

B'desh election in 2025-end or early '26: Yunus

Claims restoring democratic institutions is necessary for calling general elections

DHAKA

BANGLADESH'S interim leader Muhammad Yunus said on Monday that general elections would be held late next year or in early 2026.

Pressure has been growing on Yunus to set a date.

The 84-year-old microfinance pioneer is leading a temporary administration to tackle what he has called the "extremely tough" challenge of restoring democratic institutions in the country.

"Election dates could be fixed by the end of 2025 or the first half of 2026," he said in a broadcast on state television.

Yunus has launched commissions to oversee a raft of reforms he says are needed, and setting an election date depends on what political parties agree.

"Throughout, I have emphasised that reforms should take place first before the arrangements for an election," he said. "If the political parties agree to hold the election on an earlier date with minimum reforms, such as having a flawless voter list, the election could be held... by the end of 2025," he added.

But including the full list of electoral reforms would delay polls by a few months, he said. Key among the reforms need-

ed is an updated voter list, a "complex" challenge after years of turbulent democratic processes, requiring both the stripping of false names from lists, alongside registering first time voters in a rapidly growing youth population, he said.

Yunus said he dreamed of "ensuring 100% voter turnout" in polls. "If this can be achieved, no government will ever dare to strip citizens of their voting rights again," he said.

Bangladesh last held general elections in January when Hasina celebrated victory -

in a poll denounced as neither free nor fair and boycotted by rivals after a crackdown during which thousands of opposition party members were arrested.

Former opposition groups, such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), are now rebuilding after years of repression under Hasina.

Yunus has said his administration is also focused on ensuring those guilty of abuses during the past government face justice, including issuing a warrant for Hasina's arrest.

Hasina, 77, fled by helicopter to neighbouring India on August 5 as thousands of protesters stormed the prime minister's palace in Dhaka.

Gaza hostage deal closer than ever: Def minister

JERUSALEM

DEFENCE Minister Israel Katz reportedly told Knesset lawmakers on Monday that Israel is "closer than ever" to closing a deal with Hamas to free the hostages held in Gaza, bolstering Arab media reports of heavy optimism on the chances for an agreement in the coming weeks, The Times of Israel reported.

Katz's comments to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee were made behind closed doors but leaks of his remarks were reported widely in the Hebrew press.

"Israel is closer than ever to another hostage deal," Katz was quoted as saying. He added that the less said the better, echoing comments made by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday after he discussed



People inspect the damage following Israeli strikes on the UNRWA-run school housing displaced families in Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip on Monday | AFP

with US President-elect Donald Trump the ongoing efforts to free the abductees being held by Hamas in Gaza.

giving scant details: "The less we talk about it, the better - that way, with God's help, we will succeed."

Katz also predicted that the deal on the table would be backed by most of the coalition and should not face internal obstacles, according to the Walla news site.

He seemingly indicated that the deal would not include an open-ended halt to hostilities, a measure sought by Hamas but opposed by many in Netanyahu's hard-right coalition.

"There's flexibility on the other side. They understand we're not going to end the war," he was quoted as saying, in the latest indication that the sides may be moving closer toward a deal to free the hostages kidnapped during Hamas's October 7, 2023, massacre and stop the fighting.

Rescuers race against time as hundreds feared dead in Mayotte's worst cyclone

CAPE TOWN

FRANCE was rushing help by ship and military aircraft to its poor overseas territory of Mayotte in the Indian Ocean on Monday after the island was shattered by its worst storm in nearly a century.

Authorities in Mayotte fear hundreds and possibly thousands of people have died in Cyclone Chido, although the official death toll on Monday morning stood at 14. Rescue teams and medical personnel have been sent to the island off the east coast of Africa from France and from the nearby French territory of Reunion, as well as tons of supplies.

French television station TF1 reported Monday morning that Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau had arrived in Mamoudzou, the capital of Mayotte. "It will take days and days to establish the human toll," he told French media.

French authorities said more than 800 more personnel were expected to arrive in the coming



This undated photo provided by NGO Medecins du Monde on Sunday shows a devastated hill on Mayotte | AP

days as rescuers comb through the devastation caused by Chido when it hit the densely populated archipelago of around 300,000 people on Saturday.

Mayotte Prefect Fran'ois-Xavier Bieuvreille, the top French government official in Mayotte, told local TV station Mayotte la Iere on Sunday that the death toll was several hundred people and could even be in the thousands.

He said Mayotte's poor slums of metal shacks and other informal structures had suffered terrible damage and authorities were struggling to get an accurate count of the dead and injured after the worst cyclone to hit Mayotte since the 1930s.

Entire neighbourhoods have been flattened, while the main airport and hospital have been badly damaged.

MUJIB IGNORED IN VICTORY DAY EVENT

Dhaka: Yunus on Monday led Bangladesh in marking its 54th Victory Day. However his speech made no mention of founding leader Mujibur Rahman while calling his daughter Sheikh Hasina's administration the "world's worst autocratic government".

"Bijoy Dibosh" commemorates the Pakistan military's surrender to Indian forces and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. 'Bangabandhu' Mujibur Rahman is seen as the independence movement's iconic figure. The authorities earlier announced to phase out the currency notes currently in circulation. The new ones will not carry his image. PTI

Sr UK clergyman faces calls to quit over handling of priest abuse claims

LONDON



Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell

THE senior clergyman who is due to take temporary charge of the Church of England faced calls to resign on Monday over his handling of the case of a priest accused of sexual misconduct.

The BBC reported that Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell let a priest remain in his post despite knowing he had been barred by the church from being alone with children and had paid compensation to one of his accusers.

The case occurred when Cottrell was bishop of Chelmsford in eastern England. He is now the second-most senior bishop in the Church of England. He is due to take over next month as the church's spiritual head from Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, who resigned in November over the way he handled separate sexual abuse claims.

Cottrell said in a statement that he had faced a "horrible and intolerable" situation over the priest, David Tudor.

"I suspended David Tudor from office at the first opportunity, when a new victim came forward to the police in 2019," he said. "Up until 2019, there were no legal grounds to take alternative action."

Tudor was eventually fired by the church and barred for life from the ministry in October after acknowledging he had sexual relationships with two teenage girls, aged 15 and 16, in the 1980s.

"I am deeply sorry that we were not able to take action earlier, but that was the situation I inherited," Cottrell said. "It is extremely disappointing that this story is being reported as if it was an abuser being ignored or even protected. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth." Bishop of Newcastle Helen-Ann Hartley said Cottrell lacked the "credibility or moral authority" to be the church's figurehead.

TRUDEAU'S NO 2 QUILTS CABINET AFTER FREEBIE DISAGREEMENT

TORONTO

CANADIAN Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's most powerful and loyal minister, announced on Monday she was resigning from the Cabinet as Trudeau struggles with declining popularity. The move stunned the country and raised questions about how much longer Trudeau can stay in his job.

Freeland, who also was deputy prime minister, said Trudeau had told her Friday that he no longer wanted her to serve as finance minister and that he offered her another role in the Cabinet. But she said in her resignation letter to the prime minister that the only "honest and viable path" was to leave the Cabinet. "For the past

number of weeks, you and I have found ourselves at odds about the best path forward for Canada," Freeland said. Freeland and Trudeau disagreed about a two-month sales tax holiday and \$250 Canadian (US\$175) checks to Canadians that were recently announced.

Freeland said Canada is dealing with US President-elect Donald Trump's threat to impose sweeping 25% tariffs and should eschew "costly political gimmicks" it can "ill afford."

"Our country is facing a grave challenge," Freeland said in the letter. "That means keeping our fiscal powder dry today, so we have the reserves we may need for a coming tariff war." Trudeau has said he plans on leading the Liberal Party into the next election.

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EXPRESS READ

German chancellor loses confidence vote

Berlin: Chancellor Olaf Scholz lost a confidence vote in the German parliament on Monday, putting the country on course to hold an early election in February. Scholz won the support of 207 lawmakers in the 733-seat lower house, or Bundestag, while 394 voted against him and 116 abstained. That left him far short of the majority of 367 needed to win.