

## Democratic Transition or Political Paralysis: *Assessing the Implications of Electoral Uncertainty in Post-Hasina Bangladesh*

Shamshil Arefin <sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Following the July Revolution, which took place less than a year ago, the interim government took charge of a country suffering from widespread corruption, highly politicized institutions, and a long-standing authoritarian regime that had drained the nation's resources for the past fifteen years. When the interim government came to power in August 2025, Bangladesh was burdened with heavy foreign debt, a complete breakdown of public order, and no genuine democratic transitions in the last three national elections.<sup>2</sup> Despite these serious challenges, the interim administration has made notable progress in stabilizing the situation and improving the country's condition in a relatively short period of time. As part of its commitment to reform, the government formed several commissions to investigate the extent of the damage and to recommend solutions. One of the key goals was to reform Bangladesh's electoral system to ensure that the abuses seen under the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) regime would not be repeated. However, nearly a year later, electoral reforms are still ongoing, and a clear timeline for holding elections has yet to be announced. While several commissions, including the one on electoral reform, have published their findings, the government is still discussing how to implement the

---

<sup>1</sup> Shamshil Arefin is a Research Assistant at Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) He has completed his BSS in International Relations from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

<sup>2</sup> Serajul I. Bhuiyan, "Review of the White Paper on Bangladesh Economy," The Financial Express, December 23, 2024, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/review-of-the-white-paper-on-bangladesh-economy>.

recommendations. Given the fragile and uncertain situation, it is crucial that the interim government provides a clear and credible roadmap for elections, one that ensures the process is fair, timely, and widely supported by the public.

## Bangladesh: Forever A Flawed Democracy

An examination of the history of elections in Bangladesh reveals that the country has rarely, if ever, experienced a smooth and genuine democratic transition. For a significant portion of its post-independence existence, Bangladesh was governed under military rule. The formal restoration of democracy in 1990 marked an important milestone, but the transition itself was far from seamless. Since then, the political landscape of Bangladesh has been overwhelmingly dominated by two major political parties: The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL). No other party has managed to secure a parliamentary majority comparable to these two, resulting in a persistent two-party system.<sup>3</sup> This alternating cycle of power between the BNP and the BAL has created a political environment where the electorate is often left with limited options, effectively choosing between what can be described as “the devil and the deep blue sea.”

Although the national parliamentary elections held in 1991 formally reinstated democratic governance, in practice, democratic norms and values remained largely absent from the behaviour of both ruling and opposition parties. Following 1991, several legislative measures were introduced through ordinances, many of which undermined democratic principles. Scholars such as Hasanuzzaman have described this trend as establishing a “dictatorship of the Prime Minister,” as these ordinances often bypassed parliamentary deliberation and accountability.<sup>4</sup> The political climate further deteriorated in 1994 when the entire parliamentary opposition resigned from their positions, citing political dysfunction, bureaucratic inefficiency, and inadequate representation within the legislative process.

---

<sup>3</sup> Shola Lawal, “Bans and Boycotts: The Troubled History of Bangladesh’s Elections,” Al Jazeera, January 5, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/5/bangladesh-elections-a-timeline-of-controversy>.

<sup>4</sup> Al Masud Hasanuzzaman, *Role of Opposition in Bangladesh Politics* (University Press Limited, 1998), 230.



Political Violence in Bangladesh  
(Credit: Wall Street Journal)

The erosion of democratic practices became even more visible during the election cycle scheduled for 2007. During this period, large sums of money were reportedly spent not only on campaigning but also to secure nominations for parliamentary seats within parties, indicating a rise in internal corruption and *clientelism*.<sup>5</sup> The situation worsened during the 2014 national elections, during which the ruling BAL party launched a targeted and vengeful campaign against the BNP leadership.<sup>6</sup> Many BNP leaders were imprisoned under what were widely considered to be false charges of vandalism and terrorism. In a particularly striking instance, the ruling party placed trucks loaded with sand in front of the residence of the BNP leader, thereby physically

---

<sup>5</sup> Mohiuddin Alamgir, “Only Wealthy Have Access to Politics,” The Daily Star, February 2, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/only-wealthy-have-access-politics-3813936>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

preventing her from reaching the polling centre.<sup>7</sup> Similar patterns of repression and intimidation were observed during the 2018 and 2024 national elections. In both cycles, the ruling BAL party used state machinery and institutions to suppress political opposition and to influence the voting public, raising serious concerns about the integrity and fairness of the electoral process.

## The Need for Democratic Reforms

### Interim Government: Lessons from the Past

Following the July Revolution of 2024, Bangladesh established an interim government with the stated objective of restoring the rule of law and re-establishing effective governance. This transitional administration was introduced as a necessary measure to address and reform the deeply damaged political system inherited from the preceding Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) regime. The formation of the interim government was seen as a step towards “cleaning the house” and preparing the country for a more stable and democratic future.<sup>8</sup> However, a significant constitutional issue has emerged regarding the legality of this interim arrangement. Under the current Constitution of Bangladesh, there is no explicit provision that allows for the formation or functioning of an interim government outside of regular constitutional mechanisms.

---

<sup>7</sup> Chief Political Correspondent, “Sand-Laden Trucks Close off Road to Khaleda’s Office,” bdnews24 (bdnews24.com, January 5, 2015), <https://bdnews24.com/politics/sand-laden-trucks-close-off-road-to-khaledas-office>.

<sup>8</sup> TBS Report, “Restoring Law and Order First Priority: Interim Govt Advisers,” The Business Standard, August 9, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/restoring-law-and-order-first-priority-interim-govt-advisers-912946>.



The Swearing-in Ceremony of Chief Advisor of Bangladesh's Interim Government

(Credit: Somoy News)

To address this legal gap, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh has endorsed the legitimacy of the interim government by invoking the “doctrine of necessity”.<sup>9</sup> This doctrine is typically applied in exceptional circumstances, permitting temporary deviations from constitutional procedures to preserve order and continuity in governance. In this case, the Supreme Court’s ruling was based on the fact that the former Prime Minister had resigned and the Parliament had been dissolved by the President, creating a power vacuum that necessitated an interim solution. While this judicial affirmation has provided the current government with a degree of legal cover, it remains vulnerable to future legal challenges. The legitimacy granted under the doctrine of necessity is not permanent, and it is possible that the Supreme Court could revisit or overturn this decision if a case is brought before it.

This possibility poses serious implications for the actions and decisions undertaken during the tenure of the interim government. As the administration continues to make significant policy decisions and sign agreements that could shape the country’s future, there is a real risk that any

---

<sup>9</sup> Shakhawat Liton and Rezaul Karim, “Dr Yunus-Led Interim Govt Legal: SC,” The Business Standard, August 9, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/court/supreme-court-legitimises-interim-govt-912966>.



future government might question or reject these decisions if the interim government is ultimately found to have operated beyond its constitutional mandate. This raises concerns about the durability and enforceability of the reforms and commitments made during this period, particularly if future political leaders perceive them as inconsistent with their own agendas or legal interpretations. Therefore, while the interim government currently functions with judicial endorsement, its constitutional position remains fragile, and the long-term legitimacy of its actions is yet to be fully secured.

## The Tale of a Broken System: Blood, Power, and Politics

Democracy is not limited to the conduct of elections alone; it also requires the establishment of the rule of law, accountability of those in power, protection of the fundamental rights of citizens, and the peaceful coexistence of ruling and opposition parties. In the case of Bangladesh, the state of democracy has consistently remained flawed. The politicisation of public administration, deep political polarisation within the media, widespread corruption, rent-seeking practices, extortion, and an entrenched culture of bureaucratic authoritarianism have severely weakened democratic institutions and processes.<sup>10</sup> One of the most striking features of Bangladeshi politics is the intense rivalry between the leaders of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL). This animosity often resembles a personal feud rather than political competition, and it frequently escalates during transitions of power, resulting in political violence and acts of retribution, including revenge killings.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the reliance on musclemen or politically affiliated enforcers to resolve disputes has become a common and deeply concerning aspect of the political culture.

---

<sup>10</sup> Iqbal, Soheli, M., and Seo, Dr. Jin Wan (2008). "E-Governance and Corruption Prevention at Local Government in Bangladesh: Learning from Korean Experience". *The Journal of Rural Development*. BARD, Comilla, Bangladesh, Vol. 35, No-1, January 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Amit Ranjan, "A Country in Turmoil: Political Violence in Bangladesh" (National University of Singapore - Institute of South Asian Studies, August 6, 2024), [https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/ISAS-Brief-1149\\_new-2.pdf](https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/ISAS-Brief-1149_new-2.pdf).



Police arrests BNP opposition leader

(Credit: Benar News)

Efforts to combat these entrenched and corrupt practices have rarely yielded meaningful results. This is largely due to the expectation that the administrative machinery will serve the interests of whichever party is in power, rather than acting in a neutral and accountable manner. In many instances, ministers and senior politicians exert undue influence over bureaucrats, compelling them to prioritize political objectives over legal or institutional responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the enforcement of laws often appears selective and biased, with legal mechanisms being applied only when they serve the interests of those currently in power. This erosion of impartial governance further undermines the democratic foundations of the state and poses a serious obstacle to achieving genuine democratic consolidation in Bangladesh.

---

<sup>12</sup> Bakshi, Rejaul Hasn Karim, A.S.M. (2005). "Democracy, Good Governance and Development: Bangladesh Perspective." Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences. 3(7), Grace Publications.

## Repairing the Republic: A New Hope

Bangladesh has long functioned as an illiberal democracy, with political power monopolized by entrenched political elites, public frustration has grown over the years as these leaders repeatedly return to power despite their poor governance records. The last 15 years saw a marked erosion of democratic norms, but this decline is rooted in the country's long-standing failure to build a truly people-oriented democratic system. The July Revolution of 2024 demonstrated a growing public awareness of democratic rights and a willingness to demand change.

The Electoral Reform Commission, created by the Interim Government, has proposed a wide range of reforms to rebuild trust in the political process. Key recommendations include restoring a non-partisan caretaker government for a 120-day election period, expanding Parliament with more women's representation and an upper house, and introducing measures such as a "No Vote" option, mandatory re-elections for low turnout, and the abolition of EVMs.<sup>13</sup> The commission also urges stricter candidate vetting, internal party elections, regular audits, and greater independence for the Election Commission. Provisions for expatriate voter registration and online/postal voting have also been suggested.

Whether these proposals will ultimately be implemented remains uncertain, as the process now enters a crucial phase of political negotiation and deliberation. The Election Commission, in collaboration with the major political parties, must engage in extensive discussions to evaluate each recommendation put forward by the Electoral Reform Commission. These negotiations will involve assessing the political feasibility, legal implications, and public acceptance of each proposed reform. Given the deep-rooted mistrust and rivalry among political actors, reaching a consensus will prove to be a complex and time-consuming task.

---

<sup>13</sup> Md Abbas and Ahmed Deepto, "Electoral System: EC Opposes Key Reform Proposals," The Daily Star, March 17, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/elections/news/electoral-system-ec-opposes-key-reform-proposals-3850586>.



# The Way Forward

The current Interim Government, led by Dr. Muhammad Yunus, has shown commendable leadership in managing the political and institutional crisis that followed the July 2024 revolution, restoring a degree of stability and beginning to address long-standing issues that have hindered democratic development in Bangladesh. However, it is now essential for the government to take immediate and strategic steps toward a sustainable democratic transition by implementing reforms that are effective, legally defensible, and minimal which is focused solely on restructuring the political framework to prevent the return of authoritarianism. These reforms must reinforce the rule of law, ensure electoral integrity, and protect fundamental rights, while maintaining the legitimacy of the interim government. Historical examples caution that decisions taken by unelected interim administrations have been legally challenged and overturned by successive governments, rendering their reforms unsustainable. Although the Supreme Court has currently upheld the interim government's legitimacy, this status could be revisited and reversed in the future, particularly by any authoritarian-leaning governments, potentially invalidating all the progress made. To ensure that its achievements endure, the interim government must root its reforms in broad political consensus and legal soundness, paving the way to allow for a democratic transition based on inclusivity and popular participation. The reestablishment of democracy is essential, as it will enable the formation of a government whose legitimacy is clear and beyond dispute.