



RUMEEN FARHANA

In the final 10 days, you are forced to spend at least Tk 10 lakh every day just to keep the campaign alive. You cannot even ask where the money goes or whether it reaches voters.



TASLIMA AKTER

At the end of the day, political parties legislate in Parliament and shape the path and policies of the state. Yet the mindset within these parties is still not conducive enough for meaningful participation by women.



TASNIM JARA

We might have female MPs, but are they in the decision-making seats? No. The number of women may be an 'convenient metric' to track, but it does not reflect where real power actually lies.



NABILA TASNID

In clusters of joint families, a male mediator approaches political leaders saying, 'I have 10 NIDs' or 'I can supply 20 votes'.... The women don't even know their identities are being sold.



MEGHNA ALAM

I am a survivor of state repression. The conspiracy and false case against me were engineered by the state. My opponent has over 200 cases -- yet the media focus only on my supposed 'crimes'.



HABIBA AKTER CHOWDHURY

We went to the Election Commission with videos of our sisters being attacked on the streets. We were met with chilling indifference. If we must run to local authorities for everything, why is the commission there?



TANIA HAQUE

We try to fight our battles in the political arena, but the real battlefield should be the home. Family is the root. When we talk about family policy, it should begin with how we raise children.

Men, money and muscle still guard the gates of politics

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systemic muscle power, and coordinated digital warfare.

"We use the number of women in Parliament as a 'convenient metric,' but it measures presence, not power," said Tasnim Jara, who was an independent candidate for Dhaka-9. She argued that while parties aggressively court the female electorate -- who comprise 51 percent of voters -- they remain fundamentally resistant to allowing women into the "backrooms" where real decisions are made.

This "calculated erasure" is reinforced by what gender specialist Dr Tania Haque, professor of the women and gender studies department at Dhaka University, described as a "toxic masculinity" that weaponises misinformation.

"Our society is conditioned to view women as liabilities rather than leaders," she noted, pointing to a persistent narrative that "decent girls don't do politics."

As Bangladesh navigates its post-uprising transition, these candidates warn that the "July Spirit" will remain unfulfilled until the political parties' "Mother-Sister" trope is replaced by genuine political agency, they said.

THE 'MASTAN' PHENOMENON
Candidates argued that Bangladeshi politics equates leadership with physical aggression, rebranding criminality as an asset while dismissing feminine traits as inherent weaknesses.

They noted that this culture of "muscle power" creates a formidable barrier, measuring political viability through dominance rather than merit.

"When we imagine a hero, the image of a man still flashes before our eyes," said Taslima Akter, a Gonosamhati Andolon candidate for Dhaka-12, highlighting how societal expectations and party biases define

women by appearance and demeanour rather than capability.

Meghna Alam, independent candidate for Dhaka-8, exposed a stark double standard: while she faced scrutiny for what she described as a single politically motivated case, her opponent was lauded for having over 200. "People said, 'He is a mafia boss? That's exactly who we need,'" she recalled, noting that society often views a "mastan" (thug) or arrogance as the only source of protection.

"Almost always, if a man is beaten, he is a survivor; if a woman is harassed, society asks, 'Why was she there?'"

Nabila Tasnid, a National Citizen Party candidate for Dhaka-20, described the persistent barriers within party structures.

"Women are constantly forced to re-prove their qualifications," she said, pointing to internal resistance where some partners of the Jamaat-led II party alliance, which the NCP joined, refused to campaign under female leadership, costing her thousands of votes.

She said religious narratives and misinformation further marginalise women in rural constituencies, leaving female candidates fighting not only for electoral success but also for basic recognition as capable leaders.

"While many supported me, a significant segment was adamant that they would neither vote for a woman nor campaign for one. These prejudices remain deeply entrenched in our society."

To survive this, Barrister Rumeen Farhana, a member of parliament who contested independently and won in Brahmanbaria-2, described a publicised "outburst" against a biased administration as a strategic shield.

"Had I remained 'polite,' I would have lost 50 percent of my votes. I had to show my workers I could protect them... I had to be a 'mastan' when it

was needed."
WHEN MONEY TALKS
Candidates reported that despite legal spending ceilings, Bangladeshi elections remain a "money game" of financial attrition that structurally excludes women.

Rumeen described the process as "straight-up vote-buying", noting that contesting effectively for less than several crores is impossible.

"Beyond legalities, we see systemic bribery through direct cash or gifts like soap or oil to voters' homes... The scale is staggering."

She revealed that in the final ten days, she had to spend Tk 10 lakh daily, while opponents spent triple that amount.

On the gendered nature of political investment, the MP added that investment follows expected profit.

"Investors back those they believe will win, while confidence in a female candidate is often absent from herself, her family, society, and the business community."

In this battle of capital, a woman begins the race already handicapped, she said.

Nabila also noted that "investors" prioritise financial returns over ethics, allowing wealthy male candidates to exploit the economic vulnerability of voters.

"This creates an unequal playing field where women are sidelined by the sheer volume of 'black money'." Jara identified this as the "elephant in the room" -- a rigged system that protects the status quo.

"If rules are just decorative and the real game is played with off-the-books money, how do you compete honestly?"

She argued that the system is designed to keep newcomers out, calling for a "cross-partisan commitment" to return people -- not money and muscle -- to the centre of

politics.
THE PENALTY FOR COMPLIANCE
Candidates highlighted a paradox: the administration often penalises rule-followers while allowing violators to thrive.

Jara described the system as skewed.

"If there are no consequences for breaking rules, what is the incentive to comply? Rules regarding decibel limits or posters are violated openly because the rewards for breaking the law outweigh the risks."

Nabila also recounted following the 20 billboard limit precisely, only to see her opponent exceed it in a single union.

When she complained, authorities told her to document the violations herself -- a reflection of systemic bias favouring wealth and influence.

Rumeen highlighted a partisan administration that ignored formal complaints while her opponent engaged in hate speech and personal attacks.

"When the state apparatus shows a step-motherly attitude, the law is reduced to a tool used only against the weak."

"Where is the neutrality when even a UNO [upazila nirbahi officer] visits localities to solicit votes for a major party?"

Dr Habiba Akhtar Chowdhury, member of Central Working Council and campaigner of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, reported 13-14 documented cases of physical assaults on female party workers.

"We went to the Election Commission with videos of our sisters being attacked on the streets. We were met with a 'chilling indifference'. We were heated with urgency; they were cold."

When they demanded action, the commission simply redirected them to local authorities.

"If we have to go to local authorities for everything, why is the Election Commission even there?"

IDENTITY AS COMMODITY
The candidates also highlighted how economic dependence and low literacy reduce female voters to a "silent vote bank."

"Despite comprising 52pc of the electorate, women in areas like Dhamrai remain politically invisible," Nabila said, describing men openly "trading" women's National ID cards, treating them as commodities rather than citizens.

This systemic theft of agency is reinforced by inadequate voter education: many women do not know the candidates and simply follow instructions from husbands, sons, or fathers.

Jara argued that this lack of female representation in decision-making leads to a catastrophic failure in addressing basic human needs -- issues that disproportionately cripple women's lives.

In her constituency, she found that utility crises, such as the chronic shortage of cooking gas, were viewed as peripheral by male leaders but were central to women's survival.

"Systems disproportionately affect women, yet women's political agency is absent from the rooms where decisions are made -- neither in nominations, nor finance committees, nor the cabinet, nor in policy-making. These issues should not just be 'women's burden'; both men and women must treat them as national issues."

This systemic neglect is further masked by what Meghna described as the "charity mask" of political corruption.

"The public often leans toward a 'mafia' candidate because he spends lavishly during festivals -- handing out soap, oil, and blankets.

"The voters often do not stop to think that this money is actually looted or earned unethically. Honest, policy-driven politics is becoming helpless against this manufactured 'charity' image."

THE DIGITAL BATTLEFIELD
Beyond financial and structural barriers, female candidates face a relentless war of coordinated delegitimisation online.

Rumeen, who has endured 15 years of online abuse, calls it a systemic attempt to weaponise women's identities.

"I started politics 15 years ago as a single woman -- an easy target... Now we see AI and deepfakes, but the motive remains the same: character assassination. I may have developed a resistance overtime. But why should every woman be forced to develop such a thick skin against filth?"

She also criticised agencies like the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre, whose effectiveness remains unclear.

Jara added, "For women, it is about coordinated character assassination and delegitimisation... Men are attacked too, but for women, the target is always their personal character. It's subtle and sinister. When these are read or shared at dinner tables, it plants a seed of doubt in voters' minds."

CHANGE STILL POSSIBLE
Despite the "cancerous" systemic inertia described by Nabila -- where parts of society instinctively defend a corrupt system -- there remains an undeniable hunger for reform.

Jara offered a defiant note of hope. "There is an appetite for change. It always seems impossible until it's done. As long as people hold onto the hope that change is possible, the politics of 'money and muscle' will come to an end. The ground is fertile, but we need more agents to act on it."

No surrender

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"In this attack, the American terrorists' air warfare centre, satellite communication centre, early warning radars, and fire control radars were hit," the Guards said in a statement, according to Tasnim news agency.

Dubai airport, the world's busiest for international traffic, briefly suspended all operations yesterday after an aerial interception in the area.

Iran's Guards also said they had targeted the oil tanker Prima in the Gulf as it attempted to cross the narrow Strait of Hormuz, a key chokepoint for global shipping that Iran has effectively closed.

A spokesperson for the Guards yesterday challenged Trump to deploy US naval vessels to escort oil tankers through the strait, warning that they will meet with fatal blows. The US Navy could begin escorting oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz if necessary, Trump said on Tuesday.

At least nine vessels have been attacked since the war began.

Amid the tensions, Saudi Arabia's Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman yesterday urged Iran to "avoid miscalculation". His comment came a day ahead of the meeting of the foreign ministers of the Arab League to discuss Iranian attacks on several of the group's members.

Revolutionary Guards also said they struck three positions of separatist groups in Iraq's Kurdistan region at 4:30am local time. A spokesman for the armed forces warned that if separatist groups in the Kurdistan region took any action against Iran's territorial integrity, "we will crush them."

Earlier reports said the CIA and Israel were preparing Kurdish groups to infiltrate Iran and support efforts to bring about regime change.

On Friday, drones struck airports and oil facilities in Iraq, and the US-led troops shot down several over the Kurdish city of Erbil after a warning of possible attacks on hotels.

Late Friday, Baghdad International Airport, which houses a military base and a US diplomatic facility, "came

under a series of attacks" with drones and missiles, a security official told AFP.

Fire also broke out in offices and warehouses belonging to US firms Halliburton and KBR after a drone attack in Iraq's Basra targeted a compound housing employees of foreign oil companies.

Now in its second week, the war was sparked by joint Israeli and US airstrikes on February 28 that killed Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei and destroyed military, administrative and security infrastructure.

The conflict has since widened to Lebanon, as well as Cyprus in the EU, Turkey and Azerbaijan -- and reached as far as waters off Sri Lanka, where US forces sank an Iranian warship with a torpedo.

Meanwhile, Trump on Friday said major US defence companies have agreed to quadruple production of advanced weapons.

"The largest US defence manufacturing companies" have "agreed to quadruple Production of the 'Exquisite Class' Weaponry," Trump said in a post on Truth Social, referring to advanced, high-precision military hardware.

In another development, the US State Department approved the "emergency" sale of 12,000 bomb casings to Israel. The requested sale of 1,000 pound bomb casings, worth an estimated \$151.8 million, was approved by the State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, according to a press release.

The Iranian health ministry put the civilian death toll at 926 on Friday, with around 6,000 injured -- numbers that AFP could not independently verify. It did not add military casualties.

Israel has also intensified its air strikes on Lebanon, repeatedly striking and ordering the evacuation of Beirut's densely populated southern suburbs, where the Iran-backed militant group Hezbollah holds sway.

Lebanon's health ministry said at least 294 people have been killed in Israeli air strikes. In addition to the toll, 300,000 people in the country had been

DAMAGE TO US MILITARY SITES HIT BY IRAN



BASE IN MANAMA, BAHRAIN, MARCH 1



ALI AL-SALEM BASE, KUWAIT, MARCH 1



WARNING RADER, QATAR, MARCH 3



PRINCE SULTAN BASE, SAUDI ARABIA, MARCH 5

forced to flee their homes, the Norwegian Refugee Council said.

Global stock markets have slumped, while crude oil prices have surged, with analysts warning that there appears to be no clear path to ending a conflict that US and Israeli officials have suggested could last a month or more.

Though Iranian retaliation has been

inflicted widely across the Middle East, US rivals China and Russia have stayed largely out of the fray despite their ties to the Islamic Republic.

Russian President Vladimir Putin voiced support for an "immediate" ceasefire during a phone call with Iranian counterpart Masoud Pezeshkian on Friday, the Kremlin said.

US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said the United States is "not concerned" about reports that Russia is providing intelligence to Iran on US troop positions and movements.

While declining to confirm the reports, Hegseth, in an interview with CBS's "60 Minutes", said: "We're tracking everything."

Eid shopping ends in tragedy

Father, daughter die under truck in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A father and his daughter went out for Eid shopping, but their return home ended in tragedy on Dhaka's streets.

Four people, including a female student and her father, were killed in two road crashes in the capital on Friday night.

In the first incident, Saju Ahmed Sumon, 45, a public works department official, and his only daughter, Sumaiya Ahmed Trisha, 19, died in the Science Laboratory area when a truck ran over their motorcycle around 10:30pm.

Trisha's uncle Ripon Ahmed Shakil said Trisha went out with her father in the evening to buy dresses for Eid.

They first went to a shop at Asad Gate. After searching for a long time, she could not find a dress she liked. She later called her mother and said she had not found anything suitable and that they were heading back home in Shahjahanpur.

Her mother then asked her to buy a pair of shoes from Chourangi on Elephant Road on their way home.

Following that request, the father and daughter were heading towards Elephant Road when the accident occurred.

Shakil said Trisha secured GPA 5 in this year's HSC examinations. As she had studied science, her father wanted her to pursue medicine, and preparations were underway to admit her to a private medical college.

Sub-Inspector Mahmudul Hasan of New Market Police Station said victim Sumon worked at the public works department office in Segunbagicha and the family lived in South Shahjahanpur.

He said Sumon and his daughter were returning home on a motorcycle when a truck hit and ran over the vehicle in front of the mosque near Science Laboratory.

Sumon died on the spot.

Trisha was rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital in critical condition, **SEE PAGE 6 COL. 3**

SOURCE: 2026 PLANET LABS PBC / AFP