

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## Ensure free, fair, and peaceful voting

EC, law enforcers, and political parties must deliver this together

Today, the nation is voting in one of the most anticipated and consequential elections of Bangladesh's history. From 7:30 am to 4:30 pm, citizens will cast their ballots to decide the country's future, not just for the next five years but perhaps for many years to come. They will determine not only the next government but also the fate of the constitution through a referendum. Never before have Bangladeshis cast two such crucial ballots on the same day; however, this is not the only factor making today's election special. This poll comes after a bloody uprising that ousted Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian government through the sacrifices of thousands in 2024. Since then, people have been eagerly awaiting this poll so as to return to the democratic process. This aspiration is primarily dependent on all parties accepting the verdict unreservedly.

The majority of voters believe that, unlike the last three elections, their ballots this time will reflect their choice. Undoubtedly, this poll is more participatory than the previous three held under the Awami League government. Regardless of whom voters supported, the results of the polls were largely predetermined. For example, in the January 2024 election, voting choices were limited to Awami League, its allies, and its dummy candidates. Ironically, AL is absent from the polls this year, and for justifiable reasons. Another factor that makes today's voting special is the composition of young voters. Aged 18 to 37, they form 44 percent of the 12.77 crore voters and will be a decisive factor in the results. Nevertheless, the excitement to vote is evident across all age groups. Since Tuesday, many have been heading home to cast their ballots. Bus and train stations, as well as launch terminals, have been flooded with people, similar to the rush seen during Eid holidays.

The overall festive atmosphere has not been disrupted by large-scale violence compared to previous elections, though it hasn't been completely violence-free. According to the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), pre-election violence during the 12th national polls—from the schedule announcement date to the eve of election day—claimed seven lives and left 1,681 people injured in at least 379 incidents, whereas five people died and 603 were injured in pre-election violence between the 13th election's schedule announcement date and February 9 (two days before the election), as per police headquarters data. Security has been beefed up across polling centres, and the visible presence of law enforcers on the streets provides assurance of a safe voting environment.

After 18 long years, people are vying for a free and fair election, one the interim government had promised when it took office on August 8, 2024. We hope the government will follow through on this particular pledge, although it faltered on many others during its 18-month tenure. It must ensure the integrity of the process as domestic and international observers, the media, and the wider world watch on. Political parties and their supporters must also aid this process by exercising restraint to protect ballots and ensure peaceful voting. And they must respect the people's will, accept the result gracefully, and allow for a peaceful transition, as is the norm in mature democracies. Let today's election be the turning point that transforms Bangladesh for the better.

## Partial transparency not enough

Advisers' asset disclosure must be comprehensive and consistent

We welcome the publication of wealth statements by the advisers of the outgoing interim government in line with their earlier commitment. According to the published information, all current advisers have assets exceeding Tk 1 crore; the assets of 18 advisers increased, while those of three declined. The commerce adviser holds the most assets at Tk 91.65 crore, while the chief adviser's assets stand at Tk 15.62 crore, marking an increase of Tk 1.61 crore over one year. While these disclosures are significant, their coverage still raises important questions.

The advisers' wealth statements cover the period from July 2024 to June 2025. But the statements for the last seven months—from July 2025 to January 2026—are missing. The status of their assets during this period—how much cash they hold and what types of investments they possess—should also be made public.

Moreover, the statements provide only total net assets—movable and immovable—but do not include detailed breakdowns such as landholdings, flats, bank deposits, or cash in hand. By contrast, parliamentary candidates are required to submit far more detailed affidavits. There is no reason why the wealth statements of appointed state officials should not be detailed as well.

Transparency must also extend beyond the advisers themselves. The wealth statements of those appointed as special assistants to the chief adviser—many of whom had significant influence over key government decisions—should also be made available without delay. Similarly, during its tenure, the interim government appointed many civil servants to key positions on a contractual basis. What has become of their wealth statements? The government directed all civil servants to submit asset declarations, and it has repeatedly claimed that they have complied. Yet, these statements have not been made public.

Arrangements should therefore be made to ensure that the wealth statements of all officials holding key government positions and senior offices are disclosed. While the eventual publication of these statements is significant, a proactive and timely release would have set a stronger precedent. We hope that, from now on, those occupying important positions in government, whether in a ministerial capacity or in senior civil service roles, will publish their wealth statements annually. Only through consistent and comprehensive disclosure can accountability be truly strengthened.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Abraham Lincoln born

On this day in 1809, US President Abraham Lincoln was born in Hardin County, Kentucky, later leading the nation through the American civil war and ending slavery.

# Why this election matters more than ever



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

Despite many uncertainties and deep misgivings that weigh heavily on our minds, the excitement of voting this time is inescapable. It is an election unlike any other, and definitely not like the one-sided, engineered elections we witnessed in 2014, 2018, and 2024 where "victory" was as predictable as the possibility of nighttime following dusk. This time, there is real competition, with expectations that it will be fair and free, that the power is with the voters.

In this election, we are witnessing the return of Jamaat-e-Islami, a party that has gained significant support of late, despite its stigma of 1971. The emergence of the National Citizen Party (NCP), a new political party born out of the July uprising and now aligned with Jamaat, adds further complexity. And then there's the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), long repressed but now emerging with the legacy of two beloved leaders. Led by their son, returning after 17 years of being forced to stay abroad, BNP appears poised to make a serious run. The total absence of Awami League (AL) in the election is another factor that makes it so different.

The results of this election will reveal whether people's July aspirations are aligned towards the religious right or the pragmatic centre. With a large number of swing voters—women, young voters, and traditional AL voters—the outcome is not as clearly predictable.

The January 2024 election seemed to be the last nail in the coffin of our democracy, and of course many of us didn't even bother to vote. Then July happened, and we watched in disbelief and awe how scores of unarmed students, like their predecessors many decades before, led the stand against a ruthless regime.

It was the women in the university residential halls who took the first step—to defy a dictator who lost all connection with her people and chose to use fear, repression, and the flourishing of avarice to stay in power. Again, it was the female students who got mercilessly beaten by the Chhatra League goons, igniting the first spark that transformed a seemingly simple anti-quota, anti-discrimination

movement into something much more consequential. And when Abu Sayeed stood, arms outstretched, his face frozen with disbelief, as bullets pierced his chest, making him the first martyr, the movement gained tremendous momentum as thousands marched the streets in anger and grief, the students leading and the people following. We watched in awe as the protesters, most of them young people, put forward their bodies in defiance, their courage catalysed by Abu Sayeed's spirit. We watched in horror as the bullets kept coming, first from the police on the ground, then from helicopters, a



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

killing spree that took around 1,400 and maimed thousands.

Then, on August 5, 2024, the impossible happened. The repressive ruler fled, and the country was free of her brutal regime. The celebrations of people from all walks of life were spontaneous, unadulterated, unanimous. Finally, there was hope. We dared to dream again.

When Prof Muhammad Yunus answered the call of the students and an unconventional cabinet of civil society members and student representatives was sworn in to form the interim government, there were expectations that our prayers had been answered and real change was coming. The shackles that bound us seemed to be breaking. Victims of enforced disappearances were freed, and political prisoners long held captive by the previous regime were released.

But all too soon, chaos returned

as streets became a battleground of protests, each one demanding an immediate solution. All too often, the government, struggling to put out the fires, was forced to cave in. We were understanding of their predicament. We decided to be patient.

But fear, that insidious emotion that can cripple and corrode even the bravest among us, returned all too quickly. The need for justice for all the July killings and shootings predominated everything else. However, the justice process became diverted, selective, biased, and determined by the ones with the loudest voices and the biggest mobs. "Mobocracy" ruled everything—from arbitrary cancellations (and appointments with the current political colours) of posts at universities, schools, media houses, and the bureaucracy, to deciding who deserved to be beaten or burnt to death for "being a fascist sympathiser," "hurting religious sentiment," or being suspected of "theft." The state, apart from often languid statements

allowed to escape after months of hiding.

Women, who played a pivotal role during the movement, started to become invisible in politics but remained visible for being targeted by abusers, both online and offline. Certain political groups had the audacity to publicly hurl abuses at women's groups—even the Women's

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Affairs Reform Commission's members—for recommending equal rights, weaponising religion to justify their misogynistic words. In fact, never before have religious groups become so obsessive about women: their movement, their attire, and their "place" in society. Major political parties even failed to field a bare minimum of female candidates. Only 83 out of the 2,028 candidates are women.

The interim government, despite its promise of major reforms, became subsumed by perpetual street protests, the push-and-pull of political parties and student groups, and endless discussions with political parties on the much-heralded July National Charter, which vows to bring about real change in our future and will likely be endorsed through a referendum today. Over the last 18 months, there have been some significant gains: in banking discipline, an end to looting of banks, stabilising foreign exchange reserves, and ordinances to ensure labour rights and create an independent judiciary, to name a few. But the disappointments have been crushing too. Women, minority, and Indigenous communities, the jobless, the poor—these groups have felt left in the lurch.

This election, therefore, is not just another political contest. It is the culmination of all our hopes and all our disillusionments. It represents the final card we can play if we are to secure a future that reflects the aspirations we so desperately sought during the July uprising.

We cannot afford to fail.

# Not voting is not an option



Monorom Polok is a member of the Editorial team at The Daily Star.

MONOROM POLOK

For those of us in our 20s and above, the 13th parliamentary election is the first where we hold real leverage, or at least much better leverage than people did in the last three elections. That's why this election is rightly being referred to as Gen Z-inspired.

In the last three elections, votes were cast but that rarely translated into meaningful change in how the country was governed. We also had no real say in the formation of the interim government in terms of who was selected as an adviser, or how the government has since operated. Many had also hoped for an election to take place immediately after the July 2024 uprising, but that decision was left to be finalised by the interim government without any input from citizens.

However, this election, we have the opportunity to exercise our democratic power that was missing for more than 15 years, which was reclaimed through protests, bloodshed, and sacrifices by thousands. This means we finally have the chance to effectively shape the broader direction of the country.

Despite this reality, many are still contemplating opting out of voting altogether. This sentiment largely

stems from their disappointment with the two dominant players in this election: BNP and Jamaat. But this argument for abstaining fails to consider the consequences of silence.

The BNP carries a history of corruption and extortion allegations. Worse, these practices from within the party re-emerged after the July uprising, with a report by the Transparency International Bangladesh linking 91.7 percent of political violence between August 2024 and December 2025 to the BNP. So, those who are frustrated by everyday corruption and the normalisation of extortion have reason to question whether such practices will intensify under a BNP government.

Jamaat, on the other hand, stood on the wrong side of history during the Liberation War. It opposed the formation of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the very state we inhabit today and the leadership of which Jamaat is vying for in this election. Then there is the concern of the party or party-aligned groups imposing religious morality upon citizens. Jamaat's stance on women's rights is another concern. Referring to men

as the "managers" of women runs counter to the equal legal rights for all as enshrined in our constitution. The Jamaat ameer's past "criticism" of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission's recommendation to recognise marital rape is also hard to forget.

If you are someone who believes that the promises of "zero corruption" are enough to outweigh potential

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regressions in the rights of half of the population, that calculation deserves serious reconsideration. Oppression is rarely announced loudly; it takes root quietly and usually over many years. Each time we justify the injustice someone faces on the basis of not being directly affected by it ourselves, we ensure that, sooner or later, injustice comes for us as well. Even claims of incorruptibility must be scrutinised.

One must remember that no political entity is beyond accountability simply because it promises moral purity.

It is clear that both parties carry flaws, but this dilemma does not absolve one of their civic responsibility. If one believes that both options are flawed—even "evil"—the task is to make an informed choice for who represents the lesser harm, if not at the national level, then in their own constituency.

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The country's future will be shaped, at least in part, by the choices we make, or refuse to make. Many argue that with the contest effectively reduced to BNP vs Jamaat, and with the absence of the Awami League, there is no real option at all. That both are problematic in different ways. But flawed is not the same as identical. BNP and Jamaat are neither interchangeable in every respect, nor will they govern in the same way. They will also not shape institutions, rights, and public life in identical terms.

Each voter must ask themselves: how do I want to live? What kind of country do I want my friends, my family, and my peers to inhabit? Democracy does not promise purity. What it offers is choice. And abstaining is also a choice, often the most consequential one of all.