

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

A chance to break the cycle of retribution

Tarique Rahman's call for ending the politics of vengeance welcome

Elections in Bangladesh are seldom calm civic exercises. More often, they resemble winner-takes-all contests in which the victor claims the spoils while the defeated braces for reprisal. Our political history has long been trapped in a cycle of retribution between our two dominant dynastic forces, deepening divisions and weakening institutions. In the aftermath of a landslide victory that swept the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) back to power after 20 years, Tarique Rahman, party chairman and prime minister-in-waiting, has struck a note that is both welcome and urgent: unity over vengeance.

Speaking to the press in Dhaka on Saturday, Rahman called for a "safe and humane Bangladesh." His first address since BNP secured a two-thirds majority in the February 12 election avoided the triumphalism that so often curdles into retaliation. Instead, he congratulated all 51 parties that took part in the polls, from Jamaat-e-Islami to the Gono Odhikar Parishad, and urged his supporters to ensure that election-time tensions do not metastasise into "revenge or retaliation." The tone was deliberate and clearly aimed at resetting expectations in a country weary of political score-settling.

Bangladesh emerges from years marked by the authoritarian excesses of the Awami League era. Rahman is inheriting a fragile economy and institutions weakened by partisanship. In such an environment, the temptation towards tit-for-tat politics would be understandable. Rahman's explicit warning against allowing disputes to slide into "revenge or retaliation" is therefore more than mere rhetoric, or so it seems. By declaring that "division is our weakness," he may interrupt a destructive pattern in which state machinery has too often been wielded as a partisan weapon. We hope he means it.

In the same address, Rahman outlined three central priorities: reviving the economy, restoring law and order, and depoliticising state institutions. Each presents a formidable challenge. He inherits an economy strained by structural weaknesses—persistent inflation, sluggish investment, and a banking sector crippled by chronic loan defaults. Re-establishing order will require curbing the recurring outbreaks of mob violence that accompany political transitions. Most difficult of all will be repairing institutions hollowed out by years of politicisation. Winning a landslide is easier than rebuilding a battered state.

Restoring the rule of law will be the true test. A credible commitment demands a judiciary independent enough to prosecute wrongdoing without becoming an instrument of political harassment. If the promise of depoliticisation is to mean anything, it must be visible in how power is exercised, not merely in how it is described. By framing unity as a "collective strength" and division as a national weakness, Rahman has set a new benchmark for his party. Words, however, are only the beginning. If he can impose the discipline he now demands and translate his party's 31-point programme from aspiration into policy, he may fulfil the promise of this moment.

Bangladesh has heard calls for unity before; what it needs now is proof.

Publishers' concerns must be heeded

Bangla Academy should balance tradition and practicality in book fair decision

The concerns raised by major mainstream publishers over the timing of this year's Ekushey Book Fair, scheduled to begin on February 20, deserve careful consideration. This is more so given the convergence of significant national events in quick succession—the parliamentary election held on February 12, the impending formation of the new government, and the start of Ramadan this week.

Last year, in September, Bangla Academy decided that the month-long event would begin on December 17, 2025. The director general of the academy then cited election preparation, Ramadan, Eid holidays, and April storms as reasons to justify the fair's preponement. A week later, however, the academy issued a notice mentioning that the fair would be held after the election, citing a decision by the home ministry. Then, on December 17, 2025, the academy decided that the fair would run from February 20 to March 15. These frequent date changes by the academy raise the question of whether all the stakeholders, including the publishers, were duly consulted during decision-making.

Against this backdrop, more than 300 publishers recently threatened to boycott the fair—the largest literary event in the country—citing fears of economic losses. Some have also written an open letter to BNP Chairperson Tarique Rahman, urging Bangla Academy to reconsider the fair dates, preferably rescheduling it to after Eid ul-Fitr. While we acknowledge the historical sentiment and cultural significance of holding or starting the Ekushey Book Fair in the month of February, the practicalities of rescheduling the event should also be considered.

The demand for books is likely to be limited during Ramadan. Besides, many who work and volunteer at the fair—mostly students—may choose to return home during the Ramadan and Eid holidays. Furthermore, visitor numbers might also be affected, both during the day and in the evening, given it collides with iftar and special prayers hours.

Although the Ekushey Book Fair has its ties to February, commemorating the historic Language Movement, there are precedents of the fair taking place later than February. Therefore, at a time when publications are incurring losses all year, with some reporting as big as almost a 60 percent drop in sales, measures should be taken to make the fair profitable and a success for all the stakeholders.

Therefore, we call upon the authorities to be open to renegotiating the fair dates with the publishers, all while acknowledging the logistical challenges that might follow. After all, the spirit of Ekushey Book Fair exists in the heart of all those who participate in it, having its core in its commitment to language and literature, not in rigid adherence to a particular date on the calendar.

Advisers' asset disclosures and a test for the new government



Dr Iftekharuzzaman is executive director at Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB).

IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

The interim government's (IG) disclosure of the assets of advisers on February 10, just days before the scheduled end of its tenure, was not only delayed by 533 days after its commitment to do so, but was also incomplete, flawed, and unfit for purpose. It represents a high-level breach of public trust and is merely the tip of the iceberg of the departing government's failures to set credible examples of transparent and accountable governance. Over the past months, numerous such failures have been reported and commented on through columns like this, whether in the exercise of authority or in initiatives taken as an interim administration tasked with laying the foundations for state reform, including ordinance-making.

Disappointing as these developments are, this façade of IG asset disclosure at least leaves behind a clear message for the incoming BNP government that prepares to take office on Tuesday. The message is on how it can do this better. Unlike the IG, it may begin by proactively making such disclosures timely, easily verifiable, and complete to ensure the

all public servants. Later, a gazette was issued on September 22, 2024, making the submission of wealth statements by government servants mandatory and prescribing a format for the purpose. On October 1 that year, the government also issued a "policy on disclosure of income and asset statements of advisers of the interim government and persons of equivalent rank." No one knows why the advisers' disclosures were parked for so long, nor whether any submissions by government servants actually took place; no disclosures, of course, have been made public.

The disclosure commitment had raised high expectations, and for good reason. It reflected a recognition of one of the most effective global best practices that Bangladesh has long failed to adopt, a failure that not only contributed to deepened and widened public-sector corruption with implications for the entire state

not realise at the time of making the pledge that it had been entrusted with state power to demonstrate that promises are meant to be kept. Or perhaps it didn't realise how hard the internal resistance would be. This may explain why, as demands for compliance from civil society and the media grew, the disclosure was eventually uploaded as a parting eyewash. It is no coincidence that this approach is consistent with the IG's broader governance record: secrecy to deny, or at best minimise the scope of, accountability.

There are several reasons why the IG disclosure amounts to little more than eyewash. Asset declarations by publicly exposed persons—including public representatives, government leaders, and public servants—should, as per global good practice, allow for assessment of consistency between legitimate income and assets acquired. They should also allow for robust scrutiny and checks against any

concealment. What has been disclosed instead consists merely of aggregated financial and non-financial assets, with no granularity or comparability to assess the level of transparency and accountability. The base and closing periods of the information (June 2024–June 2025) do not serve the purpose of meaningful disclosure or comparative analysis, which is the primary objective of such practices worldwide, including in some of Bangladesh's regional neighbours.

There are no statistics on income and expenditure, no disclosure of sources thereof—including salary and business interests—or major heads of expenditure for the period. The information is not accompanied by relevant documentation such as bank statements, property titles, or tax returns. The principal purpose of such disclosures is not only to ensure accountability for inconsistency or non-disclosure, but also to prevent corruption, including illicit enrichment through abuse of power and conflicts of interest. It is therefore highly unlikely that the information disclosed by the IG would withstand critical scrutiny for accuracy, completeness, comparability, or truthfulness. In this connection, one can also question the lack of disclosures by those appointed as special assistants to the chief adviser, or contractual recruits in key positions, at least those who drew government salaries.

So the key message for the new government here is that it has an opportunity, and obligation, to demonstrate a stronger commitment to practising what it preaches. This will require consistency of delivery with regard to public expectations of accountable governance as reflected in BNP's 31-point Outline of Structural Reforms, its election manifesto, and the July Charter approved through the referendum. Notably, as per the charter, all political parties consented—without any note of dissent—to the commitment that "all public representatives at all levels will submit to the Election Commission statements of income and wealth of self and family within three months of taking office and renew them annually, which shall be published on the EC website".

The IG undermined the mandate for transparent and accountable governance derived from the uprising, at least as far as asset disclosure is concerned. It now remains to be seen whether the new government refrains from similarly ignoring the sacred authority it derived from the overwhelming popular mandate of the election thanks to the pledge to ensure corruption-free, transparent, and accountable governance.

Do not waste it.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

The IG took almost 18 months to prepare and upload a set of asset descriptions that it may claim fulfilled its pledge. It may be argued that the disclosure per se was a notable exception, as no previous government had done this before. However, the real question is whether the interim government can truly be credited for having walked the talk.

full transparency and accountability of power-holders, including public representatives and government servants at all levels.

We may recall that the head of the interim government, in his first address to the nation on August 25,

A woman's message to the government we just elected



Naziba Basher is a journalist at The Daily Star.

NAZIBA BASHER

On Thursday, for the first time in my adult life, I stood in a voting line that felt real. There was no whispered certainty about the result the night before, no hollow theatre dressed up as democracy, no ballot cast only to decorate a predetermined victory speech.

For the first time, my generation did not perform citizenship—we practised it. And we made a choice that was neither romantic nor naive.

On one side stood a politics that openly imagines a future where women shrink; where our public lives are conditional, negotiated, permitted in moderation. On the other stood a party whose history carries the smell of muscle, patronage and street power, a past heavy with intimidation and extortion.

We did not vote because we were inspired. We voted because we calculated. We chose the lesser danger so the greater one would not become law. We chose you. Understand what that means. This was not loyalty; it was conditional trust. We escorted you

into parliament knowing exactly who you have been, and hoping—not assuming—who you might become. You were handed a probationary contract, and women were central to that. Many of us voted against fear more than for ideology. We voted to prevent our lives from being negotiated in theological committees. We voted so our ambitions would not require permission slips. We voted because even flawed secular politics still leaves room to argue, organise, and resist. We voted because space matters, even imperfect space.

Now, that space is your responsibility. So, here is the message: do not misunderstand our vote as forgiveness for your past. It was an investment in your future behaviour. You promised governance instead of gangs. Deliver it. You promised rule of law instead of influence. Prove it. You promised safety in streets and workplaces. Enforce it.

Women do not need symbolic respect; we need structural protection. Make cities where a woman returning home at night is routine, not bravery.

Fix public transport so harassment is punished swiftly and visibly. Reform policing so reporting violence does not feel like negotiating humiliation. Train officers who record complaints instead of interrogating character.

In workplaces, safety cannot remain a corporate slogan. Strengthen labour monitoring, ensure that complaint mechanisms actually function, and

Women do not need symbolic respect; we need structural protection. Make cities where a woman returning home at night is routine, not bravery. Fix public transport so harassment is punished swiftly and visibly. Reform policing so reporting violence does not feel like negotiating humiliation. Train officers who record complaints instead of interrogating character.

punish retaliation against women who speak up. Sexual harassment policies exist on paper across the country; your job is to make them exist in consequence.

Online spaces, too, are now part of public life. Digital abuse silences women faster than censorship ever could. Treat coordinated harassment,

threats and image-based abuse as civic crimes, not personal inconveniences.

And understand something deeper: women's participation in society is not preserved by protectionist speeches about honour. It is preserved by predictable justice. When systems work, freedom survives. When systems fail, control replaces it.

We did not vote so you could "allow" women to live freely. We voted so you would build a state where freedom does not depend on who is in power.

Also, clean your own house. Remember this, if extortion continues under new banners, we will notice. If student wings become private militias again, we will notice. If local strongmen become untouchable because they wear your colour, we will notice.

This election gave you legitimacy, but your behaviour will determine whether you deserve it.

Our generation did not grow up trusting politics. We grew up studying how it failed us. That makes us patient but not forgiving. We understand compromise, but we do not accept betrayal. We voted because we want a country where "choosing the lesser evil" is no longer the only rational choice.

So, here is the simplest way to honour that vote: make it possible for the next election to be decided by hope instead of fear. You now govern not just a state, but a moment—the fragile moment when citizens tried believing again.

Do not waste it.