

## REFLECTIONS ON 13TH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

The much-awaited national election concluded with minimal disruptions despite high stakes in most of the constituencies. BNP saw a sweeping victory, while Jamaat-e-Islami and its allies won 77 seats. The referendum question, too, was largely answered in the affirmative by voters. We asked experts for their thoughts on the election and the road ahead.

### A test of democratic renewal



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On Thursday, Bangladesh held an acceptable election after 18 years, one in which participation was not curtailed by the state itself. It was not an all-inclusive contest, seeing as the Awami League could not take part in it. However, the circumstances that led to the AL's absence were of its own making. In the elections of 2014, 2018, and 2024, coercive, manipulative, and strategic tactics employed by the AL kept its rivals largely out of the race. In continuity with that political trajectory, compounded by the July 2024 uprising that led to its ouster, Awami League now finds itself excluded from the process it once controlled.

Despite its absence in this election, AL still retains a significant support base. That may partly explain why the voter turnout did not reach the level many had anticipated, particularly since this election was relatively peaceful compared to the others in recent years. Even though there were some incidents beforehand, on polling day, there were no reports of widespread violence, no major clashes, and no atmosphere of terror. People who wanted to vote were largely able to do so. There were minor complaints, but no major disruptions.

The situation before the election, however, was marked by uncertainty. During Sheikh Hasina's 15-plus years in power, there had effectively been no credible elections. Under the interim government that was formed following Hasina's ouster, we witnessed the

assertiveness of religious and right-wing hardliners. Over the past year and a half, there have been incidents of vandalism, intimidation, and violence. Women, members of minority communities, and cultural activists felt increasingly vulnerable. Cultural activities such as music, theatre, and folk performances came under attack and declined across the country.

In that context, this election raised a fundamental question about the direction the country would take. Many feared it was heading towards deeper instability. We are now on the verge of getting an elected government and moving away from an unaccountable mode of governance.

Over the last 18 months, the interim administration made several decisions without adequate transparency. Just two days before the election, it signed a trade agreement with the United States that many view as risky for Bangladesh's future. It also made financial allocation decisions for which no one appears willing to take responsibility. Such opaque decision-making cannot continue. Under an elected government, there must be parliamentary scrutiny and public accountability. A government elected through people's vote must remain answerable to the people.

However, our experience with past governments that won overwhelming majority in parliament has not been reassuring. In this election, the BNP has

secured more than two-thirds majority. We have seen similar moments before. In 2001, the BNP-led alliance won an overwhelming majority. In 2008, the Awami League-led alliance did the same. In both cases, the government's conduct raised concerns. The BNP-led government took several undemocratic decisions. The Awami League, after 2008, amended the constitution in ways that many believe weakened democratic balance in the country. A large parliamentary majority creates an opportunity for reform, but also the temptation to centralise power and sideline dissent.

We hope history will not repeat itself this time. BNP must reflect on its past. Allegations of extortion, land grabbing, and political patronage must not resurface. The party

must ensure that the minority communities feel secure and long-standing concerns about their safety are addressed. This overwhelming mandate presents a historic opportunity that should not be squandered.

There are several steps the new government should take immediately.

First, the trial of the killings during the July uprising must proceed fairly. Justice must not become another arena for political manipulation. Writers, journalists, lawyers and others who were detained under dubious charges should be granted bail or released where appropriate.

Second, the government should publish a white paper on human rights violations and anti-public interest decisions taken during the interim period. Attacks on minorities,

violence against women, vandalism of shrines, attacks on media houses, mob violence, and online abuse demand investigation. The public deserves to know who was responsible and why action was not taken.

Third, international agreements signed over the years with China, India, the US, Russia and Japan must be reviewed transparently. Some of these may create long-term financial and security risks. If any of them appear to be in conflict with national interests, they should be reconsidered and those responsible should be held accountable.

Fourth, cultural life must be revived. Theatre productions, music events, and other artistic activities have declined under pressure and intimidation in recent times. A democratic society cannot flourish without vibrant cultural expression.

Beyond these steps, structural reforms are essential. Previous commissions, including those on media and women workers, should be taken seriously. New commissions on education, healthcare, rivers and agriculture should be formed, and policy reform must be evidence-based. Accountability must be ensured and justice must be served for the crimes committed by the autocratic regime.

Above all, the government must cultivate a democratic culture that tolerates criticism and respects diversity. Dissent and cultural plurality must not be treated as threats. Politicised and unqualified appointments made at universities and public institutions must be reviewed and corrected where necessary.

Ultimately, the direction of the elected government will be determined in its first days in office. Its early actions will shape public trust and define its tenure. With a decisive mandate comes immense responsibility. Whether this moment becomes a turning point towards democratic transformation or another missed opportunity now rests in the hands of those elected.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

'The relatively calm environment this election encouraged people to vote.'

### A landmark election with room for improvement



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MD ABDUL ALIM

I had the opportunity to observe around 15 polling centres on election day, beginning early in Dhaka-14 before polling officially started at 7:30am. By 7:15am, nearly 200 voters were already waiting in a queue outside which grew to about 300 within 45 minutes—it was quite striking to notice.

What stood out immediately was the peaceful atmosphere. Voters were casting their ballots themselves, freely and without interference. I also noticed an exceptionally heavy presence of security forces, more than I had ever seen at polling centres during previous elections. It was a strong and coordinated deployment.

Later, I visited several centres in Dhaka-13 where voters' presence was comparatively

low, still significant, and voting looked peaceful and orderly. In some polling centres, I observed two voting booths. Since there were two ballots this time—one for the candidates and another for the referendum—the arrangement helped ensure voting was completed within the stipulated time. Furthermore, the entire process—voter identification, the application of indelible ink, and the issuance of ballot papers—was carried out properly by the temporary polling officials. I did not witness any irregularities.

Although there had been widespread rumours that violence would erupt and that law and order would deteriorate on election day, what we observed on the ground told a different story. In my opinion, this election

witnessed a remarkable presence of law enforcement agencies—unlike any other in Bangladesh's history. The Bangladesh Army, which was given magistracy power, played a crucial role in building public confidence. In previous elections, the military had sometimes been deployed with such authority, but that changed before the 2014 election. Later, the Election Reform Commission recommended restoring magistracy power to the armed forces during elections, which was accepted. The army's patrols of constituencies and visible presence offered reassurance, since in Bangladesh, people still place considerable trust in the military as an institution. Their involvement helped counter the rumours and eased anxieties.

While there were some isolated incidents of violence and intimidation, those did not impact the overall outcome. People were mostly able to cast their ballots independently. Taken together, this was a peaceful and credible election.

Of course, voter turnout—59.44 percent—has been lower compared to some past elections, particularly the 2008 election, which was 87.13 percent. However, there were two major challenges this time. First, in Bangladesh, major political parties have

established vote banks. Many voters affiliated with a party are unlikely to vote outside that party line. It appears that a portion of the Awami League's traditional vote bank did not turn up this time. That naturally affected turnout.

Second, the persistent rumours about possible violence not only discouraged some voters from going to polling centres, but also created genuine fear among segments of the electorate. Had those rumours not existed, turnout might have been higher.

Still, voter turnout of around 60 percent in Bangladesh cannot be used to raise questions about election credibility. It is because voter turnout, even in the 1991 election—one of the widely considered free and fair polls in the country's history—was about 55 percent. Moreover, the turnout this time is within an internationally acceptable range.

Regarding the allegations of improper vote counting, I did not see any lack of transparency when I personally observed the counting process in some centres. My colleagues who monitored other centres shared similar feedback. Counting took place in the presence of observers, polling agents, and journalists. Transparency was ensured.

Unfortunately, in our political culture,

even a good election is often followed by allegations. Many of these are political statements rather than substantiated claims. That said, any complaint must be investigated. One of the key features of a credible election is that grievances are formally examined and findings are communicated to the public.

Encouragingly, we have seen instances where candidates have accepted results and congratulated winners. Such gestures contribute to democratic maturity.

Although some people have described this as the best election in our history, I would take a slightly more measured position. This was one of the best elections in Bangladesh's history, given the adverse conditions, the climate of uncertainty, and the fears of violence. However, we cannot be complacent. This election should be seen as a starting point, the beginning of institutionalising the electoral process in Bangladesh. We must identify shortcomings, define areas for improvement, and learn from them. The Election Reform Commission proposed around 250 recommendations. Some of these have been incorporated into revised laws, but many remain unaddressed. The task now is to carry forward those reforms and begin preparing for the next election from today.

### An election marked by lack of women's representation



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The 13th national election on Thursday was fair, and there was significant participation. There were reports of some issues across the country, but most of them were administrative and procedural in nature. These problems could have been avoided had the Election Commission been more professional. Still, the scale of violence and other worrying incidents was far smaller than in many previous elections, which came as a major relief.

The night before polling day was tense. Allegations circulated about ballots being cast in advance and other irregularities. Those claims created anxiety. However, law enforcement agencies responded quickly; their visible and prompt action helped prevent the situation from escalating. As a result, the fear of widespread violence or

large-scale disruption did not materialise.

In fact, the relatively calm environment encouraged people to vote, particularly in the morning. When voters saw that polling stations were peaceful and orderly, they felt reassured enough to come out and cast their ballots.

The absence of the Awami League did affect voter enthusiasm. Many of its supporters felt less motivated to participate. Some did not vote out of fear of retaliation because they had been openly affiliated with the party. Some are currently outside the country, having fled amid political developments. Then there are silent supporters—those who are not publicly vocal about their allegiance. Some of them did vote, which is why the turnout was nearly 60 percent.

One major area of concern in this election

was women's representation. I have been writing about this for a long time. In the July National Charter, parties promised to nominate at least five percent women candidates. Yet, none of the 30 political parties that participated in the consensus-building process fulfilled that commitment. They broke their promise well before voting began. The highest nomination rate was only a little over four percent.

Political parties should be ashamed of such a poor showing when it comes to women's representation. This failure is especially painful because women were central to the July uprising. Their participation helped create the political space in which these parties were able to contest the election. Yet, their voices and presence in the uprising have not translated into institutional or formal political representation.

This backsliding is particularly troubling given Bangladesh's achievements over the past five decades. The country has performed well on several gender and development indicators. The country has often been described as a champion of women's empowerment in the region. It once ranked highest in South Asia on the Gender Parity Index for political participation.

But over the last year and a half, with no parliament and a cabinet that included

only three women, the country was already at risk of slipping. Now, with only seven women elected to parliament—alongside the prospect of around 50 reserved seats—the overall picture remains discouraging. Bangladesh is backsliding in terms of gender parity in political participation and leadership. That is deeply concerning.

As for expectations from the new government, the first and most urgent one is that its celebrations should not incite violence. Historically, Bangladesh has seen episodes of post-election violence, often targeting those who lost, as well as marginalised communities, and women and children. The country cannot afford a repeat of that pattern. The immediate priority must be to ensure peace and protection of vulnerable groups.

The new government must also ensure that law and order are upheld across the country. Beyond that, it must honour the commitments it made in its manifesto, particularly regarding women's empowerment. Promises are easy to make during campaigns; what matters now is how they are implemented. There must be institutional measures that make it possible for women not only to enter politics but to sustain meaningful roles within it.

There are considerable uncertainties as

well. There were promises in the July charter and pledges in the party manifesto, and in some cases, they are in conflict. There is confusion about how these commitments will be reconciled. What the country needs is a clear pathway to democracy and a clear framework for protecting citizens' rights. There must also be clarity on how plans for women's financial empowerment will translate into genuine decision-making power.

For the opposition parties, the results are, in some ways, already a success. Few expected Jamaat-e-Islami to secure as many seats as it has. This appears to be the highest number of seats it has ever won in parliament, often by narrow margins in various constituencies. The NCP, a party that is barely a year old, has also secured several seats. For them, this is already a significant achievement.

The expectation now is that they will act as responsible opposition parties. Criticism for its own sake does not strengthen democracy. What is needed is constructive engagement. They should work with the government to ensure a smooth democratic transition and avoid creating unnecessary obstacles. The shared goal must be to safeguard the country's democratic journey and ensure that all citizens' rights are protected.