

Briefing Paper #1

Bangladeshi election 2024: Quality of democracy, human rights & future directions

April, 2024



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Background

On January 7, 2024, Bangladesh had its 12th national parliamentary election. The election was boycotted by the main opposition party BNP and its alliance partners, giving the ruling alliance, led by Awami League (AL), a walkover. Awami League's official nominees won in 224 constituencies, while independent candidates, backed by factions of the local Awami League, won in 62 constituencies.

Four other parties, all allied with the ruling party, won in the remaining 14 constituencies. The candidates of these four parties didn't have any official AL nominee in their constituencies.

Human rights groups, think tanks, and analysts have questioned the credibility of the election, and there is a widespread concern that the election would make Bangladesh more authoritarian in the future.

Against that background, the Asia Democracy Network (ADN) and Sydney Policy and Analysis Centre (SPAC) have launched a bimonthly webinar series on Bangladesh. The first of the six webinars was held on April 5, 2024, where the participants discussed the nature of the election, the role of the state and the key development and trade partners, as well as the future of Bangladesh's political system and relations with the global partners.

This briefing paper provides a summary of the discussion.

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1. Outline and the Discussants

The webinar was divided into four segments based on four thematic areas: the context of the election; the nature of the election the post-election Bangladesh; and the foreign policies of the United States and India regarding Bangladesh.

The panellists who joined the webinar were:

- **Ali Riaz**, Distinguished Professor, Illinois State University, Illinois
- **Jami Spykerman**, Program Director, National Democratic Institute (NDI), Washington DC
- **Geoffrey Macdonald**, Senior Program Adviser, International Republic Institute (IRI), Washington DC
- **Smruti S Pattanaik**, Research Fellow at The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) in New Delhi

The webinar was moderated by **Mubashar Hasan**, the Executive Director of SPAC (and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Oslo, Norway). **Ichal Supriadi**, Secretary General of the Asia Democracy Network, delivered the opening remarks.

The 90-minute session started at GMT 1200.

2. Key discussion points

2.1) Electoral process and governance

The discussants covered Bangladesh's electoral context by focusing on its governance system and on-ground realities. Bangladesh's governance system is identified as hegemonic electoral authoritarianism, a regime where elections occur but are manipulated to favour the ruling party. Elections in this system serve three purposes: legitimising the regime, dividing the opposition, and co-opting dissenters, all of which are evident in Bangladesh.

Before the election, protests against price hikes and demands for a non-partisan caretaker government were suppressed with brute force, and "Phantom Cases" against opposition members were used to put them behind bars, stopping them from participating in the electoral process. It was also noted that threats by the ruling party's secretary general against opposition activities indicated an environment hostile to free and fair elections. Questions were raised about whether it can be called even an election.

Before the election, the NDI and IRI Pre-Election Assessment Mission suggested measures like restraining violent political rhetoric and promoting dialogue. Despite these recommendations, no significant changes in the election environment were observed, indicating a lack of responsiveness from the authorities. It was concluded that a fair election is unachievable without a government free from electoral stakes, emphasising Bangladesh's compromised electoral integrity.

2.2) Political Violence and Repression

A significant reduction in physical and online violence during the 2024 elections in Bangladesh was noted during the discussion, compared to the previous election cycles around the 2014 and 2018 elections. This decrease was attributed primarily to the lack of partisan competition and the enhanced efforts by the state to ensure election security. However, violence was observed in regions where leaders from the Awami League were competing against their party members who had become independent candidates. A direct link between competition and violence was thus shown by this internal competition within the Awami League.

Despite a decrease, political violence was prevalent during the election cycle, including attacks on processions, pressures on candidates to withdraw, and arson of campaign offices. These acts were primarily attributed to the Awami League and their independents. The responsibility for violence during the BNP blockade remained unclear though the ruling party blamed BNP for them.

Concerns were expressed about the quality of the election, as it was compromised by violence led by the state and parties and a decline in freedom of expression and civic space. The election commission's move to increase its budget and extend the deployment of security personnel to enhance election security was appreciable.

Nevertheless, the widespread arrest campaign against opposition leaders and activists purportedly to curb violence and the partisan approach of security forces in enforcing laws

were criticised. The justification for the scale of these arrests, over 30,000 opposition activists according to some estimates, was not convincing enough and disproportionate to the alleged offences.

2.3) Human Rights and Minority Protection during election cycles

It was discussed that gender-based violence, particularly in the context of elections, is not fully addressed by legal frameworks and that there is limited awareness among key political and government stakeholders. Insults and threats were reportedly faced by female candidates, but the state did not adequately respond to their complaints. Pressure was exerted on members of the religious minority community, specifically Hindus, to vote for certain candidates or to abstain, and they faced religiously charged rhetoric from opponents. Retaliation was faced by some Hindus post-election, with media reports indicating that physical violence and attacks on their homes occurred, forcing some to vacate their homes due to security concerns.

The youth were described as both victims and perpetrators of violence, with the Awami League's student unit, Chhatra League (Students League), being identified as a common perpetrator throughout the electoral process. A general disillusionment with politics was also experienced by the youth. Many young people were reported to be wary of expressing their political opinions in public, attributed to concerns about security risks and potential legal actions under digital security laws, which has significantly contributed to declining political engagement.

2.4) Future directions

While discussants argued on the definition of the nature of governance in Bangladesh, they generally agreed that the state's grip had tightened after the three faulty elections. State institutions and intelligence agencies have been used to persecute and imprison opposition members, indicating a significant deterioration in the rule of law and democratic norms.

The electoral process was described as manipulated by the ruling elites, effectively deciding the composition of the opposition. It was argued that to claim any democratic residue remains in Bangladesh would necessitate redefining democracy itself. Despite the shift toward autocracy, it was noted that political evolution is not irreversible, and autocracy is not Bangladesh's destined path. Concerns were raised about the extensive state surveillance, the weaponisation of the judiciary, and the media being controlled through both legal and extra-legal measures by the ruling party.

It was suggested that some single-party dominant systems can maintain a degree of democracy and positive governance outcomes, as seen in South Africa under the ANC, Japan under the LDP, and Mexico under the PRI. However, similar types of governance led Turkey and Nicaragua to become more autocratic. whereas Zimbabwe, under a single-party dominant rule, collapsed into a failed state.

Concerns were expressed about weak citizen responsiveness, prevalent corruption, authority abuses, and Clientelism, all contributing to stunted economic growth in recent years.

It was recommended that fostering competition within and outside the party and within the broader governance system is crucial to avoid such negative outcomes. Maintaining trust in key institutions, replacing underperforming representatives, cultivating internal party democracy, ensuring bureaucratic autonomy, and protecting economic freedom for citizens were identified as essential measures.

2.5) Future of relationships with key foreign partners

Bangladesh's biggest export destination, the United States, appeared to have been reassessing their relationship. According to the discussion, the United States identified Bangladesh as a significant geopolitical battleground where issues like human rights and democracy are expected to remain U.S. priorities. The potential impacts of U.S. economic, political, and diplomatic investments were underscored as potentially decisive for future relations.

Discussants highlighted the strategic importance of elections in Bangladesh to India due to security and economic considerations. Notably, China's visible support for Bangladesh's current leadership was mentioned, suggesting a strategic shift influenced by past experiences. The relationship between India and Bangladesh was characterised as crucial for security and developmental needs, particularly benefiting India's northeastern regions.

Despite a call for a boycott of Indian products in Bangladesh, the campaign's effectiveness was questioned due to its minimal economic impact and the continued travel of Bangladeshis to India for various purposes.

3. Recommendations

The webinar identified the nature of Bangladesh's electoral process as hegemonic electoral authoritarianism, with the ruling party heavily favouring the process. The recent elections, boycotted by the main opposition, reflect a deepening autocratic trend, risking the integrity of democratic processes and the stability of Bangladesh.

- a) To minimise political bias during the election cycle, the government should implement comprehensive electoral system reforms to ensure free, fair, and inclusive elections and consider introducing an election-time, non-partisan, credible government system.
- b) To protect religious and ethnic minorities, as well as women, from political and election-related violence, laws should be amended.
- c) To ensure the flow of credible information, freedom of expression should be safeguarded, and restrictive laws like digital security laws should be repealed.
- d) To foster political reconciliation and address the electoral challenges, the civil society and the international community should increase advocating on issues affecting democracy in Bangladesh, support opposition parties, and encourage dialogue between the government, opposition, and civil society members.
- e) To promote a healthy political system in Bangladesh, major trade partners should balance their strategic interests with promoting democratic values and human rights in their foreign policies toward Bangladesh.

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