

## The trajectory of democratic transformation in Bangladesh: Issues of electoral and constitutional reforms

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### Abstract

Despite holding regular elections and maintaining a parliamentary and constitutional framework, Bangladesh has been undergoing a profound democratic crisis for a long while, since the very beginning of its independence. Using secondary data from literature, reports, government documents, and media sources, this chapter critically explores the nature of this democratic crisis, not through statistics or institutional blueprints, but through the subsistent experience of politics in Bangladesh. It focuses on how executive overreach, electoral manipulation, institutional politicization, the suppression of dissent and civil society, and, most notably, the Constitution of Bangladesh itself have stripped out the element of democracy. The analysis offers a grounded examination of the country's political trajectory, from its fragile democratic foundations in the first Parliament to today's established culture of control and fear. The chapter argues that unless reforms are rooted in political compromise, civic empowerment, and a renewed public mandate with citizen-oriented constitutional reforms, the ongoing crisis may deepen into irreversible democratic decay.

**Keywords:** Democratic Transformation; Electoral Manipulation; Institutional Decay; Executive Centralization; Political Polarization; Constitutional Reforms

### 1. Introduction

In the political context of Bangladesh, the notion of democratic decline or 'backsliding' has emerged as a significant and relevant concept. Over the last fifteen years, Bangladesh has experienced a gradual yet considerable erosion of democracy, resulting in the emergence of electoral autocracy (Wani & Iqbal Dar, 2024). Since independence, democracy has often served as a facade under which authoritarianism has flourished unabated. Leaving aside the fifteen years of direct military rule, the political structure of Bangladesh has rarely experienced the true essence of democracy. Almost every political party, forming governments with pledges to uphold democratic principles, has gradually turned autocratic over time. Elected leaders have become obsessed with centralized power, seeking to suppress opposition forces and exert undue influence over the media and the Judiciary. This crisis intensified especially after the 9<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election held on December 29, 2008.

Democratic decline—or "backsliding" is a process whereby political and democratic institutions are gradually eroded, often under the guise of legality and public order (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This erosion does not necessarily occur through military coups or overt suspension of constitutions, but through legal and institutional manipulation. There are different schools of thought about the decline of democracy. However, the key indicators of democratic decline primarily include constitutional manipulation, erosion of electoral integrity, media suppression, judicial capture, co-optation of civil society, and the use of state violence (Hasan, 2025).

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Bangladesh's democratic endeavor has lost its way, and the country is heading towards a closed autocracy (Riaz & Rana, 2024). More especially, the Awami League's recent forceful and unjust attempts to cling to power have driven a nearly final nail into the coffin of democracy in Bangladesh. The main opposition parties were compelled to boycott the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> national elections (Abedin, 2020). In effect, democracy has become nominal, an empty structure where genuine public opinion and participation are minimal. Ending the practice of authoritarianism in the name of democracy and establishing a participatory, accountable political culture has become an urgent need. However, the situation remains unchanged, with no positive outcome for a long time.

Freedom House rates people's access to political rights and civil liberties in 208 countries and territories through its annual Freedom in the World report. It categorizes the rating ranges from 1 to 7, where 1 refers to the most free and 7 refers to the least free. The Freedom in the World status of a country or territory is determined by its aggregate Political Rights score, ranging from 0 to 40, and its aggregate Civil Liberties score, ranging from 0 to 60. Bangladesh's status is 'Partly Free' in the report, scoring 39 to 56 from 2013 to 2025.

**Table 1** Freedom in the World Report by Freedom House; Country: Bangladesh

<b>Edition</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>PR rating</b>	<b>CL rating</b>	<b>PR</b>	<b>CL</b>	<b>Total</b>
2025	PF	5	4	16	29	45
2024	PF	5	5	15	25	40
2023	PF	5	5	15	25	40
2022	PF	5	5	15	24	39
2021	PF	5	5	15	24	39
2020	PF	5	5	15	24	39
2019	PF	5	5	17	24	41
2018	PF	4	4	19	26	45
2017	PF	4	4	20	27	47
2016	PF	4	4	21	28	49
2015	PF	4	4	21	29	50
2014	PF	3	4	24	29	53
2013	PF	3	4	25	31	56

Source: (Freedom House, 2025); \*F=Free, PF=Partly Free, NF=Not Free; \*PR Rating=Political Rights Rating; \*CL Rating=Civil Liberties Rating; \*PR =aggregate score for the Political Rights category; \*CL =aggregate score for the Civil Liberties category; \*Total =aggregate score for all categories

In fact, democracy in Bangladesh exists more in form than in function. At first glance, the country appears to follow democratic norms where constitutional assurance of rights and rule of law, elections are held regularly, an elected parliament based on adult franchise, and opposition parties are legally allowed to operate without any disturbance, the media if free from the control and the Judiciary is fully independent to operate its function without any interference of the Executive branch (The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh). These are the notions in black and white – not in reality. However, beneath the surface lies a more upsetting reality. All the public institutions in Bangladesh lack independence due to executive overreach (Yadawa, 2025). Additionally, the media and civil society face heavy restrictions, and the opposition leaders are criminalized with hundreds of false and illegal cases. Moreover, there are no actual civic spaces, and the citizens, especially the youth, are becoming increasingly disheartened with the entire political system in Bangladesh.

**Table 2** Democracy Index of Bangladesh from 1971 to 2024.

Year	Score (0-3)	Year	Score (0-3)	Year	Score (0-3)
1971	0	1989	1	2007	0
1972	0	1990	1	2008	1
1973	1	1991	1	2009	1
1974	1	1992	2	2010	1
1975	1	1993	2	2011	1
1976	0	1994	2	2012	1
1977	0	1995	2	2013	1
1978	0	1996	1	2014	1
1979	1	1997	2	2015	1
1980	1	1998	2	2016	1
1981	1	1999	2	2017	1
1982	0	2000	2	2018	1
1983	0	2001	2	2019	1
1984	0	2002	1	2020	1
1985	0	2003	1	2021	1
1986	1	2004	1	2022	1
1987	1	2005	1	2023	1
1988	1	2006	1	2024	1

Source: (V-Dem, 2025); \*0=closed autocracies; \*1=electoral autocracies; \*2=electoral democracies; \*3=liberal democracies

The present democratic crisis in Bangladesh is not a new experience here. Instead, it is the culmination of decades of institutional erosion, hyper-partisan governance, and a lack of genuine political dialogue. In a true sense, Bangladesh has never experienced a constitutional or liberal democracy. Analyzing the data on democracy, we found that Bangladesh started its journey as a 'closed autocracy'. The closed autocracy has been restored again and again. Bangladesh experienced 'electoral democracy' only 9 times among 55 years of independence, and most awfully, it never experienced 'liberal democracy' status. For a long period of time, Bangladesh has been experiencing 'electoral autocracy' in the guise of democracy.

Indeed, the preservation of democracy relies on fortifying institutions and governance, enhancing resilience to upheaval, and cultivating a credible framework to rebuild public trust. However, popular uprisings may instigate regime transitions; nonetheless, the endurance of democracy, without a doubt, relies on strong and durable democratic institutions (Yadawa, 2025). This chapter critically analyzes the current trend of democratic transformation and the causes behind the failure of democracy in Bangladesh. This chapter also provides a brief analysis of how democracy is being weakened in Bangladesh across institutions and political practices, with a special focus on the urgency of electoral and constitutional reforms.

## 2. The Historical Transformation of Democracy in Bangladesh (1971-2025)

Democracy in Bangladesh has never been firmly established. Following independence in 1971, the country adopted a parliamentary system, modeled after the Westminster system. However, only after four years of parliamentary democracy, the system transitioned to a one-party system under the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) in 1975 (Talukdar, 2025). This historical phase of the transformation of democracy in Bangladesh can be categorized into five major parts. These five phases include the independence to the death of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, successive military regimes for 15 years from 1975 to 1990, return to parliamentary democracy in 1991 to 2008, and 15 years of authoritarian power of the Awami League from 2009 to 2024, and after the fleeing of Sheikh Hasina in July

uprising in 2024, commonly known as Bangladesh 2.0 to present. Indeed, the people of Bangladesh have experienced a dramatic trajectory of democratic transformation, with all attempts to consolidate power either with direct military rule or in the name of democracy.

### **2.1. The Era of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from Independence to 1975**

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was recognized as a visionary leader of the state, and he was made the all-in-all of the newly independent Bangladesh (Badiuzzaman, 2023, p.). In 1972, some proponents called for a national government, inclusive of all political groups engaged in the Liberation War. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, however, opposed this and sought to create a one-party government under the leadership of the Awami League (Paul, 2025). Mujib's close relationship with India and his signing of the twenty-five-year treaty of peace, friendship, and cooperation were regarded in military circles as a submission to India's dominance, leading to criticism from the mostly anti-Indian army members about Mujib's actions. Facing civil and military opposition, Mujib's interim regime proclaimed a state of emergency on December 28, 1974, suspending fundamental rights and fundamentally reorganizing the political system, referring to it as his second revolution, to institutionalize his dominance over the governmental apparatus (Haider, 1999b).

On January 25, 1975, the legislation to establish Bangladesh as a single-party, dictatorial state was enacted in the rubber-stamp parliament within fifteen minutes of its introduction, without permitting any discussion in the assembly (Rahman, 2023). Following this extensive constitutional Amendment, the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) was established as the only political party in the state, and Sheikh Mujib ascended from Prime Minister to President. All other political parties were banned unlawfully (Rahman, 2023). On June 16, 1975, the Awami League administration ceased operations of all print media, permitting just two state-run newspapers, Dainik Bangla and Bangladesh Times, along with two privately owned papers to continue (Burrett & Kingston, 2020). However, in the same year, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was killed, starting a period of military coups and autocratic governance in Bangladesh.

### **2.2. Era of Military Rule from 1975 to 1990**

Military coup is a common scenario worldwide, especially in Asia. Between 1943 and 1984, there were 316 successful coups globally, with the overall count of coups, including failed attempts, totaling 615 over that period (Eide & Thee, 2021). Bangladesh also endured 15 years of military governance in South Asia (Haider, 1999a). Sheikh Mujib's one-party civil authoritarian rule transitioned to military authoritarian regimes from 1976 to 1990 under Ziaur Rahman (1976–1981) and General Ershad (1982–1990). The beginning of President Ziaur Rahman's administration was characterized by several observers as a kind of "guided democracy," "constitutional autocracy," or "martial democracy," while the opposition accused Zia's dictatorship of establishing a "rubber stamp" national parliament (Kumar, 2025). Additionally, despite affirming that General Ershad had no personal aspirations for leadership and intended to continue his service as a soldier, on November 28, 1981, he ascended to power through a bloodless military coup and governed the country from 1982 until 1990 (Kabir, 2013).

Both the military regimes employed survival measures to extend their dictatorial rule (Sheikh and Ahmed, 2020). Over the 15 years of successive military regimes, democratic institutions were drastically curtailed, and power was consolidated. Likewise, from 1973 to 1975, media freedom was subjected to stringent restrictions from 1982 to 1990. Nevertheless, during Ziaur Rahman's era, there was a progressive liberalization of the media from governmental control (K. Ahmed, 2021). However, General Ershad's regime from March 1982 was highly known as a corrupt and degenerated regime for nine years until his overthrow in December 1990 (Hashmi, 2022). However, the downfall of the Ershad government in 1990 and the swift shift to genuine multi-party democracy ultimately highlighted the limitations of these efforts at 'guided democracy' (Evans, 2001).

### **2.3. Era of Parliamentary Democracy from 1991–2008**

The collapse of General H. M. Ershad's military rule in 1990 initiated a new era in democratic politics in Bangladesh. The fall of General Ershad's military regime facilitated the emergence of the democratically elected Khaleda Zia government in the 5<sup>th</sup> National Election of 1991, along with a novel framework of democracy and participatory governance that it established (Alam, 1995). The return to parliamentary democracy with competitive elections is a marked event in the trajectory of Bangladesh. In fact, the people of Bangladesh experienced true democracy for the first time as it opened a door for competitive elections. However, politics remained confrontational between the two major parties—the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Thus, the Parliament has not succeeded in becoming the focal point of political and legislative operations throughout this time. Various factors contributed to this failure. Nonetheless, this mainly occurred due to the governing parties intentionally circumventing Parliament, while the opposition abandons it (Moniruzzaman, 2009). The opposition's boycott, the governing party's incompetence, and the absence of

ordinary members rendered the parliamentary standing committees ineffective, resulting in a deficiency of governmental accountability throughout this period (Moniruzzaman, 2009).

A multitude of political thinkers believe that democracy was imperiled during this time. Although the third wave of democracy seemed to be permeating the world, the fledgling democracy in Bangladesh faced internal threats in 1994 after almost four years of experimentation, due to the obstinacy of both the governing party and the opposition (Hossain, 1995). The entrenched stances of both parties over the conduct of elections under a caretaker government led to a parliamentary boycott by the opposition, plunging the nation into a severe crisis. Extensive public unrest stemming from the crisis, violence, and the backlash against perceived fundamentalist revival has led to significant stagnation and regression in economic development and a bleak investment environment (Hossain, 1995). However, the essence of this era is immense because of the return of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh after two decades of independence.

However, after the successful termination of the Khaleda government, President Iazuddin sought to address the political crisis by enabling the participation of rival political parties in the forthcoming parliamentary election scheduled on January 22, 2007. General Moeen staged a military coup by annulling the election on January 11, 2007 (commonly known as 1/11), and forced the President to proclaim a state of emergency (Mahmud, 2017). A new Caretaker Government was formed, headed by Chief Advisor Fakruddin Ahmed and backed by the then-army chief, General Moeen Uddin Ahmed, under the emergency law. Thus, an extra-constitutional, military-backed Caretaker Government ruled Bangladesh for almost two years without legitimacy or constitutional basis, undermining democratic norms. Instead of realizing significant success in reforming the party system, these actions reinforced the 'old' party politics, marked by excessive concentration of power in the party leader, inter-party rivalry and distrust, absence of mutual confidence, dynastic control of party leadership, and a deficiency in democratic principles among the parties (Ahmed, 2010).

#### **2.4. Era of Awami League from 2009-2024**

The Awami League's return to power in 2009 signified a crucial transformation in the political dynamics of Bangladesh. Under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, the Awami League government initiated a process of power consolidation that significantly eroded democratic norms and compromised electoral neutrality (Hasan, 2025). The initial significant action was the elimination of the caretaker government system via the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution in 2011, which was established by the Constitution Act of 1996 in the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

Throughout her 15-year tenure, Sheikh Hasina maintained a firm grip on the Prime Minister position, with the elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024 marred by controversies and allegations, including claims of rigged polls and nighttime ballot box stuffing (The Asian Age, 2025). Even the Election Commission (EC), originally intended to function as an impartial entity protecting democratic processes, has been compromised due to the partisan selection of senior officials and inherent procedural biases. The governing authority selected commissioners via a "search committee," with recommendations that frequently appear to be preordained (Hasan, 2025). Additionally, the Hasina-led regime employed all types of mechanisms to silence the media. During these 15 years, intelligence agencies were directly involved in suppressing newspapers (The Daily Star, 2025a). Journalists could face job loss if they were to receive specific phone calls, leading to the removal of certain news reports.

In response to increasing criticism regarding the 2014 election, which was perceived as one-sided and disenfranchising, the Hasina regime aggressively utilized section 57 of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act of 2006 (Litton, 2024). A significant number of editors, journalists, educators, social media users, and independent thinkers faced lawsuits for defamation under Section 57 of the ICT law. The ICT Act was subsequently replaced in 2018 by the more stringent Digital Security Act, a law that has become closely linked to media suppression during Hasina's regime. This Act has been utilized to facilitate a suppression of dissent (Bari & Dey, 2019). Furthermore, nearly 7,000 cases were initiated under the act from 2018 to 2023, with 255 of those cases involving journalists concerning their reporting (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2024). A total of 155 journalists faced charges under section 25, which pertains to the "publishing, sending of offensive, false or fear-inducing data-information," and is associated with a potential three-year sentence. An additional 154 individuals were confronted with a five-year prison sentence for the act of publishing, broadcasting, and disseminating information considered defamatory (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2024).

However, in 2023, following criticisms from national and international levels, the Digital Security Act was substituted with the Cybersecurity Act, which bore a striking resemblance to the previous one (Ehsan & Saquib, 2024). Detention of the opposition was a common scenario during this period, and each time the opposition party organized a protest against the government, the response was a significant escalation in the crackdown efforts; the occurrence of firing and charging was prevalent. From 2009 to 2023, over 138,000 cases were filed against more than 5 million leaders, activists,

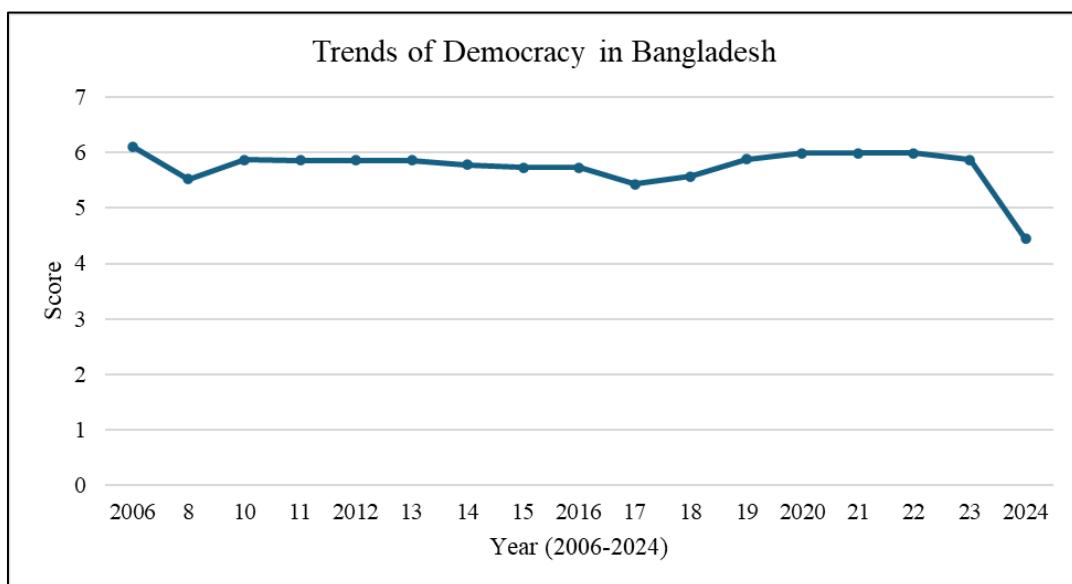
and supporters associated with the BNP and its allies (Ellis-Petersen & Rahman, 2023). The culture of political violence and punishment was evident during this period under the authoritarian rule of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh.

## 2.5. After the July Uprising to the Present

The July Movement in Bangladesh is a crucial stage in the country's quest for democratic liberty and the right to free expression after the Anti-Authoritarian Movement of 1990 (Siddik, 2025). Following Sheikh Hasina's fleeing to India on August 5, 2024, an interim government, headed by Nobel Laureate Professor Dr. Muhammad Yunus, took power, marking the beginning of a new political era instilled with renewed optimism for democracy (Ahmad, 2025). The interim government was supposed to hand over power to an elected government with a fair, participatory, and credible election. However, even after one year of taking charge, the interim government of Bangladesh had not been able to arrange an election on the basis of political consensus. Additionally, people from different classes opined that the interim government has failed to tackle the country's law and order situation (Parmar, 2024).

As of February 2025, mob violence has escalated, resulting in a minimum of 119 fatalities and 74 injuries in 114 events since the interim government assumed power in August 2024, as reported by the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS) (The Daily Star, 2025b). Besides, Internal strife within the BNP has allegedly resulted in 74 fatalities countrywide since August 5, highlighting divisions and intensifying discord among competing groups (Hasan, 2025, p. 5). From August 2024 to April 2025, the BNP had 291 internal conflicts, resulting in 3,352 injuries and 63 fatalities. Between January and April of 2025, about 154 confrontations resulted in 1,660 injuries and 32 deaths across the country. Furthermore, HRSS reports that from September 2024 to May 2025, Bangladesh saw 815 instances of political violence, leading to 118 fatalities and 6,046 injuries (Hasan, 2025, p. 5).

In the 2024 Democracy Index published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Bangladesh had the most significant drop, dropping 25 positions to rank 100<sup>th</sup> out of 167 countries (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024). The EIU index categorizes the countries into four regime types, i.e., full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes. The report suggests that there exists a 'Hybrid' regime type in Bangladesh. Bangladesh was categorized as a flawed democracy only in 2006.



Source: (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025)

**Figure 1** Trends of Democracy in Bangladesh (2006-2024) by EIU

In fact, the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991 created a surge of confidence. Nevertheless, the foundation was inadequate. Institutions were politicized under military regimes, and elections rapidly became catalysts for violence and fraud. Rather than refining a democratic culture, politics became equated with power conflicts and personal allegiance. The lack of a consensus-oriented political tradition rendered each election a zero-sum struggle for survival. This fragile basis established the conditions for the democratic deterioration seen today. However, the nation's experience as a multi-party democracy arguably started in the 1990s. Throughout the majority of its initial two decades of independence, Bangladesh was governed by regimes that struggled to align the urgent developmental needs of one of the world's most impoverished nations—an international exile, as Henry Kissinger infamously described it—with the

demands of Western-style democracy (Evans, 2001). However, Bangladesh has reached this today's phase through diverse ways—BAKSAL, military rule, and a democratic regime with authoritarian rule.

### **3. Key Factors behind the Democratic Failure**

The democratic crisis in Bangladesh is not a recent phenomenon—it has persisted since independence. Even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as democracy began to flourish in many parts of the world, Bangladesh remained stagnant. In a true sense, Bangladesh never experienced a taste of actual constitutional democracy. Bangladesh's position in the global democracy index is alarming, even since the fall of military rule and the introduction of the 'so-called' democracy. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2023, Bangladesh ranks 75<sup>th</sup> out of 167 countries, with a score of only 5.87. The score for civil liberties is only 4.71, which is undoubtedly an alarming concern for a democratic nation like Bangladesh (Bhuiyan, 2024). Based on the score, Bangladesh is classified as a hybrid regime (Riaz, 2019), which refers to a system where fair and free elections are hindered, the opposition faces suppression, the Judiciary is controlled, and media freedom is undermined with rampant corruption and weak rule of law. Moreover, democracy has never been institutionalized here since its independence (Khan, 2003).

#### **3.1. Electoral Crisis and Allegation of Vote Rigging**

Elections in Bangladesh are held on time—but not always in good faith. The BNP boycotted the 3<sup>rd</sup> national election in 1986, and most parties—including the Awami League and BNP—boycotted the 4<sup>th</sup> national election in 1988. The political crisis in Bangladesh, which lasted for two years, began in March 1994 when the Awami League accused the BNP-led government of electoral fraud at the Magura parliamentary by-election. The opposition parties boycotted the Parliament, resulting in the resignation of all 147 of their members on December 28, 1994 (Kochanek, 1997). Khaleda Zia was compelled to resign, and the Parliament was dissolved in November 1995 (Rashiduzzaman, 1997). The subsequent national elections were held on February 15, 1996. The opposition's boycott of the elections led to a decisive win for the BNP, which secured 289 of the 300 seats in an almost voteless election (Kochanek, 1997). The Parliament was also dissolved within a short period, making way for the 7<sup>th</sup> National Parliamentary election under a non-party election commission.

The 10<sup>th</sup> national election in Bangladesh was held on January 5, 2014, devoid of any legitimacy requirements. BNP and allied opposition parties boycotted the election, resulting in the majority of parliamentary members (MPs) being elected uncontested. Voter turnout was approximately 22.66%, with numerous polling centers remaining vacant (Abedin, 2020). In 2018, despite greater participation, the credibility of the election held under the leading government was seriously questioned. Reports of ballot-stuffing, voter intimidation, and partisan use of state machinery have undermined public trust, raising questions about the independence and neutrality of the Election Commission of Bangladesh (Akter, 2023). Additionally, the decision to abolish the caretaker government system in 2011 marked a turning point, leading to accusations of vote rigging. Election, indeed, has become a set game where voters go to the polls, but the outcome often seems predetermined.

#### **3.2. Executive Overreach and Institutional Decay**

Bangladesh's current political landscape experiences an excessive dominance of the executive branch headed by the Prime Minister. The cabinet, consisting of the PM and his/her ministerial colleagues, lies at the apex of central administration, which is the ultimate decision-making body (Mashreque, 2019). The PM's Office exercises extensive influence over the legislature, the judiciary, bureaucracy, and even the media. Parliament, dominated by the ruling party, functions more like an approval chamber than a forum for debate, making a path for extensive centralization of power and institutional decay. The President—constitutionally holds considerable power—can't work independently; instead, he has to perform his duty as a puppet. Additionally, Judicial independence has been eroded, with politically sensitive cases often decided in ways that favor the government, leading to its significant reliance on the executive branch (Khan, 2003).

Civil servants operate under heavy political influence, and law enforcement agencies are frequently accused of targeting opposition activists and journalists to maintain their political influence. Following the restoration of electoral democracy in 1991, the foremost influence of bureaucrats continued, primarily due to the inclination towards confrontational politics and a contempt for democratic institutions (Huque & Rahman, 2003). The parliament has lost its sovereignty, where the Prime Minister and the Cabinet remain responsible for their work. Instead, Parliament in Bangladesh is heavily controlled by the cabinet, and even the MPs can't stay silent or vote against their party (Article 70 of The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh). The existing system no longer functions effectively; instead, power has become overly centralized, making actual democracy an illusion.

### **3.3. The Silencing of Civic Spaces**

One of the most upsetting trends in Bangladesh is the narrowing of civic space for dissent. The Bangladesh government enacted a controversial Digital Security Act (DSA) in 2018, replacing the Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT) 2006, intended to address the growing cybercrimes. However, it served as a barrier to suppress the freedom of speech of the citizens, as ensured by Article 39 of the Constitution of Bangladesh (Runa, 2019). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) also recognizes the right to free speech, the right to hold opinions without interference (Hasan, 2023). However, the DSA Act has been used to arrest and intimidate journalists, social media users, and human rights defenders, and thousands have been jailed for criticizing the government.

Rozina Islam, a senior investigative journalist of the Daily Prothom Alo, was arrested in mid-2021 under sections 379 and 411 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, and sections 3 and 5 of the Official Secrets Act of 1923 (Ahmed, 2021). These incidents were highly criticized countrywide, and the civil society referred to the case as a tool to silence the voice of dissent. Additionally, the civil society organizations face constant surveillance and regulatory hurdles, especially if they engage in rights advocacy. Media houses that step out of line risk closure or defamation suits. Many media outlets are compelled to withdraw news, despite having valid grounds, due to political pressure, leading to the vulnerability of the democratic culture (Clark & Grech, 2017). Later, facing heavy criticism from all classes of people, the Bangladesh Government passed the Cyber Security Act 2023, replacing the DSA 2018. Nonetheless, it has not alleviated public concerns over freedom of expression, hence fostering potential for abuse and instilling anxiety among the civic (Ehsan & Saquib, 2024).

### **3.4. Political Polarization and the Democratic Disconnectedness of the Masses**

Bangladesh's democracy is heavily poisoned by polarization, where political division has persisted since its independence and is mainly elite-driven. Moreover, an inadequate party structure has exacerbated the political and cultural polarization here (Rahman, 2019). The zero-sum mentality of the major political parties—Awami League, BNP, and Jamaat-e-Islami has degraded political norms as they treat each other as enemies, not competitors. Additionally, transnational forces have influenced internal politics, while the nation's fragmented social landscape has obstructed the formation of an integrated national identity, hence hindering democratic progress and political stability in Bangladesh (Behera, 2025). Additionally, the culture of distrust and confrontational politics has blocked democratic dialogue and peaceful transitions of power. When in power, each party attempts to marginalize the other, often misusing state institutions to do so. Aligning these marginalization attempts, Piazza argues that affective partisan political polarization leads to the dehumanization of opposition partisans, imbues political life with a moralistic and zero-sum ethos (Piazza, 2023).

Bangladesh's democratic crisis is intensifying due to the erosion of public trust. Additionally, politics remains controlled by substantial financial influence, goons, and individuals without formal political education and experience, and elections have grown so costly that ordinary people only function as passive voters (Khan, 2003). The youth turn their backs on politics, and they consider politicians as elites protecting their interests, not as public servants. Urban middle classes retreat into silence, and the fear of surveillance and reprisal keeps people from speaking out—fostering the democratic failure without expected positive outcomes.

### **3.5. International Interference and Regional Realpolitik**

The fulfillment of national interest and power is prioritized over normative or ideological commitments in realpolitik, which is rooted in classical realism (Thapa, 2025). This regional and global realpolitik has fostered a climate conducive to authoritarianism, whereby the government attains legitimacy via foreign alliances while internal dissent is delegitimized or suppressed. International politics have dominated South Asia since the Cold War, with the U.S. and Russia competing for hegemonic dominance through regional countries like India and Pakistan. Additionally, the growing influence of China has significantly altered the region's political, economic, and security dynamics, resulting in heightened rivalry among regional and extra-regional countries (Hossain & Islam, 2021). The United States and the European Union have often prioritized geopolitical interests over democratic considerations. At the same time, India, as the dominant regional power, has persistently emphasized the establishment of a favorable government in Bangladesh, ignoring the true norms of competition among parties. This disparity has allowed the Awami League Government in Bangladesh to consolidate power by using foreign legitimacy, whilst repressing local opposition and compromising election integrity. Therefore, the trajectory of Bangladesh's democratic institutions must be contextualized within the dynamics of foreign influence and regional realpolitik.

Machiavelli's landmark book, *The Prince*, offers a foundational viewpoint on the contemporary analysis of realpolitik (Mannan et al., 2015). In Bangladesh, the governing party engages in all necessary actions—moral or immoral—to

maintain political dominance. However, regional political dynamics and external pressures impede South Asia's progress, especially in Bangladesh, with weak governments emerging as the primary sufferers (Hasan, 2024). Both internal and foreign powers influence the country's electoral dynamics. The internal rift between the AL and BNP has diminished faith in democratic institutions, since the opposition's insistence on a caretaker government has not gained popular support (Ahmed, 2025). That is how the actual democratic norms have faded with time in Bangladesh.

Democratic failure in Bangladesh is the outcome of a multidimensional historical process shaped by political, institutional, and geopolitical constraints since independence. Following independence, democracy was the foremost aspiration of the people. Political instability, antagonistic politics, leadership crises, and attempts to establish a one-party system under Sheikh Mujib substantially stalled democratic development. Consequently, over 15 years of military and authoritarian rule weakened state institutions and restricted people's participation. Although constitutional democracy was restored in 1991, deep-rooted hostility and distrust between the two major political parties, the Awami League and the BNP, hindered the actual practice of democracy. A non-transparent electoral system, parliamentary boycotts by the opposition, and demands for a neutral caretaker government during elections exacerbated political instability countrywide. Additionally, executive dominance and the limiting of civic spaces have emerged as weighty obstacles to the establishment of a constitutional democratic system in Bangladesh.

#### **4. Reimagining Democracy in Bangladesh: The Way Forward**

Despite the deepening crisis, hope is not lost. Bangladesh still has the structural capacity to renew its democracy—if the political will exists. Indeed, Bangladesh's electoral process has been controversial in most cases. Therefore, establishing a neutral electoral system is essential to foster fair competition among political parties. The history of Bangladesh showcases a typical scenario of the opposition boycotting elections. This is mainly due to the lack of a credible election. However, following extensive movements, the 5<sup>th</sup> national election in 1991 marked a democratic turn, leading to a BNP-led government. Despite objections, the 6<sup>th</sup> national election was held under a partisan government in 1996, which was boycotted by several parties and annulled within 45 days. The last credible election under a caretaker government took place in 2008, in which the Awami League won. However, the elections of 2014, 2018, and 2024 under the ruling Awami League are widely criticized as one-sided and rigged, lacking credibility both domestically and internationally. To ensure electoral transparency and impartiality, constitutional safeguards are necessary. Elections must be held not under any ruling party, but under an independent commission operating within the bounds of the constitution.

In Bangladesh, the prime minister's position holds excessive power. All institutions and political actors are practically subservient to the prime minister. This concentration of power undermines the separation of powers and transforms a democratic structure into an authoritarian one. Therefore, constitutional amendments are needed to define and limit the powers of the prime minister. Executive power must remain within limits, allowing other institutions to function independently. A president with comparable powers and public support, elected by the people, should exist to provide balance. The President's role should not be subordinate to the Prime Minister, as it currently is. Additionally, a two-term limit for prime ministers should be enforced—preferably even one term—to prevent monopolization of the position and reduce the path to authoritarianism.

As Bangladesh has a unicameral parliament, power tends to be more centralized. There are several historical examples where laws have been passed within one or two days, even sometimes within hours. Therefore, a bicameral parliamentary system—inspired by federal structures—should be introduced. Members of the lower house would be directly elected. In contrast, the upper house would consist of both elected and nominated individuals, including civil society members, intellectuals from universities, journalists, and prominent figures. This would allow internal corrections to government missteps. A free media and an independent civil society must also be ensured. Their active role brings governmental errors to light and enhances accountability, reducing arbitrary decision-making.

The most crucial reform needed is constitutional reform. Bangladesh's constitution provides the prime minister with opportunities for authoritarian control. Although the constitution distinguishes the responsibilities of the President and Prime Minister, all executive powers are concentrated in the Prime Minister's hands. Article 55 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh states that the cabinet, led by the prime minister, is responsible for governing, which effectively gives the PM total authority over executive decisions. While Article 55(3) states that the cabinet is collectively accountable to Parliament, in reality, the ruling party controls the Parliament, making proper accountability a myth. Besides, Article 70 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh prohibits free voting and floor crossing by the Members of Parliament, mandating that MPs who vote against their party immediately lose their seats. Consequently, this makes party MPs mere rubber stamps, further solidifying the PM's dominance. In addition, Article 22 mandates the separation of the judiciary from the executive. Yet, Articles 95 and 96 provide the government with significant influence over judicial appointments and removals, leading to politically biased appointments. Similarly,

appointments to key commissions are made by the President, effectively by the PM. Article 142 allows constitutional amendments if a two-thirds majority in Parliament is achieved, making it easy for a dominant ruling party to change the constitution at will. As a result, the PM can pass almost any law and have it upheld by an obedient judiciary. Unless this root-level crisis is addressed through reform, democratic culture won't flourish.

Undoubtedly, a sustainable democratic system is now a widely shared demand of the people of Bangladesh. But this will not materialize automatically. It requires a new, innovative, and inclusive approach that will ensure democratic values, political awareness, and good governance. To achieve a participatory culture, checks and balances on power are essential. Toward this goal, the interim government of Bangladesh had formed several reform commissions aiming for legal, structural, and procedural reforms. However, the recommendations of the Commission are yet to be materialized. Additionally, there is still ample room for broader discussions on the priority areas of reform. Without the political consensus, it won't work as expected.

Undoubtedly, the process of altering political culture is a time-consuming endeavor. However, structural and institutional adjustments are far more immediate. However, the National Consensus Commission had submitted the final copy of the "July National Charter 2025" to political parties, including extensive changes throughout the constitution, elections, judiciary, public administration, law enforcement, and anti-corruption measures. The proposal specified that no individual may concurrently serve as party leader and prime minister, and no person may hold the post of prime minister for over 10 years (Abdullah, 2025). It further advocates for a bicameral legislature to enhance democratic government. Moreover, there are no specific recommendations for structural modifications to the current Election Commission in the July Charter. Indeed, the question of political goodwill needs to be given equal weight to structural reforms, as democracy is a culture, not merely a set of laws.

Additionally, well-organized political dialogue mechanisms are essential for expected reforms. After the overthrow of PM Sheikh Hasina in August 2024, the interim government of Bangladesh took power to offer democratic reforms in all areas of administration. Later, the National Consensus Commission of Bangladesh was formed by the interim government to spearhead essential democratic changes (A seven-member 'Jatiya Oaikymoto (Consensus) Commission' headed by Prof Muhammad Yunus was formed on 13 February 2025 to consider and adopt the recommendations submitted by six reform commissions.). The Commission held numerous sessions to reach a consensus but was unsuccessful in achieving the expected outcomes (Prothom Alo English, 2025). Political parties have been unable to achieve a consensus. With collaboration, there needs to be a consensus on every structural reform to make democracy successful in Bangladesh.

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## 5. Conclusion

Bangladesh has had a democratic journey to tell, full of promise, and up to now, power concentration and institutional weaknesses and political intolerance have worked against it time after time. Since the ecstatic independence to the tumult of coups, since the brief experiments of parliament to the electoral autocracy, the history of politics of the country demonstrates a certain pattern: democracy has frequently been proclaimed much more as a slogan than as the implemented practice. The last several governments, irrespective of ideology, have viewed the state institutions as controls on the will of the people, as opposed to the benefit of checks and balances in a working democracy.

However, this course is not unavoidable and unchanging. The country still has the building blocks, which can create a strong democratic order; Bangladesh has an active citizenry, a thriving civil society, and a constitutional system that, given a makeover and adherence to, would help in protecting democratic ideals. What is difficult is the political foresight of acting upon the diagnosed crisis, which now seems self-evident, but rather the summoning of the political courage to face entrenched interests, decentralize the executive branch, and recover institutional independence.

It will take more than a reformation of a procedure; it will take a change in political culture, a shift in conceptualization, formulating rules on a case-by-case basis to building consensus, a focus on self-interest versus a sense of community, and a passive versus an active citizenry. It is only in such re-imagining that Bangladesh can come out of its relapses of authoritarianism and achieve the democratic dreams that had led to its formation. The challenge is daunting, but even greater is the future of democracy in Bangladesh; it lies in the decisions taken now.

## Compliance with ethical standards

### Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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