

Briefing Paper #6 on

Future of Democratic Transition and Reforms: Youth Perspectives in Bangladesh

July 2025



Briefing Paper #6 on
Future of Democratic Transition and Reforms:
Youth Perspectives in Bangladesh

Published in July 2025

Editorial Oversight: Mubashar Hasan

Prepared by: Aaqib Md Shatil

Edited by: Jyoti Rahman

Cover: Aaqib Md Shatil

Photo credit: Jibon Ahmed/Netra News

Published by: Asia Democracy Network and Sydney Policy and Analysis Centre

Portions of this work may be reproduced and/or translated for non-commercial purposes provided SPAC and ADN are acknowledged as the source of the material.

Websites: www.adnasia.org and www.sydneypolicy.com.au

Email: ADN@adnasia.org and editor@sydneypolicy.com.au

Background

In July 2024, protests erupted in Bangladesh, demanding a fair and non-discriminatory recruitment system for government jobs. These protests were primarily led by educated youth who had suffered from high unemployment for years due to a lack of decent job opportunities. In response, the government, led by Sheikh Hasina, launched a week-long crackdown that resulted in the deaths of over a hundred people. The protests escalated into an uprising, ultimately leading to the overthrow of the government on August 5, 2024.

The uprising had a profound impact on the youth, who not only led the protests but also paid a heavy price, with many losing their lives. Consequently, following the uprising, the youth expected sweeping reforms in key institutions to prevent the return of authoritarianism and ensure accountability from future governments. In response, the government formed several reform commissions. By the end of July 2025, almost a year later, most political parties agreed to introduce provisions in the constitution to meet the people's demands.

However, questions remain about whether these constitutional reforms alone can facilitate the development of more accountable institutions and expedite the much-needed structural changes.

In this context, the Asia Democracy Network (ADN) and the Sydney Policy and Analysis Centre (SPAC) organised the final webinar of a six-part series titled “Future of Democratic Transition and Reforms: Youth Perspectives in Bangladesh,” on July 18, 2025. The webinar aimed to listen to the youth who participated in the protests and gather their perspectives on the reforms and the democratic transition.

Index

Background.....	1
1. Outline and the Discussants.....	3
2. Key Discussion Points	4
2.1) Recollection of the Bangladesh Uprising.....	4
2.2) False dichotomy of election and reforms	5
2.3) The progress and future of reforms	6
2.4) Ensuring the Representation of Marginalised Communities	7
3. Recommendations	9

1. Outline and the Discussants

The [webinar](#) started with a recollection of the July protests from the discussants who had first-hand experience of seeing youth fighting back on the streets and getting wounded and even dying for a cause, which was followed by a discussion on three thematic areas: the false dichotomy around elections and reforms, the progress and future of reforms and ensuring the voice of marginalised communities being heard.

The panellists who joined the webinar were:

1. Meherba Sabrin, Lecturer of Law at Eastern University, and
2. Nowshin Noor Aysharzo, MSc in Public Policy candidate from University College London

Jyoti Rahman, the Director of SPAC, moderated the webinar. Sabra Zahid, the Program Officer of the Asia Democracy Network, delivered the opening remarks.

2. Key Discussion Points

2.1) Recollection of the Bangladesh Uprising

One year ago, in July 2024, the Sheikh Hasina regime ordered a violent crackdown on protesters demanding reforms to the quota-based recruitment system. This week-long, state-backed violence resulted in the deaths of over a hundred people, which set the stage for an uprising that ultimately toppled Sheikh Hasina's government, which had been in power for more than 15 years. The fall of the regime signified a new dawn for democracy in Bangladesh, as the Awami League-led government had been accused of winning elections through fraudulent means. It is essential to remember how the absence of democracy contributed to this tragedy and to honour those who sacrificed their lives in the fight for a democratic and prosperous future for Bangladesh.

After scrapping the constitutional provision for setting up an election-time technocrat caretaker government to oversee the election, the Awami League government, led by Sheikh Hasina, held three general elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024, with Sheikh Hasina as the prime minister of the election-time government. Researchers have found these elections to be flawed and lacking credibility. The decline of democracy and the absence of periodic, credible, free, and fair elections gradually eroded civil liberties, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly.

As a result, when the students took to the streets to protest the decision to reinstate the quota-based recruitment system for government jobs and to reform the system, the trigger-happy police and Awami League's armed youth groups, with the tacit support of the Sheikh Hasina regime, responded in a heavy-handed manner. After killing six protesters on July 16th 2024, they hit the streets with more vigour and indiscriminately shot at the students who tried to block some roads in the capital, Dhaka, in some cases with lethal weapons.

Witnesses of the brutal crackdown on July 18, 2024, including a relative of a victim who was shot in the leg, recounted the violence and gross violations of human rights that unfolded

that day. Security forces and goons affiliated with the Awami League shot at the protesters, while security agencies and ruling party supporters obstructed injured individuals from reaching hospitals for proper treatment. The atmosphere of fear that enveloped the city was so intense that hospitals hesitated to treat victims with bullet wounds.

The persecution of protesters continued in the days that followed. Security forces and plainclothes individuals conducted raids on hospitals and residential areas in search of youth aged between 18 and 25. Being a student or young person was seen as a crime by security officials, leading families with young children to spend sleepless nights in fear of arrest. Nights were long, and there was no hope for justice as the country was turned into a police state.

Yet, the people fought back, and within weeks, they mobilised themselves to force the regime to resign. With the spirit of the uprising in their hearts, Bangladeshis now aim to ensure that these sacrifices propel the country toward accountability, justice, and genuine change in its political culture.

2.2) False dichotomy of election and reforms

In June 2025, Chief Adviser Professor Yunus announced that elections should take place by mid-April 2026, potentially as early as mid-February if reforms progress well enough. However, some government officials worry that announcing this timeline could stall the reform process, as political parties might delay reforms to wait out the election period.

The July uprising marked a significant push against authoritarianism and a call for democratic change. The announcement of an election timeline responds to public demand for clarity on electoral goals. While risks from anti-democratic forces exist, withholding election timelines is unwarranted, as the public deserves to know about the future of [governance and the electoral process](#).

An election timeline can encourage reforms by imposing accountability and providing structure. Transitional governments in the past have successfully implemented reforms, and with over six months until elections, the interim government has an opportunity to

make meaningful changes. Aligning substantial reforms with the elections can enhance democratic legitimacy.

Additionally, from a civic standpoint, it is essential to fulfil commitments to the citizens of Bangladesh. Since the most recent general elections were accused of fraudulent practices, many voters, especially the youth, did not experience fair elections. In recent years, those who voted last time have had limited opportunities to exercise that right. Ensuring free and fair elections is vital. While the interim government has raised hopes for reform, the actual improvements have fallen short of expectations.

Concerns remain about whether a newly elected government will genuinely pursue reforms once in office. This underscores the complexities of Bangladesh's political landscape. There is a clear need for a balance among reforms, elections, and the roles of political actors, to ensure that essential reforms are realised, regardless of who implements them.

2.3) The progress and future of reforms

Following Sheikh Hasina's departure, Bangladesh's interim government proposed sweeping [constitutional reforms](#), including the introduction of term limits for the Prime Minister and the establishment of a bicameral parliament. However, concerns about the role of past governments in manipulating the electoral process cast doubt on the future of these reforms.

The reform proposals shared by the National Consensus Commissions are widely viewed as necessary responses to public demands for accountability and democratic safeguards, especially following the repression and violence experienced during the previous regime. Proposals like creating a bicameral legislature and establishing term limits for the Prime Minister are significant steps, but they are not sufficient on their own. Without structural reforms, such as ensuring the independence of the judiciary and the election commission from executive influence, these reforms risk becoming mere cosmetic changes. Besides, ensuring that institutions like the Anti-Corruption Commission and the police can operate

independently, without serving as tools of the ruling party, is paramount. Additionally, the media and civil society must be empowered to hold those in power accountable and act as watchdogs of the democratic process.

It is also crucial to distinguish between constitutional amendments and structured reforms. While legal reforms may provide a framework for democracy, their success relies on consistent and equitable enforcement. History shows that legal safeguards can be overridden or weaponised by those in power. Therefore, reform efforts must be institutionalised in a manner that resists manipulation. Furthermore, it is vital that the reform agenda is not dictated solely by transitional elites; it should emerge from a broad national consensus that includes diverse voices, such as youth, women, civil society, professional groups, and marginalised communities.

To achieve lasting democratic transformation, reforms must reflect the will and interests of the people. It is not enough to rewrite the rules; the system itself must be restructured with public participation and transparency at its core. Only by doing so can Bangladesh build a resilient democratic future and safeguard itself against future authoritarian threats.

2.4) Ensuring the Representation of Marginalised Communities

For structural changes to be effective, they must reflect the voices and needs of all communities, particularly those that have been historically excluded from policy-making spaces. A comprehensive approach is necessary; otherwise, reforms may remain at the surface level and fail to achieve lasting transformation. In Bangladesh, despite years of organising and activism by women, religious minorities, and indigenous communities, national politics continues to be dominated by groups with the capacity to mobilise large crowds or wield disproportionate influence, such as major political parties and Islamist factions.

A notable example of this imbalance emerged after the publication of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission's report. Although the report contained progressive proposals to advance gender equality and enhance protection for women, it was met with vocal

opposition from certain conservative and Islamist groups. Rather than facilitating a constructive national dialogue on the proposals, the government responded with silence and failed to defend the commission's recommendations publicly. This inaction not only undermined the credibility of the commission itself but also suggested that reform outcomes could be dictated by the loudest of most threatening voices, rather than by democratic debate and consensus.

This sets a dangerous precedent for the broader reform process. When governments retreat under pressure from reactionary groups, it signals that inclusivity and equity are negotiable, and that reforms can be derailed by veto actors who reject pluralism or minority rights. It also discourages civil society and marginalised communities from engaging meaningfully, as their voices are drowned out or discarded in the face of backlash.

To build trust and legitimacy in the reform process, governments must stand by inclusive policy proposals and articulate clearly how reform commissions were formed, who they represent, and how public feedback will be integrated. Reform should not be reduced to a symbolic gesture; it must be backed by political courage, transparent engagement, and a defensive resolve when inclusion is challenged.

A participatory, transparent, and principled reform process is the only way to ensure that Bangladesh's democratic future is not only free from authoritarianism but also rooted in social justice, gender equity, and equal citizenship for all.

The success of cultural and structural changes depends not only on political parties but also on civil society. Public engagement should go beyond just voting in periodic elections. It is essential to have transparency in decision-making, which means providing clear communication and regular updates on reform processes. Decentralising power and empowering the marginalised groups could improve the current situation.

3. Recommendations

- a) Sustaining the constitutional amendments, including the introduction of term limits for the Prime Minister and the establishment of a bicameral parliament, requires structural reforms aimed at ensuring the independence of key institutions, such as the judiciary and the election commission, from executive influence. This is essential for maintaining impartiality and preventing a regression towards authoritarianism.
- b) Encouraging inclusive dialogue and participation can enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of reforms. Reforms should engage not just political elites, but also civil society, youth, women, and marginalised communities to align with the aspirations of the Bangladeshi population.
- c) Linking reforms to electoral milestones can help structure the political process and impose accountability on transitional authorities. Free and fair elections are critical to institutionalising reforms and must be held in a timely manner to restore trust in representative government.
- d) Redistributing authority from central hubs in Dhaka to local institutions can create a more equitable and democratic structure. Decentralisation enhances regional representation, governance responsiveness, and reduces elite capture, allowing rural and marginalised populations to participate in national political development.
- e) Reforms should explicitly address the rights and representation of women, religious minorities, and tribal groups. The government must uphold pluralism and not allow reactionary groups to veto inclusive policy recommendations.
- f) Transparency is crucial for building public trust. Reform bodies should consistently communicate their decisions, share progress updates, and explain the steps taken for implementation through media briefings and accessible public reports. Without transparency, reforms may be seen as imposed from the top down or merely symbolic, which could damage their credibility in the eyes of the public.

- g) The newly elected government should prioritise reforms that would maximise political participation, as this will strengthen democratic legitimacy and prevent the risk of transitional authorities overstaying their mandate.

Briefing Paper #6 on

Future of Democratic Transition and Reforms: Youth Perspectives in Bangladesh

Published by: Asia Democracy Network and Sydney Policy and Analysis Centre

July 2025