

Guard the ballot: Why February 12 vote must not be stolen



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It is said that the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter. But those who say this have perhaps never visited Bangladesh, where the average voter has survived 15 years of electoral theatre and still hopes the ballot box might listen to them. On February 12, that hope gets its day, across 42,779 polling centres, where more than 127 million Bangladeshis will—for the first time since the rigged spectacles of 2014, 2018, and 2024—choose their next government. Let nobody steal that opportunity from them.

This is not merely an election. It is a referendum on whether Bangladesh can govern itself without a strongman, a coup, or an interim arrangement that overstays its welcome like a guest who moved in to help with the cooking but now changed the Wi-Fi password. Investors, development partners, and neighbouring capitals—all are watching to see if Bangladesh can pull off the biggest

it's due, BNP has campaigned on a platform of inclusion and transformation and has articulated a vision of governance beyond "winner takes all." Although the real test, as always, will be in making this happen. Then there is Jamaat-e-Islami, which deserves a nuanced conversation. Jamaat commands a significant voter base, has run a disciplined campaign, and could play a constructive role in parliament, particularly in ensuring that the next legislature does not degenerate into the familiar theatre of absolute majority versus decorative opposition. With the Awami League absent, it is poised to be one of the two majoritarian parties of Bangladesh's once-again predominantly bipartisan parliament. The country desperately needs checks and balances in its parliament.

But here is where the plot thickens, not in an Agatha Christie way, but in the distinctly Bangladeshi fashion where everyone knows who the suspects are but nobody names them

Over 600 were reportedly injured in January alone. Firearms looted during the July 2024 uprising are resurfacing during present clashes. Days before the vote, strategically timed street protests escalated into violent confrontations, including near the chief adviser's residence. Whether driven by genuine grievance or calibrated provocation, the pattern that emerges from these incidents suggests that forces are out there trying to

heard a democratic principle or a pre-drafted press release for rejecting inconvenient results. One hopes it's the former.

Another key dimension here is the Awami League's absence. Awami League voters deserve to vote freely as citizens. I would tell them that one should not take dietary advice from a person feasting at a five-star buffet abroad while they tell you to starve at home. Awami League affiliates owe nothing

comparative political memory but remains sceptical. Together, they form a decisive bloc largely guided by whoever appears least likely to repeat the sins of the past. At the same time, I do not doubt Dr Muhammad Yunus's intention to deliver a credible election. But I am Machiavellian enough to suspect that some within the government would prefer the current arrangement to continue indefinitely, or for the election to fall short of its intended goal of democratic renewal. They will be judged accordingly once a new government takes office.

The interim government has undertaken considerable grassroots electoral preparation, which should be acknowledged. But its critical limitation lies elsewhere. The government and its cohorts failed to empower or encourage local communities to actively resist violence and rigging at the polling station level. Law enforcement, however dedicated, cannot protect every booth or ballot. What was needed was a culture of citizen vigilance—communities understanding that guarding the vote is a shared civic responsibility, not the state's job alone.

Which brings me to the most important point. The people must guard this election. Nearly one million security personnel have been formally deployed, but they may still face the cumulative effects of misinformation, deepfakes, or manufactured mob fury. The role of ordinary citizens in protecting polling stations and aiding security forces is therefore not optional; it has become essential. There has to be genuine public mobilisation to resist anyone with a banner, a slogan, or a whisper from the corridors of power or influence that suggests that the election should not happen as promised.

At the end of the day, Bangladesh cannot afford another parliament where the opposition is a decorative minion. Nor can it afford parties rewriting the post-August 5 settlement because they fear the ballot box. Rabindranath Tagore wrote, "You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water." Bangladesh has stood and stared for long enough. February 12 is the day we wade forward. Let not the chaos actors write the nation's history for us. Vote and guard the polling booth.



'Bangladesh cannot afford another parliament where the opposition is a decorative minion.'

PHOTO: STAR

destabilise the security environment or create enough chaos to legitimise claims of election engineering and rigging after the fact.

The military and law enforcement agencies are the only organised forces capable of delivering electoral security. Antagonising the public against them now serves only those who benefit from any electoral chaos or postponement of the polls. In this regard, it should be mentioned that major contesting parties have warned against foul play in the election, which carries an undertone that gives one pause—the kind of pause where you smile politely while wondering if you've just

to their remorseless leaders, who chose exile over accountability and now demand loyalty from the comfort of someone else's guest room. So, any attempt to destabilise this election—through provocations, boycotts, or manufactured crises—will breed instability and open the floodgates for the very forces everyone claims to oppose.

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democratic exercise of 2026 without the kind of chaos that makes international headline writers reach for their favourite adjective: "failed."

Among the contesting parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party enters the election from what many acknowledge to be a favourable position. To give credit where

at dinner.

Since the election schedule was announced, at least 16 political activists have been killed. The assassination of Sharif Osman Hadi—shot in broad daylight the day after the election schedule was announced—served as a wake-up call about how far certain forces may go to derail the electoral process.

A coherent political vision is key to empowering local government



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With the parliamentary elections only a few days away, a legitimate question is whether the political parties participating have a clear vision about the future of local government in Bangladesh. The country's two-tier government structure, comprising central and local governments at district, upazila, union, municipality, and city corporation levels, requires strong democratic institutions. While the central government is supposed to frame policies, the local government bodies are tasked with implementing development programmes and delivering services to the people under their respective jurisdictions.

During the last one and a half years, we have noticed a significant shift of emphasis in popular discourses, towards strengthening local government in Bangladesh through radical restructuring to decentralise power, remove political parties' influence in local affairs, and limit the role of members of parliament (MPs) in local governance. A fresh thinking is noticeable among the political leaders towards strong local and urban governance, especially to make Dhaka and Chattogram cities more efficient and dynamic. So far, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Jamaat-e-Islami, National Citizen Party (NCP), Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and some others have clearly mentioned their commitments through election manifestos and public meetings to build a strong local government and limit the role of the central government in local affairs, if they are voted to power in the next elections.

The BNP, in its "31-Point Outline for Structural Reforms" and "Vision-2030" initiatives, wants to remove the use of party symbols in local government polls to reduce electoral violence and reduce political parties' influence. It also wants to ensure the freedom of operation of local government bodies by removing direct interference of

central administration MPs. Local government will have an additional role in local development, education and health service delivery, BNP promised.

Jamaat-e-Islami pledged that the country will not be administered from all 64 districts, cities and upazilas, indicating the need to decentralise the governance structure and ensure good governance in the country. The party strongly stressed a corruption-free society by ensuring accountability at all levels of government.

Whatever the results of the elections are, there needs to be consensus among the political parties about making the local government system more effective, results-oriented and functioning. The age-old centralised government system inherited from the British and Pakistan rules cannot efficiently deliver development and services for the entire population.

The NCP has made a strong commitment to strengthen local government in its 36-point manifesto. It emphasised decentralising power by shifting authority from the centre, introducing "village parliaments" to strengthen grassroots governance and facilitate effective local participation. The party also wants to make local government the nucleus of development. The new party wants to reduce corruption by transparent local governance, such as making budgets and project funding public.

The CPB and other left-leaning parties also support a decentralised, autonomous, and participatory

local government. These parties draw their commitments for a strong local government system from an ideological point of view, especially strengthening grassroots democracy, reducing central power at the local level, stronger financial autonomy of local bodies, local participatory planning, more transparency, women's participation, and empowering marginalised groups to ensure their participation in local government decision-making processes.

Jatiya Party (JP), since its establishment, has strongly emphasised the strengthening of local government. The JP established the upazila as a new tier of local government in Bangladesh. It also continues emphasising the re-establishment of upazila-level courts to make the legal system more accessible, the introduction of local-level planning, and participatory development.

Whatever the results of the elections are, there needs to be consensus among the political parties about making the local government system more effective, results-oriented and functioning. The age-old centralised government system inherited from the British and Pakistan rules cannot efficiently deliver development and services for the entire population, especially in a populous country like Bangladesh. The poor implementation capacity of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) and abysmal performance of the education and health sectors are examples of poor capacity of a centralised development system. With around 75,000 elected representatives and several lakh employees, the local government of Bangladesh is a reservoir of human resources waiting to shoulder the development and service delivery responsibilities across the country.

Effective people's participation is one of the cornerstones of a functioning local government system, and the Constitution of Bangladesh ensures local-level participation, such as in Articles 11, 19, 23, 37, and others. To ensure that local-level planning, decision-making, service delivery and development are effective, meaningful participation of women, men and youth is necessary. The role of the state is important in creating an environment for people's effective participation in local governance.

About 40 percent of the people in the country are already living in urban areas, raising the demand for infrastructure and services there quickly. It is predicted that in the next two decades, the urban population will reach around 60 percent of the total population. Therefore, we need to plan our urban areas now and develop necessary roads, drains, schools, hospitals and other infrastructure and services. The city corporations and municipalities must take up these responsibilities.

Unplanned development in both cities and towns must be arrested at any cost. The functional capacity of urban local governments should be built with priority.

The local government expenditure in Bangladesh is only one percent of GDP, which is extremely low. The percentage is significantly high in emerging economies like China (11 percent), Brazil (seven percent), South Korea (23 percent), South Africa (10 percent), and Indonesia (six percent). Therefore,

Bangladesh needs to seriously decide to empower local governments to catch up with other countries with strong local government systems.

If the country decides to devolve several functions to the local level and strengthen the system, the commitments made by the political parties before the upcoming parliamentary elections must be carried forward, and a serious effort should be made in that regard over the next five years.

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e-GP Tender Notice

e-Tender is invited in the national e-Gp system Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of the following

Tender Id No	Package No	Name of Physical Service	Publishing Date	Last Date & Time of Selling	Opening Date and Time
1223797	PSN/e-PPS3/BCMC/01/2025-26	Sub-soil Investigation of Mongla Bridge over the Mongla River at Daulatdia-Faridpur-Magura-Jhenaidah-Jashore-Khulna-Mongla (Digraj) National Highway (N7) at Bagerhat District during the year 2025-26	10-Feb-2026 14:00	22-Feb-2026 10:00	22-Feb-2026 15:00

This is an online tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in the national e-Gp portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted.

To submit e-Tender, Registration in the National e-Gp system Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required.

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Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-Gp System Portal and from e-Gp help desk (<http://www.helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd>).

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