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## A parliament of firsts, youthful lawmakers

Integrity and restraint will determine success

The incoming 13th parliament promises renewal. More than two-thirds of lawmakers-elect will take their seats for the first time. The country will see a first-time prime minister, a first-time opposition leader, and six young members of parliament from the National Citizen Party who helped organise the 2024 July uprising. Eight parties will be represented, and five party chiefs will enter the House as first-time MPs. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which secured 209 seats, brings 132 newcomers. Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami has 59 first-time MPs. While seasoned stalwarts, particularly within the BNP, remain, the overall composition of the parliament signals a more vibrant and diverse legislature, backed by an active opposition.

This marks a clear departure from recent parliaments led by Awami League, where the absence of a credible opposition reduced proceedings to ritual. The treasury benches were filled by the same figures elected through controversial polls. Instead of lively debate on public interest issues and meaningful legislative scrutiny, the chamber too often became a stage for sycophancy. MPs competed in praising the prime minister, while dissenting voices, whether individuals or institutions, were branded "enemies of the state," with little opportunity for rebuttal. Arbitrary laws were passed unchallenged. Among the most damaging was the Digital Security Act, later recast as the Cyber Security Act, widely criticised for stifling freedom of expression and enabling arbitrary arrests. Such measures became symbols of a legislature that failed in its duty to safeguard democratic freedoms.

Hopefully, this time, the presence of many young MPs and a strong opposition bench should ensure substantive debate on legislation and policies affecting citizens' lives. Also, the opposition must remember that its role is to be constructive, not disruptive. The country cannot afford a return to habitual walkouts and street agitations that once paralysed parliamentary politics. Sharp disagreements are inevitable, but they must be addressed within the House, in language befitting its code of conduct. The Speaker's role will be pivotal. Neutrality and equal opportunity for all members to speak are key to restoring public trust in parliamentary procedures. Women MPs must be given equal time to speak.

With a two-thirds majority, the BNP bears special responsibility. Power demands restraint. More than half of the new MPs are businesspeople, many from the ruling party. This raises legitimate concerns about conflicts of interest, an issue that also plagued past parliaments. MPs must not exploit public office to advance private business. Party leadership must remain vigilant against such transgressions. There are also reports that 11 winning BNP candidates are loan defaulters; most of them secured court stay orders to contest. Under the Representation of the People Order, defaulters are barred from running. If loans remain unpaid beyond the stay period, or if fresh defaults occur, the Election Commission has the authority to cancel membership. That rule must be enforced without any bias.

This parliament has the numbers, diversity, and generational shift to reset democratic norms. Whether it succeeds depends on integrity, accountability, and respect for the institution it now represents.

## Curb post-poll misinformation

False narratives must be shunned

Since the February 12 election, post-poll violence in various parts of the country has been reported in the media. While such incidents are not unprecedented in our country's political history, the rapid spread of disinformation and misinformation online raises serious concerns. An analysis by Dismislab, a fact-checking organisation, has shown that rival camps have circulated false claims, recycled videos, and misleading narratives to inflame tensions and implicate political opponents. Before the election, disinformation was deliberately spread to influence the election results, and now both misinformation and disinformation continue to circulate online.

According to Dismislab, multiple misleading claims alleged that activists and supporters of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami were attacked by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). In other cases, claims were made that Jamaat itself had carried out attacks or was directly involved in clashes. Fact-checkers documented at least 13 instances of false claims related to post-election violence or protests on February 13 and 14. Old videos were recirculated with new captions. A month-old clip was falsely linked to alleged arson over voting for Jamaat. A seven-year-old video was presented as evidence of post-election reprisals by BNP at Dhaka University. Other unrelated footage was shared to suggest retaliatory marches by Shibir that never occurred. Such false claims on social media deepen mistrust, provoke outrage, and serve only political agendas.

Encouragingly, after this election, both the winning and opposition parties have shown a restrained response, which is unprecedented in our recent political history. The BNP, despite securing a two-thirds majority, has shown commendable courtesy and expressed its willingness to work with the opposition. BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman's recent visit with Jamaat and National Citizen Party chiefs signals a possible shift in the country's political culture.

While opposition parties may have grievances, these must be pursued through lawful and institutional channels, demonstrating political maturity. Any crime or act of violence should be addressed promptly and in accordance with the law. At the same time, vigilance is needed to protect minority communities, who have historically been vulnerable after elections. Protecting them from harm requires political commitment not only from the party forming the next government but also from the opposition. All political actors must send an unequivocal message that violence, intimidation, or misinformation will not be tolerated.

As the newly elected government is formally sworn in today, a pledge to shun the spread of misinformation, disinformation, or any attempts to disrupt the democratic transition must be made. Restraint, accountability, and truth must guide the nation to strengthen democracy and ensure stability.

# What BNP should keep in mind as it assumes power



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Views expressed in the article are the author's own.

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BNP rightly deserves our congratulations for winning a decisive victory in the 13th parliamentary election. This outcome reflects an unequivocal mandate that is both politically and historically significant. Coming as it does at a critical point in Bangladesh's democratic journey, this moment marks more than a change of government; it signals a renewed public resolve to restore democratic norms, accountability, and institutional integrity.

The election came after years of severe distrust in the electoral process, questions over legitimacy, and institutional strain, so the poll's successful conduct has reinforced trust in the process as well as the principle that governments derive authority from the consent of the governed. For quite some time now, Bangladesh has faced deep polarisation, intolerance, and threats to its democratic foundations. Regressive and anti-democratic tendencies—whether institutional, ideological, or political—risked steering the country away from its foundational goals. BNP's decisive victory can therefore be interpreted as a call to reverse this trajectory, and a public desire for accountable, forward-looking governance rooted in liberal democratic principles.

However, the road ahead is going to be bumpy, to put it mildly. A broad mandate alone cannot resolve deep-rooted structural problems. The BNP government will likely continue to face economic challenges and institutional constraints for the foreseeable future. This will test its capacity and sincerity not only to govern but also to transform the culture of governance in the country.

### Economic reform imperatives

A key challenge will be stabilising the economy, which continues to face mounting pressures: growth has decelerated, inflation has eroded people's purchasing power, foreign exchange reserves remain low, and public finances are tight. External debt has increased significantly in recent years, while the tax-to-GDP ratio has fallen to historically low levels. State-owned enterprises and the banking sector face persistent structural weaknesses, and confidence among both domestic and international

investors remains fragile.

The new government should begin by restoring macroeconomic discipline. Containing inflation will need close coordination across ministries and agencies. Monetary policy must remain cautious and credible, free from political interference, while fiscal policy should prioritise stability rather than expand populist spending.

Tax reform is also unavoidable. The National Board of Revenue requires comprehensive modernisation, digitalisation, and total compliance. Broadening the tax base, especially by bringing all high-income groups and segments of the informal economy into the formal system, is crucial. Over time, reliance on indirect taxes such as value-added tax and import duties should be reduced, paving the way for a more



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progressive direct tax regime.

Banking sector reform is equally crucial. Proper asset quality reviews and regulatory oversight are necessary to rebuild confidence in the sector. Political patronage within the financial institutions must end. Without a resilient financial system, private investment cannot recover. As regards growth, the government should focus on diversifying exports beyond ready-made garments and deepening integration into regional value chains. Attracting foreign direct investment will depend on regulatory predictability and improvements in logistics and energy reliability. Ambitious growth targets must be matched by realistic implementation capacity.

### Political challenges

Distrust among political actors, partly fuelled by fears of retribution and violence, is a reality that may persist. BNP will face pressure from its supporters to act quickly in addressing perceived injustices, but good governance demands restraint. If the new government resorts to or tolerates exclusion or retaliation, it will risk perpetuating the very cycle it has condemned.

Managing internal party discipline will also be crucial, as a large parliamentary majority can sometimes lead to complacency or factional rivalry. Strong leadership will be required to maintain unity while allowing constructive internal debate. BNP must also rebuild trust with minority communities and vulnerable groups. Elections often heighten anxieties among minorities, so a credible commitment to equal citizenship is crucial. BNP's political maturity will also be judged by how it treats or engages with its opponents. In this regard, Chairman Tarique Rahman's visits to the residences of top opposition leaders on Sunday marked a positive gesture, one that many hope will withstand the inevitable pressures or conflicts over

depend on transparency, professional management, and impartiality. Meanwhile, the civil service must be depoliticised. Appointments based on loyalty rather than merit have long undermined governance in the country. So the new administration must work on curtailing the influence of political networks to ensure a professional, impartial civil service. Media reform and digital rights also deserve careful attention. We must remember that democratic consolidation is built through institutional habits, and these habits must be established early.

### Beyond winner-takes all

Bangladesh's politics has long been characterised by a winner-takes-all mentality. Electoral victories have often resulted in monopolisation of power, marginalising opposition voices and weakening checks and balances. If BNP is serious about democratic renewal, it must consciously break with this tradition. Inclusive policy consultations will be a good starting point. Major economic and constitutional reforms should be based on cross-party dialogue and consensus. Appointments to constitutional bodies should be transparent and consultative, and parliamentary debates should be done with the letter and spirit of the July Charter in mind.

### Meeting public expectations

The scale of public expectations now is naturally immense. Citizens want economic relief, employment opportunities, necessary institutional reforms, and improved governance. Managing these expectations will be quite difficult. Many reforms will not yield immediate results, and some may impose short-term costs. So it is imperative to ensure transparent communication about the associated timelines, trade-offs, and fiscal constraints.

Anti-corruption efforts must be credible and monitored at all times. Measures are needed to strengthen oversight institutions, improve transparency in public procurement, and expand digital service delivery to reduce opportunities for rent-seeking. Governance reform should be systematic, not selective or politically driven. Tangible improvements are urgently needed in public service delivery, particularly in health, education, social protection, and local government.

Finally, a word of caution: BNP's decisive victory presents both opportunities and risks. It can enable bold reforms but it also carries the danger of overreach. The key deciding factor here is political judgment. The question is, can our leaders deliver based on the mandate voters have given them?

## GLOBAL TOURISM RESILIENCE DAY

# Our tourism needs a policy reset



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While our neighbours in Asia count billions in tourist dollars, it is unfortunate that we are still largely relying on garment exports or remittances for foreign currency. Just think: Thailand hosts 30-40 million international visitors annually. Vietnam attracts about 13 million tourists. Even the tiny island nation of the Maldives has built a sizeable percentage of its GDP on tourism. Meanwhile, Bangladesh, blessed with the world's longest natural beach and the mystical Sundarbans, struggles to attract international tourists. This is not just embarrassing; it is an economic upheaval hiding in plain sight.

As the UN commemorates Global Tourism Resilience Day on February 17, Bangladesh faces a dual challenge: we must simultaneously build a tourism sector capable of attracting foreign visitors while making it resilient enough to withstand the climate shocks and crises that inevitably lie ahead.

Our economy's overwhelming dependence on garment exports leaves us exposed to global supply chain disruptions, automation threats, trade policy shifts, etc. Tourism offers a useful means of diversification, and it brings foreign currency directly. Unlike exports that face challenges of tariffs

and quotas, every dollar a foreign tourist spends flows immediately into local pockets, from beach vendors to hotel staff to tour guides. No intermediaries, no shipping costs, no trade barriers. Just direct economic impact.

While garment factories cluster in industrial zones, tourism can spread wealth geographically: Cox's Bazar's beaches, Sylhet's tea gardens, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Paharpur's archaeological sites. Such distribution is impossible to achieve through manufacturing alone. Tourism creates jobs across skill levels. A tourist doesn't just book a hotel; they eat at restaurants, hire guides, purchase handicrafts, and support entire supply chains. If Bangladesh attracted just five million international tourists annually, at an average spend of \$1,000 per visit, you're looking at \$5 billion in direct foreign revenue. Factor in the multiplier effect, and the amount reaches \$15-20 billion in total economic impact.

What's Bangladesh's tourism brand? Most foreigners couldn't tell because we haven't created one. Every tourist choosing Phuket over Cox's Bazar represents lost revenue. Every cultural enthusiast visiting Angkor Wat instead of our ancient Buddhist sites is foreign currency we'll never

see. The longer we delay in reversing this situation, the harder it becomes. Tourists going elsewhere build loyalty to competing destinations. Hotel chains investing in Vietnam and Thailand aren't investing here. International airlines adding routes to Colombo and Kathmandu aren't adding routes to Dhaka. The first-mover advantage is lost.

But here lies the paradox: we can't attract tourists without resilience, and we can't justify resilience investments without tourists. We must solve both simultaneously. As one of the planet's most climate-vulnerable nations, Bangladesh's tourism assets sit on the frontlines of rising sea levels and intensifying cyclones. Without resilience, our natural treasures will disappear along with potential tourism revenue. But resilience isn't just about absorbing the shocks of disasters. It's about creating consistent, reliable experiences that build confidence.

What should we do then? First, build world-class green infrastructure: solar-powered resorts, rainwater harvesting, and zero-waste hotels aren't just survival tools; they're also marketing advantages. Second, revolutionise accessibility: implement visa-on-arrival for key markets, improve flight connectivity, upgrade roads to tourist destinations, and train hospitality workers to international standards. Third, launch aggressive international marketing: hire world-class branding agencies, leverage social media influencers, and sponsor travel documentaries. Create a compelling national brand positioning Bangladesh as South Asia's undiscovered gem.

Fourth, diversify the tourism product: over-concentration in Cox's Bazar or the Sundarbans limits appeal

and increases vulnerability. Our rivers offer significant cruise potential. Currently, Mughal and colonial-era heritage sites remain feloniously underutilised. The Chittagong Hill Tracts could rival any rival adventure destination. Sylhet's tea gardens offer Instagram-perfect landscapes. So, appeal to different segments—beach lovers, culture enthusiasts, adventure seekers, eco-tourists. Fifth, empower local communities to deliver authentic experiences that international tourists crave, while building natural resilience. And sixth, create professional crisis management systems through digital mapping of vulnerable zones, early-warning protocols, a top-class crisis response, etc.

The UN recognises tourism resilience as a "cross-cutting" issue spanning infrastructure, environment, governance, and social equity. But we must add economic urgency to this equation. Tourism isn't just about resilience; it's also about growth, diversification, and foreign currency earnings. Our delay in this regard only compounds our disadvantage. It is true that persistent political instability and security concerns in the country may put off many potential visitors, but this again reflects a policy failure that can, and must, be addressed.

The tourism boom is sweeping Asia, and it's happening without us. We can continue our narrow economic dependence while our competitors capture the tourism windfall, or we can finally commit to making tourism a pillar of national prosperity. The choice will determine whether the "land of six seasons" becomes a must-visit destination generating billions or whether it remains neglected and underutilised.