

Several houses torched as tribal groups clash in Manipur's Ukhrul

Twenty houses burnt in arson by Kuki-Zo and Naga community members; people suffer injuries in ensuing violence; Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh appeals for peace and restraint; Deputy CM Losii Dikho visits conflict zone

Rahul Karmakar

GUWAHATI

The Litan Sareikhong area of Ukhrul district in Manipur remained tense on Monday after members of two tribal communities – Kuki-Zo and Naga – torched each other's houses for the second successive day.

A few people were injured in the ensuing violence in the area located between the State's capital, Imphal, and the district headquarters, Ukhrul. Officials said the injured had been admitted to the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences in Imphal.

After meeting them in the hospital, Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh appealed for peace and restraint.

Monday's violence, which made villagers flee to safer places, occurred hours after the district administration enforced prohibitory orders under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita on Sunday evening "until



Security personnel deployed after suspected militants allegedly torched houses in Ukhrul district of Manipur on Monday. PTI

further orders".

Ukhrul's District Magistrate, Asish Das, said people from both communities torched five or six houses on Sunday. "The fire spread due to a strong wind, and 20 houses were burnt," he said.

Losii Dikho, one of Manipur's two Deputy Chief Ministers, visited the conflict zone along with local MLA Ram Muivah and his Saikul counterpart Kimneo Hangshing Haokip. They

held a meeting with leaders of the civil society organisations of the two communities for the restoration of peace.

However, violence resumed soon after the meeting and "unidentified miscreants" set fire to eight houses.

"The affected families and other villagers moved to the houses of their relatives elsewhere, fearing more trouble," Mr. Das said, adding that the situa-

CM assures Kuki-Zo people safety in Imphal

The Hindu Bureau

GUWAHATI

In an effort to rebuild confidence between Kuki-Zo and Meiteis, Manipur Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh on Monday said that the State government would ensure the safety of Kuki-Zo people visiting Imphal.

He said this while flagging off the work to strengthen a major stretch of National Highway 137A, which connects Imphal with Kakching.

"Adequate security will be provided to members of the Kuki-Zo community who wish to visit Imphal for various purposes, including medical treatment," Mr. Singh said.

Tangkhul man on Saturday night.

The situation escalated the following afternoon when Naga villagers approached the chief of Litan Sareikhong village and demanded that the culprits be produced before them.

A few people, including a police officer, were injured in stone pelting that evening. An arson attack followed, during which members of an armed group allegedly fired shots.

Delhi Police to probe 'leak' of former Army chief's book

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

Delhi Police has taken cognisance of a pre-print copy of the book, *Four Stars of Destiny*, authored by former Chief of Army Staff General M.M. Naravane, being circulated online, according to an official statement issued on Monday. The police have registered an FIR and taken up probe into the purported leak. According to the police statement, it was also reported that the necessary clearance for publication of this book is yet to be received from the relevant authorities.

“Penguin Random House India would like to clarify that we hold the sole publishing rights for the book *Four Stars of Destiny*,” the publishing house stated, adding that the “book has not gone into publication” and any copies in circulation constitute an infringement of its copyright.

Opposition mulls motion to remove Speaker Birla

Denying Rahul an opportunity to speak, suspension of MPs, allegations against women members among reasons cited; Opposition can bring motion, but it doesn't have the numbers, says Rijiju

Sandeep Phukan

NEW DELHI

Opposition parties belonging to the Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) are considering moving a no-confidence motion against Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, accusing him of acting in a partisan manner and denying Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi the opportunity to speak during the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President for her Address to the joint sitting of Parliament.

The move is also based on the suspension of eight Opposition MPs from the Lok Sabha, the alleged failure to initiate action against BJP MP Nishikant Dubey for objectionable remarks against former Prime Ministers and the "unsubstantiated" charges against the women MPs. The decision was taken at a meeting at the Parliament office of Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge.

Reacting to reports of a possible resolution, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said that while the Opposition is free to bring such a motion in a parliamentary democracy, it lacks the numbers to carry it through. "They can bring [the no confidence motion], but the issue is they [the opposition] have



Voicing out: Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra with suspended party MPs staging a protest in New Delhi on Monday. PTI

insulted the institution of the Honourable Speaker. They climbed onto the table of the Chair, table of officers and stormed the Speaker's chamber," he said.

Under Article 94(c) of the Constitution, a Lok Sabha member may give a written notice of intention to move a resolution for the removal of the Speaker to the Secretary-General, with at least 14 days' notice.

Over 100 MPs, including those from the Congress, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Samajwadi Party, are said to have signed such a notice, said a source. However, Congress MP K. C. Venugopal said, "I

can't comment on reports. Wait for action."

Efforts to break the parliamentary logjam continued, with a delegation of senior Opposition leaders, including Mr. Gandhi, calling on Mr. Birla to convey their grievance that the House is being "run one-sided". When Mr. Birla told them that it was their right to bring a notice against him, the Opposition leaders said that they wanted the House to function, but insisted on his action on four specific points.

Mr. Gandhi was accompanied by Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, Trinamool Congress leader Abhishek Banerjee, and DMK MP T.R. Baalu.

The Trinamool wants to raise the issue of the SIR, while the SP plans to discuss the alleged vandalism of the statue of Malwa queen Ahilyabai Holkar.

However, the stand-off between the Union government and the Opposition continued, with proceedings in the Lok Sabha remaining paralysed on Monday. A discussion on the Budget, which was listed for the day, could not be taken up due to repeated disruptions.

Mr. Gandhi wanted to raise a few issues before his colleague Shashi Tharoor could speak on the Budget but he was not allowed, leading to protests and adjournments.

Opposition MPs continue protests over Rahul issue, trade deal; walk out of RS

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Opposition staged a walkout in the Rajya Sabha on Monday, protesting against developments in the Lok Sabha where Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi could not finish his speech during a debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President for her Address to the joint sitting.

The Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge, sought to raise the issue at the start of the day's proceedings. He referred to Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal addressing the press on the interim India-U.S. trade deal instead of making a statement in Parliament.

Mr. Kharge attempted to raise the matter again at noon, at the beginning of the Question Hour. Chairman C.P. Radhakrishnan allowed him to speak but cautioned him against referring to proceedings in the other House.

"I am only raising issues concerning the Constitution. Parliament consists of our House and Lok Sabha... and the Constitution recognises these two Houses. We have to run according to procedures and rules," Mr. Kharge said, before adding that the Leader of Opposition in the Lower House was "not being allowed to speak".

Mr. Radhakrishnan, ho-



Congress leaders Mallikarjun Kharge and Sonia Gandhi and other MPs protest in the Rajya Sabha on Monday. SANSAD TV

wever, interjected, reminding Mr. Kharge of his earlier ruling, where he had cited former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's suggestion that proceedings of one House should not be discussed in the other. He then proceeded with the Question Hour.

'Insulting women MPs'

However, Mr. Kharge and other Opposition leaders continued to stand in their seats, demanding that they be allowed to speak. As the Chairman did not relent, Opposition MPs raised slogans, accusing the ruling BJP of insulting women MPs. MPs of all the INDIA bloc parties, except the Trinamool Congress, were on their feet.

After raising slogans for a while, the Opposition MPs staged a walkout from the House, and the Question Hour continued.

The Lok Sabha has witnessed repeated disrupt-

tions since February 3 after Mr. Gandhi was disallowed by the Chair from quoting from an article based on excerpts from former Army chief M.M. Naravane's unpublished memoir, which refers to the India-China conflict of 2020. Eight Opposition MPs have since been suspended from the House.

Later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stayed away from proceedings amid allegations that some women MPs could have attacked him.

On February 5, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla said he had "concrete information" that many Congress members might move towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi's seat and carry out "some unexpected act", following which he requested the Prime Minister not to come to the House to reply to the debate on the Motion of Thanks.

Misri doesn't refute U.S. claims, says 'national interests' guide oil imports

Suhasini Haidar

Sobhana K. Nair

NEW DELHI

India's oil imports will be guided by "national interests", Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri said on Monday, but did not refute U.S. President Donald Trump's claim that India has committed to stopping buying Russian oil.

Mr. Misri's statement came even as the government prepared to brief MPs about the trade deals finalised with the European Union and the U.S., as well as on trade ties with Bangladesh.

A notice sent out on Monday said that the External Affairs Ministry will brief the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, chaired by Congress leader Shashi



Our approach is to maintain multiple sources of supply and diversify them as appropriate to ensure stability

VIKRAM MISRI

Foreign Secretary

Tharoor, on Tuesday.

"What I can firmly and confidently say is that whether it is the government or indeed our business [sector], at the end of the day, national interests will be the guiding factor for us in our choices," Mr. Misri told presspersons at a briefing meant to discuss Seychelles President Patrick Herminie's visit to India.

Mr. Misri said that the key drivers of India's energy policy are "adequate

availability, fair pricing, and reliability of supply", calling it a "rather complex matrix of issues".

However, he did not respond or comment directly on the U.S. President's Executive Order issued on Friday that, while cancelling punitive 25% tariffs on India, said that India had already begun to stop buying Russian oil, and threatened to resume the tariffs if India buys more.

"Our approach is to maintain multiple sources

of supply and diversify them as appropriate to ensure stability. Therefore, I would say that the more diversified we are in this area, the more secure we are," Mr. Misri added.

Falling imports

While nearly 25% of India's oil imports are still being sourced from Russia, India is expected to raise its imports from other countries including the U.S. and Venezuela. As *The Hindu* reported last week, India's purchases of Russian oil were down to a 38-month low in December 2025, and a number of news agencies confirmed on Monday that India's major refiners Indian Oil, Bharat Petroleum, and Reliance Industries have so far avoided advance orders for the month of April entirely.

Trade framework gives India room to navigate but tilts ground in US favour

THE LINE between pragmatism, giving in to the art of the possible, and abdication, abandoning judgement, accountability, or principle, is very thin. The Indo-US framework agreement on trade is a case in point.

Public discourse, of course, is dominated by the theatre of the agreement, presenting it as loud declamations of India's power and the Prime Minister's wisdom. But two framings undergird its defence. The first is the triumphalist America lobby, which believes that India's future is hitched to the United States. It sees this as a new strategic breakthrough, a deepening embrace from which neither side will be able to escape.

The second is the economic pragmatists. The agreement is better than the status quo. It removes Russia-related punitive tariffs. It gives India renewed access to the US market, potentially restoring competitiveness for Indian exports. It may consolidate India's trajectory toward openness and allow a China-plus-one strategy to come back into play. As a bonus, it might even induce reforms, shaking up entrenched positions on GMOs and non-food agriculture. How all this plays out is anyone's guess. There is no detailed agreement yet, and its success will depend as much on domestic reforms, competitor behaviour, and the evolution of Sino-US relations as on anything written on paper.

But even if we acknowledge that the agreement has some pragmatic economic potential, it does not pass the smell test. For starters, this is not a reciprocal free-trade agreement. As Trump has made clear, America is not playing for reciprocal equality; it is playing for imperial domi-

nation. Even on its own terms, the agreement reflects this asymmetry. The new tariff regime is worse for India than what existed before Trump came to power. In a manner reminiscent of 19th-century imperial trade, the tariff structure favours the United States: India cuts tariffs to zero, while the US imposes rates as high as 18 per cent. More astonishing still, India has committed to purchasing \$500 billion worth of American goods over five years. Which free-trade agreement contains a one-way obligation by one party to massively purchase goods from the other?

This commitment can also distort India's policy choices. Purchase targets of this magnitude risk reshaping industrial strategy and building resilience by fiat rather than design. They are also likely to be met only through a major reorientation of defence procurement, with profound strategic consequences. This is not an agreement for free trade and openness, despite the ideologically mystifying language of our economists. It is an agreement for mercantilist extraction, one that increases vulnerability.

Trade is never just about trade. India's strategic abdications are already visible. India's position on the Ukraine war was a classic case of evasion. But being compelled under duress to do what one might have chosen on principle, namely, to stop purchases of Russian oil, is something else altogether.

Does anyone remember when our government proudly declared that no power would be allowed to define India's relations with third countries? That claim now rings hollow. We routinely allow it to happen. The ul-



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

timate repercussions for India-Russia relations will depend on many contingencies, including the outcome of the war in Ukraine. But the blunt truth is already evident: India's relations with other states are increasingly determined not by its own judgement, but by external pressure. We are now putting ourselves formally under surveillance on this score.

As long as both India and America remain open societies, the organic sinews of connection between them can be powerful. These connections are real, and they matter. But they should not be confused with strategic alignment at the level that counts for national security.

The designs and political economy of the American state are something else altogether. The United States does not see India as a strategic partner in the arenas that matter most to India's security, its immediate neighbourhood. On Pakistan, Washington has repeatedly subordinated Indian concerns to short-term American objectives, and will continue to do so. Historically, the United States has frequently had an interest in managing, rather than resolving, regional conflict, keeping them below the threshold of explosion while retaining leverage over all parties.

Even on China, the supposed cornerstone of Indo-US convergence, the jury remains out. The United States' primary objective is not to secure India's rise, but to manage China's power on terms favourable to itself. India figures in this strategy less as an autonomous pole and more as an instrument, useful when pressure is needed, dispensable when expedient. The history of great-power politics suggests that such instru-

mental alignments are reversible, and often abruptly so. To call this agreement a strategic breakthrough is a gross abuse of language.

Liberal internationalist wars in the name of democracy promotion have indeed receded. But this should not be mistaken for a retreat from imperial power. What has replaced them is a more arbitrary and transactional assertion of dominance, one that relies on sanctions, tariffs, regulatory coercion, financial leverage and even military intervention. The United States increasingly demands regulatory conformity even in domains that ought to fall squarely within domestic jurisdiction: Regulatory regimes, trade standards, data regimes. In its engagement with others, sovereignty is not denied in principle, but hollowed out in practice.

American agreements are no longer anchored in stable institutional commitments. The framework agreement reflects this reality. Formally, it gives both sides room to renegotiate. Substantively, however, it embeds asymmetries that favour American leverage. Recent experience has shown that when pressure is applied, it is India that blinks.

Acknowledging power asymmetry is realism. To internalise it so completely that one relinquishes independent judgement is something else. We might want to, in the name of pragmatism, give in; we could even make the best of this deal in a way that the consequences are not bad. But this is not a triumph. The perfume of official announcements cannot disguise the stench of our own diminishment.

The writer is contributing editor,
The Indian Express

India and Greece agree to strengthen defence industrial cooperation in five-year road map

Saurabh Trivedi

NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh held a bilateral meeting with Greece's Minister of National Defence, Nikolaos-Georgios Dendias, in New Delhi on Monday.

The meeting focused on strengthening defence cooperation under the India-Greece Strategic Partnership.

According to the Defence Ministry, both Ministers reiterated that the partnership was rooted in shared values of peace, stability, freedom, and mutual respect. They agreed



Defence Minister Rajnath Singh with Greek counterpart Nikolaos Georgios S. Dendias in Delhi on Monday. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

to expand the capacities of their indigenous defence industries by aligning India's Aatmanirbhar Bharat

initiative with Greece's defence reforms under Agenda 2030.

A Joint Declaration of In-

tent on strengthening defence industrial cooperation was signed, marking the beginning of work on a five-year road map. The two sides also exchanged a Bilateral Military Cooperation Plan for 2026, outlining future military engagements between the armed forces of both countries, the Ministry added.

Peace, security

The discussions covered regional peace and security, with both leaders acknowledging the steady deepening of bilateral defence cooperation and strategic ties. Convergence on key

maritime issues was highlighted, reflecting the shared outlook of the two ancient seafaring nations.

The Greek side announced the deployment of a Greek International Liaison Officer at the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram, underlining enhanced maritime cooperation.

Earlier in the day, Mr. Dendias laid a wreath at the National War Memorial and paid homage to fallen soldiers. He also inspected a Tri-Service Guard of Honour at the Manekshaw Centre.

Muslim nations protest as Israel tightens grip on West Bank

Stanly Johny

Israel's security cabinet has approved new measures aimed at easing Jewish settlements in the West Bank and tightening Tel Aviv's control over the occupied Palestinian territory. Eight Muslim majority countries, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan, have condemned the move "in the strongest terms".

The rules "are intended to remove decades-old barriers, repeal discriminatory Jordanian legislation, and enable accelerated development of settlement on the ground," Defence Minister Israel Katz and Fi-

nance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said in a joint statement.

The new measures include declassifying land registries in the West Bank so that property list will be open for the public and allowing Jewish individuals to buy land in the Palestinian areas. Until now, Jews could buy land in the West Bank only through companies registered in the area, not individually.

Jews will now be allowed "to purchase land in Judea and Samaria just as they purchase in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem," said the statement, referring to the biblical terminology for the West Bank, Israeli me-



A Palestinian puts on a keffiyeh as an Israeli soldier keeps vigil in Hebron, occupied West Bank

dia reported. Israel will also expand oversight and enforcement activities in Areas A and B of the West Bank, which are partially governed by the Palesti-

nian Authority as per the Oslo Accords. Area C of the West Bank is under full Israel control.

The plan also transfers authority over issuing building permits for Jewish settlements in Hebron from the Hebron Municipality, run by Palestinians, to the Israeli government.

West Bank has witnessed growing number of attacks by settlers on local Arab communities in recent years. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, at least 870 Palestinians, including 177 children, were killed by settlers and the Israeli forces since the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel.

Between October 7, 2023 and January 2026, six entire communities comprising 112 families have been forcibly displaced in the northern Jordan Valley, according to a report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) dated January 19, 2026. "In the same period, 4,037 Palestinians have been displaced due to settler violence across the West Bank."

On Tuesday, the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the UAE, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, Qatar and Egypt condemned the "illegal Israeli decisions and measures aimed

at imposing unlawful Israeli sovereignty, entrenching settlement activity, and enforcing a new legal and administrative reality in the occupied West Bank, thereby accelerating attempts at its illegal annexation and the displacement of the Palestinian people".

The Ministers reaffirmed that Israel has no sovereignty over the West Bank and said Israel's actions "undermine the two-state solution and represent an assault on the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to realise their independent and sovereign state on the 1967 lines with occupied Jerusalem as its capital."

Jimmy Lai locked up for 20 years

James Pomfret
& Jessie Pang
HONG KONG, February 9

HONG KONG'S most vocal China critic, media tycoon Jimmy Lai, was sentenced on Monday to 20 years in jail, ending the city's biggest national security case which drew global concern about Beijing's clampdown on freedoms in the former British colony.

Lai's sentence on two counts of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces and one for publishing seditious materials ends a legal saga that has lasted nearly five years.

The 78-year-old British citizen has denied all the charges against him, saying in court he is a "political prisoner" facing persecution from Beijing.

Lai, founder of the feisty and now shuttered *Apple Daily* newspaper, was first arrested in August 2020 and was convicted last year. His sentence was within the harshest penalty tier for offences of a "grave nature", reflecting the fact that he was the driving force behind "persistent" foreign collusion conspiracies, the three judges said in announcing their verdict.

They cited prosecution evidence that the conspiracies had sought sanctions, blockades and other hostile acts from the U.S. and other countries while involving a web of individuals including *Apple Daily* staff, activists and foreigners. Six former senior *Apple Daily* staffers, an activist and a paralegal were also sentenced to jail terms ranging from six to 10 years.

"In the present case, Lai was no doubt the mastermind of all



Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai, center, who founded the local newspaper *Apple Daily*. FILE/AP

• WHO IS JIMMY LAI?

1981: From a child labourer in a glove factory, Lai transforms himself into a clothing entrepreneur, founding the Giordano casual clothing chain

1989: The Tiananmen Square crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Beijing changes Lai's path. He becomes interested in the media to disseminate information.

1990: Lai breaks into the media world and sets up *Next Magazine*

1993: Lai, a UK citizen, launches *Apple Daily* two years before Hong Kong, then a British colony, is returned to China.

2003: *Apple Daily* distributes posters in support of a major protest against a proposed national security law.

2014: Lai joins pro-democracy protests against proposed electoral reforms that fall short of full democracy.

2019: After demonstrators storm

and vandalize the legislative building on July 1, Lai suggests his newspaper colleagues report on the young protesters' thinking to gain sympathy for them.

2020: Police arrest Lai on suspicion of collusion with foreign forces.

2021: *Apple Daily* is forced to close after authorities arrest top executives and editors, and freeze some of its assets. The final edition sells 1 million copies.

three conspiracies charged and therefore he warrants a heavier sentence," the judges said.

Britain, Australia, the European Union, Japan and Taiwan expressed concerns about the impact of the sentencing.

UN rights chief Volker Turk called for the verdict to be

quashed and for Lai to be released on humanitarian grounds, given his age and health. British foreign minister Yvette Cooper said the verdict was "tantamount to a life sentence" and that London would "rapidly engage further on Mr Lai's case".

A spokesperson for the Chinese embassy in London said they "firmly oppose the UK side's erroneous comments". It urged Britain to "respect China's judicial sovereignty and stop interfering in Hong Kong's rule of law and China's internal affairs". REUTERS

"This highlights how... the provisions of Hong Kong's national security legislation can lead to being interpreted and enforced in violation of international human rights obligations"

VOLKER TURK,
UN HUMAN RIGHTS CHIEF

"The EU calls on the... authorities to restore confidence in press freedom in Hong Kong, one of the pillars of its historic success as an international financial centre, and to stop prosecuting journalists"

EUROPEAN UNION, STATEMENT

"I remain deeply concerned for Mr Lai's health, and I again call on the Hong Kong authorities to end his appalling ordeal and release him on humanitarian grounds..."

YVETTE COOPER, FOREIGN SECRETARY, UNITED KINGDOM

"Canada is disappointed by the sentencing of Hong Kong pro-democracy figure Jimmy Lai to 20 years in jail and is urging for his immediate release on humanitarian grounds"

ANITA ANAND,
FOREIGN MINISTER, CANADA

"It signifies the total destruction of the Hong Kong legal system... After more than five years of relentlessly persecuting my father, it is time for China to do the right thing and release him before it is too late."

SEBASTIEN LAI,
JIMMY LAI'S SON

"In white-washing Lai's criminal acts, Western apologists have resorted to slogan-chanting, turning a blind eye to the irrefutable evidence presented in court by the prosecution.m."

CHINA DAILY, EDITORIAL



Iran continues to clamp down on reformist figures

Associated Press

Dubai, February 9

IRANIAN SECURITY forces have launched a campaign to arrest figures within the country's reformist movement, reports said on Monday.

Th widens a crackdown on dissent after authorities earlier put down nationwide protests in violence that killed thousands and saw tens of thousands more detained.

Detained Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi has received another prison sentence of over seven years. It signals a widening effort to silence anyone opposed to the bloody suppression of unrest by Iran's theocracy as it faces new nuclear talks with the United States. President Donald Trump has repeatedly warned he could launch an attack on the country if no deal is reached.

Media reports quoted officials within the reformist movement, which seeks to change Iran's theocracy from inside, as saying at least four of their members had been arrested. They include Azar Mansouri, the head of the Reformist Front, which represents multiple reformist factions, and former diplomat Mohsen Aminzadeh, who served under reformist President Moham-



Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, one of the student leaders of the 1979 US Embassy takeover. FILE/AP

mad Khatami.

Also detained was Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, who led students who stormed the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979, sparking the 444-day hostage crisis.

Their arrests likely stem from a reformist statement in January that called for Iran's 86-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to resign from his position and have a transitional governing council oversee the country.

Iran's state-run IRNA news agency quoted a statement from prosecutors in Tehran, the country's capital, saying four people had been arrested and others summoned to meet authorities. It accused those allegedly involved of "organising and leading... activities aimed at disrupting the political and social situation in the country amid military threats from the United States and the Zionist regime."

• AS BIGGEST CHALLENGER TO BNP, PARTY SETS EYES ON BEST-EVER PERFORMANCE

From margins to centre stage, Jamaat's new role in Bangladesh's poll battle



EXPRESS AT
DHAKA
Shubhajit Roy
Dhaka, February 9

IN A narrow and congested lane in Moghbazar area of Dhaka is a three-storeyed building next to a small mosque — the headquarters of the Jamaat-e-Islami. Freshly painted yellow, it has new furniture, woodwork and a swanky elevator — a sharp contrast from its ramshackle

condition just about a year-and-a-half ago, when the ban on the party had just been lifted.

Today, the Jamaat-e-Islami office is buzzing with visitors — party workers, journalists, or just people who want to be associated with the party, which is tipped to become a major political force in Bangladesh's political landscape after the February 12 elections.

"Vote for *dari palla*" (balance scale, the party's election symbol) posters and banners can be seen around the streets leading to the office. There are many replicas of the symbol, consisting of a rod with two plastic pans suspended at the

ends, hanging on the streets leading to the Jamaat headquarters as well.

With Sheikh Hasina's Awami League out of the contention in the coming polls, the Jamaat (as it is popularly called in Bangladesh) is emerging as the biggest challenger to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Tarique Rahman, son of the late Khaleda Zia.

While the BNP is widely seen to be the winner, the Jamaat's worst-case scenario is to be the main Opposition party in Bangladesh's Parliament. This is a big turnaround for a party which was banned by Hasina's government and the Bangladesh Elec-



Streets around the Jamaat-e-Islami headquarters in Moghbazar area of Dhaka are festooned with banners seeking votes. SHUBHAJIT ROY

tion Commission, whose leaders were jailed or beaten or detained in the 17 years of Awami League-

rule, and top leaders were sentenced to death for their role in the 1971 war crimes.

From being completely marginalised and struggling for survival, the Islamist party, which espouses religious law to govern the country, is now hoping for its best-ever electoral performance. While the Jamaat's top score was 18 seats in 1991, it was part of the ruling coalition with the BNP in 2001-2006, under then Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, with just 17 seats in Parliament.

This time, the Jamaat is hoping to increase its tally to 30-90 seats of the total 300 seats at stake. Some Jamaat leaders are even claiming that they may win the elections by a narrow margin.

"We are hoping to win the elections by a narrow margin, but if not, we will play the role of a constructive Opposition," said Mir Ahmed bin Quasem, who goes by the nickname of Barrister Arman and is one of the party's young leaders. He was in jail during Hasina's rule, and was released after the collapse of the Awami League government in August 2024. He is now contesting from one of Dhaka's parliamentary seats.

The party's confidence, a year-and-a-half after the student protests toppled the Hasina regime, comes from a range of factors. Primary among these is the victory of its

youth wing, the Chhatra Shibir, in student elections in universities across Bangladesh — seen as a bellwether of the party's changing fortunes.

Sitting outside the Dhaka University's iconic cafeteria, Modhu'r Canteen, associated with various political movements and whose owner was killed during Operation Searchlight in 1971, a group of girls said they have been watching the developments after the Jamaat's youth wing won the campus elections.

"We have seen that they are quite active with helping out students, especially those who

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Jamaat's new role

are in need of financial assistance," said Nahida, a history student at the university.

Another student shared her concern about the possibility of the Jamaat's youth wing imposing a dress code. "Ultimately, it should be the choice of the person concerned, and should not be forced," she said.

In fact, many others, too, voiced concerns about likely restrictions on women if the Ja-

maat wins the coming elections. For instance, the party has proposed five-hour work days for women; many feel this would disincentivise employers from hiring them.

Earlier, Ameer Shafiqur Rahman, the party chief, had said that women would work for five hours but receive wages for eight hours, adding that the employers would pay for five hours, while the government would bear the

wages for the remaining three hours. However, there is no such mention in the party's manifesto which promises "fair opportunities and rights for women".

To assuage concerns, Ahmed, alias Barrister Arman, said: "We are committed to the rule of law and nobody will be discriminated against on the basis of gender or religion".

The party has, strategically, tied up with the National Citizens' Party, which comprises student leaders who were behind the protests that led to Hasina's ouster. But, many feel

they are only strong on social media campaigns, which has influenced Bangladesh's Gen Z. "They appear to be very sophisticated in their social media campaign, but my sense is that they have limited impact and may not be able to dethrone BNP," Kazi Mohammed Mahbubur Rahman, professor of political science at Dhaka University, said.

But, whether as a party in power or in Opposition, the Jamaat-led coalition is expected to play a key role in Bangladesh's politics after 20 years — a possibly more consequential

role than in the five decades of the country's existence.

Meanwhile, over the last few months since the Jamaat outfit came to power in Dhaka University, the famous TSC (teacher student centre), which is the cultural space of the campus, has witnessed a quiet change. A Dhaka University official said the TSC, the nerve centre for cultural activities by different clubs run by students, has hardly hosted any "song and dance programmes", like songs by Rabindranath Tagore or Kazi Nazrul Islam. "We see Qawwali pro-

grammes being organised which have religious undertones, but hardly any song and dance programmes. Earlier, we would have at least one or two programmes a day..., now there are almost none," the official said. At the TSC, posters of the Jamaat outfit and BNP have come up, reflecting the choice of new powers dominating the campus's political and cultural sphere.

But, despite these fears and concerns, the TSC is filled with young couples — with nobody bothering them, at least for now.

Back on track

India and Malaysia have set about repairing ties during the Modi visit

Making amends was at the top of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 24-hour visit to Kuala Lumpur over the weekend after he had cancelled a planned trip to Malaysia last year, at short notice, to attend the ASEAN summit in October 2025. As a result, Mr. Modi said that he made Malaysia his first destination abroad in the new year. His talks with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who had visited India in 2024, resulted in MoUs, with plans to strengthen ties. There was some strain in India-Malaysia ties in 2025 too – although Malaysia condemned the Pahalgam terror attacks, Mr. Ibrahim had called for a “full and thorough enquiry” into the perpetrators and also for “de-escalation and meaningful dialogue between India and Pakistan”, which ruffled feathers in New Delhi. He had even offered his services to mediate if required, and in October 2025, had hosted Pakistan Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif for an official visit. It is, therefore, significant that Mr. Modi set aside these concerns, and that the joint statement said India and Malaysia condemned terrorism unequivocally “... including cross-border terrorism”. India and Malaysia also discussed counter-terrorism cooperation, intelligence and information sharing and coordinating positions at the United Nations and the Financial Action Task Force on the issue. Other important decisions were an MoU on semiconductors, building on cooperation between IIT Madras Global and the Advanced Semiconductor Academy of Malaysia. Building ties in trade, defence, energy and digital technologies were highlighted by the two sides, that took care not to discuss contentious issues publicly, such as the continued stay of preacher Zakir Naik, wanted in India on UAPA charges.

The two sides also side-stepped their differences over multilateral issues. Mr. Modi's decision to skip the ASEAN summit despite accepting the invitation had also dealt a blow to negotiations on reviewing the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA). Critical comments by Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal about the FTA, as “badly negotiated” and “silly”, and his reference to ASEAN countries as “B-teams” to China still rankled. Mr. Modi's visit was an important reminder of India's commitment even as New Delhi moves ahead with FTAs with Europe and the U.S. India will chair the BRICS Summit later this year – in the joint statement, India merely “noted” Malaysia's aspirations to become a member. Mr. Ibrahim will be invited as Malaysia is a BRICS partner country, while Indonesia has become a member. Mr. Modi's visit, which was welcomed warmly by Mr. Ibrahim, may thus lead to closer coordination but also lay the ground for closer ties between India and the ASEAN region, in terms of their shared geographies, and in dealing with the larger changes in the world.