

From boycott to balance: Rethinking the opposition's role in parliament



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On Thursday, Bangladeshis got another chance to practise parliamentary democracy through a national election that appeared more participatory and competitive than those in 2014, 2018, and 2024. While the opportunity has been precious, it has also forced us to ask ourselves an awkward question: not just what kind of government, but what kind of opposition are we prepared to accept this time?

Since the 1990 mass uprising, Bangladesh has formally followed a British-style parliamentary model. On paper, this system assumes two pillars: a government that governs, and an opposition that questions, scrutinises, and holds power to account. Parliamentary democracy is simply unimaginable without both.

In theory, the country has always had an opposition. In practice, that opposition has rarely behaved as if parliament is its main arena. We invest a great deal of energy in criticising whoever is in power, often because of very real abuses of authority and corruption. But the record of opposition politics since the 1990s has also been quite problematic. The story is not only about authoritarian governments, but also about opposition sides that repeatedly walked away from the one institution designed to restrain those governments—sometimes of its own volition, sometimes because of pressures coming from the side in power.

Since 1991, both the major parties have treated parliament as almost optional. The Awami League, in opposition during the BNP governments, boycotted around 30 percent of the sitting days during the fifth parliament (1991-1995) and 60 percent of the sitting days during the seventh parliament (2001-2006). Later, when BNP became the main opposition in the ninth parliament (2009-2014), its MPs were absent on 83.38 percent of the sitting days. Overall, studies show that over roughly two decades, opposition parties in the country skipped about half of all parliamentary sittings, regardless of who was in power.

So when we talk about a “culture of boycott,” it is not a metaphor. It is a measurable pattern. Both the Awami League and BNP have treated parliament like a stage that can be deserted whenever negotiations stall, criminal cases are filed, or street pressure seems more useful

competitive.

In 1996 (February), 2014, 2018, and 2024, the pattern was similar: an incumbent party used constitutional formalities to stage an election with minimal competition, while opposition parties responded with total boycott. Each side played both roles at different moments: sometimes as the overbearing government, sometimes as the sulking boycotter.

“sessions,” and Jatiya Sangsad became a symbolic backdrop.

This habit has several consequences. First, it leaves legislative power almost entirely in the hands of the ruling party. With supermajorities generated by the first-past-the-post system, governments already enjoy the mathematical ability to pass any law they like. Second, it helps ruling parties shift political argument from policy to

has signalled that if his party wins, it will prefer to form a government alone. Jamaat, in contrast, has floated the ideas of a national government or broader power sharing. These are tactical disagreements about cabinet formation and coalition management, but beneath them lies a deeper reluctance to accept opposition as a legitimate, long-term role.

The debate will become even sharper if the proposed package of constitutional reforms goes ahead. If the referendum, held on the same day as the election, approves the creation of an upper house, the opposition will no longer be confined to just one chamber; it will have institutional footholds in both. On paper, this could create stronger checks and balances. In reality, if the boycott culture continues, the country will simply end up with two half-empty houses instead of one. New architecture without new behaviour will not rescue parliamentary democracy.

At the minimum, a democratic opposition in Bangladesh needs three shifts.

First, an opposition that shows up. That sounds banal, yet the statistics say it would be a radical change. Turning up to sessions, serving on committees, engaging in budget debates and Q&A sessions is not charity. It is the job. Walkouts and boycotts might still have a place, but as rare, targeted tools with clear demands and time limits, not as a default operating system.

Second, an opposition that does its homework. Criticising “corruption” or “misrule” is easy. Drafting an alternative budget, dissecting the fine print of a bill, or proposing concrete amendments to a policy requires staff, research, and discipline. A serious opposition should behave like a government in waiting, not a permanent protest group. That includes presenting alternative policies inside parliament, not just in talk shows and rallies.

Third, an opposition that defends rules even when it hurts. Real commitment to democracy is tested when your rivals are under threat. That means speaking up against extrajudicial killings, media intimidation, or attacks on minorities even when the victims are seen as “enemy voters.” If opposition parties only care about rights when their own activists are targeted, they simply rehearse the same selective morality that they condemn in governments.

Without these changes, any new parliament will slowly reproduce the old pathologies. Governments, no matter how popular at birth, will drift towards arrogance once they realise that there is no institutional cost to ignoring parliament. Opposition parties will again discover that they gain more attention from street violence than from committee hearings. The cycle of boycott, crackdown and sham election will reassert itself.



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FILE PHOTO: STAR

than parliamentary debate. This is the first layer of the problem. The second layer is how these boycotts interact with elections themselves.

Bangladesh has already experienced “elections without voters” more than once. In February 1996, disputes over a by-election and demands for a caretaker government led all major opposition parties to boycott, turnout fell to about 21 percent, and the BNP government that emerged survived only 12 days before a caretaker administration was installed. In January 2014, the roles reversed: the Awami League stayed in office without a caretaker system, while BNP and most other opposition parties stayed out of the race. That election saw 153 of 300 seats go uncontested and effectively decided before polling day, with the Awami League winning 127 by default. International observers largely stayed away, and serious research now treats the 2014 polls as neither free nor genuinely

The aftermath of the 2014 election created a new distortion. With BNP and Jamaat out of the race, Jatiya Party stepped into the vacuum as the “main opposition” in parliament. At the same time, its leaders also joined the Awami League-led cabinet and took ministerial portfolios. Analysts and even party documents have described this as a “domesticated opposition”—formally in the opposition benches but functionally a part of the ruling arrangement.

So the country moved from one extreme to another: from boycotting opposition to ornamental opposition.

If we look at the period between 1990 and 2014, excluding the military-backed caretaker interludes, one pattern runs through every parliament. Opposition parties were far more active in press conferences, hartals, road marches, and talk shows than in committees and floor debates. Hartals became the real

security. Once politics moves to the street, governments can frame every confrontation as a law and order problem, rather than a democratic disagreement. Third, boycott politics normalises the idea that parliament is optional. MPs are elected on taxpayers’ money, supported by public allowances, yet they feel no shame in skipping hundreds of sittings.

Now the political script is changing again. Sheikh Hasina was forced out of power following the uprising in 2024. The Awami League was barred from the just-held 13th parliamentary election. A transitional government oversaw a vote that many describe as the most open in a decade and a half. Whoever wins will form the government; whoever loses will sit in opposition.

The temptation will be strong to dust off the old playbook. Already, we hear hints of zero-sum thinking. Tarique Rahman

Can we finally confront gendered violence seriously?



MIND THE GAP

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NOSHIN NAWAL

On January 29, Bangladesh’s interim government finally pushed through two headline-grabbing ordinances: one on preventing sexual harassment in workplaces and educational institutions, and another on preventing domestic violence. On paper, both are designed to do what our legal system has historically struggled to do with conviction: move women’s safety from the “please deal with quietly” folder to the “the state has intervened” folder. That is the good news. However, Bangladesh has historically lacked outcomes. So, a measured assessment must do two things at once. We need to read what has changed in the reported black-letter features and ask whether the architecture is strong enough to withstand implementation avoidance.

Let us begin with the sexual harassment ordinance. The most significant shift is symbolic and legal simultaneously as we deal with codification. For years, the closest thing Bangladesh had to a comprehensive anti-harassment framework was judicial guidelines issued by the High Court Division in Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) v. Government of Bangladesh (2009), treated as binding until replaced by legislation. The guidelines required complaint committees, confidentiality, timelines, and institutional responsibility, and they became the backbone for many workplace policies, at least on letterheads. The ordinance appears to take that idea and attempt to make it legally mandatory. It reportedly defines sexual harassment broadly, covering physical, verbal, mental, suggestive and digital space behaviour, explicitly recognising harassment through online and information technology channels. That matters because modern harassment often happens in the virtual world, and the old legal ecosystem forced survivors to either squeeze the conduct into outdated penal provisions or accept that



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

digital humiliation is somehow not “real” harm.

Institutionally, the ordinance’s committee model mirrors the High Court guidelines’ vision, with sharper operational detail. Complaints can be made verbally, in writing, or online, and investigations must be completed within ninety days of receipt. There is also an emphasis on survivor-centric measures, including confidentiality, safety, mental support, and protection from retaliation. If these safeguards are embedded as enforceable obligations, they address a chronic weakness of earlier practice: committees existing in name only, while complainants are pressured to withdraw, transfer, or “settle”. Another improvement, if implemented, would extend coverage beyond neat, formal institutions.

already moved, at least partially, towards workplace protection through labour reforms. The Bangladesh Labour Act (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, reportedly introduced a framework for committees addressing discrimination, violence, and harassment, aligned with International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 190 (C190). If two separate committee systems now exist (one under labour law and one under the new harassment ordinance), employers and institutions may respond with the classic bureaucratic defence: jurisdiction ping pong. The law will need crystal clear coordination rules so complaints do not get bounced between committees. Additionally, committee-based models can be transformative, but in Bangladesh, they can

also become polite theatre: meetings happen, minutes are written, and everyone waits for the complainant to get tired. The ordinance reportedly includes provisions addressing false complaints. Safeguards against malicious use are legitimate, but if drafted broadly, they can discourage women in a culture that already punishes women for speaking.

Now, the domestic violence ordinance. This one is explicitly framed as replacing the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010. That is a big claim because the 2010 act was itself a landmark, primarily because it acknowledged domestic violence as a distinct harm and built civil protection remedies into the legal system rather than relying solely on general criminal law. What seems improved in the new ordinance, based on official briefings reported in the press, is breadth and speed. The definition is reportedly broadened to cover physical and psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and economic abuse. Economic abuse is where domestic control in Bangladesh often lives—confiscated earnings, blocked access to money, coercive dowry pressure disguised as “family needs”, and deliberate financial dependence. Naming it is a legal gateway to remedies.

The ordinance also appears to tighten timelines. A preliminary investigation must begin within seven days of receiving a complaint in the prescribed form, with a report submitted within thirty days. Compared to the lived pace of domestic violence proceedings, where urgency is routinely downgraded into adjournments, these deadlines signal intent. Moreover, the ordinance reportedly strengthens protective orders, including temporary orders restricting contact or proximity with the perpetrator, followed by permanent orders after investigation. If courts use temporary protection orders early, that can be the difference between prevention and postmortem justice. There is also a more overt survivor support package being described: safe shelter, medical care, legal aid, rehabilitation, counselling, and even a dedicated fund with monitoring committees at the district and upazila level. This is the part that separates just a “law” from a safety system. Many survivors do not remain in violent homes because they love chaos; they remain because there is nowhere else to go, no money, no social support, and no faith that the state will protect them if they leave.

The biggest problem is the choice to pass these laws as ordinances. Ordinances can be necessary in transitional periods, but they also carry fragility: they are vulnerable to political turnover, legislative replacement, and selective enforcement. The durability question matters because violence and harassment prevention is not a six-month pilot; it is a generational recalibration of power. Furthermore, shelters, counselling, emergency protection, and local committees require trained officers, budgets, monitoring, and accountability. Bangladesh’s protection regime has repeatedly suffered from the gap between statutory promises and service delivery. Funds and committees help, but only if they are insulated from patronage and treated as core governance, not charity.

Likewise, survivors’ experience with police and courts is also crucial. Even a perfect ordinance will collide with familiar realities: pressure to “settle”, stigma, unsafe reporting environments, and the risk of retaliation. The new harassment ordinance’s emphasis on confidentiality and anti-retaliation is encouraging. The domestic violence ordinance’s fast-track investigation timelines are also promising. But unless the system builds consequences for non-compliance by institutions and officials, the deadlines may become aspirational. Lastly, harassment frameworks often lean heavily on disciplinary outcomes (warning, suspension, dismissal), while survivors may also want criminal accountability depending on severity. Domestic violence frameworks often centre protection orders, while survivors may also need parallel criminal processes for assault, marital rape-related conduct, dowry violence, or child abuse.

The ordinances will be judged not only by what they create but by how they interact with existing penal and family law pathways without forcing survivors into procedural mazes. The honest verdict, right now, is this: both ordinances look like an attempt to convert long-standing demands and judicial guidance into more structured, time-bound, survivor-oriented systems, with explicit recognition of digital harassment and economic abuse. That is real progress. At the same time, Bangladesh’s history suggests that the hardest part will not be passing the ordinances. It will be making sure that every committee is not a paper committee, every deadline is not a decorative deadline.