

The people have given their verdict

All contestants must honour it with grace and dignity

As the nation awaits the final outcome of this historic election to confirm which political party or coalition will emerge victorious, we must reflect on the overall election environment. By and large, save for a few unfortunate incidents, the 13th parliamentary election has been conducted relatively peacefully, with a decent turnout in most centres.

The overall atmosphere was celebratory, with people spontaneously coming out to cast their votes. Women and men of all ages were seen at the polling centres. The elderly, people with disabilities, and young voters—everyone—participated enthusiastically. This indicates a hard-earned, long-overdue public trust in the election process and demonstrates people's excitement in exercising their vote, something they were deprived of in the last three elections.

In fact, many of the concerns that had surrounded the election were adequately allayed. There were apprehensions that there would be many incidents of violence leading to panic among the people, lowering the voter turnout. In fact, hours before voting began, various political actors, seemingly aligned with the Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami, and BNP, used social media platforms to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the election, falsely or unconvincingly accuse rival parties of foul play, and discourage people from voting. There were a few isolated incidents of attempts at creating panic and ballot snatching, but these were very few and promptly prevented. In the end, voters refused to be deterred by false propaganda and were determined to exercise their democratic right.

With around 12.77 crore voters, almost half of them women, and 2,028 candidates and 50 political parties joining the race, this was an election with very high stakes. Consequently, a vast number of security personnel were employed to make sure that it took place smoothly. The number of polling centres were 42,779, with 21,506 considered "risky" due to close competition between the two major parties. About eight lakh election officials were engaged, and nearly 10 lakh security personnel were deployed to maintain tight security, including over one lakh army personnel and more than 1.86 lakh police officials, along with thousands from the air force, navy, BGB, coast guard, Ansar, Rab, and village police. Considering the fact that this election also included a referendum, the voting process was notably smooth and efficient.

The overall atmosphere was celebratory, with people spontaneously coming out to cast their votes. Women and men of all ages were seen at the polling centres. The elderly, people with disabilities, and young voters—everyone—participated enthusiastically.

The government and the Election Commission must be commended for efficiently managing the formidable logistics of organising this election while ensuring it was conducted peacefully and fairly. Despite the large number of polling centres and voting booths, the presence and sincerity of helpful volunteers and polling agents ensured the overall discipline and avoided long queues and crowding. The presence of police and army personnel gave voters confidence, enabling them to cast their votes freely. The prompt action by the army the night before the election, during which they arrested a number of individuals for attempts to tamper with the process, played a major role in deterring potential mischief-makers and alleviate any fears the voters may have had. The consistent role of the army chief in maintaining a position of advocacy for a free and fair election and helping to deliver one also deserves praise.

Finally, much of the credit for such a peaceful election goes to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus who, despite having fallen short of some crucial public expectations during his tenure, has commendably overseen the delivery of a festive, free and fair election that will set the standard for future polls. This will undoubtedly be an important accomplishment of his legacy.

At the time of writing this editorial, vote counting has not concluded, and it is therefore not possible to comment definitively on the results. We congratulate whoever emerges victorious and urge the losing side to accept the verdict of the people with grace and dignity. Political parties, in general, also deserve appreciation for their relative restraint and cooperation during the election.

Going forward, we look forward to a parliament with an honest, pro-people ruling party and a strong, conscientious opposition that keeps the government accountable. We also expect the next government to be committed to upholding the basic rights and freedoms, especially freedom of the media. May this election usher in the new Bangladesh we have long dreamed of: a nation with a healthy, thriving democracy where all citizens will enjoy justice, equality, accountability, and peace.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



China's last emperor fall

On this day in 1912, Hsian-T'ung, the last emperor of China, was forced to abdicate following Sun Yat-sen's republican revolution. A provisional government was established in his place, ending 267 years of Manchu rule in China and 2,000 years of imperial rule.

A new Bangladesh demands new directions



Altaf Parvez is a researcher and political analyst.

ALTAF PARVEZ

Today, Bangladesh begins a new journey. After over 18 months since the mass uprising, the long-awaited election has finally been held, opening up the path for a democratic transition. After any election, it is natural that one party will form the government and another will be the opposition. The question for now is whether a large section of the voters have participated in the election, and whether the electoral process has been relatively free from external interference or disturbance. Going by initial estimates, the election has certainly passed the test.

While all our expectations from this pivotal moment may not have been fulfilled, we have, nevertheless, obtained a roadmap for moving forward. Bangladesh is soon going to have a parliament with members elected through a largely credible competition. Citizens are going to have a team of their choice at the helm of the state and as their political guardians. In the coming days, political authority and a healthy political environment must be restored at every level of society. Instead of reactionary YouTubers and social media influencers, elected representatives must be at the helm of things, both in parliament and outside.

A new national parliament is also a nod to the rebuilding of our fragile political institutions. Through their campaigns prior to the elections, political parties have already begun reorganising themselves. Those who could not take part in the election could, in time, also return through a process of reorganisation. In other words, Bangladesh's political reconstruction has begun anew.

Going forward, our primary expectation is that the new government will make parliament the central platform for all national decisions, be it political, economic, or social. Policy decisions must not be made at the Secretariat by bureaucrats, but by the elected representatives, and implemented through the executive branch. In this regard, we must stress the importance of empowering the local government, a vital but persistently ignored segment of the administration. Due to the lack of credible polls and support from the state, the union parishads, upazila parishads, zila parishads and other local government bodies have long been weakened, undermining grassroots democracy and service delivery, an imbalance the new government must fix. Our farmers are suffering. Local communities are struggling under the double digit inflation. Poverty has risen. Past MPs showed little interest in developing or empowering the local government

bodies, which has only obstructed the country's overall development. At this moment of national renewal, we hope the new government will sufficiently empower and activate the local government.

Another area demanding immediate attention is the reconstruction of the police force. It still remains structurally and morally weak. The public does not want police to return to its pre-July uprising state. The resentment caused by the police during the uprising must be remembered objectively by the incoming government. People want a police force that is both corruption-free and free from political influence.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

The interim government, beyond changing uniforms, could do little to achieve that goal, so it is crucial that the new parliament and government focus on reorganising the force to make it truly professional.

Bangladesh cannot go back to the culture of enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killing or custodial torture of political opponents and ideological dissenters. Intelligence agencies, too, must therefore be transformed. Many within these agencies will likely seek favour with the newly elected government as soon as it is formed. Perhaps the government's first test will be whether it considers such overtures strictly through a professional lens. If freed from partisan influences, police and intelligence agencies can certainly perform much better, and they should.

Another urgent task is a national initiative for social reconciliation. Both Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP mentioned this in their manifestos. The interim government also initially said it would

all political groups, as well as all socioreligious categories.

As part of its mandate and July National Charter obligations, the new government will likely soon start undertaking various reform initiatives. The sustainability of these initiatives will, however, depend on durable political unity, proper planning and enforcement, and reconciliation-oriented outcomes. Well-planned initiatives can also help manage the supervisory impulses of certain influential countries and also open the way for substantial domestic and foreign investment. In this connection, a foremost task will be to construct a non-discriminatory economy. The youth are waiting eagerly. They want change, and elected leaders must deliver that.

It is worth recalling that, as in Bangladesh, mass uprisings in Sri Lanka and Nepal were also largely driven by economic injustice. In our case, economic injustice has two

this anarchic atmosphere and establish a rights-based order in the country. During the interim period, mob violence has inflicted heavy damage on our social cohesion. Women and minority communities have especially suffered immense physical, psychological and material harm. In this climate, the seeds of armed extremism have been increasingly visible. Some political actors have even fuelled these tendencies, exploiting existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

To address this, three simultaneous actions are necessary: i) a pro-poor economic reform, giving priority to marginalised districts and upazilas in resource distribution; ii) ensuring democratic practice at every level of administration, from the centre down to the union level; iii) firm policing against any form of extremism. Without these measures, securing a peaceful future will be difficult. Let these be the foundation on which the new parliament operates.

Finally, an election that felt real



Afia Jahin is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

AFIA JAHIN

On January 7, 2024, when most people around me had abstained from voting in the Awami League's staged national election, I had swallowed self-judgement and stamped the first ballot of my life. It was the first election I was witnessing since becoming a journalist, and I wanted to experience the process of voting and write about it. "When will I ever get the chance again?" I had thought. At that time, all signs indicated that every future election held under the Awami League government would be more restrictive than the one before it. By the next election, I had assumed, the autocratic regime would not even bother to put up an act of being "democratic."

As Prof Ali Riaz had estimated in an op-ed centring on the 2024 election, "After January 7, theoretically, the government will have two options: 1) to scale back and return to past practices; or 2) to double down in its

persecution and attempt to rule with an iron fist." Awami League took the latter course. But, only months later, the party's firm iron fist made it all the simpler for Bangladesh to make a choice of its own.

More than a decade of repression had been knocked off our backs, and we found ourselves in an inevitable vacuum.

In the 18 months since then, politicians new and old tried their best to seem democratic, journalists had to unlearn one type of self-censorship and learn a few new ones, and citizens could only trust that the interim government would do a decent job of 1) ensuring justice for the victims and survivors of the July mass uprising and 2) delivering a credible, participatory national election.

As of writing this article, votes are being counted and we are now hours away from learning the outcome. And while there have been reports and

flashbacks of riggings, irregularities, already cast votes, and even a crude bomb blast, the country's 13th parliamentary election has concluded in a largely positive way.

In comparison to the scenes of deserted polling centres in 2024, almost all polling centres this time saw steady, even overwhelming, flows of enthusiastic voters. Across the country, we noted a large turnout of the youngest of young and the frailest of elderly voters. This was also the first time many young adults voted, to the point where a lot of them had not even learnt the basics of the electoral process itself until this election. What was only rhetoric, even propaganda, for so many years became reality: voters cast their ballots in a festive electoral environment.

Yet, I hesitate to assign finality to that sentiment. All my life, I have only seen polls that were marred by conflict, violence, and autocratic opacity. And while this is the most participatory election we have had in a long time, no matter which way the results go, we cannot be expected to shed the fear of facing another government that tries to erase our individualities and deny us our rights.

When we think of July-August 2024 now, we subconsciously choose to think only of August 5. We generally shudder away from the

flashbacks of protesters being shot at with clear intent to kill. We often shake off reminders of innocent, battered, killed bodies being laid over the footstep of a rickshaw or shoved off the side of a police vehicle; of law enforcers' vehicles reversing directly into and over a crowd of protesters. Most of us understandably don't go back to the footage of Abu Sayeed's killing—which has been meticulously analysed as evidence by open-source investigators globally—for fear of feeling shocked and numbed again.

After casting his own vote on Thursday morning, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus said, "Through today's process, people have rejected the past. Whatever nightmarish past existed, we have completely discarded it."

In speaking of a new Bangladesh, Yunus likely meant one that is democratic in practice. However, we need to be careful about which aspects of the old Bangladesh we choose to reject and discard. Our collective trauma surrounding the July uprising is one that we must overcome, not avoid acknowledging altogether. And we must overcome it by sparing no opportunity of speaking truth to power and challenging any move or declaration that toes the line drawn 18 months ago in the blood of our martyrs.