

Reject political violence

Political parties must commit to mutual respect and tolerance

Three deaths so soon after an otherwise largely peaceful election are a grim reminder that Bangladesh's toxic political culture has not disappeared. At a moment when the nation should be looking ahead to a newly elected government and a vibrant parliament, violence has once again cast a shadow over democratic hopes. On Friday, 30-year-old Md Jasim Nayeb was killed in a clash between rival factions in Munshiganj. He had supported an independent candidate expelled from the BNP. In a separate incident in Chapainawabganj, two people were killed and three others injured when a crude bomb exploded inside a house, blowing off its tin roof and leaving bodies charred. On Saturday, a clash between local BNP and Jamaat supporters left several people injured.

There have also been reports of Jamaat BNP clashes in various districts which left people injured and properties destroyed. Though isolated, these incidents reveal how quickly political tensions can escalate. The Chapainawabganj blast is still under investigation; whether accidental or deliberate, it exposes a disturbing reality: that crude but lethal explosives and illegal firearms remain in circulation, and can be used to target opponents or spread fear.

An investigation by Prothom Alo found that illegal arms are entering via at least 30 points along the Bangladesh-India and Bangladesh-Myanmar borders. Authorities believe many of these weapons were brought in to fuel election violence. Their interception no doubt helped prevent wider violence during polling. Yet, numerous illegal firearms, along with weapons looted from police stations after the July uprising, remain unaccounted for. In the wrong hands, they pose a continuing threat.

The deeper concern is cultural. Bangladesh's entrenched politics of revenge and retaliation must end. Between September 2024 and January 2026, at least 195 people were killed and 11,229 injured in political violence nationwide, according to the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS). During that period, internal feuds within the BNP and its affiliates reportedly led to 121 deaths and 7,131 injuries. Activists across party lines have fallen victim to unidentified assailants. Inquilab Moncho leader Sharif Osman Hadi, an independent candidate, was fatally shot in broad daylight on December 12 last year, with two suspects reportedly fleeing across the border.

These frightening statistics demand introspection. As a new government prepares to take office and a parliament reconvenes, we urge all political parties to remember the spirit and unity of the July uprising, which they are morally committed to. To do that, they must cleanse their parties from within and remove all criminal elements. BNP and Jamaat must immediately take exemplary actions against members responsible for any kind of violence and criminal behaviour. Leaders bear responsibility not only for strategy but also for creating a culture of restraint, tolerance, and respect—both within their ranks and towards opponents. Political disagreement must be played out through vigorous debates in parliament, not through bitter clashes that turn violent and deadly.

Politics remains rigged against women

Low female candidacy is a concern for democracy

As the dust settles on Bangladesh's 13th National Parliamentary Election, with the Election Commission (EC) declaring the 297 candidates elected to our parliament, a major source of disappointment remains: the systematic lack of women's political participation. While a total of 85 women contested the polls last Thursday, including 66 with party nominations and 19 as independent candidates, only seven have been elected. Of the seven candidates, only one is independent; the rest are from BNP. Furthermore, as per pre-election stats from the EC, nearly a third of female candidates were relatives of influential men. Although in the ninth parliament, 21 women were directly elected, the total number of female contestants in this election was the highest on record. These numbers put the low participation of women politicians in perspective.

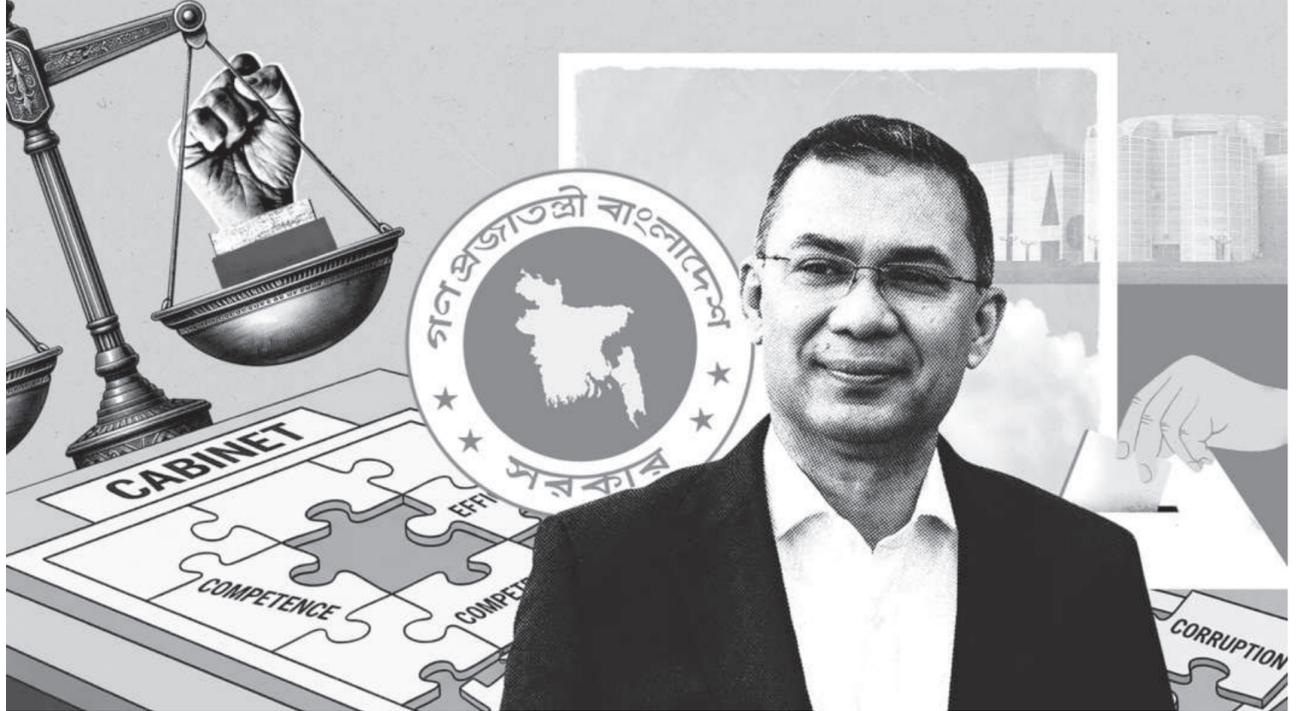
Myriad factors are cited by those who attempt to deny that a systemic exclusion of women persists in Bangladesh's politics. But when a party announces outright that it will not include women in roles of leadership in a post-uprising Bangladesh, we must acknowledge the urgency of this problem.

Women played a crucial role in the ousting of the Awami League regime in 2024, yet hardly any female representatives were included in the July National Charter consensus discussions. When male politicians were subjected to enforced disappearance by Sheikh Hasina's regime, it was the women in their families who led the fight for justice for years. The requirement by the Representation of the People Order, 1972, for political parties to reserve at least 33 percent of committee posts for women, including at the central level, was also not heeded by the major political parties in this election. Unsurprisingly, the recommendation by the Women's Affairs Reform Commission to increase the number of reserved seats for women to 100 with direct elections was not accepted by political parties. Meanwhile, promises and sentiments about women's empowerment by contesting politicians sound more like rote than out of a genuine wish to improve the persisting imbalance.

We hope the new parliament will actively work to advance women's political participation as per the existing legal framework, including ensuring significant participation in local government polls. It should go without saying that this is expected of all parliamentary members, not just female representatives. When women are kept out of parliament by design, women's issues move further down the government's list of priorities. It is a dire threat to the practice of democracy itself when the inclusion of one half of the population is treated as optional.

The likely PM's first crucial challenge

Choose cabinet with utmost care, for it may determine success or failure



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL



THE THIRD VIEW

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Hearty congratulations to the BNP as a party and to its leader, Tarique Rahman, for a magnificent win. This is not just the win of a political party in an election. It is the taking up of political power at a crucial moment in Bangladesh's history. We have had successes but also significant failures, the most devastating of which was destroying institutions and not allowing them to function independently and professionally. Sadly, this has become part of our political culture.

The ruling parties of the past always tried to dominate every branch of government, not for the sake of the country but for the party and mostly for personal gains. Thus, as they got richer, the common people got poorer, resulting in the most cruel and destructive rich-poor gap in Bangladesh today. The politicisation of the administration and the budgeting process, among many others, is so deeply entrenched that the prime minister-in-waiting will find it most difficult to challenge. In this effort, his own party is likely to be his biggest obstacle. Many leaders from all tiers will plead and ask for rewards, citing their loyalty to the party for the last 17-18 years, despite suffering, the destruction of their businesses and financial losses. Although such an argument is both real and emotional, giving in to this will be the beginning of corruption and misgovernance, which have plagued most of our past governments.

People will not accept it, and neither will the independent media. The ruling party must also remember that the opposition will be quite powerful—77 members—and it will use, as it should and must, every parliamentary procedure to hold the government accountable and expose even the slightest sign of corruption. Given what he said so far, Tarique Rahman will most likely not allow it. But he will find it most challenging to resist. And resist he must.

To win this struggle, Tarique Rahman will have to select the right cabinet. Of course, loyalty and service to the party will be important factors, but they shouldn't be the deciding ones. Rather, honesty, integrity and efficiency should be given priority. The new cabinet must be highly competent, modern, decisive, and management savvy; the last quality is something we always under-rate.

Tarique Rahman may already have made his choices for the cabinet. However, we would like to suggest that he takes a little more time in finalising his team. He may take an immediate

oath—as soon as the process permits—with a small cabinet consisting of the best ones and those he has already decided upon. As for the rest, he should take his time, which will give our prospective prime minister a valuable opportunity to fine-tune his final selection. This is vital because the new government has an enormous task at hand. Bangladesh is at a critical phase of development. With broken institutions, a high level of corruption and widespread inefficiency, the incoming cabinet will have to play a far more effective and insightful role than usual.

There is also intense partisanship in bureaucracy, various administrative branches, law enforcement agencies, etc. Such a phenomenon has a long past and getting rid of it quickly will be almost impossible. But Tarique Rahman's government may have an advantage. His declaration that "I have a plan," one which he made public during the presentation of BNP's manifesto, gives us the confidence that the new BNP government will consist of "doers and not talkers." People who will work closely with him are already known to him; they have been tested by him and on whom he has faith. That's excellent. But he must remember, however closely he knows them, they must be competent enough to implement the plan they helped him formulate. In Bangladesh, a "plan" and its "implementation" belong to two different worlds. This is very important to remember, otherwise the risk of failure multiplies manifold.

In my view, an underlying reason for the interim government's miserable failure in terms of good governance was Prof Yunus's wrong choices of his cabinet, except perhaps for a select few. He made two blunders: one, choosing the wrong team and the other, not reshuffling it. In fact, he never held them responsible for their performance. Why he just allowed them to drag his reputation down to the ground is something only he can tell. However, his contribution to an excellent election will be gratefully remembered by the nation.

Perhaps it is a bit premature, but the incoming prime minister must remember that reshuffling a cabinet is no sign of weakness or admission of fault. To ensure better performance, a prime minister must always be open to changing members of his cabinet. On the other hand, the prospect of a reshuffle keeps ministers on their toes and ensures better and honest performance.

Of the three factors that should

determine the choice of the cabinet—loyalty, honesty, and efficiency—only the first played any role in the past.

After the loyalty factor comes honesty. Fighting corruption has to start at the very top, which we hope will be ensured. Then comes the question of the integrity of the ministers. On this score, the new government will be closely monitored and the slightest deviation will hurt the government badly. However, the sternest message from the prime minister-in-waiting should be zero tolerance on corruption and the harshest punishment should be meted out if it occurs. Lee Kuan Yew, the former leader of Singapore, should serve as a model, not in terms of citizens' freedom but in terms of honest and efficient governance.

Third comes the question of competence. A minister in a modern government needs to be far more knowledgeable, efficient and decisive than in earlier times. Political acumen is necessary, but it is far from sufficient

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in today's world. He or she has to be open to diverse views and ideas that contest practice and be modest enough to admit mistakes and quickly correct the course. A minister needs to be like a CEO of a company with the party manifesto as his or her "mission and vision." A modern minister needs to be well-versed in management, which in today's world is a science and an ever-evolving one. Again, the Lee Kuan Yew-led Singapore government is a model to learn from with its globally recognised success mainly springing from competent management. This is where we fail most of the time, as we do not give sufficient importance to it.

There are veteran BNP leaders who will have to be rewarded for their lifelong role in the party, especially during Sheikh Hasina's oppressive rule. But luckily for Tarique Rahman, there are only a handful of them. So, in the case of a large number of ministries, the party leader can appoint young, committed, energetic, competent, and academically qualified individuals with

modern mindsets as ministers. The danger here is that many such young and qualified individuals may not be connected with the people and well-versed in the realities of Bangladesh. We have seen in the past that scholars who return to serve the country from abroad exhibit an inner arrogance of "know-it-all" that prevents them from appreciating local scholars and experts. This, thereby, creates a destructive rift that prevents the much-needed collaboration between global scholars and local academicians, both of whom need to learn from each other.

As Tarique Rahman declared, "I have a plan," we assume he also has a clear idea of how to implement it and with whom to do so. Here is where we want to sound some alert bells. When he was planning, he was the thinker. Now that people of Bangladesh have given him power, he is now the "implementer," the main one at that. There is an ocean-wide difference between these two realities. How should he transform into his new role? First, as the unchallenged leader he has to resist all temptation and be truly modest. This is very challenging. In my mind's eye, I can see the type of adulation and praise that has already been showered on him and which is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Even with the strongest determination to resist all these, it will prove to be highly challenging. We wish him, most sincerely, genuine success here. He must constantly remember that there is almost no "check" on him in terms of power. This is a very dangerous place to be in. His senior political colleagues could play a restraining role, but our political culture neither permits nor encourages it. He and his family are the only "check" that can work as some sort of restraint to his literally unlimited power. And, of course, the independent and ethical media can also play an effective role, but only if he allows them a free play without prejudice—to which he has committed—and takes them seriously.

In everything the new government does, the election slogan "Bangladesh First" should play a pivotal role. As each of the BNP leaders become ministers, they must take to heart the fact that the moment they take the oath of office, they transform themselves from BNP leaders to "people's" leaders. They no longer represent only those who voted for them but also those who voted against them—supporters of Jamaat-e-Islami, National Citizen Party, Islami Andolon Bangladesh, as well as every other candidate who may have won or lost. If Tarique Rahman can put into his every action his party's slogan "Bangladesh first," meaning Bangladesh before personal interest and Bangladesh before party interest, and if he can ingrain in the mind of every cabinet member that, once in government, they must treat every citizen equally—something he asserted in his press conference yesterday—then he will be able to ensure the success of his government. Nothing else can.