



LAST-MINUTE LOGISTICS

On the eve of the 13th national election, ballot papers and other materials were transported under tight security to polling centres across the country. *Clockwise from top left:* Security personnel wait outside Dhaka Polytechnic Institute in Tejgaon to receive election supplies for distribution; materials are carried out of Azimpur Govt Girls' School and College for delivery; volunteers at election campaign booths in the capital assist voters in locating their designated centres; election materials are ferried across the Padma River and escorted to polling centres in Rajshahi's Paba upazila; and supplies are being prepared for dispatch from the Sadar Upazila Parishad office to polling centres in the Barishal-5 constituency. The photos were taken yesterday.

PHOTOS: AMRAN HOSSAIN, MEHEDI HASAN, PRABIR DAS, TITU DAS, AZAHAR UDDIN



Attacks, widespread use of money concerning

Says IAB at presser

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Islami Andolon Bangladesh (IAB) has expressed concern over the overall electoral environment, citing incidents of attacks and the widespread use of money.

Political parties like the BNP and Jamaat did not get rid of the previous electoral culture, said Gazi Ataur Rahman, senior joint secretary of IAB, at a media briefing yesterday at its office.

The party said its leaders and activists have been facing threats, intimidation and attacks in different constituencies including Barguna 1 and 2, Patuakhali-1, Bhola 1 and 4, Pirojpur-3, Laxmipur 4, Jhalakathi-1 and constituencies in Barishal.

"At least 10 of our activists are still hospitalised due to different attacks across the constituencies."

BNP men have broken an activist's leg in Barguna-1 while Jamaat men have attacked us in Barguna-2, he said.

"Both parties' activists are involved in the wrongdoings. In some places, they are spreading lies that the IAB has provided their support to the candidates of other parties."

IAB fielded 258 candidates across the country and none of the candidates have withdrawn from the race.

"It's impossible that anyone expressed their support for any other candidates."

Besides, they have information that the parties have been spending a huge amount of money on voters.

"We urge the law enforcement agencies to play more active roles in this regard."

The IAB wants a free, fair and credible election and any sort of election engineering would not be accepted, he added.

'Cash seizures' infringing on civil liberties

Says NCP spokesperson

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

So-called money recovery drives targeting leaders of various parties are infringing on individual freedoms, said Asif Mahmud Shojib Bhuyain, spokesperson for the National Citizen Party and chairman of its election steering committee.

"We are making our position very clear -- if any candidate or their activists are seen trying to buy votes with money... then it is clearly a crime," he told an emergency press conference at the party's Banglamotor office last night.

Asif added that such crimes must be punished regardless of party affiliation. However, he alleged that ordinary possession of cash was being framed as criminal activity, with money forcibly taken from individuals.

"... in such cases, the administration must play a more neutral role."

The NCP spokesperson praised joint forces and the army for recovering illegal weapons from different areas and urged authorities to act quickly on remaining illegal stockpiles of weapons.

Asif alleged that BNP and its alliance partners are trying to disrupt voting in constituencies where they are weak. "We learned that in seats where BNP and their alliance candidates fear defeat, they are trying to sabotage the election."

He said more than 50,000 observers have been deployed but lack proper logistical support. "We fear they will not be able to perform properly, and neutral reporting may be hampered."

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Nation votes, hope rekindled

FROM PAGE 1

Prof Sk Tawfique M Haque, an expert on policy and governance at the North South University, said people now feel empowered, as they will be able to elect their representatives.

Regarding enthusiasm among voters, he said that images of people rushing home in large numbers to cast ballots have been absent for many years. "The turnout could reach record levels."

Even poor and low-income citizens are spending from their own pockets to travel home just to cast vote -- some riding on the roofs of trains, he said.

"Since the mass uprising, people have become far more politically confident. There is no fear, no hesitation. This level of enthusiasm is unprecedented, and for democracy, it is a major achievement," he said.

Ever since the interim government took office, it often repeated its priorities -- reforms, justice, and election. Although elections are generally held every five years, this election, the 13th edition in Bangladesh, comes just 26 months after the last one -- triggered by a mass uprising that ousted the previous regime in August 2024.

Awami League has been barred from the election for its role in the brutal crackdown that claimed at least 1,400 lives. While 50 parties are contesting the election, the main contest will be between two alliances -- one led by the BNP and the other by the Jamaat-e-Islami.

While the BNP was pressing for an election by December 2025 from early in the interim government's tenure, other parties, including the Jamaat, said they would go to polls only after reforms were carried out.

But as demands for a quick election became stronger, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus announced in June 2025 that polls would be held in the first half of February, provided that preparations were complete.

Reforms remained elusive until mid-October, when 25 parties signed the July charter after months of negotiations among 30 parties at the National Consensus Commission. Five parties refused to sign, which included the National Citizen Party (NCP), the natural heir to the July uprising.

In November, the government announced that the national election and the referendum would be held on the same day. Later, the Election Commission confirmed February 12 as polling day.

In his address to the nation, Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin yesterday urged citizens to vote, reminding them that it was not only a civic right but also a responsibility.

"I appeal to political parties, candidates and voters; behave responsibly to maintain peace and harmony," he said.

Polling is taking place in 299 constituencies, with election to Sherpur-3 suspended following the death of a candidate. Today, 42,779 polling stations will open their doors to 12.77 crore voters between 7:30am and 4:30pm.

They will be picking from 2,028 candidates -- 1,755 fielded by 50 parties and 273 independents. Among them, only 83 are women.

The BNP fielded 292 candidates, compared to 225 from the Jamaat. Both parties gave up the remaining seats to their alliance partners. The NCP, formed by frontline July protesters, is contesting 32 seats as part of the Jamaat-led alliance.

The Jatiya Party (Ershad) fielded 196 candidates, while Islami Andolon Bangladesh nominated 259 contestants.

With the AL banned and its registration withheld, the political landscape has shifted dramatically, leaving the scope for the BNP and the Jamaat-led alliance to secure AL strongholds where they never had a chance.

Founded in 1978, BNP has been out of power for 17 years -- its longest stretch. The Jamaat, banned after independence for collaborating with Pakistan during the war, was revived in 1976 and later joined BNP in a four-party alliance in 1999. Together, they won in 2001, with two Jamaat leaders becoming cabinet members.

In 2013, the High Court cancelled Jamaat's registration, ruling that provisions of its charter violated the constitution and election laws.

Facing criticism for its ties with the Jamaat, the BNP distanced itself from the Islamist party. The 20-party

alliance dissolved in December 2022 after BNP asked allies not to use the alliance's name.

BNP won the 1979 election, and then the election in 1991 following the fall of HM Ershad in a mass uprising. It also won the one-sided polls in February 1996 but that administration was short lived. It regained power in 2001.

Jamaat took part in the national election under its name in 1986. The party achieved its best result in 1991 with 18 seats and 12.13 percent of the popular vote.

While both parties pledge justice as a founding principle, their chiefs have exchanged taunts and barbs, and at times fiery rhetoric.

BNP's Tarique Rahman and Jamaat's Shafiqur Rahman had been in a war of words. The BNP slammed the Jamaat for its role during the 1971 Liberation War, and accused of misleading people through misuse of religion, and of conspiring to carry out "election engineering."

On the other hand, the Jamaat accused the BNP of corruption, land grabbing, extortion, and "neofascism."

While pre-polls violence is not unusual in South Asia, it has been low in Bangladesh this time.

"In a densely populated country like Bangladesh, where emotions run high during elections, the overall atmosphere remains relatively calm," said Prof Tawfique.

Political analysts note another striking feature of this election: the heightened global interest in Bangladesh's democratic transition. The polls are being held under the watch of the largest contingent of local and international observers since 2008 -- 335 international observers from 40 countries and eight representatives from international organisations. Another 57 observers have arrived at the EC's invitation.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, chief of the now-defunct Electoral Reform Commission, said the surge in observers reflects the competitive nature of this election.

"Many international observers showed little interest in monitoring the last three polls, as they were not contested," he added.

'Guard polling centres until results are in'

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this because they do not like the restoration of democracy. Others are doing it because they think they have little chance of winning."

The BNP leader said that they did not expect a political party to take an immoral and illegal path.

"But sadly, from the information and news we have received throughout the day, we are very hurt. We do not think that what is happening can disturb or damage the election."

Nazrul also said that what they were about to achieve after many years of struggle must not be obstructed or derailed.

"We want the democratic rights of the people to be restored. With the support of the people, we want to take responsibility for running the state. After getting that responsibility, we want to work for the welfare of the people. We want to implement the July Charter," he added.

Seven hours earlier, at a separate briefing, BNP Chairman's Adviser Mahdi Amin yesterday urged political parties to prevent fraud and protect a festive and spontaneous vote.

"From BNP, we call upon all democratic political parties: let us ensure a peaceful election environment, not violence. Let us maintain mutual coexistence and cordiality," Mahdi said at a press conference at the party's Gulshan office.

Referring to the incident at Saidpur airport where Belal Uddin, the ameer of Jamaat's Thakurgaon district unit, was held with Tk 74 lakh in cash earlier in the day, he said there is "no scope" to view it as an isolated episode.

Questions have arisen over how a top district-level Jamaat leader was travelling from Dhaka to Thakurgaon on the eve of the election with a "huge amount of money" when banks, financial institutions and business activities were shut to prevent illegal money transactions during the polls.

"Where is this money coming from, what is the purpose and who was it meant for?"

Mahdi, also the spokesman for BNP's Election Management Committee, termed it a breach of the electoral code of conduct.

It showed the "bankruptcy" of a party "detached from the people" and an attempt to spread "unethical influence".

He also questioned what he called a contradiction between Jamaat's rhetoric on establishing justice and fighting corruption and the alleged use of money to buy votes.

Mahdi further alleged that similar incidents of illegal financial transactions had been seen in Dhaka-15, the constituency of Jamaat's ameer, as well as in other areas including Cumilla, Noakhali and Khulna.

Citing media reports, he said that in many places "terrorists" of a political party were stockpiling bamboo sticks, pipes, stamps and locally-made weapons to spread fear among voters.

He alleged that incidents of violence, sudden attacks, arson, voter intimidation and money distribution had taken place in different districts, and that several people linked to such activities had been arrested by law enforcement agencies.

As an example, he mentioned an attack in Bogura-4, saying Jamaat "identified terrorists" attacked Thalta-Majhgram Union BNP President Masud Rana in Nandigram, leaving his eye "seriously damaged". He condemned the attack and demanded swift justice.

He urged the Election Commission, returning officers and law enforcement agencies to treat each incident with the "highest importance" and take necessary action quickly.

The BNP had learned that large numbers of burqas and niqabs were

being made in different places. If anyone tried to misuse the Islamic attire to cast fraudulent votes under false identities, it must be resisted, he said.

Referring to an earlier incident in Lakshmipur, Mahdi said a printing press owner was arrested after illegal voting seals were recovered and later gave a confessional statement in court, claiming the seals were made on the instruction of a leader of "that party".

"This is evidence of a plot to influence the election."

Today's election would help establish a government that is accountable to the people, committed to transparency and accountability.

Sudan RSF drone strike on school kills two children

AFP, Khartoum

A drone strike blamed on Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces killed two children and injured 12 others yesterday in the southern Kordofan city of El-Rahad, a medical source told AFP.

The Kordofan region is currently the fiercest battlefield in the war raging between the RSF and the regular army since April 2023.

"I saw a dozen students injured," Ahmed Moussa, an eyewitness to the attack, told AFP, adding that the drone had struck a traditional Koranic school.

El-Rahad lies on a key axis linking El Obeidi, the North Kordofan state capital, to the White Nile river -- the army's main line to the capital Khartoum.

The city was retaken by the army last February, as part of a rapid offensive that saw it push west to break a long-running siege on El-Obeidi.

The RSF has been trying to re-circle El Obeidi since, including by launching successive drone strikes on the eastern highway, which connects the vast western region of Darfur with the rest of the country.

Since it began, the war has killed tens of thousands and left around 11 million people displaced, creating the world's largest hunger and displacement crises.

It has also effectively split the country in two, with the army holding the north, centre and east while the RSF and its allies control the west and parts of the south.

The army -- on the back foot since the RSF consolidated its hold on Darfur in October -- has appeared to tilt the balance in recent days, breaking two paramilitary sieges on South Kordofan cities: Dilling and Kadugli.

The cities had come to exemplify the violence in Kordofan, where hundreds of thousands face starvation under daily drone strikes.

China's Xi hails 'fight against corruption' after top general's fall

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping hailed the military's "fight against corruption", state media reported yesterday, in a rare acknowledgement of graft weeks after Beijing escalated a sweeping purge by probing its top general.

Beijing's defence ministry said last month it was investigating Zhang Youxia, a vice chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission (CMC), as well as Liu Zhenli, chief of staff of the CMC's joint staff department, which oversees combat planning.

The pair were the latest to fall under a huge drive to root out graft at all levels of the Chinese Communist Party and state since Xi came to power more than a decade ago. The drive has targeted the military in recent years.

Speaking to soldiers in a virtual

address on Tuesday, Xi said the military had "undergone revolutionary tempering in the fight against corruption", using a phrase commonly associated with strengthening military and party loyalty.

"The People's Liberation Army has advanced in depth political rectification (and) effectively responded to various risks and challenges," Xi said, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

The anti-graft drive in the military has decimated the powerful CMC from its seven-person roster in 2022 to one general alongside Xi, who serves as its chair.

Leaders across the military's service branches have also been investigated or expelled.

Xi said in his remarks that "the past year has been highly unusual and extraordinary" but troops "have proven fully reliable and trustworthy".