



## Polls catch the eyes of global media

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh's historic election yesterday drew the attention of global media, which highlighted the backdrop of the polls, possible outcomes, the challenges it faces and expectations of the people for a democratic and inclusive country.

Apart from about 400 foreign observers, nearly 200 foreign journalists are covering the polls and the referendum on the reforms, which were held 18 months after the July uprising.

The New York Times ran a story – titled "Bangladesh Holds Elections on Thursday. Here's What to Know" – that said many Bangladeshis see the election as a chance to build an inclusive democracy with safeguards against authoritarian rule and against the widespread corruption.

This election is significant because millions of voters are casting their ballots for the first time.

Stating that Awami League is not in the polls race, Times said this leaves the BNP as the dominant player and its chairman Tarique Rahman expected to become the next prime minister.

The other major party, Jamaat-e-Islami, has made significant inroads by playing on people's anger at the demonisation of Muslims, particularly by the Hindu right-wing movement in neighbouring India.

The alliance of the new party born out of the July uprising – National Citizen Party – upset many students and those who want Bangladesh to be more secular, moderate and inclusive, it added.

The British newspaper Guardian ran two reports: one on February 11 and the other on February 12.

The first one – titled, "Women's freedoms are at stake: concern at rise of Islamist party before Bangladesh election" – said despite the July uprising that called for an inclusive society, for swathes of women in the country, the hope of the election has become tinged with disappointment and fear amid a resurgence of regressive Islamist politics.

Limited polling suggests the BNP will win the election but it appears as if Jamaat-e-Islami will earn a historic share of the vote and be a significant force after the election.

Critics say the resurgence of conservative Islamist politics has already begun to seep into society.

While Jamaat-e-Islami has

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PHOTO: BNP MEDIA CELL, STAR

**Clockwise from left... BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman, his wife, Zubaida Rahman, and their daughter, Zaima Rahman, pose for a family photo after casting ballots; BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir votes at Thakurgaon Government Girls' High School; NCP Convener Nahid Islam exercises his franchise at AKM Rahmatullah University College in Badda.**

## First-time voters hoping for a new dawn

STAR REPORT

As voting in the 13th parliamentary election and a nationwide referendum began yesterday morning, first-time and young voters turned out in large numbers across the country, many describing the experience as emotional and historic.

Polling opened at 8:00am amid tight security, with queues forming early at several centres.

Law enforcement personnel were deployed nationwide.

At Mirzapur Government Primary School polling centre in Rajshahi city, Peyari Begum, a resident of Hanuful Mor, arrived around 7:30am. "I did not vote last time. This time it feels like Eid. Everyone has come together early in the morning to vote. It feels festive," she said.

In Dhaka-9, Sumaiya Akter Mim, a class 12 student, cast her first ballot alongside her parents and also took part in the referendum on constitutional reforms.

"There was a lot of tension about whether I would be able to vote. I came feeling quite scared. However, I was able to cast my vote in a peaceful environment for my preferred candidate," she said.

At the Monipur High School polling centre in Dhaka-15, 25-year-old Tajia Khan

voted with her mother, Khadija Begum. Both said they felt proud after casting their ballots.

Twin siblings Saima and Sajid also voted for the first time at the same centre. Saima, 23, a fourth-year electrical engineering student at Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology, said she returned home on leave specifically to vote.

"I am here to uphold democracy. I want to see democracy firmly established everywhere," she said.

Her brother Sajid, a student at Sir Salimullah Medical College Mitford Hospital, said social media posts the previous night had raised concerns.

"But when I arrived at the centre this morning, I found the environment calm and well organised," he said, adding that he also participated in the referendum.

In Dhaka-1, 18-year-old Sabbir Hossain said he had been excited since the previous day.

"This is my first time voting. I am very happy to cast my vote for my preferred candidate," he said.

Hasib Islam, a mechanical engineering student at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, cast his first ballot at Mirpur University College centre.

"I feel really good to have voted for the first time. I was able to vote in an orderly

manner within a short time," he said.

At Ideal Public School centre in Matikata Bazar under Dhaka-17, 27-year-old Naznin Ayesha voted for the first time.

At Kisholoy High School in Mohammadpur, Wajihaba, a university admission candidate, said she was initially nervous.

"But I didn't face any difficulty. Everything went very smoothly and it was faster than I expected," she said, adding that she cast two ballots – one for the parliamentary candidate and another for the referendum.

"We got exactly what we were told beforehand, including the yes-no vote and the candidates. It was simple, and it went well," she added.

Across constituencies, many young voters said the atmosphere felt different from previous elections.

"It feels like we finally have the freedom to express our voice and make our own decision," said one voter.

After years without a competitive national election, a large segment of the electorate is casting ballots in a closely contested race for the first time. Alongside the parliamentary vote, citizens also took part in a referendum on proposed constitutional reforms aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and accountability.

## Voting festive, peaceful

Says ANFREL; EU, Commonwealth note strong participation

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Election monitors from the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) yesterday said voting in the 13th national polls and referendum was mostly festive, orderly, and peaceful.

After visiting 414 polling booths across all eight divisions – 169 in rural areas and 234 in urban locations – covering 71 percent of the country's 64 districts, ANFREL said nearly 90 percent reports from its observers found no discrepancies in general voting procedures.

However, it noted that most polling stations lacked ramps and wheelchair access, creating mobility barriers for persons with disabilities and elderly voters.

The observers also reported activities, such as political party-operated voter identification desks distributing voter slips in the vicinity of several polling stations, which, they feared, may facilitate vote-buying.

In a post-poll statement, ANFREL said that although most centres opened in an orderly manner, some experienced minor delays that prevented polling agents and observers from entering on time.

"This led to tensions and, in isolated instances,



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

**European Union observers speak to a polling agent at Tejgaon Polytechnic Girls' High School centre in Dhaka-12, half an hour before voting closed at 4:30pm yesterday.**

physical confrontations between representatives of competing parties," it said.

ANFREL said 94 percent of observed polling stations closed on time, with no reported incidents disrupting the process. The counting also proceeded without major disruption, except at two centres where polling agents raised concerns.

More than 50 percent of ANFREL observers reported that presiding officers failed to announce the serial numbers when opening ballot boxes. Nearly one-third said counting centres were not under CCTV surveillance, and 30 percent reported that presiding officers did not ensure separate counting of parliamentary and referendum ballots.

Security arrangements were extensive and highly visible throughout the electoral process, it noted.

Meanwhile, election observers from the

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## Pro-Jamaat actors dominate polls-day disinformation

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This newspaper logged the disinformation as it appeared, without any regard for the political affiliation of the actors.

The content includes 37 photocards mimicking news agencies, 30 videos, eight images and three deepfakes.

About 65 percent of the disinformation documented by this newspaper was spread by entities that appear to be aligned with Jamaat. AL-aligned actors trailed by 21.21 percent, pro-BNP groups 7 percent and National Citizen Party-aligned users pushed 3 percent of the content.

At 12:20am yesterday, a Facebook page named InfoBangla claimed that the election will not take place.

Miraj Ahmed Chowdhury, who leads fact-check organisation Dismislab, called this category of disinformation among the most harmful. He said that Dismislab itself debunked nearly a dozen instances of disinformation claiming that candidates have withdrawn from the elections.

Another fact-checking organisation FactWatch debunked photocards floating on social media claiming that two major candidates for the Barguna-2 seat Nurul Islam Moni (BNP) and Dr Sultan Ahmed (Jamaat) had withdrawn from the election at the last minute.

To make these claims appear legitimate, the disinformation campaign deployed fabricated "photocards" mimicking well-known Bangladeshi news outlets, including Bangla dailies Prothom Alo, Inqilab, Jugantor and Amar Desh as well as Jamuna Television.

Both candidates contested the election.

Dismislab spotted a fake Jamuna TV photocard claiming BNP called an emergency press conference to boycott the election. Dismislab confirmed this was fake.

**FALSE VIOLENCE**

At least 43 pieces of disinformation were disseminated on social media by pro-Jamaat actors specifically targeted at BNP, mostly accusing them of being criminals and

conducting violence.

A primary tactic involved resharing old news and presenting it as breaking news to frame BNP members as criminals or rapists on election day.

A pro-Jamaat Telegram group called Basherkeella posted a photo of a weapons seizure around 8:50pm on February 11, claiming "Chhatra Dal and Jubo Dal leaders were arrested with arms by the army in Feni."

The photo shared was from an operation by joint forces in Feni on September 18, 2024, where two men named Ziauddin Dalim and Jiban Krishna De were arrested in the Kazirbag area of Feni Sadar. The recovery happened in Hokdi and Baligaon areas of Feni Sadar Upazila, according to Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR).

Miraj Ahmed, who leads Dismislab, said disinformation about violence taking place before the elections is a method of voter suppression, to dissuade voters from showing up.

Multiple pro-Jamaat entities also circulated old news reports from 2021 and 2025 regarding rape allegations against Chhatra Dal leaders. They presented these events as having happened "today" or "yesterday" to incite moral outrage.

Another Jamaat-aligned social media user claimed that on February 11, Chhatra Dal activists raped a young woman in Jashore. "Even today, they haven't stopped! They're going to start a "grand festival" the day after tomorrow!" the post claimed. The incident took place on March 17, 2024.

The pro-BNP entities reciprocated. One post circulated a video claiming that a vast quantity of weapons was recovered from the car of the son of a Jamaat leader in Comilla. The narrative suggested these weapons were gathered to rig the election.

Another pro-BNP page posted a photo of a man at 1:27am yesterday claiming that a Jubo Dal man died in an attack by activists loyal to National Citizen Party leader Abdul Hannan

Masud.

The Daily Star's local correspondent confirmed that while there was a scuffle in Hatiya late at night, no casualties were reported, and the army intervened to stop the violence.

Prof Din Md Sumon Rahman, Head of Media Studies and Journalism at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh and the founder of Factwatch, called this disinformation one of the "most harmful" of the night.

"Claims of deaths can seriously harm the quality of the election, especially when candidates

themselves are also sharing these posts," said Prof Rahman.

Attack on media

Social media activity from pro-Jamaat entities reveals a coordinated narrative portraying mainstream media as a biased apparatus facilitating a purported "media coup" to benefit the BNP, an analysis of 29 such Facebook posts shows.

These posts claimed that mainstream media outlets, including Jamuna TV, Kaal Bela and Prothom Alo, suppressed reports of alleged electoral irregularities by the BNP while actively targeting Jamaat through "information terrorism."

These narratives frequently employed the word "fascism" against

the media. Many posts claimed that the same media outlets that allegedly enabled authoritarianism during the Awami League are now doing the same, "creating a monster" in the BNP (1, 2, 3).

Engagement metrics suggest that these narratives gain significant traction when amplified by high-profile figures.

A post by social media influencer Pinaki Bhattacharya accused three major media outlets of controlling the media headlines. Similarly, a video by Elias Hossain, another social media influencer, alleged of a "media coup" to undermine Jamaat's

specifically targeted Jamaat with three pieces of disinformation documented by this newspaper, but more than half of their tirade was aimed at the voters.

A reel posted by a pro-AL Facebook page at 3:16am on February 12, four hours before voting centres opened, claimed that votes had already been cast at a polling centre in Gazipur-2.

"Done and dusted before Tahajjud. The countdown is real! Praying that Fajr brings the results along with the sunrise," said the reel, which showed an old video of officers counting ballots.

A pro-AL Telegram group Area71 posted a video at 8:00pm on February 11, claiming that "Voting has started at the Jubilee School and College centre located in Ward No. 43 under Dhaka-6" in old town.

Sutrapur Police Station OC (Investigation), Mohaimen, told The Daily Star no such thing happened there. According to his investigation, the Presiding Officer was actually distributing identification cards to the polling agents, which was misrepresented as a scene of ballot stuffing.

A pro-AL Facebook user shared an AI-generated video at noon with the caption, "All the voting in the Jashore-2 constituency was completed last night. This is Yunus's 'healthy' election. It's happening, but don't mind it – these are 'healthy' votes."

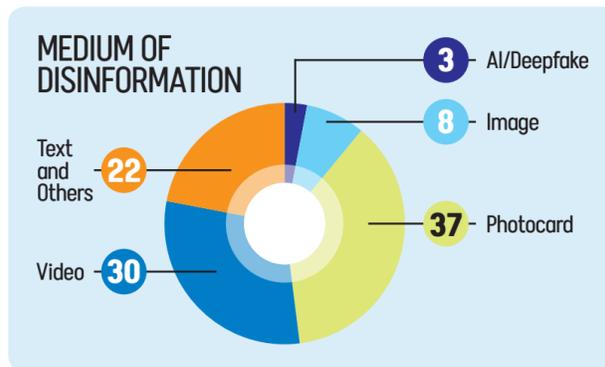
The video showed masked men in caps making the same repetitive stamping motions and stuffing ballots into box cartons.

Dismislab found social media posts falsely claiming that police had raided the home of Jamaat Master Abdur Rahim in Daganbhuian, Feni, recovering ballot papers and arresting him.

According to Dismislab, while police did conduct a raid on his house based on a tip-off, they neither found ballot papers nor arrested him.

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electoral prospects.

DUCSU Vice President Shadik Kayem echoed the same sentiment in a separate post, calling for resistance against what he termed "media fascism."

Specific claims raised by other posters include accusations that The Daily Star deliberately concealed the alleged BNP affiliation of armed activists in Pabna and that Jamuna TV and Channel 24 removed reports documenting BNP-linked crimes to shield the party's image.

**FAKE BALLOT STUFFING**  
Pro-Awami League entities spread disinformation alleging ballot-stuffing and challenging the legitimacy of the elections. They

[Zyma Islam is a senior reporter and Mir Rownak, Abdullah Hel Bubun, Nourin Sultana, Abir Ayon and Tarek Hosen are interns at The Daily Star]

## Ctg-4 result withheld over pending appeal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission has decided to withhold publication of the result of the Chattogram-4 constituency in the 13th national election, citing a pending appeal before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court.

In an official communication issued by the EC Secretariat, the commission said the decision followed an order passed by the Appellate Division on February 3 in connection with a petition earlier disposed of by the High Court Division.

On that day, the apex court ruled that BNP candidate Mohammad Aslam Chowdhury could contest the election from Chattogram-4 in accordance with the law. However, it directed that the final publication of the election result for the constituency would remain withheld until disposal of a leave-to-appeal petition challenging the HC verdict that cleared his candidacy.

In compliance with the court order, the commission said it was under a legal obligation to refrain from publishing the result of the seat until a conclusive decision is reached by the SC.

The Appellate Division also permitted Jamaat-e-Islami candidate Md Anwar Siddique to proceed with his leave-to-appeal petition against the HC judgment.

Anwar's counsel, Advocate Mohammad Hossain Lipu said his client had challenged the EC's decision to allow Aslam to contest, alleging that the BNP candidate has outstanding loans amounting to Tk 2,100 crore from 23 banks.