitats we have failed to protect over the years.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

First Black man walks in space

On this day in 1995, Nasa astronaut Bernard Harris became the first Black man to walk in space. His mission contributed to a burgeoning collaboration between the US and Russia in space exploration.

Will this election pass the minority protection test?



A CLOSER LOOK

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TASNEEM TAYEB

In late December, several houses of minority communities in Raozan and Rangunia upazilas of Chattogram were padlocked from outside and set on fire, forcing families to cut their way out to safety. A citizen delegation that inspected the Raozan site on February 1 said the attack was meant to create fear among religious minorities ahead of the election. The visiting team leader also underscored a deeper question: "When elections come around, we talk about a level playing field for candidates [equal opportunity for all]. But we don't talk about a level playing field for voters. Can all voters exercise their right to vote by going to polling centres without fear?"

In other words, can the minority voters go to the polls without fear or intimidation, like everyone else? For many, such attacks are not just isolated crimes. They serve as a signal. After all, elections in this country have a way of reigniting unpalatable memories. Long before the first ballot is cast, fear begins to circulate: not as rumour, but as recognition of times past. For religious minorities, election cycles have historically coincided with heightened vulnerability—threats, intimidation, attacks on homes and places of worship, and the cautious calculation of when to stay indoors. It has been repeated enough to become part of how elections are anticipated, not just experienced.

That anticipation matters politically, because fear that is predictable is rarely irrational.

Civil society organisations have often attempted to document this vulnerability, though not without controversy. Recently, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddha Christian Oikya Parishad reported 42 incidents of communal violence in January alone, including attacks on homes, land, and places of worship. Such reporting, especially the characterisation of crimes, should be treated with caution, but the recurrence of these incidents during election periods is not new.

The government, for its part, rejects

claims of widespread communal violence. According to official numbers, 645 incidents were recorded in 2025 involving members of minority communities. Of these, officials say only 71 contained what they called "communal elements," while the rest were categorised as general criminal acts. The state argues that these numbers demonstrate the importance of distinguishing religiously motivated violence from broader law-and-order challenges.

This distinction deserves to be acknowledged. Accuracy matters



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in public debate, and conflating all crimes involving minorities with communal violence risks distortion. However, it does not resolve the deeper democratic question. Even a single incident rooted in communal targeting is not acceptable in a democracy that claims equal citizenship. Violence and intimidation tend to cluster when political stakes are high and accountability is diffuse, usually before votes are cast, and sometimes after results are declared.

This is not so much an aberration of democratic life as a pattern that institutions have learned to manage rather than dismantle. Their response thus feels almost routine:

condemnations are issued, assurances are offered, and additional security is deployed around polling stations and other sensitive sites.

These measures are not meaningless, but they are temporary. They address the visibility of risk, not its persistence. Protection intensifies when legitimacy is publicly at stake, then recedes once attention moves on, while accountability—thorough investigations, consistent prosecutions, visible consequences—remains elusive. The harder question is not whether the state can anticipate risk, but why minority insecurity remains so foreseeable and yet so episodic in its protection.

Political theory offers a useful perspective here. Political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell once warned that electoral democracy can coexist with what he described as "low-intensity citizenship"—systems in which rights do exist but the state's protective reach is uneven. Some citizens experience the

period after elections is often the most revealing. It is then that political attention shifts, security deployments thin, and cases stall. Communities are left to wonder what the state's silence or inaction means. The message they get is that protection was temporary, extended when political legitimacy was visible, and withdrawn when it was no longer urgent. So, if the upcoming election is to be understood as a democratic reset, it cannot be judged solely by the calm of polling day; it must be assessed by what follows.

A democracy is not measured only by how it administers choice but also by how it distributes security. Bangladesh is not alone in confronting this tension. But election periods do sharpen the contradiction. The incidents of recent months should therefore be acknowledged not as aberrations, but as ground realities, and these are part of a legacy pattern that must be dismantled. But for that, acceptance of the risk is the first step. After all, democracies mature not by denying their fault lines, but by confronting them institutionally. The standard expected here is the predictability of protection. Citizens, including minorities, must be able to assume that their safety does not depend on electoral attention, media coverage, or political convenience.

This election arrives with a set of expectations that have been absent in recent years. It is being framed, domestically and internationally, as more competitive, more open, and more credible than the last three national polls. But this also raises the threshold by which democratic performance will be judged. A democracy that secures its minorities only when it is being watched has not yet resolved the question of equal citizenship.

Women voters are not undecided — they are unconvinced



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At the moment when women have become the most invoked voters of the upcoming election—celebrated or disrespected in speeches, targeted through promises, and framed as the moral centre—it is worth pausing to ask: what if women are unconvinced?

This question emerged during Round 3 of the People's Election Pulse Survey (PEPS) by Innovision Consulting, an initiative tracking shifts in voter sentiment over time. This round was a panel survey of electoral attitudes as the election approached. As part of the survey unit, I personally spoke with women who had identified themselves as "undecided."

One of the most striking findings from this round is the persistent gender gap in political disclosure. Across all three rounds of PEPS, women remained significantly less likely than men to say they decided whom to vote for. In Round 3, around 23 percent of female respondents reported being undecided, compared to 16 percent of men, while a substantially higher proportion of women chose "I don't want to say." This consistency suggests that what we are seeing is not momentary hesitation, but something more fundamental: women's political preferences are more constrained, more private, and harder to articulate in both public and survey settings.

To understand what lies beneath this silence, I wanted to speak to these women, selected at random from the list of undecided voters. Of the 30 women called, 10 picked up; the rest were either uninterested in speaking further or did not answer. What emerged from these conversations is far more complicated than the assumption that undecided voters are simply confused or waiting for better information.

Instead, many women were remarkably clear about their priorities: reasonable price of essentials, law and order, safety, better education for children, employment opportunities, and peace. However, they were deeply uncertain that electoral politics would meaningfully respond to them.

"I will vote because I have to," many women said across districts and age groups, often immediately followed by "but nothing will change." This resignation was striking. It did not sound like apathy, but like experience.

For working-class and economically vulnerable women—domestic workers, day labourers, etc.—political disengagement was shaped by immediacy. Rising prices, healthcare costs, housing insecurity, and unsafe public spaces left little room for political optimism. Several women described voting decisions as something men make or something families decide collectively. Their

exclusion was not dramatic or enforced; it was normalised.

Lower-middle and middle-income homemakers expressed a different kind of disengagement: fatigue. These women were not disconnected from public life. They followed the news, discussed elections occasionally, and were aware of party promises. But trust was absent. Politicians were

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described as corrupt, interchangeable and distant. Electoral competition appeared repetitive rather than responsive. For these women, withholding a voting preference was less about indecision and more about disbelief.

Among Gen Z women, disengagement took its most explicit form. Many openly questioned whether elections had any bearing on their future, particularly on employment prospects and personal safety. Party assurances, including women-focused welfare schemes or symbolic concessions, failed to persuade. For younger women, scepticism was not inherited; it was learnt.

What connects these experiences across class and generation seems like a collapse of expectation. Women are struggling to locate themselves within electoral politics as agents of meaningful change. Their reluctance to declare a preference is a response to repeated disappointments.

This matters because women are not a peripheral voting bloc. They are central to household economies, care work, community stability, and social reproduction. Yet, the issues they consistently prioritise—price stability, safety in public spaces, accessible healthcare, quality education, and dignified employment—remain chronically under-delivered. Whether this election and the government that follows will succeed in addressing these concerns in credible ways remains to be seen. The disengagement seemed like a rational choice at the moment for some.

The persistence of women's undecided status across several rounds of the survey suggests something structural. It points to a political system that has not earned women's confidence, even when it seeks their votes. More rallies, louder slogans or gender-specific promises will not bridge this gap.

For the next government, regardless of who forms it, this should serve as a warning. A democracy in which women do not have faith is not a stable one. If political parties want women's trust, they must move beyond symbolic inclusion and demonstrate through governance: that politics can tangibly improve everyday life by controlling prices, ensuring safety, delivering education, and healthcare, and reducing corruption in ways that are visible and felt. Until that changes, many women will remain absent from ballot boxes and political beliefs.