

## Bangladesh renews its democratic journey

### BNP's landslide victory marks a turning point in politics

We congratulate the people of Bangladesh for demonstrating the nation's admirable capacity to restore trust in democracy through a peaceful and largely participatory election. We also commend the collective resolve to transform months of public protest into tangible political reform and long-term stability. The electorate has delivered a decisive mandate to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its leader, Tarique Rahman, who, after enduring years of persecution and exile, now carries the responsibility of steering the country towards inclusive prosperity while rekindling hope and energy among the youth.

We also congratulate Tarique Rahman for earning the trust of millions with his pledge to build a government that is accountable to the people and responsive to all citizens, including critics. Despite nearly two decades in exile in London, he demonstrated resilience in keeping his party united following the incarceration of his mother, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. He revitalised the BNP by promoting younger leaders, reorganising grassroots networks, and sustaining party morale amid intense pressure from the then-ruling Awami League under Sheikh Hasina.

He extended support to the student-led anti-quota movement and, following Hasina's fall, backed the formation of an interim administration led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus. While pressing for a time-bound reform agenda and election within 2025, he ultimately agreed to the February timeline proposed by Professor Yunus.

His return on December 25, 2025, after 17 years in exile, removed lingering doubts about the BNP's commitment to participating in the February 12 elections. As one may recall, more than a million supporters gathered in Purbachal to welcome him home. Just days later, the passing of Khaleda Zia drew over two million mourners who gathered to bid farewell to her. These outpourings of support and sympathy for the Zia family reflected the enduring legacy of BNP's founder, former President Ziaur Rahman, and signalled the party's deep-rooted public support.

The BNP's electoral success may also reflect its prior experience in government—experience unmatched by other major contenders in this election. While many senior leaders with such experience may not serve long in demanding ministerial roles, Tarique Rahman's extended stay in the United Kingdom afforded him the opportunity to observe the workings of Westminster-style parliamentary democracy firsthand. His endorsement of the July National Charter for constitutional and democratic reforms, and his call for a "yes" vote in the referendum, suggest a commitment to institutional reform and more inclusive governance.

By Bangladesh's historical standards, a voter turnout approaching 60 percent underscores the strength of the democratic mandate. Claims questioning the inclusiveness of the election therefore lack credible foundation. The absence of the Awami League in this election was largely due to its failure to own up to past crimes, seek forgiveness for such aberrations, and pursue internal reform. The turnout of over 40 percent in its traditional stronghold constituencies also shows that its supporters have largely deserted them by now.

We also commend the democratic spirit displayed by Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, the second-largest seat winner, in conceding defeat. Under the leadership of Dr Shafiqur Rahman, the party ran an energetic and strategically effective campaign, including forging an alliance with the National Citizen Party (NCP), which emerged from the anti-authoritarian uprising of 2024. This partnership may have broadened its appeal and softened longstanding concerns about aspects of its ideological rhetoric. Voters now expect Jamaat-e-Islami to serve as a constructive and responsible opposition, holding the incoming government accountable through parliamentary processes rather than resorting to destabilising street agitation as some opposition parties did in the past.

Recognising the immense logistical challenge of organising voting for 12.77 crore citizens—many casting ballots for the first time—we applaud the Election Commission for maintaining order and neutrality throughout the process. However, its response to the widespread misuse of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and disinformation on social media was insufficient. Strengthening institutional capacity to address digital threats will be essential to safeguarding future electoral integrity, including in upcoming elections of local government bodies as well as parliamentary by-elections.

The professionalism of the armed forces, led by General Waker-Uz-Zaman, and the police in ensuring a peaceful campaign and voting process is also commendable. Their vigilance and timely interventions prevented isolated incidents from escalating. With the transition to an elected government now underway, we hope their role in supporting civilian authorities concludes with pride and dignity.

Finally, we wish for a smooth and seamless transfer of power. The nation looks forward to the new government under Tarique Rahman focusing on the urgent tasks of governance, reform, and national renewal—aspirations long held by the people of Bangladesh. We also hope that the new ruling party would keep in mind the extra burden of having super majority in parliament that, as we know from experience, may very well cause arrogance and democratic backsliding.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



## YouTube registered

On this day in 2005, Steve Chen, Chad Hurley, and Jawed Karim registered YouTube, a website for sharing videos. More than a year later, it was acquired by Google for \$1.65 billion in stock.

# V for Victory, V for Valentine: A mandate is not a licence



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza  
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

It's perhaps divine timing that V-Day falls just after the confirmation of election results, marked by the public's overwhelming support for the party at the top and the strengthening of support bases for the parties in second place. So, it's a day of victory for BNP, which has been out of power for 20 years, and a day of vindication for Jamaat and its ancillary organisations, which strategically survived the previous regime and emerged as a formidable force. It's also a valiant day for first-time voters, who felt compelled to choose a progressive vision without succumbing to conservatism. There is much to celebrate for a nation that has shown maturity in exercising its voting rights without any violence.

The interim government and the security forces deserve all the credit for delivering a fair, credible election to pave the way for democratic renewal. If we look at the parties, during the last 18 months, grassroots BNP often succumbed to the old political ways of extortion, vendetta, and aggression, but the centre appeared restrained and future-focused, and it worked at the ballot box. The agents of change, the new generation of National Citizen Party (NCP), stirred hope but only to have a late reckoning that they do not have the nationwide support structure to become a formidable force. They aligned with Jamaat-e-Islami, which proved to be the most strategic of the lot. But their combined strategies have still fallen short. Although the BNP's "landslide" victory might not show it, this electoral race has been a wake up call for both the winners and the wider political class.

These issues move this Valentine's Day away from its typical paraphernalia, like cards, flowers and velvet hearts. A day that celebrates hearts to attain harmony and hope appears before us as a rupture, in the coinage of Slavoj Žižek. For the Slovene political thinker, love is violent because it denies accepting the world as it is. The logic of love is irrational. You have to believe that you are in love. Love is a dangerous commitment; it chooses and moves beyond inertia and cynicism, resulting

in transformation.

So, today, we can wave two powerful symbols in one gesture: "V for Victory" and "V for Valentine." "Victory" refers to the decisive mandate delivered by the public; "Valentine" because it celebrates love in a unique way that has interrupted the logic of choosing someone. The influence that BNP currently holds is not just based on sentiment. It is also a choice under uncertainty. To many, by publicly questioning women's leadership or suggesting curtailing work hours for women, Jamaat displayed the "risk" of its version of democracy. The



The nation exercised its voting rights in a festive mood after almost two decades.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

interviews given by the Jamaat chief and several others probably came as a shock even for the NCP, their electoral ally.

NCP's female candidates, who deflected from the party and ran the election independently, exposed the rift within. The tally of votes suggests that some of these candidates would have won the election if they had competed from a single platform. BNP became a beneficiary, but it knows that the public mood is volatile. A generation that has not spared Awami League

for its transgressions will carefully monitor its actions, too. So, the love shown for BNP is not unconditional. It must perform to retain and solidify this love and be wary of post-uprising voters whose political consciousness was shaped in a climate of protest, social media activism, and distrust of institutional continuity. This is a cohort of voters who expect novelty and were willing to give a chance to youth parties, ideological outsiders, and anti-dynastic formations. They are not blindly enchanted by the word "change;" they will examine its substance.

NCP's underperformance is also a warning sign that moral symbolism alone does not secure or retain trust. The scandals of some leaders from the interim government dented the moral high ground they claimed as the authentic voice of generational politics. However, once these leaders aligned themselves with Jamaat, they ventured into an area of ideological ambiguity, a move that voters rejected.

voters are not monolithically secular. Many value religious identity, but there is a qualitative difference between religious identity and restrictive governance. For a country that had more than three decades of female leadership, the lived reality of our politics can be contained neither within ideological nor secular camps. For a developing country that has its economic cushion tied to women workers, the issue became existential across the gender divide. Voting, then, can be read as a refusal of extremes. The V for verdict is not for revolutionary rupture or doctrinal rigidity, but governability. Most voters have rejected ambiguity and chosen to support an established order that can be held accountable. Hints of jurisprudential reservation towards women's top leadership triggered anxiety, not because voters were anti-religion, but because the suggestion disrupted an established symbolic order. The new breed of educated, digitally literate, economically aspirational voters view professional and political advancement as intertwined with gender equality. They have given a verdict for fidelity to the future, not nostalgia for orthodoxy.

Let us address the other V word: violence. This election has demonstrated that even in a polarised landscape, electoral competition need not descend into violence and chaos. That alone is a civic milestone. Maybe the absence of Awami League eased the tension or caused restraint within the participants who were united against the former regime. The heavy presence of the armed forces also acted as a deterrent. But if BNP treats this peaceful tide as entitlement rather than responsibility, it will only invite ruptures. The same goes for the opposition parties. They must recognise that the electorate's support or restraint is conditional. It will endure only if politics and governance in the coming days remain anchored in accountability and a collective refusal to return to the old ways.

Voters have demonstrated relative maturity in their voting behaviours. So, while our leaders show "V for Victory" on this Valentine's Day, they need to be equally alert to the electorate's commitment to a democratic relationship that refuses both violence and regression. This day is not one to romanticise politics but to discipline it. And perhaps that is the most radical form of love available to a democracy emerging from turbulence: not passion, but responsibility.

# How BNP can align victory with public aspirations



Dr Selim Raihan  
is professor of economics at Dhaka University  
and executive director at the South Asian  
Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem). He can  
be reached at selimraihan@gmail.com.

SELIM RAIHAN

Congratulations to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on its sweeping victory in the general elections. This result signifies more than a mere electoral outcome. It marks a telling change in our political landscape. By winning over 200 seats, the BNP now holds a clear parliamentary majority. This provides them an opportunity to rule without the unstable coalitions or potential legislative standstill. Such a mandate, if exercised with care and foresight, can restore a sense of policy continuity. It can also help strengthen public institutions and ease the confrontational political climate that has persisted in recent years. Yet the litmus test for stability will lie not solely in the numbers. That will depend on whether the BNP decides to govern democratically, through consultations, with input from diverse quarters, and by constructively working with political rivals.

This victory also appears to reflect a broader public rejection of divisive political narratives—particularly the use of religion as a tool of propaganda, the distortion of the historical legacy of 1971, and rhetoric that demeaned or humiliated women in public discourse. It seems many voters have signalled that they want politics to focus on governance, economic opportunity, and dignity rather than ideological

plotting. If the BNP realises this and actively encourages inclusive and respectful political engagement, it might even steer the tone of national politics in a more positive direction.

Will this majority bring lasting stability? A commanding majority creates space for swift decision-making and allows reforms to move forward without constant obstruction. In the short term, this may bring a degree of political calm and administrative clarity. Yet deeper and more lasting stability will require something more difficult—rebuilding trust. Confidence in electoral institutions must be strengthened, the rule of law must be applied consistently and fairly, and political power must be exercised without a spirit of retaliation. Bangladesh's past offers an important lesson—periods of dominant political control have not always translated into durable stability; instead, when power is used without consensus-building, polarisation often deepens. The present moment, therefore, carries both promise and risk. If BNP opts for dialogue instead of domination, reform in place of repression, and reconciliation rather than confrontation, this majority can initiate a democratic political cycle. Otherwise, instability may persist beneath a surface appearance of order.

Even under auspicious political circumstances, economic stabilisation usually doesn't occur overnight. Can BNP quickly stabilise the economy? Bangladesh's economy is dogged by a series of complex structural pressures. Inflation continues to run high and strain households. Foreign reserves are still improving, but need to be carefully managed. Governance deficiencies and bad loans plague the banking sector. The domestic investment environment is constrained by heightened uncertainty, rising business costs, and an unsatisfactory law-and-order situation. External debt repayments and global economic uncertainty weigh heavily on the balance.

A secure parliamentary mandate allows the BNP to take strong measures like practising fiscal discipline, tightening financial regulation, and dealing with long-standing anomalies in the investment environment. But rebuilding that economic confidence is about more than policy statements. Investors, businesses, and citizens look for consistency, predictability, and signals that rules will not shift abruptly with the political winds. Early steps may improve market sentiment, especially if they demonstrate seriousness and coherence. But lasting stability will take a calm political environment and years of gradual reforms credibly implemented by trustworthy institutions.

BNP's electoral victory also presents a deeper opportunity. It provides the opportunity not just for political change but also for institutional renewal. The public's aspirations that formed in the run-up to and the aftermath of July 2024 reflected citizens' calls for accountability. They demanded fairness and sought

dignity in governance. Many wanted institutions that serve the public interest rather than partisan agendas.

Meeting these expectations will require meaningful reforms across key pillars of the state. The civil service must be strengthened with professionalism and merit-based advancement. Appointments should reflect competence rather than political loyalty to help restore confidence in administrative neutrality. Parliament, too, must reclaim its role as a place of genuine debate and oversight to reduce political tensions and enhance democratic legitimacy. The judiciary's independence must be protected, and legal processes must remain fair, transparent, and free from political influence. Without these deeper reforms, even a powerful electoral mandate may prove temporary. With them, it could become the foundation for lasting democratic stability.

Public expectations, meanwhile, remain high. There is both hope and caution. International partners will also be observing closely. Their confidence will depend not only on economic policy but on the overall direction of governance. The early actions of the new government will matter greatly. The first months in office often shape perceptions that endure far longer. They can signal a commitment to reform and reconciliation. The electoral mandate is unquestionably strong. Yet its true significance will be determined by how it is used. This moment holds the potential to become a turning point that strengthens democratic institutions and economic resilience. Whether it becomes transformative or simply transitional will depend on the choices made now.