Opinion | Bangladesh's Historic Elections Mark Beginning Of A New Era

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The polls mark the beginning of a new era---one of clarity of vision, restructuring of institutions, economic realism and strategic autonomy by adopting balanced national policies

Bangladesh's 13th parliamentary elections held on February 12 were indeed historic, given the turbulent environment and ambivalence on its outcome.

With Sheikh Hasina's Awami League (AL) banned, there were three major parties in the fray: Bangladesh National Party (BNP) chaired by Tarique Rahman (son of former President Khalida Zia and General Ziaur Rehman), Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) headed by Shifkur Rehman and National Citizens Party (NCP) led by convener Nahid Islam, key coordinator of the student-led July 2024 Revolution. It was expected to be a close fight between BNP and JeI. The two parties, incidentally,

had been allies for years. There were 2028 candidates vying for 300 seats with 127 million eligible voters to decide their fate..

The BNP alliance swept the polls, with a grand tally of 212, gaining clear two-third majority. The JeI alliance of 11 parties secured 77 seats, improved its past score almost four times, emerging as a viable opposition. The NCP managed to win barely six seats out of 30 contested. The thumping victory of BNP clearly indicated voters' mandate for the democratic system—a snub to the Jamaat's Islamist ideology and lack of faith in the students-led NCP. It is to the credit of Bangladeshis that they voted overwhelmingly to deliver a decisive a mandate.

The European Union (EU) observers have described Bangladesh parliamentary elections as credible and a remarkable achievement for a democracy.

The elections also included vote on the referendum for the 'July Charter'—a document seeking 84 reform proposals to reshape Bangladesh system of governance. The 'Yes' votes in favour of the referendum were well over 60 per cent. It implies amendments to the Constitution to include setting term limits for the prime minister to hold office, enhancing the powers of judiciary and measures to increase women representations in politics. It is seen a victory for the students who had demanded inclusive democracy.

During first press conference on February 14 ahead of the swearing-in ceremony, Rahman called for all to remain united, dedicating his party's victory to those who 'sacrificed for democracy'. Reaching out to the opposition leaders, he said: "Our paths and opinion may differ, but in the interest of the country, we must remain united". In a reconciliatory gesture, Rahman also met JeI and NCP heads.

The BNP has returned to power after nearly two decades and on February 17, Rahman was sworn as the 11th prime minister of Bangladesh, along with 50 cabinet ministers. Interestingly, the BNP's elected parliamentarians did not take the second oath to implement the referendum. The new

government has its job cut—to fulfil promises which include strengthening democracy, improvement of law and order, reduction of corruption and provisioning of greater opportunities.

Rahman, who returned from England on the eve of elections after a 17-year exile, carries the past baggage of corruption allegations and running a parallel power centre when his mother was the prime minister. He will have to demonstrate his commitments to win the trust of public. Revamping the demoralised police force and ensuring security of the minorities need to be addressed on highest priority. While the election verdict has been against the Islamist parties, yet pressure from the conservative religious groups remains. Economy is another major challenge as inflation and unemployment have eroded public patience. The country's garment and textile sector, which underpins exports and employment, faces disruption and competition. With the recent trade deal with US, the likely relief will ameliorate the current situation to some extent.

With regard to the foreign policy, Rahman has stressed that he will prioritise national interest and people's welfare. His 'Bangladesh First' policy aims to balance ties with regional powers such as India, US, China and Pakistan. The PM's statement "No Pindi-No Dilli" vindicates this approach. However, during the last 18 months under the Muhammad Yunus administration, there has been significant reset of ties between Dhaka and Islamabad, especially military. Beijing has also further deepened its engagement with Dhaka. China has committed an investment of around $ 38 billion of which almost $ 7 billion have already been utilised in major infrastructure projects, as part of the 'Belt Road Initiative' (BRI). Even during his farewell speech, Yunus made provocative remarks about India's Northeastern region. Hence, the BNP government is unlikely to make major shift and will continue to lean towards Beijing and Islamabad. Moreover, Bangladesh Army, which traditionally has maintained close ties with BNP, would ensure maintenance of status quo.

Given the past trend, during the BNP's rule, Delhi-Dhaka relations remained in a state of flux, in typical 'blow hot-blow cold' mode. Recently, both sides made efforts towards rapprochement. India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had a meeting with Rahman before the elections and even attended Khaleda Zia's funeral. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the first to convey

felicitations on BNP's victory. Speaker Om Birla attended the swearing-in ceremony of the new government and presented PM Modi's personal congratulatory letter and invite to the newly elected PM during their brief meeting.

Under the new dispensation, Dhaka is expected to pursue more transactional and sovereignty conscious policy towards Delhi. The BNP leadership is well aware that allowing Bangladesh territory to be used against India for cross-border militancy will invite retribution and heavy price. Rahman's government is expected to address issues like border management, civilian casualties and water sharing with India by adopting an assertive approach.

The 2026 Bangladesh elections mark not merely change of government but a potential turning point; a structural shift in the nation's political trajectory. While the scale of mandate confers legitimacy, it also imposes heavy responsibility on the government for a major course correction—fraught with risks but high on possibilities. It marks the beginning of a new era—one of clarity of vision, restructuring of institutions, economic realism and strategic autonomy by adopting balanced national policies.

The author is a Bangladesh War Veteran; former Assistant Chief, and currently Professor Strategic and International Relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the writer. They do not necessarily reflect News18's views.