

Security Sector Reform and Governance in Bangladesh: Gaps and Imperatives

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Source: Dhaka Tribune

Introduction

In contemporary discourse on state-building and human security, Security Sector Reform (SSR) has emerged as a foundational pillar of democratic governance. SSR is not just about improving how well the security forces work. It is about changing the whole security sector. This includes the police, military, paramilitary forces, intelligence agencies, the justice system, and the institutions that monitor and oversee them. The goal is to change how these institutions are

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organized, how they are managed, and how they are held responsible for their actions. According to the OECD–DAC SSR framework, SSR is defined as a process aimed at improving the effectiveness, accountability, and democratic control of the security sector while ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law². A well-governed security sector enhances public safety, protects civil liberties, strengthens public trust, and supports sustainable development³. Conversely, a politicized, opaque, and abusive security sector undermines democracy, erodes legitimacy, and generates long-term instability⁴.

Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh’s security institutions from the military and intelligence agencies to the police and justice system have evolved under a legacy of colonial-era laws, repeated military interventions, and intense politicization. The Bangladesh Police, for example, still operate under the Police Act of 1861, a colonial-era law designed to maintain colonial control that remains outdated and inadequate for the needs of an independent, democratic Bangladesh. Police units have long operated with a rigid hierarchy and discretionary powers inherited from colonial rule, fostering a culture prone to abuse and unaccountability. The early decades of Bangladesh saw the armed forces coup into power and rule by military-backed regimes. Although democracy was restored in the 1990s, the military and intelligence agencies, notably DGFI have remained influential in governance⁵. The justice sector too has struggled with independence: the judiciary saw politically motivated appointments and purges which eroded the rule of law⁶.

In Bangladesh, therefore, the urgency of SSR is particularly acute. Despite decades of reform discourse, the security sector remains deeply politicized, weakly accountable, and structurally insulated from democratic oversight. The violent suppression of mass protests in 2024 and the subsequent political transition of 2025 exposed long-standing structural vulnerabilities within the

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Security System Reform and Governance: A DAC Reference Document* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264007888-en>.

³ Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Security Sector Governance and Reform: Guidelines for OSCE Staff*. https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/2/4/512470_0.pdf.

⁴ Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), “SSR in a NUTSHELL: MANUAL for INTRODUCTORY TRAINING on SECURITY SECTOR REFORM” (DCAF, 2022), https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/NUTSHELL_EN.pdf.

⁵ Human Rights Research Center, “A Damaged Democracy: Sheikh Hasina’s Authoritarian Rule in Bangladesh,” April 24, 2025, <https://www.humanrightsresearch.org/post/a-damaged-democracy-sheikh-hasina-s-authoritarian-rule-in-bangladesh>.

⁶ Human Rights Watch, “After the Monsoon Revolution: A Roadmap to Lasting Security Sector Reform in Bangladesh,” January 27, 2025.

country's security governance framework. This commentary identifies key gaps in Bangladesh's security sector governance, analyzes the risks of reform failure, and outlines critical imperatives for democratic transformation.

Overview of Security Sector Reform in Bangladesh

Security Sector Reform (SSR) in Bangladesh requires modernizing and democratizing the institutions tasked with national security. Historically, reform efforts have been inconsistent. Bangladesh launched a Police Reform Programme with UNDP support from 2006–2016. It improved training and some professionalism, but deep-rooted political challenges hindered sustained change⁷. Throughout the 2010s, civil society and media repeatedly highlighted extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and torture by agencies like the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and parts of the police. International partners also pressed for reform: for example, the U.S. imposed sanctions on RAB in 2021 for human rights abuses. Yet institutional structures remained largely unchanged with powerful intelligence units lacking oversight, a politicized police force used against opposition, and a weak National Human Rights Commission with limited enforcement power.

Recent events have reignited SSR on the national agenda. Beginning in 2020, widespread public protests over road safety, government misrule and injustice were met by police force and legal crackdowns. Notably, large-scale student demonstrations in July-August 2024 were suppressed with live firing and mass arrests⁸. These crises revealed chronic governance problems: security forces acting with impunity, weak accountability, and public trust evaporating. The interim government have announced reform initiatives, particularly targeting the police. The Police Reform Commission, established in late 2024 quickly submitted a sweeping report with 108 recommendations to modernize the force⁹. In December 2025, Bangladesh's interim government

⁷ Gwyn Lewis and Stefan Liller, "Why Police Transformation Is Critical for Bangladesh," UNDP Bangladesh (blog), November 10, 2024, <https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/blog/why-police-transformation-critical-bangladesh>.

⁸ Harindrini Corea and Nazia Erum, "What Is Happening at the Quota-Reform Protests in Bangladesh?" *Amnesty International*, July 29, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/what-is-happening-at-the-quota-reform-protests-in-bangladesh/>.

⁹ Police Reform Commission, *Police Reform Commission Final Report 2024–2025* (Dhaka: Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Home Affairs, January 15, 2025), https://cabinet.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/cabinet.portal.gov.bd/notices/51350dbe_08bc_4c1d_9c4f_e

formally approved a Police Commission Ordinance 2025, establishing a five-member commission led by a retired Supreme Court judge and empowered to advise on police modernization, accountability and public complaints¹⁰. This Commission is mandated to ensure police operate free of undue influence and remain duty-bound to citizens, investigate public grievances against police, and recommend reforms in law and practice¹¹.



Source: UNDP

These police reform initiatives from revamped uniforms and training drives to high-level coordination with international partners represent both progress and challenge. For example, in mid-2024 the Home Adviser requested British support for training and expertise to build an efficient, neutral, and people-friendly police force, and the UK dispatched experts to assist¹². Similarly, in late 2025 the Irish and Bangladeshi officials met to discuss sharing Northern Ireland's

[15a9764bbfa/Police%20Reform%20Commission%20%20Final%20report%202024-2025%20\(2\)-compressed-compressed.pdf](https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/govt-approves-police-commission-ordinance-4050646).

¹⁰ "Govt Approves Police Commission Ordinance," *The Daily Star*, December 4, 2025, 8:05 p.m., <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/govt-approves-police-commission-ordinance-4050646>.

¹¹ Govt approves Police Commission Ordinance, other laws," *Dhaka Tribune*, December 4, 2025, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/government-affairs/397988/govt-approves-police-commission-ordinance-other>.

¹² Home Adviser Seeks UK Support for Police Reform," *The Daily Star*, August 28, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/home-adviser-seeks-uk-support-police-reform-3688641>.

policing oversight experience¹³. These steps signal a cautious but significant shift toward a more professional, accountable, and citizen-centered security sector in Bangladesh, though sustained political will and robust oversight will be critical to translating reforms from paper to practice.

Key Challenges to Security Sector Reform in Bangladesh

One of the most fundamental constraints on meaningful security sector reform (SSR) in Bangladesh is the persistence of a colonial legal and institutional framework, most notably the Police Act of 1861. Enacted to serve the coercive interests of colonial rule, the Act prioritized regime security and control over citizen service, democratic accountability, and human rights, a legacy that continues to shape a force-centric and often militarized policing culture. Its vague provision on executive superintendence has enabled successive governments to exercise extensive informal control over policing priorities, investigations, and personnel management, blurring the line between political authority and professional policing. This has entrenched politicization, selective law enforcement, and weakened institutional autonomy, reinforcing public perceptions that security institutions serve incumbent power rather than the rule of law or public safety¹⁴.



Source: Al Jazeera

¹³ Ireland Offers Support for Police Reform in Bangladesh,” *The Business Standard*, November 5, 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/foreign-policy/ireland-offers-support-police-reform-bangladesh-1278131>.

¹⁴ Kazi Kamrul Hassan, “NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL for BANGLADESH: DEBATES and ISSUES,” *NDC Journal* 7, no. 1 (2008), <https://ndcjournal.ndc.gov.bd/ndcj/index.php/ndcj/article/view/51>.

In Bangladesh's context reform efforts fail when political leaders see independent policing as a threat to their power instead of a requirement for a healthy democracy¹⁵.

Bangladesh has weak democratic and civilian oversight over its security sector. Parliament pays very little attention to how the security forces operate, and the internal oversight bodies that do exist are not truly independent or powerful. For a long time, there was no civilian body to monitor the police, and even now these systems are still very weak. Parliamentary committees often do not function properly or are influenced by politics. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is supposed to address human rights violations, but it does not have enough authority or resources to take strong action. Because of these weaknesses, serious allegations such as torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings are often investigated only within the institutions themselves or not dealt with at all. A national Commission of Inquiry found that the police, RAB, and other units were involved in most enforced disappearance cases, but those responsible have still not been punished¹⁶.



Figure: Families of enforced disappearance victims holding demonstration.

¹⁵ "Police Reform Opportunities for Bangladesh: A Comparative Survey of Police Legislation in India, Pakistan, Northern Ireland, South Africa and Kenya," UNDP Bangladesh.

<https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/BGD/Research%20-%20POLICE%20REFORM%20OPPORTUNITIES%20FOR%20BANGLADESH.pdf>.

¹⁶ "Bangladesh: Concerns Around New Ordinances, Opposition Ban and Arrests and Lack of Police Reform," CIVICUS Monitor, accessed December 9, 2025, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/bangladesh-concerns-around-new-ordinances-opposition-ban-and-arrests-and-lack-of-police-reform/>.

The culture of impunity created by weak accountability is reinforced by outdated criminal laws and procedures. Broad discretionary powers of arrest and detention under the Code of Criminal Procedure, including prolonged remand without adequate safeguards, have facilitated abuse. Judicial interventions such as High Court and Supreme Court rulings requiring prompt production of arrestees before magistrates have attempted to curb these practices, but enforcement remains inconsistent on the ground. Human rights organizations have repeatedly urged repeal of provisions allowing extended detention without access to legal counsel¹⁷. In this weak rule-of-law environment, violations persist, public cooperation declines, and police legitimacy continues to erode.

Another major impediment to SSR is the gap between reform initiatives and political consensus. Security sector reform in Bangladesh has largely taken the form of donor-driven or project-based initiatives such as training programmers, ICT modernization, community policing pilots, or gender mainstreaming without parallel political agreement on deeper structural and legislative reforms. While these initiatives have produced incremental improvements, they remain vulnerable to reversal or stagnation when political priorities change¹⁸.

Governance deficits are compounded by low transparency and limited civic engagement. Media and civil society actors have often been excluded from meaningful dialogue on security governance, while new laws have expanded surveillance and executive power, including under digital and emergency legislation. Human rights organizations document instances where opposition activities were restricted and critics silenced through expansive security statutes.

In sum, the barriers to security sector reform in Bangladesh are systemic and interlinked. Law enforcement and security institutions largely lack independent governance structures, democratic accountability, and clear legal boundaries. Reform commissions and civil society have repeatedly highlighted deficiencies in human resource management, welfare, corruption control, disciplinary systems, and gender equity within the police. Without addressing politicization, impunity, and

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, “After the Monsoon Revolution: A Roadmap to Lasting Security Sector Reform in Bangladesh,” January 27, 2025.

¹⁸ “Police Reform Opportunities for Bangladesh: A Comparative Survey of Police Legislation in India, Pakistan, Northern Ireland, South Africa and Kenya,” UNDP Bangladesh.
<https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/BGD/Research%20-%20POLICE%20REFORM%20OPPORTUNITIES%20FOR%20BANGLADESH.pdf>.

outdated legal frameworks, SSR efforts risk remaining fragmented and cosmetic, rather than transformative and sustainable.

Policy Recommendations and Strategic Imperatives

Meaningful SSR in Bangladesh must be comprehensive, coordinated, and rights-based. Key policy recommendations include:

Enacting a modern Police Act is a foundational step for reform. The colonial Police Act of 1861 should be replaced with a law that clearly defines police duties as a service to citizens, embeds human rights standards, and sets firm limits on the use of force. The Police Commission has already recommended drafting such legislation immediately, drawing on positive elements of the long-shelved 2007 ordinance. A new law should codify citizens' rights during arrest and detention and ensure procedural safeguards, including mandatory presentation before a court within 24 hours in line with Supreme Court guidance.

Equally important is empowering independent oversight. The Police Commission must enjoy genuine autonomy in its composition, staffing, and budget to function effectively. International best practices suggest excluding former security officials and appointing respected civil society experts in law, human rights, and governance. Legislative or constitutional reforms should also strengthen the National Human Rights Commission and establish parliamentary security committees with real oversight authority. A free media and an empowered civil society must be able to report abuses without fear, closing long-standing accountability gaps.

Accountability for past and present abuses is essential to restoring public trust. Allegations of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture must be investigated by impartial bodies, possibly through independent commissions or tribunal. Human Rights Watch has called for disbanding the Rapid Action Battalion or, at minimum, placing it fully under civilian control with transparent oversight. Existing laws, such as the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, must be rigorously enforced, with complaint mechanisms handled by bodies entirely independent of the police.

Professionalization of the force is another critical pillar. Policing culture needs to shift from patronage-based practices to professionalism and service delivery. This requires sustained training in human rights, community policing, and ethical conduct at all levels. Anti-corruption safeguards, regular audits, and improved welfare such as body cameras, better transport, counseling services, and fair promotion systems can help rebuild public trust. UNDP's vision of a democratic, people-centered police should guide these reforms¹⁹.

Reforms must also mainstream gender and rights. Increasing the recruitment and retention of women, ensuring safe and respectful working conditions, training personnel on gender-based violence, and institutionalizing survivor-centered policing are essential. Oversight mechanisms should explicitly protect the rights of women and minorities.

Beyond policing, Bangladesh needs a unified security framework. A formal National Security Policy and a reactivated National Security Council are necessary to coordinate the military, police, intelligence agencies, and civilian leadership. Clear mandates, coordination mechanisms, and transparent annual reporting would reduce fragmentation and inter-agency rivalry. Reform processes should be transparent and participatory, with public scrutiny of appointments, budgets, and policies, and nationwide dialogues involving civil society. International assistance should be welcomed but aligned with local ownership and democratic principles, with aid tied to meaningful oversight.

In conclusion, police reform alone or reform of any single agency will not bring lasting change. Security sector reform in Bangladesh must be holistic, guided by a comprehensive national plan that simultaneously addresses the police, armed forces, paramilitary units, judiciary, bureaucracy, and other relevant institutions. Only an integrated, rights-based approach can transform the security sector into one that is accountable, professional, and genuinely responsive to the needs of the people.

¹⁹ Gwyn Lewis and Stefan Liller, "Why Police Transformation Is Critical for Bangladesh: A Nationwide Outcry for Justice, Accountability, and Systemic Reform," UNDP Bangladesh blog, November 19, 2024, <https://www.undp.org/blog/why-police-transformation-critical-bangladesh>.