

Bangladesh at a Crossroads

Will the coming national election bring political stability to Bangladesh?

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Bonn, 9 February 2026. **On 12 February 2026, Bangladesh will hold polls. The outcomes will decide the fate of democratic legitimacy, institutional stability, and public trust in governance.**

Since mid-2024, when a student-led movement demanding democratic reform forced the overthrow of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, political insecurity has affected most Bangladeshis. An interim government currently oversees Bangladesh's transition to an elected administration, but peace and stability remain elusive. For the past 18 months, persistent unrest has affected daily life. Recurring protests, attacks on media organisations, and disruptions to economic activity continue. The deterioration of the law and order has made convicting and prosecuting perpetrators challenging.

Diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries have changed. The relationship with India, Bangladesh's largest neighbour, is tense, especially after Sheikh Hasina's post-ouster refuge in India. Meanwhile, the interim government's growing closeness with Pakistan has made India wary. The interim government has also strengthened ties with China. This has aggravated complications with India but brought much-needed large-scale foreign investments. The stewardship of a democratically elected government is now essential to maintain domestic economic growth and navigate complicated relationships with neighbours. The upcoming election, therefore, attracts considerable attention from both, national and international stakeholders.

Challenges to free and fair elections

Several factors reduce the chances of a free and fair election. Doubts remain about the law-and-order apparatus's ability to support such an election. There are also concerns about limited voting options for voters. Around 30-35% of the electorate that supported the Awami League (AL) now lacks representation, as the party is banned from participating in elections. Sheikh Hasina fled to India at the peak of the protests and has been sentenced to death in absentia for crimes against humanity. This prevents her from returning to Bangladesh indefinitely.

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Voter options are further constrained by alliances and coalitions among the remaining parties. Pre-election polls indicate a close contest between the two main coalitions, led by the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami. The BNP-led alliance includes centrist and democratic parties, while Jamaat is a right-wing Islamist party with a strong Islamic ideological affiliation. The first group emphasises nationalism, economic liberalism, democratic governance, and anti-corruption reforms. The latter camp prioritises tax reduction, improving social welfare infrastructure, reducing utility costs, and improving health, employment, and education. Many student leaders who played a central role in the

protests against Sheikh Hasina have joined the coalition with Jamaat after forming a heavily factionalised yet pluralistic political party called the National Citizen Party. Through this coalition, they hope their reformist ideals will help them reach the hard-to-reach and non-urban voters that votes for Jamaat. Among different factions within NCP, the coalition with Jamaat suggests the Islamist factions are currently dominant.

Both Jamaat and the BNP have problematic histories. The BNP has a record of political violence and corruption while in power, and recent clashes among party members have raised concerns about internal discipline. Jamaat, despite its organisational discipline, faces criticism for its previous advocacy of strict Islamic laws, conservative policies, cultural restrictions, gender equity issues, and opposition to Bangladesh's 1971 Liberation War, which undermines its credibility among liberal, left-leaning, and minority voters.

Unpredictability and swing votes

For many of the 40 million first-time voters and former AL supporters, the current situation presents a dilemma with limited choices. Their decisions are likely to be shaped more by the available candidates than by political convictions. This raises concerns that the election may result in procedural democracy without substantive representation. Although the electoral process may follow democratic procedures, banning a major political party could create a significant representation deficit. Lack of motivation from political alignment with current candidates or credible assurances of electoral transparency and post-election security, many undecided voters may choose to abstain from voting.

Excluding political parties and low voter participation can shift competition toward informal and confrontational forms, increasing the risk of unrest, reinforcing zero-sum politics, and eroding public confidence in democratic institutions. This could lead to cautious engagement from global actors, weaken Bangladesh's diplomatic leverage, and slow reforms for social and economic recovery. Therefore, for Bangladeshi people, the upcoming election may be a panacea for many problems or open a Pandora's box of new challenges.