



A man carries flowers at a market ahead of Valentine's Day in Manila yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## BNP's long march back to power

FROM PAGE 1

BNP and Jamaat's paths have long been intertwined. Once allies, they shared power and took to the streets together against the Awami League government.

Their partnership reached its peak in 2001, when the four party alliance swept to power with a two-thirds majority, bringing two Jamaat leaders into BNP's cabinet. Both were later hanged for war crimes.

However, the 2024 mass uprising changed everything.

The political terrain, in the absence of the Awami League, shifted as the two parties became rivals in the electoral arena in the election that paved the way for democratic transition following the uprising.

Dhaka University Political Science Professor Sabbir Ahmed and Jahangirnagar University Government and Politics Professor Al Masud Hasanuzzaman both emphasised that the BNP endured 17 years of repression and hardship.

This long period of struggle generated a strong sense of public sympathy toward the party. The recent passing of its long-time leader Khaleda Zia further deepened that sympathy, creating a favourable environment for the BNP in the election.

Speaking to the Daily Star, Sabbir said, "Although there were negative perceptions about the BNP's involvement in extortion after August 5, Tarique Rahman's return to Bangladesh had a cooling effect. His presence restrained some of the party's controversial elements, while also calming the media hype that had built up."

According to the unofficial results declared by the Election Commission in 297 seats, the BNP alone won 209.

Its allies Ganosambhati Andolan, Bangladesh Jatiya Party and Gono Odhikar Parishad won one seat each.

Jamaat secured wins in 68 seats, while its allies National Citizen Party bagged six, Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis two, and Khelafat Majlis one.

Islami Andolan Bangladesh won only one seat, while independent candidates secured seven seats.

The BNP's journey back to power has been arduous.

Founded by Ziaur Rahman in 1978, the party burst into the scene with a sweeping victory in 1979, winning 207 seats. Over the decades, it alternated between electoral triumphs and boycotts – refusing to contest the 1986 and 1988 polls, returning to power in 1991, winning a short-lived two-thirds majority in February 1996, and then losing in June of the same year.

Its alliance with Jamaat in 2001 brought another landslide, but the momentum faded with a poor showing in 2008. Boycotts in 2014 and 2024 kept the BNP out of the race, while its participation in 2018 was overshadowed by allegations of ballot-stuffing by the Awami League, which firmly held the reins of power.

Yesterday's victory finally ended its longest stretch out of power and restored its place at the helm.

Both Sabbir Ahmed and Al Masud Hasanuzzaman noted that Tarique's leadership during this critical phase provided the party with much-needed guidance. His campaign style was interactive and engaging, breaking away from the traditional one-way speeches of political leaders.

Another factor was the absence of the Awami League from the electoral field, which made the BNP's path to victory easier.

The professors argued that the BNP's manifesto, along with its earlier 31-point reform proposals, attracted voters by promising governance reforms and institutional restructuring. The July Charter and BNP's notes of dissent also signalled their reformist stance, which they are likely to pursue in parliament now that they have a public mandate.

Hasanuzzaman said the BNP's election manifesto managed to attract the electorate by offering a variety of commitments. "Earlier, its 31-point programme had laid out a broad framework of reform proposals. Following that, their emphasis on reform commissions further strengthened their position. Together, these elements contributed to a favourable verdict from the voters

in support of the BNP. In summation, its success was crafted through these combined efforts."

Banned after independence for collaborating with Pakistan, Jamaat was revived in 1976 and contested elections under different banners before re-emerging under its own name in 1986, winning 10 seats.

Its best performance until now came in 1991, with 18 seats and 12.13 percent of the popular vote.

The party bagged three seats in June 1996. In the next election in 2001, it won 17 seats, and also got into the cabinet. It won only two seats in 2008.

The party's fortunes fluctuated in subsequent elections, and in 2013 its registration was cancelled through a High Court order.

Yet, Jamaat remained a force in street politics and alliances, even contesting the 2018 polls under BNP's symbol while being banned officially.

Thursday's breakthrough marked its beginning as a formidable opposition.

The BNP-Jamaat alliance, once a four-party bloc, expanded into a 20-party combine in 2012 but dissolved in 2022 after BNP distanced itself.

Despite this, both parties played significant roles in the mass uprising of 2024, which reshaped Bangladesh's political order.

Yesterday's results now bring them back into prominence – though not as partners, but as rivals whose resurgence will define the contours of Bangladesh's democracy in the years ahead.

According to Sabbir, Jamaat's rise was the result of long-term preparation and a shift in its ideological positioning.

"Jamaat moved away from rigid conservatism towards a more moderate stance, which increased their acceptability. Their nomination strategy was calculated, even including minority candidates, though they failed to nominate women. Jamaat's urban influence has grown, and in some constituencies, they benefited from the BNP's rebel candidates."

## World leaders congratulate the BNP

FROM PAGE 1

I congratulated him on the remarkable victory in the Bangladesh elections," Modi posted on X.

He said he conveyed his best wishes and support in his endeavour to fulfil the aspirations of the people of Bangladesh.

"As two close neighbours with deep-rooted historical and cultural ties, I reaffirmed India's continued commitment to the peace, progress, and prosperity of both our peoples."

In an earlier post on X, Modi said this victory shows the trust of the people of Bangladesh in the leadership of Tarique Rahman.

India will continue to stand in support of a democratic, progressive and inclusive Bangladesh, he said.

Marco Rubio, the US Secretary of State, also congratulated the BNP, Tarique and the people of Bangladesh.

"The US looks forward to working with the newly elected government to advance prosperity and the security of the region," he posted on X.

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said the Bangladeshi people, having navigated a period of extraordinary challenges, have spoken clearly at the ballot box, which is a triumph of democracy.

In a post on X, he also appreciated Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus for his stewardship during this important transition and for ensuring a smooth democratic process.

"Malaysia looks forward to working with the new Bangladeshi leadership to bring new energy to our bilateral ties. I join Malaysians in extending our warmest regards to the people of Bangladesh," he said.

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari reaffirmed his country's strong support for democratic partnership and shared progress ahead, while Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said he looks forward to working closely

with the new Bangladesh leadership to further strengthen the historic, brotherly multifaceted bilateral relations and advance shared goals of peace, stability and development in South Asia and beyond.

Tarique and Shehbaz also spoke over the phone last night. The latter extended an invitation to Tarique to visit Pakistan; the invitation was reciprocated by Tarique, according to a press release from Shahbaz's press wing.

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake extended best wishes to the people of Bangladesh for reaffirming their faith in democracy, while congratulating Tarique on leading the BNP in these elections.

"The results reflect the trust placed in @trahmanbnp. I look forward to strengthening ties between our two nations," he posted on X.

Nepalese Prime Minister Sushila Karki said the BNP's victory in the polls is remarkable and that she looks forward to working closely with Tarique to strengthen the neighbourly ties and consolidate cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

Maldive President Mohamed Muizzu extended warm regards to Tarique and expressed wishes to work closely to further advance and deepen the longstanding friendship and cooperation between the Maldives and Bangladesh.

"I am confident that our partnership will continue to grow in scope and strength in the years ahead."

Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay said: "This resounding mandate reflects the confidence of the people of Bangladesh in your [Tarique] leadership. I look forward to strengthening the warm friendship between Bhutan and Bangladesh."

In her congratulatory post, Seema Malhotra, UK parliamentary under-secretary of state, said the UK is

ready to work together on growth, migration, climate and security, building a future that reflects the hopes of the Bangladeshi people.

US Ambassador to Bangladesh Brent Christensen congratulated the people of Bangladesh on a successful election and the BNP and Tarique on the historic victory.

"The United States looks forward to working with you to realize shared goals of prosperity and security for both our countries," he posted on X.

China noted that Bangladesh had a steady and smooth general election and congratulated the BNP and Tarique.

In a statement, the Chinese embassy in Dhaka said China looks forward to working together with the new government of Bangladesh and writing new chapters of China-Bangladesh relations.

During a press briefing in Beijing, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said China supports Bangladesh in advancing its domestic political agenda and stands ready to work with Bangladesh to carry forward the time-honoured friendship, deepen high-quality Belt and Road cooperation and practical cooperation in various areas and further strengthen the China-Bangladesh comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership.

In a statement, the UK High Commission in Bangladesh congratulated Tarique and the BNP on his election victory, and to the people of Bangladesh as the country enters a new chapter.

"We look forward to working together on our shared priorities: economic growth, migration, climate and security," it added.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and Indian National Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge also extended their congratulations to Tarique.

## 12 Italians convicted for trying to revive Fascist party

AFP, Rome

Twelve members of Italy's fringe group CasaPound have been jailed for seeking to revive the Fascist Party, which ruled from 1922 to 1943 under dictator Benito Mussolini.

It is the first time a law which bans the "reorganisation of the dissolved Fascist party", has been applied to the neo-fascist group, the Repubblica daily said yesterday.

The case dates to 2018, when CasaPound members attacked people who attended a protest against Matteo Salvini, head of the anti-immigrant League party and then interior minister.

All defendants were convicted on Wednesday by a court in Bari in southern Italy and given 18 months in jail.

Seven were also sentenced to 12 months for assault.

Ely Schlein, head of the centre-left opposition Democratic Party, called on Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's hard-right government to ban the group.

"Now that there's a ruling that establishes it, the government has no choice but to do what we've been asking of it for a long time: dissolve CasaPound, dissolve neo-fascist organisations as laid out in the constitution," she said.

CasaPound, which is based in Rome, takes its name from Ezra Pound, the modernist American poet who collaborated with Fascist Italy during World War II.

In parliamentary elections in 2013 and 2018, the group won less than one percent of the vote. It subsequently decided not to contest polls.

CasaPound members have been filmed making the Fascist salute in Rome, an action that current Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi condemned in 2024 as "contrary to our democratic culture".

However, he said at the time that it was complicated to ban such groups, saying the law only allowed for this in very limited circumstances.

Meloni's far-right Brothers of Italy party has its roots in the MSI, a party founded by supporters of Mussolini after World War II.

However, the prime minister has condemned Fascism and acknowledged Fascist Italy's complicity in the Holocaust.

## Global media

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enter the workforce each year, though youth unemployment already stands at 13.5 percent. Declining foreign reserves have led to import restrictions that undermine energy supplies and the vital manufacturing industry.

Time also identified managing Islamism a challenge for the BNP.

Other than the BNP, the other main beneficiary of Thursday's election is Jamaat e-Islami, which, along with its alliance partners, bagged 77 seats.

While Jamaat has the goal of Shari'a law in its party constitution, it moderated its more radical rhetoric, focusing on social welfare and rebranding itself as "anti-fascist".

"However, critics say a leopard can't change its spots. Jamaat will remain a significant force in the country going forward," it added.

British daily Guardian said the election was the "first truly competitive vote in the country in years" and the largely peaceful nature of polling day was seen as a huge step forward for the country.

The new government, however, faces an uphill task of restoring democracy, law and order and economic growth to the country.

"To some, the return of the BNP – a dynastic party whose previous regime was riddled with rampant corruption – did not represent the spirit of reform and hunger for change that had driven the student-led uprising against Hasina," it said.

The media outlets also highlighted the congratulations coming from foreign countries, including India, Pakistan, the US and China, while also identifies repairing relation with India as a challenge.

India's state news agency PTI reported that the BNP thanked Indian Prime Minister Modi for congratulating Tarique and believes that under the prime minister-elect's leadership, the relationship between these two countries will be strengthened.

## 'New world disorder' threatens co-op

Says UN climate chief

AFP, Istanbul

The UN's climate chief on Thursday urged countries to unite against an "unprecedented threat" to international cooperation from fossil fuel forces – issuing the appeal as US President Donald Trump rattles the global order.

Simon Stiell, the head of the United Nations climate body, spoke in Istanbul as Turkey prepares to host the COP31 climate summit on its Mediterranean coast later this year, with Australia leading the negotiations.

"COP31 in Antalya will take place in extraordinary times. We find ourselves in a new world disorder," Stiell said in an address alongside the president-designate of COP31, Turkish environment minister Murat Kurum.

"This is a period of instability and insecurity. Of strong arms and trade wars. The very concept of international cooperation is under attack," he said.

He did not name any countries but his plea comes as climate action is competing with concerns over security and economic growth around the world.

Trump has championed oil, gas and coal while moving to withdraw the United States from the UN's bedrock climate treaty after pulling out of the Paris Agreement, the landmark deal reached in 2015 on curbing global warming.

Stiell said in a news conference that the "door remains open" to welcoming the United States back to the fold.

The American leader, who has called global warming a "hoax",

revoked on Thursday a landmark scientific finding that underpins US regulations aimed at curbing planet-warming pollution.

Trump has also rattled European allies with his desire to acquire Greenland, as shrinking Arctic sea ice is turning the region into a strategic battleground.

Other nations have resisted moving away from oil, gas and coal.

The COP30 summit in Brazil late last year ended with a modest deal that lacked any explicit mention of fossil fuels amid opposition from oil giants such as Saudi Arabia, coal producer India and others.

The United States, the world's top economy and second-biggest polluter after China, shunned COP30.

The last three years have been the hottest globally on record, driven by rising greenhouse gas emissions that are causing climate change.

Stiell warned that international climate cooperation was "under unprecedented threat: from those determined to use their power to defy economic and scientific logic, and increase dependence on polluting coal, oil and gas".

"Those forces are undeniably strong. But they need not prevail. There is a clear alternative to this chaos and regression," he said.

"And that is countries standing together, building on all we have achieved to date, to make it (international global cooperation) go further and faster."

He noted that investment in clean energy was more than double that of fossil fuels last year, while renewables overtook coal as the top electricity source.

## Trump ends immigration crackdown in Minnesota

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's pointman on Thursday announced the end of an aggressive immigration operation in Minnesota that triggered large protests and nationwide outrage following the killing of two US citizens.

Thousands of federal agents including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers conducted weeks of sweeping raids and arrests in what the administration claims were targeted missions against criminals.

"I have proposed and President Trump has concurred that this surge operation conclude," Trump official Tom Homan told a briefing outside Minneapolis. "A significant drawdown has already been underway this week and will continue through the next week."

The operation sparked tense demonstrations in the Minneapolis area, and the fatal separate shootings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti last

month led to a wave of criticism.

Homan raised the prospect that the officers would move to another location but gave no details, and speculation is rife about which city might be targeted next.

"In the next week, we're going to deploy the officers here on detail, back to their home stations or other areas of the country where they are needed. But we're going to continue to enforce immigration law," he said.

Campaigning against illegal immigration helped Trump get elected in 2024, but daily videos from Minnesota of violent masked agents, and multiple reports of people being targeted on flimsy evidence, helped send the president's approval ratings plummeting.

The case of Liam Conejo Ramos, five, who was detained on January 20, also stoked anger.

Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey said the ICE operation in his city "had been catastrophic for our neighbors and businesses, and now it's time for a great comeback."

## 'Yes' wins but ...

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Contacted, Election Commissioner Abdur Rahmani Masud said the commission would look into the matter.

EC data show that although the referendum secured majority support nationwide, the "No" vote won in 11 constituencies – Jhenidah-1, Khulna-1, Gopalganj-1, Gopalganj-2, Gopalganj-3, Sunamganj-2, Chattogram-12, Chattogram-13, Khagrachhari, Rangamati and Bandarban.

The three Gopalganj constituencies recorded clear defeats for the proposal.

In Gopalganj-1, "No" got 1,28,298 votes, far ahead of the 54,716 votes cast for "Yes".

In Gopalganj-2, "No" received 1,07,290 votes, while "Yes" obtained 34,302.

In Gopalganj-3, "No" led with 93,368 votes against 33,498 for "Yes". The proposal was also rejected in Chattogram-12, Chattogram-13, Khagrachhari, Rangamati and Bandarban, where "No" secured more votes than "Yes".

Meanwhile, many ordinary people in the hills remain unclear about the implications of voting "Yes" or "No" in the referendum, as well as about the proposed reforms themselves.

At the same time, a section of educated Indigenous people believe that the reform package did not clearly mention the rights of Indigenous communities in the CHT, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation and the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord.

In Khagrachhari, the "No" camp received 1,55,942 votes, while "Yes"

secured 1,44,355 votes.

In Rangamati, the margin was significantly wider. The "No" polled 1,79,805 votes compared to 71,699 for "Yes".

In Bandarban, "No" secured 90,156 votes against 71,417 for "Yes", out of 3,15,422 total votes.

From this perspective, many in the hills may have voted in favour of "No" in the referendum, said Aung Chaw Mong Marma, a human rights activist and president of the Bandarban district unit of the Anti-Corruption Committee.

Each of the three earlier referendums took place during periods of political upheaval, when rulers sought legitimacy for their regimes or for a new system of governance.

The referendums of 1977 and 1985 were widely regarded as attempts to validate the military governments of Ziaur Rahman and Hussain Muhammad Ershad.

In the first referendum in 1977, the total number of voters was 3,83,63,858, with a turnout of 88.05 percent. The "Yes" vote secured 98.88 percent support, while "No" received 1.12 percent.

In the second referendum in 1985, there were 4,79,10,964 voters and the turnout was 72.44 percent. Of them, "Yes" secured 94.11 percent support, while "No" obtained 5.50 percent.

The third referendum in 1991 was a constitutional exercise that marked Bangladesh's return to parliamentary democracy.

There were 6,22,04,118 voters, with a turnout of 35.19 percent. The "Yes" vote secured 84.38 percent support, while "No" received 15.64 percent.