



Center for Asian Democracy

Bangladesh General Election 2024 Pre-Election Report

CAD Research Brief

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Cover Image: [The Diplomat](#)

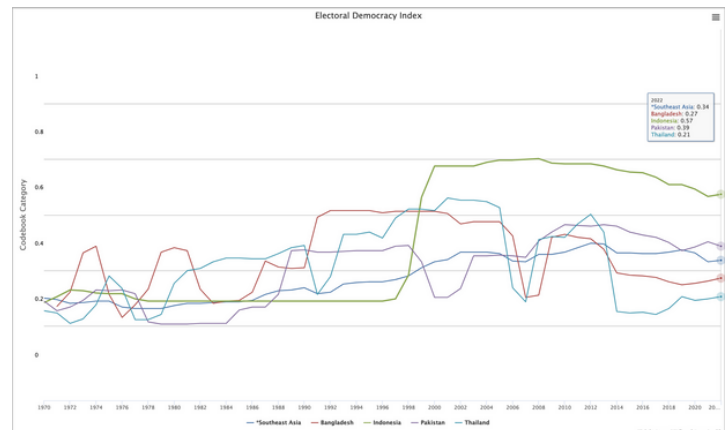
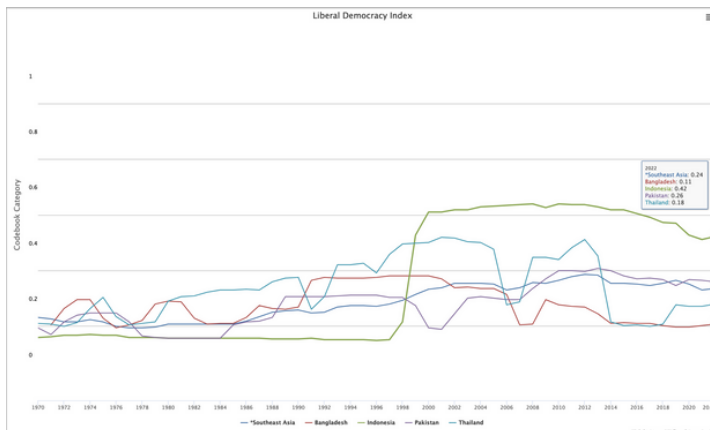
Country Profile

Overview

Bangladesh is a unitary parliamentary republic in Southeast Asia with a population of nearly 170 million. A 1992 Constitution governs the country; however, the country has experienced multiple coups, bringing setbacks to democratic consolidation. The parliament of Bangladesh, called the Jatiya Sangsad (House of the Nation), is a unicameral body consisting of 350 seats, most of which are filled through direct election and gender quotas. The parliament elects the president, who serves a five-year term, with a two-term limit. The president then appoints the leader of the legislative majority party (or coalition) as prime minister.

Measures of Democracy

In the past twenty years, Bangladesh's liberal and electoral democracy rating has been volatile. Decreases in each indicator around 2007 and after 2009 reflect political turmoil that will be discussed later in this briefing. V-Dem's electoral democracy index of 0.27 for Bangladesh is lower than Southeast Asia's rating of 0.34 and Pakistan's rating of 0.39, though higher than Thailand's rating of 0.21. Bangladesh's liberal democracy index score of 0.11, ranks lower than the Southeast Asian region, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Thailand. For both indexes, it is clear that liberal and electoral democracy is unstable in Bangladesh. This report will analyze this instability and the nature of obstacles to a more fully consolidated democracy in the country.



Media Freedom

Bangladesh is ranked 163/180 with a score of 35.31 on the Reporters Without Borders' Media Freedom Rankings. Ranking at 163 places Bangladesh in the category labeled "No Media Freedom." Bangladesh ranked as one of the least free countries within the Southeast Asian region. Bangladesh's score is ranked lower than its score in 2022, indicating growing concerns about legislative, security, and social freedom indicators. The future of media freedom remains uncertain, as Bangladesh currently has 6 journalists detained, and 3 journalists have been killed since January 1, 2023.

INDEX 2023		INDEX 2022	
163 / 180	Score : 35.31	162 / 180	Score : 36.63
POLITICAL INDICATOR	154 / 39.06	POLITICAL INDICATOR	140 / 42.12
ECONOMIC INDICATOR	142 / 36.11	ECONOMIC INDICATOR	138 / 32.48
LEGISLATIVE INDICATOR	154 / 35.22	LEGISLATIVE INDICATOR	148 / 44.15
SOCIAL INDICATOR	157 / 36.55	SOCIAL INDICATOR	149 / 48.50
SECURITY INDICATOR	167 / 29.60	SECURITY INDICATOR	172 / 15.88

Election Profile: Bangladesh's 2024 General Election

Election Credibility & Opposition Boycott

On January 7, 2024, Bangladesh will hold its general election where all 300 seats of the Jatiya Sangsad will be up for re-election. Reoccurring political turmoil between the two main parties, the BNP and the AL, has caused voter turnout to be unstable. The BNP opted not to engage in the 2014 elections unless specific conditions, aimed at ensuring fairness, were fulfilled. These conditions, such as the establishment of an impartial caretaker government to supervise the elections, went unmet. Similar dynamics have recurred in this election cycle. BNP's acting Chairman Tarique Rahman states "The predetermined upcoming election, is non-participatory not just for the political parties, but the voters as well." The BNP, along with 62 political parties have decided to boycott the election on January 7. The AL disputes the BNP's claims, and states that the reason that the BNP is boycotting the elections is not to encourage free and fair elections, but because they it lacks the organizational management to to reach voters on a grand scale. With AL encouragement, 382 independent candidates will stand in an election. More than half of these independent candidates have affiliations with the AL. The BNP has called these candidates "dummy candidates" and the BNP sees this as a politically savvy move to undercut its boycott.

Leading Parties

BNP: Bangladesh Nationalist Party

The BNP identifies as a center-right political party. Its political ideology is rooted in nationalism, democracy, and economic liberalism. While it has secular elements, the party also has ties to elements of political Islam in the country. Khaleda Zia served as the Prime Minister in the 1990s and again from 2001 to 2006. Currently, multiple BNP leaders are imprisoned as the AL tightens its hold on power in the pre-election period. In the 2018 election, the BNP gained 7 seats, but faces uncertain prospects in the current polarized political environment.

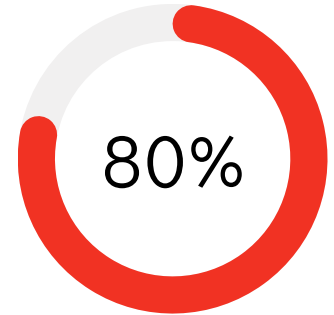
AL: Awami League

The Awami League identifies as a center-left political party with a focus on secularism, democracy, and social justice. It has historically advocated for the linguistic and cultural rights of the Bengali-speaking population. Sheikh Hasina assumed leadership when the AL gained a majority in the 2008 election, and has remained a dominant figure in Bangladeshi politics. During the 2008 election, the AL formulated the Grand Alliance coalition to gain and maintain power ever since.

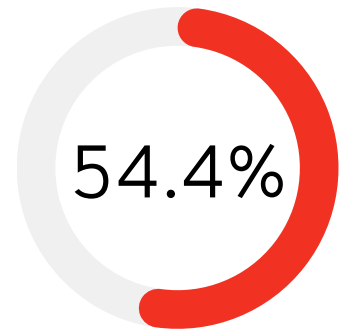
Other Parties and Independents

The Jatiya Party, an ally of the AL, gained 26 seats in the 2018 election. The Jatiya Party was a part of the 2008 Grand Alliance to oust the BNP majority. The Workers Party of Bangladesh is a communist party that won 4 seats in the 2018 election. They were also a part of the 2008 Grand Alliance, but voice concerns over the AL's tolerance of religious-based political parties. As referenced above, independent candidates have become a major feature of the 2024 election campaign. Their long-term impact on the country's party system remains to be seen.

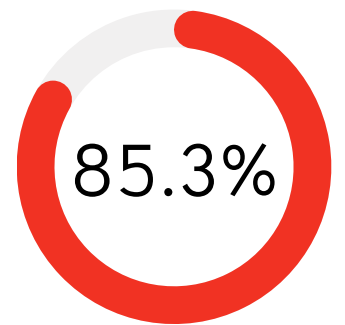
Recent Voter Turnout



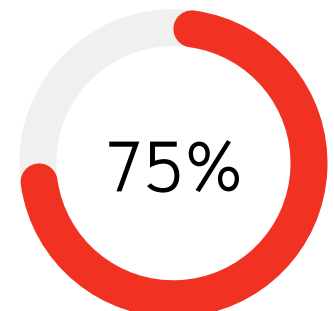
2018 General Election



2014 General Election



2008 General Election



2001 General Election

International Influence

Due to its extensive border with India, strategic positioning along the Bay of Bengal, and economic opportunities, Bangladesh is a site of strategic competition for powers with interests in the Indo-Pacific region. These international dynamics come with implications for democracy and elections in the country. While this is always the case, international dynamics have been especially prominent in the recent AL-BNP contention.

India

Along with sharing a border, India and Bangladesh have deep cultural and historical ties. India supports the AL government, as both countries have worked on building bilateral economic and trade deals to develop the Indo-Pacific region. India and Bangladesh have united on problem-solving border security issues, building energy cooperation, and increasing trade investments. India also supports Bangladesh by issuing loans for infrastructure development. India views Bangladesh as a key ally, and by supporting the AL government, which has been in power for almost fifteen years, seeks to ensure stable influence. India has supported the AL throughout this contentious election cycle, even in the face of allegations of human rights abuses, corruption, and election tampering. As former Indian minister of state for external affairs MJ Akbar stated, “We in India have our own understanding of Sheikh Hasina. We think she restored democracy in Bangladesh like her father spearheaded the fight for freedom.” India has generally stayed quiet regarding international calls for election monitoring in the upcoming election, stating that elections are an internal matter. India will be watching these election results closely as they have geopolitical, security, and financial interests in Bangladesh.

China

Hasina and the AL government have worked hard at developing economic and diplomatic ties with China. China has unabashedly criticized the US’s approach to Bangladesh and the AL government. China does not appreciate the US threatening visa bans in the name of a free and fair election, US sanctions, as well as the US’s overall goal of including Bangladesh in its Indo-Pacific strategy. As of 2016, Bangladesh is a member of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, where China has invested in numerous infrastructure projects throughout Bangladesh. The AL has prioritized using China’s investments to build ports, railroads, power plants, roads, and weapons. China accounted for 74 percent of Bangladesh’s arms imports in the 2015-2019 period. Further, the US criticizing Bangladesh over their past elections has only pushed Bangladesh closer to China, and China has seemingly taken advantage of that dynamic on numerous fronts. Bangladesh has since publicly taken a non-alignment stance in the US-Sino geopolitical debate; however, as the US pushes Bangladesh away, China becomes a more favorable ally for Bangladesh.



New Delhi: Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, at the Joint Press Statements, at Hyderabad House, in New Delhi on Oct 5, 2019. (Photo: IANS/PIB)

The West

In 2021 and 2023, the US denied Bangladesh an invitation to the Biden Administration’s Democracy Summit because of a pattern of undemocratic practices. In recent years, US officials have repeatedly called for free and fair elections in Bangladesh. Other countries such as the United Kingdom and Japan have also emphasized having free and fair elections, with the EU proposing to implement election monitors. Some US government officials have criticized the AL for lack of response to human rights abuses and weaponizing Bangladesh’s Digital Security Act. Further, the US has put sanctions on some associated with Bangladesh’s Rapid Action Battalion. Opposition groups within Bangladesh have generally supported the US and other Western powers in any criticism of the AL and calls for credible elections, while the AL, unsurprisingly, decries such criticism as scheming to overthrow the AL’s majority. AL leaders have publically called the US hypocritical, but, despite public tensions, the US wishes to maintain relations with Bangladesh to increase its influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Public Attitudes Regarding Democracy & Institutions

The 2018 [World Values Survey](#) (WVS) captures Bangladesh's attitudes about democratic institutions. This brief section highlights representative indicators from the most recent WVS polling on attitudes toward liberal rights, corruption, and election confidence.

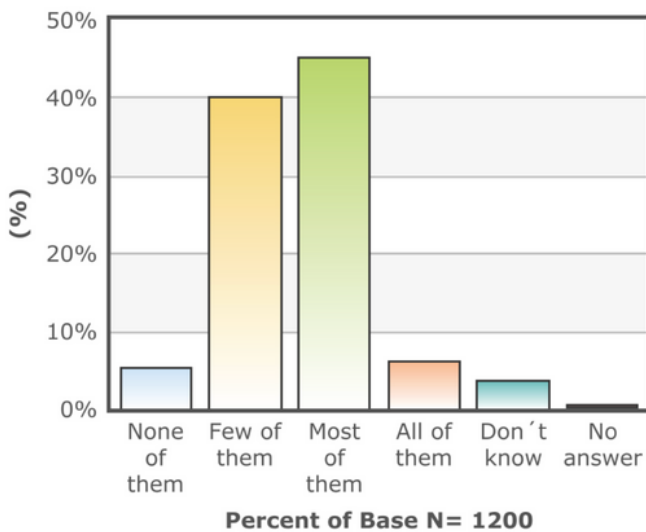
Liberal Rights

Bangladeshi respondents express strong support for the necessity of protecting civil rights as a characteristic of democracy. 43.7% of respondents agreed protecting civil rights is an essential characteristic of democracy, with only 3.87% of respondents in the bottom half of the scale taken as a whole. The country's average score on this indicator (8.61) is higher than other nearby democracies, such as Pakistan (8.05), Indonesia (7.92) and South Korea (7.2).

Civil Rights Protect people's liberty against oppression

Rating	% / Total
It is against democracy (spontaneous)	7 0.6
Not an essential characteristic of democracy	9 0.8
2	6 0.5
3	9 0.8
4	18 1.5
5	25 2.1
6	45 3.8
7	121 10.1
8	199 16.6
9	237 19.8
An essential characteristic of democracy	524 43.7
Base mean	1,200
Mean	8.61
Std Dev.	1.83
(N)	(1,200) 100%

Involved in corruption: State authorities



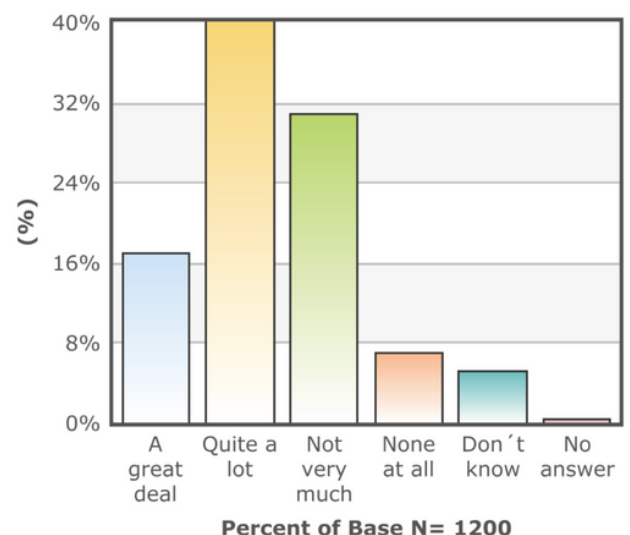
Corruption

A plurality of respondents believe that most state authorities are involved in corruption. This indicates low levels of public trust in state officials but also shows that Bangladesh's voters are aware of the corruption taking place. [Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index](#) ranks Bangladesh 25/100, with 0 being highly corrupt. Pakistan (27/100) and Indonesia (34/100) rank similarly, while Malaysia (47/100) and South Korea (63/100) are rated more highly. Transparency International's 2020 [Global Corruption Barometer](#) found that 20% of public service users paid a bribe in the previous 12 months.

Electoral Confidence

According to the 2018 WVS, 56.6% of Bangladeshi respondents have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in Bangladesh's elections. Where 37.8% of respondents have not very much, or no confidence at all in Bangladesh's election. For regional comparison. Pakistan rated closely to Bangladeshi respondents, with 57.8% of respondents having a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in elections, and 36.3% of respondents having not very much or no confidence in their elections. Indonesians express more confidence, with 73.2% of respondents having quite a lot and a great deal of confidence in their elections.

Confidence: Elections



Democracy: The Threat of Backsliding

Closing Space for Civil Society

Bangladesh's civil society has experienced institutional interference, as reports detail opposition NGO offices being raided, along with academics, lawyers, journalists, and bloggers being harassed and killed. New regulations monitor NGO programs and their funding. As a result of the strict and swift institutional tightening on civil society organizations, groups may censor themselves or produce content that is neutral or supports the AL government and their allies. Historically, Bangladesh's civil society has been vibrant; however, amid electoral polarization, space for a non-weaponized civil society dwindles. This shift raises concerns, as both the connections with the government and their function as a watchdog ensuring state accountability may have diminished.



Xulhaz Mannan, left, was the founder of Bangladesh's only LGBT magazine and was murdered. Photograph: [The Guardian](#)

Pluralism and Religion in Bangladesh's Politics

Bangladesh, one of the world's largest Muslim-majority countries, has formally secular political institutions. The current election is at times framed as pitting Islamists (BNP) vs. Secularists (AL). However, the relationship is more nuanced. The wording of the current Bangladesh constitution indicates that secularism in Bangladesh is inspired by Islamic ideals and culture. Further, politicians from various political backgrounds in Bangladesh emphasize their Muslim identity, integrating religious culture into both state and party matters. Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist party banned in 2013, was an ally of the BNP, and their judicial silencing has been viewed as a political move. However, the AL has built coalition ties with other Islamic parties in parliament. In 2018, 61 out of 70 Islamic parties allied with the AL election alliance. While the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution reinstated secularism as a state principle, it has simultaneously reinforced the status of Islam in the country.

The influence of Islamists and religious nationalism has raised concerns regarding the continued weaponization of religion and anti-minority sentiment in the country's politics. Despite opposition from secular factions, Bangladesh has criminalized actions deemed offensive to "religious sentiment." Expressing atheist beliefs is currently considered risky in Bangladesh. In 2018, the AL accused the BNP and its Islamist ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, of the deaths of two gay rights activists. The BNP denies these claims. At the same time, some critics have claimed the AL government ignored the rise of international radical groups in Bangladesh such as the Bangladeshi branch of al-Qaida.



"Bangladesh's Religious Minorities are Under Attack." Nov 6th 2021. Photograph - [The Economist](#)

Spotlight on the Campaign Trail

BNP announcing their election boycott:
“Won’t join farcical vote.”

Source: [Aljazeera](#)



Protesters outside the office of the Election Commission of Bangladesh, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, November 15, 2023. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the country’s main opposition party, is boycotting January elections [Mohammad Ponir Hossain/Reuters]



Bangladesh Prime Minister [Sheikh Hasina](#) formally kicked off her ruling Awami League party’s campaign on 20 December 2023 amid an election boycott by the country’s main opposition party.

Source: [The Diplomat](#), AP

A group of garment workers joins as supporters of the BNP in forming a human chain on International Human Rights Day in support of the BNP boycott.

Source: [REUTERS](#)



Further Reading

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Activists from the Leftist Party's Alliance 'Ganatantra Mancha' hold red cards as they participate in a rally to protest against the upcoming 2024 general elections in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on December 30, 2023.

About the Center for Asian Democracy

The mission of the Center for Asian Democracy, established at the University of Louisville in 2006, is to promote research and teaching about democracy and the prospects for democratization in Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia. Through publications, conferences, workshops, visiting scholars programs, colloquia, and research projects in Asian countries, the Center creates a forum for studying political dynamics in this vital region. The Center is currently led by Dr. David Buckley, Paul Weber Chair of Politics, Science and Religion, and Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Louisville.

About the Author

The substantive research for this report was conducted by CAD Graduate Research Assistant, Toree Doll, under the supervision of Dr. David Buckley. Toree Doll is a political science MA student, with interests in US foreign policy, economics, and democratic trends in Asia. Toree graduates from the UofL Political Science Masters Program in December 2023. Toree is also a UofL undergraduate alumna, where she earned a B.A. in Political Science, a B.A. in Economics, and minored in Chinese language.

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