

Bangladesh has spoken. Now it's time to deliver



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Let's congratulate Dr Muhammad Yunus first. I have been a critic of the interim government and not kind to its missteps. But one thing we knew for certain was that his legacy of presiding over Bangladesh's most consequential election in a generation would change the course of politics in the country.

To aid the election on February 12, General Waker-uz-Zaman's team worked tirelessly to make this extraordinary event happen. The police and bureaucracy followed suit with equal resolve. Nearly 10 lakh security personnel deployed across 42,651 polling centres, not a single lethal bullet fired, and yet peace prevailed. That is no accident; it is a genuine commitment to the republic. While Dr Yunus took the podium, the Election Commission built the stage. Credit where it is due.

And what a spectacular stage it was. Around 12.77 crore voters, nearly 60 percent turnout, and a verdict that needs no spin. The BNP-led alliance swept at least 212 of 299 contested seats while Jamaat-e-Islami's 11-party coalition secured 77, as of February 14. Tarique Rahman, back in Dhaka after 17 years in exile, won both his constituencies and is on course to form the next government with a commanding two-thirds majority. The referendum passed with 68.1 percent approval. Bangladesh did not just vote—it voted as it meant it.

The milestones deserve public memory. Not a single organised act of election violence spiralled into a crisis. Tarique Rahman told reporters after casting his vote, "For more than a decade, the people of Bangladesh have been waiting for this day," pledging to "prioritise improving law and order so that people feel secure." Jamaat Ameer Dr Shafiqur Rahman called the election a "turning point." "People demand change. They desire change. We also



The public voted in a festive mood during Thursday's election and many said they felt it was like Eid.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

desire change," he said. Both camps, for once, read from the same script: the people's script. The political maturity shown by both BNP and Jamaat in accepting the verdict is the real victory. Shafiqur Rahman confirmed his party's graceful acceptance of results "regardless of whether others choose to do so or not." If this maturity is genuine, Bangladesh will go a long way. The people voted in a festive mood; first-time voters said

it "felt like Eid." A former teacher who had not voted since 2008 laughed in the queue, saying that standing in line was nothing compared with the joy of casting his own ballot.

The BNP, the power-to-be in parliament, will need a solid cabinet that works beyond partisan interests, with zero tolerance for corruption, impunity, and violence. Every BNP member should have tattooed somewhere

as responsible opposition will define the country's democratic future. This verdict is about restoring democracy where everyone's voice matters—including women and minorities, who remain apprehensive. It is time to ensure that inclusivity, accountability, and the rule of law are at the heart of governance, so that every citizen can participate fully in the country's new democratic journey.

This is also the NCP's chance to rebrand

which is a bit rich from a party that won 257 (281 if we count Jatiya Party's 24 seats) out of 300 seats in 2018 and saw nothing one-sided about that. Will it choose genuine reform and reorganisation, or keep running a party-in-exile from talk shows, sitting in someone else's guest room? The choice is there, but history suggests they will pick the option with the most dramatic background music.

And to our beloved social media misinformation industry—the deepfake merchants, the bot armies, the "breaking news" pages run from home and abroad: over 700,000 propaganda posts since August 2024, and the people still saw right through you. The shelf life, my friends, has expired. The public upgraded their misinformation detector faster than you upgraded your bots.

A necessary word on the interim reform commissions is also needed. They proved to be, diplomatically, underwhelming—and, honestly, weak in parts. Grand ideas drafted in seminar rooms with little connection to the constitutional and political realities of a functioning parliament. The new parliament must continue but rethink reform from scratch: what is implementable, what is aspirational fantasy, and what belongs in the dustbin.

Let us not forget that most interim affiliates were chosen by the students and Dr Yunus. That selection process explains a fair share of the governance hiccups. The show is not over; the transparency of their 18 months is yet to be judged. History is keeping notes.

Meanwhile, BNP will enjoy the most comfortable international position of any Bangladeshi government. Delhi has agreed to work with any elected government; Beijing and Islamabad respect the people's mandate; Washington, Tokyo, Brussels, London, Ankara, Geneva, the Middle East and beyond will stay supportive as long as transparency is delivered. But every handshake now comes with a price tag. Prepare for it.

Bangladesh spent 18 months in the waiting room of democracy. On Thursday, the doctor finally called our name—and people walked in, heads held high, ink on their fingers, and a verdict in their hearts that no algorithm, no exile, and no autocrat can override. The prescription is simple: govern like the people are watching, because this time, they actually are.

Reviving RTI a test for the new government

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SHAMSUL BARI AND RUHI NAZ

The long anticipated and widely speculated national election has concluded. Contrary to many predictions, voters delivered a decisive mandate to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). People's participation signals their endorsement of a platform framed around institutional stability, rational governance, and inclusivity. The party leadership has reiterated its commitment to strengthening the rule of law and combating corruption—priorities that, if pursued consistently and with integrity, will shape both the credibility and durability of the incoming administration.

The result also holds significant implications for the future of the Right to Information (RTI) regime in Bangladesh. The year and a half of the interim government (IG) elicited both praise and criticism for reasons widely known. For many who viewed the July 2024 uprising—driven largely by a politically awakened younger generation—as a turning point aimed at restoring popular sovereignty and revitalising democratic institutions, the IG's record on transparency and accountability proved deeply disappointing.

For the entirety of its tenure, the IG allowed the Information Commission—the statutory guardian of the RTI framework under the RTI Act, 2009—to lapse into paralysis. During the previous 15 years, however imperfectly, the commission had been among the very few institutions willing to assert a measure of

democratic oversight in the face of executive overreach. That modest but important role came to a halt when the IG failed to appoint the three commissioners required by law, including the chief information commissioner, after the previous incumbents resigned. As a result, the commission was unable to perform its quasi-judicial functions: hearing appeals, enforcing compliance, and holding public authorities accountable for unlawful refusals to disclose information. For RTI activists and civil society organisations who regard the act as a central tool of democratic oversight, this institutional vacuum generated deep frustration.

The failure to reconstitute the commission cannot easily be dismissed as administrative oversight. At minimum, it reflected institutional neglect; at worst, it suggested ambivalence towards the very transparency mechanisms the uprising had sought to strengthen. At a moment when public expectations of reform were at their peak, revitalising the Information Commission would have been one of the clearest demonstrations of a commitment to open, citizen-centred governance. Unfortunately, that opportunity was not seized.

The reform of the law also did not progress. Civil society groups and RTI advocates participated in the process in good faith, submitting detailed proposals to make the act more accessible, citizen-oriented, and enforceable. However, their recommendations received little substantive engagement. When draft amendments were made public towards the end of the IG's tenure, they inspired neither confidence nor serious public debate, appearing disconnected from the reformist energy that had animated the July uprising.

The transitional period thus ended without either a strengthened statute or a functioning oversight body.

Transitional authorities carry a heightened moral and political burden. Lacking an electoral mandate, they derive legitimacy from public trust and from their adherence to reformist principles. To sideline the principal

have preferred to avoid. If the latter is true, it should prompt concern. A government confident in its integrity has little reason to fear transparency. The ultimate test of commitment to reform lies not in rhetoric but in a demonstrable willingness to submit to scrutiny. In this respect, the IG's record warrants critical reflection.



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

legal instrument that enables citizens to scrutinise the state is therefore not a neutral act; it is a consequential choice. There are two plausible explanations for it. Either the RTI regime was treated as a secondary concern amid competing priorities, or it was viewed as inconvenient—capable of revealing truths that a transitional administration might

The advent of a new government thus opens a renewed window of opportunity. BNP campaigned on a 31-point reform programme, which was later incorporated into its election manifesto, and had reaffirmed its commitment to the July Declaration. It will therefore fall to the citizenry—and to civil society institutions—to

hold the new administration to these pledges during its formative months. The BNP must be reminded of its electoral commitments, and citizens should carefully assess the extent to which those promises are translated into concrete action.

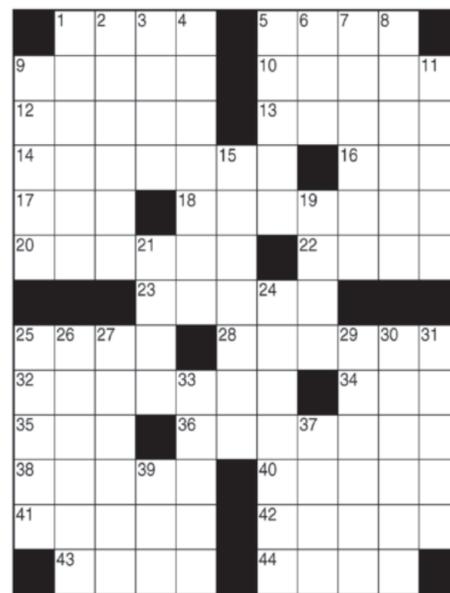
One immediate, concrete step for the new government would be the prompt, transparent reconstitution of the Information Commission. The RTI Act itself provides guidance on the qualifications and selection of commissioners. An objective, merit-based appointment process would send a powerful signal that the government intends to restore institutional integrity rather than merely fill vacancies. Independence, competence, and credibility must be the guiding criteria.

Parallely, the government can strengthen the law substantively. Particular attention should be paid to the provisions governing exemptions from disclosure, especially those framed broadly in terms of national security and public interest. Narrowing and clarifying these exemptions, and introducing a robust "public interest override" clause, would better align the act with international best practice. The law would mandate the release of information whenever the public's need to know is more important than the government's preference for confidentiality.

Restoring the Information Commission and refining the RTI Act would not merely rehabilitate a neglected statute but also reaffirm a constitutional principle—that sovereignty ultimately resides with the people, and that transparency is the lifeblood of democratic governance. The new administration now has both the mandate and the opportunity to demonstrate that commitment in practice.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Surrender
 - 5 Recipe instruction
 - 9 Flatten
 - 10 Sharpens
 - 12 Even a little
 - 13 Muscat native
 - 14 It's earlier on school nights
 - 16 Way off
 - 17 Magnetite, e.g.
 - 18 Hobby
 - 20 Salad bar item
 - 22 Cart pullers
 - 23 Critter
 - 25 Skilled
 - 28 Writer Hardy
- DOWN**
- 1 Et _____
 - 2 Steered clear of
 - 3 Shouldermuscle, forshort
 - 4 Oval's cousin
 - 5 Loafers, e.g.
 - 6 Male cat
 - 7 Facing trouble
 - 8 Update, in a way
 - 9 Toil away
 - 11 Ambulance sound
 - 15 Title for Mohandas
 - 19 Visitor to Oz
 - 21 "Yeah, right!"
 - 24 Nanny
 - 25 Ready to hit
 - 26 Smiled broadly
 - 27 Thin layer
 - 29 Title for un professeur
 - 30 Warring groups
 - 31 Exorbitant
 - 33 Bitter humor
 - 37 Brashness, informally
 - 39 Web address ending



THURSDAY'S ANSWERS

