



# Bangladesh Elections 2024: An Overview

By: Md. Salman Rahman | Dec 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023



Figure 1: Opposition parties protest in Bangladesh ahead of General Polls. Picture Courtesy: AP NEWS

## Introduction

As Bangladesh gears up for its 12<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election, scheduled for January 6, 2024, political tensions grip the nation.<sup>1</sup> The lead-up to the poll has been marked by clashes between opposing factions.<sup>2</sup> The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, the main opposition parties, insist that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, heading the current government, resign to allow a neutral interim government to oversee the upcoming election. Yet, the ruling

party stands firm in its position to hold the election under its reign, arguing that the establishment of an interim government contradicts the constitution.<sup>3</sup>

### **State of General Elections 2024**

As rulings and oppositions stand in the antithetical direction, a trajectory of uncertainty erupts, risking a wider clash across the country. Since October 28, 2023, the opposition's street protests have led to the destruction of public transportation, assaults on journalists, the targeting of police medical facilities, and a breach of the chief justice's residence.<sup>4</sup> Tragically, over a dozen individuals have lost their lives, including the reported death of a police officer amid the clashes. <sup>5</sup>

The government has heightened its response to this situation. PM Hasina, in an interview, labelled the opposition as "terrorists" due to the level of violence exhibited. <sup>6</sup> However, the BNP denies responsibility for the deaths; rather, they allege that the government is undermining the protest's morale by remaining complicit following these killings.

### **Party System in Bangladesh**

Since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the political system in Bangladesh has undergone substantial transformation.<sup>7</sup> Following integration with Pakistan, Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) endured a period of military dictatorship until gaining independence in 1971.<sup>8</sup> Post-liberation, there was a widespread sense of anticipation across the nation regarding the establishment of democracy and the preservation of people's rights. However, this optimism was short-lived as Bangladesh's founding

father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and his family were tragically assassinated in a coup in 1975.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequent to these events, the electoral process in Bangladesh has witnessed multiple deviations, yet, it remains predominantly characterized by the presence of two major political parties.<sup>10</sup> This duopoly has rendered it exceptionally arduous for candidates aligned with alternative political entities to secure elections.<sup>11</sup> Jamaat E Islami if not by seats but with supporters can be considered as the main Islamist party after BNP.<sup>12</sup> In addition, there are moderate Islamic parties, anti-Islamic parties, left-wing and right-wing parties, student-affiliated organizations, nationalist parties like the BNP, and so on.

### **The Ruling Party**

Over the past three consecutive terms, the Awami League has remained in power. Bangladesh saw the emergence of its initial secular political party in 1949, aiming to champion democracy and ensure fairness and justice across the nation's social, political, and economic landscape.<sup>13</sup> Notably, the Awami League played a significant role in liberating Bangladesh in 1971. <sup>14</sup>Throughout more than seven decades, the AL has transformed significantly. Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the party's founding member and longtime leader, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina now heads the party, steering its direction.

### **The Main Opposition Party**

While Sheikh Mujibur Rahman held power, there existed no prominent opposition. He is revered as the nation's pioneering hero, making it highly

improbable for any opposition to rival him. However, in 1978, former military chief Ziaur Rahman introduced the BNP as a formidable nationalist party.<sup>15</sup> The party is well-known for advocating Islamic sentiments and maintaining a swift alliance with Islamist groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami and others.<sup>16</sup> Since the inception of parliamentary democracy in 1991, the BNP has held power on three occasions: in 1991, 1996, and at last in 2001. Since the inception of parliamentary democracy, Begum Khaleda Zia, the wife of the late President Ziaur Rahman, has held the position of chairperson. Currently under house arrest and reportedly in critical condition, Begum Zia's absence has led her older son, Tareq Rahman (sentenced to jail for 3 years to life), to assume an executive role, guiding the party from exile in London.<sup>1718</sup>

### **Internal and External Factors in the Elections**

The internal dynamics shaping Bangladesh's electoral process hinge on critical elements like political parties, leadership diversity, the electoral framework, socio-economic circumstances, civil society participation, and media influence. Bangladesh boasts over 40 political parties, each led by distinct leadership, vying fiercely for parliamentary seats. At the core of this process lies the pivotal role of the Election Commission (EC).

Constitutionally independent and answerable solely to the parliament, the EC's full implementation of established regulations has remained an elusive goal despite the country's independent status for over five decades.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, external dynamics like foreign relations, involvement of international organizations, aid from global sources, trade relations, remittance inflow, diaspora impact, and security considerations significantly

shape the course of Bangladesh's electoral process.<sup>20</sup> Bangladesh's leading export, Ready-Made Garments (RMG), chiefly traded with the US and the EU, adds another layer of significance.<sup>21</sup> With the election nearing, there are apprehensions surrounding the possibility of sanctions or embargoes imposed on Bangladesh should the electoral proceedings be deemed undemocratic.<sup>22</sup>

### **Major powers and their Outlook toward Bangladesh Elections**

The United States has recently intensified its scrutiny of Bangladesh's democratic system, expressing concern over cases of extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances.<sup>23</sup> This led to the imposition of sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion- the elite force, resulting in increased pressure from Washington.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, in March of this year, the US implemented a visa restriction policy targeting individuals involved in undermining the democratic election, aiming to ensure a free and fair power transition in Bangladesh.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the European Union (EU) has taken a parallel stance, urging all the parties to engage in dialogues and seek a peaceful way ahead of the poll. <sup>26</sup>

On the flip side, Russia and China seem to be more accommodating partners. Moscow has condemned what it perceives as interference, accusing the US of meddling in Bangladesh's internal politics.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, this month, a Russian Navy squadron from the Pacific fleet visited Bangladesh's port after a hiatus of over 50 years, considered by experts as a significant development in the relations between Dhaka and Moscow. <sup>28</sup>

Beijing is in no way different from Moscow, as it maintains a positive relationship with the ruling party by avoiding involvement in Bangladesh's internal political affairs. Earlier this year, Bangladesh reaffirmed its stance on the Indo-Pacific perspective, ensuring it was carefully formulated to not disrupt Beijing's interests.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, China has a large investment in Bangladesh since it is involved with a good number of mega projects there. In addition, Beijing is the top import source of Bangladesh's military hardware.<sup>30</sup> Although not explicitly expressing allegiance to any specific political party, rumours circulate in Dhaka regarding China's affinity towards authoritarian regimes worldwide.

Yet, in terms of India, its stance on the election was vague. Delhi echoed sentiments similar to those of its Western allies, emphasizing the necessity of a free and fair poll in Bangladesh. Speculation arises that India prefers the Awami League in power because it better serves Delhi's interests in addressing terrorism and upholding India's established position in its eastern region.<sup>31</sup>

### **What awaits in the future?**

The current exclusive nature of this poll, characterized by boycotts and mutual intolerance, might influence future ballots, placing at risk the country's foundational principles, for which sacrifices were made in 1971. All resulting social divisions based on opposition parties and the cultivation of political vendettas are the outcomes of this ongoing event, wherein there seems to be no path to victory for the nation, only paths leading to losses.<sup>32</sup>

Every election cycle in Bangladesh seems to mirror the past. Street-level political confrontations, the burning of transportation, and targeting opposition figures have become a distressing norm for many Bangladeshis. This recurring pattern leads people to accept these events as commonplace. Bangladesh is now going under a substantial financial crisis as pressure mounts on the Foreign Reserve, which has been consistently dwindling.<sup>33</sup> Like many developing nations, the economy and livelihoods are at risk due to price hikes resulting from inflation and disruptions in the supply chain, attributed in part to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, this political crisis may add fuel to the flame, worsening the plight of ordinary citizens in the country.

In addition, trade uncertainty looms over and gradually becomes more vivid as election day approaches. As the single largest export market for Bangladesh, the United States holds significant economic sway.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the European Union is a collective purchaser of billions of dollars' worth of Ready-Made Garments from Bangladesh. Thus, a rising concern persists that an undemocratic ballot may propel Western powers to contemplate imposing trade embargo on Bangladesh. This month, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasized concerns about labor rights in Bangladesh, stressing the importance of equitable treatment and fair wages for workers, which many economists consider politically motivated.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, changing dynamics have cast uncertainty over Bangladesh's national and international affairs. Powerful entities vie for

dominance, but the true essence lies elsewhere. To millions of Bangladeshis, the forthcoming election signifies a potential turning point in their destinies. Whether it unfolds positively or spirals into a precarious situation, ordinary citizens face the consequences of the worst-case scenarios.

### **Author Biography**

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