



# BANGLADESH UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

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IAD

On the 5th of August 2024, Bangladesh was thrown into a constitutional crisis. A massive uprising, first from students and then the population at large, led to the ousting of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The new government has so far been unable to solve the constitutional issues facing Bangladesh, such as establishing the legitimacy of the new interim government. Of particular concern is the legitimacy of the upcoming 2026 elections. This brief outlines the major concerns and some concrete recommendations for the new Bangladeshi government and the international community to uphold democratic principles in this period of transition.

### Overview of Recommendations

- Send UN election observers to monitor the election in February
- Lift the ban on the Awami League.
- Launch an independent review of the violence perpetrated by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)
- Enact fair, impartial, and comprehensive processes to investigate human rights abuses
- Document human rights abuse's taking place under the current government
- Extend prosecutions to all responsible parties
- End political party bans
- Issue and enforce new regulations on security forces

Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has navigated a turbulent path between democracy and authoritarianism. Born out of a bloody war of liberation, the nation emerged with a secular and democratic constitution that promised equality, justice, and the rule of law. Yet its politics have been marked by power struggles, coups, and recurring assaults on democratic institutions.

The country's founding leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, envisioned a pluralist and participatory democracy, but his assassination in August 1975 plunged Bangladesh into a cycle of military rule and political violence that lasted more than fifteen years. Civilian rule was restored in 1991 with the re-establishment of parliamentary

democracy. To safeguard that democracy, Bangladesh later introduced the “caretaker government” system—an interim, non-party administration mandated to oversee national elections.

For two decades, this system ensured fair elections and smooth transfers of power. Its abolition in 2011 under the Fifteenth Amendment, led by the Awami League government, concentrated control in the ruling party and eroded public trust in the electoral process.

By the time of the January 2024 general election, those tensions had reached a breaking point. The election was boycotted by major opposition parties, producing a one-sided result and a government with diminished legitimacy. The months that followed saw an unprecedented uprising, led first by students protesting against changes to the public sector quota system and soon joined by workers, professionals, and ordinary citizens demanding accountability and reform. These protests culminated in the flight of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 5 August 2024, ending her fifteen-year rule but plunging the country into a new constitutional crisis.

Following Hasina's exit, Muhammad Yunus became interim leader, even though the constitution provides no basis for an unelected government. A year later, Bangladesh remains in political limbo, with only President Mohammed Shahabuddin holding legitimate authority.

The crisis deepened in May 2025 when the Awami League was banned under the Anti-Terrorism Act, silencing millions of voters. Reports from human rights groups and the UN cite ongoing detentions, torture, and media restrictions, raising doubts about the interim government's direction and reform promises.

Bangladesh's instability now affects the wider region. As a major South Asian economy and UN peacekeeping contributor, its turmoil has drawn concern from India, the EU, and the UN. The February 2026 elections will test both Bangladesh's constitutional resilience and global support for democracy in South Asia.

The task ahead is clear: Bangladesh must return to a legitimate, participatory, and constitutionally grounded system of governance. For that to happen, the interim government must ensure that the next election is free, fair, and inclusive—open to all parties, monitored by credible international observers, and conducted under the rule of law. Without such guarantees, Bangladesh risks sliding back into repression and losing once more the democratic promise upon which it was founded.

## CONCERNS

### Electoral Issues

While the removal of Prime Minister Hasina is broadly positive, there are nonetheless concerns about the manner in which the new government of Bangladesh has been established. There are constitutional limits on new governments, how power is transferred, and procedures following the resignation of public officials. For example, the constitution mandates that the handover of prime ministership is to be transferred by written letter. With this step missing, there is a break in the chain of legal and legitimate transfers of power. Although some of these concerns were addressed with the elections of the new prime minister, Mohammed Shahabuddin, the government administration he oversees is unelected.

A constitutionally elected prime minister ruling with an unelected administration is a clear violation of the Bangladeshi Constitution. While in 2024 the Supreme Court struck down a section of the 15th amendment, which previously abolished the non-party caretaker government system, the Supreme Court decided that the current Yunus-led interim administration fell outside this ruling. This has brought further confusion regarding the constitutional standing of the current administration, as the Supreme Court failed to rule on the administration itself.

The confusion and instability following the July Revolution creates the potential for ill-intentioned actors to further their own agendas. Oversight of the upcoming election is therefore needed to ensure that the next government consists of constitutionally elected representatives. IAD urges the mobilization of UN observers during the planned 2026 elections.

### Banning of Political Opposition

Under the current government, there has developed a deeply worrying trend of banning political parties. The Awami League was banned under anti-terror laws on May 10th, 2025. The move was reportedly supported by the National Citizen Party (NCP)—a youth organization aligned with the interim authorities. The Awami League's support hovers around [7.3%](#), with their banning effectively disenfranchising a significant percentage of the electorate. Without proper guardrails, moves like these can quickly become the norm. The upcoming elections are an opportunity for the interim government to let the people of Bangladesh make the final decision on their leadership.

## Human Rights Violations

Human rights violations have taken place under both the former and current administrations. Several instances of human rights abuses under the previous administration were made worse during the protest and revolution. Between the 15th of July and the 5th of August, a UN report found that an estimate of 1,400 people were killed. Of those, 12%-13% were children. Thousands more were wounded, mostly shot by Bangladesh security forces. More than 11,000 arbitrary arrests were made, and there have been crackdowns on freedom of the press.

*“The brutal response was a calculated and well-coordinated strategy by the former Government to hold onto power in the face of mass opposition...” “...There are reasonable grounds to believe hundreds of extrajudicial killings, extensive arbitrary arrests and detentions, and torture, were carried out with the knowledge, coordination and direction of the political leadership and senior security officials as part of a strategy to suppress the protests.”*

-UN Human Rights Chief Volker Turk.

There have also been reports of abuse in government-controlled detention centers. These include claims of beatings and torture by government agents. Protesters, students, ordinary workers and even children have been victims of beatings, electroshocks, withholding of medical care, and breaking of fingers. Reports have surfaced of detainees being taken into interrogation rooms, and emerging hours later limping, crying and visibly injured from beatings... The reports show a widespread pattern of force used against citizens while in detention, and abuses committed by security forces.

## Conclusion

Bangladesh today stands at a decisive crossroads. The July–August 2024 uprising, culminating in the removal of Sheikh Hasina, reflected the people’s determination to end decades of repression and demand accountability. Yet the interim administration that replaced her has failed to address fundamental constitutional and democratic concerns. With power concentrated in unelected hands, elections postponed, and even major political parties banned, many fear that Bangladesh risks replacing one system of abuse with another. This lack of constitutional clarity, combined with alarming restrictions on political participation, undermines public trust and threatens the credibility of the state.

Equally urgent is the need to reckon with widespread human rights violations. Independent reports, including those of the UN, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch, have documented thousands of deaths, mass arrests, and systematic torture at the hands of state forces both during and after the protests. The people of Bangladesh must be in a position to make an informed decision over whether to

Justice for these crimes is not only a moral imperative but also a necessary condition for restoring legitimacy. Security institutions, particularly the Rapid Action Battalion, must be restructured, any legal provisions granting them impunity repealed, and any evidence of their crimes preserved and documented so that perpetrators may be held accountable.

In the upcoming 2026 elections, Bangladesh's credibility will hinge on transparency, oversight, and the meaningful participation of its citizens. Without impartial oversight, they could cement authoritarian tendencies; with genuine transparency, they could mark the beginning of a new democratic chapter. For this to happen, UN observers and robust safeguards are indispensable.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

IAD welcomes the Bangladeshi government's decision to hold an election in February 2026 and the potential this represents for Bangladeshi democracy. It is vital, however, that the Bangladeshi authorities, the UN, and the international community work together to ensure that these elections are not marred by corruption and violence but are instead allowed to function as an opportunity for the people of Bangladesh to chart their nation's future, free from intimidation. Post-election, political reforms are needed to ensure that the abuses of the past are not repeated, and a thorough documentation of those abuses must be conducted to ensure those responsible are answerable to the law. To this end, we make the following recommendations.

### 2026 Elections

1. Send UN election observers to monitor the election in February. This entails allowing them to engage in pre-election monitoring, observation on election day, and post-election assessment and reporting.
2. Lift the ban on the Awami League, allowing them to participate fully and freely in the election.

### Human Rights Abuses

1. Launch an independent review of the violence, arrests and institutional missteps inherent to the use of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an antiterrorist organization, against protesters and civilians. As late as May 2025, a police superintendent was killed in a RAB Field office in Chattogram, with the reason for death still unclear.
2. Enact fair, impartial, and comprehensive processes to investigate and properly document human rights abuses, including cases that predate the 2024 quota protests, and cases of revenge violence.
3. Continue UN work documenting human rights abuses taking place in Bangladesh under the current government, and to compile and preserve relevant evidence, including official orders and other internal documents and forensic evidence, and for the authorities in Bangladesh to take proper disciplinary and criminal justice measures against officials and others who seek to destroy or hide evidence.

### Political Reform

1. End political party bans that disenfranchise large sections of the Bangladeshi electorate and maintain a commitment to multi-party democracy.
2. Issue and enforce new regulations to ensure that the security forces are in line with internationally recognised laws on human rights and the use of violence.

## Sources and further reading

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