



ISLAM & LIBERTY
NETWORK

إدراك
Recognizing Liberty

Edraak - Recognizing Liberty¹

Research Brief No. 3

Bangladesh

A Future of Liberty & Rule of Law

By Noor Netusha Nusaybah²

Introduction

The political landscape of Bangladesh has long been marked by a struggle between democratic aspirations and authoritarian governance.

The recent political shifts, most notably under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, have raised pressing questions about the future of democracy, civil liberties, and the rule of law in the country. Bangladesh's democratic transition has been fraught with challenges, from political instability to regional power dynamics, making its journey toward a robust democratic system uncertain. The webinar themed "Bangladesh: A Future of Liberty & Rule of Law" hosted by the Islam and Liberty Network (ILN) delved into these issues, drawing on both academic literature and contemporary case studies. This research brief explores the key issues raised by the presenters about Bangladesh's political future and the broader implications for liberty and rule of law, especially in light of recent developments, such as youth-led street protests and increased regional interest. These discussions are not merely academic; they highlight pressing real-world challenges that affect governance, human rights, and economic stability across the Muslim world.

Context: How the Quota-Reform Protests Changed a Nation's Fate

Abu Sayed, a 25-year-old scholarship student from Bangladesh, aspired to secure a government job to lift his family out of poverty. However, his dreams were shattered when the government reinstated a quota system that reserved 30% of these jobs for the descendants of "freedom fighters" from Bangladesh's 1971 liberation, leaving millions of students like Sayed disadvantaged.

Determined to challenge this system, Sayed became a leader in the "Students Against Discrimination" movement. During one protest, he was shot and killed by police, sparking outrage across the country. His death ignited widespread protests, with thousands—including students, educators, and civilians—rallying against the government's violent crackdown, which had claimed over 200 lives. Their

¹ This research brief is part of the Islam & Liberty Network's Edraak Webinar Series, which included a session on Bangladesh's recent political developments, organized on 30th September 2024. This project is generously supported by the Atlas Network.

² Noor Netusha Nusaybah is the Programme Coordinator of the Islam & Liberty Network.

efforts were indeed worthwhile, as it resulted in not only a revision of the quota system, but also the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina after her iron-fisted reign of 15 years (Al Jazeera, 2024).

As highlighted by one of the presenters, Dr. Thowhidul Islam, looking back into history allows us to understand that the outcomes of the recent student protests stem from decades of movement-building. During the 1971 Liberation War, students played a critical role in mobilizing support for independence, organizing campaigns, and rallying the public to demand political change (Riaz & Fair, 2010). Their activism, rooted in a desire for liberty and self-determination, laid the groundwork for political engagement in Bangladesh's formative years. In more recent times, student activism has again surfaced as a powerful force for change, particularly during the 2018 student-led protests demanding road safety and government accountability (Kuttig, Suykens & Islam, 2020).

Civil society organizations, particularly the Ulema and Sufi regimes, have also historically played a role in influencing and mediating political positions between the state and society (Mostofa, 2023). These religious leaders have often been viewed as moral authorities who seek to promote social justice and mediate conflicts. However, their role in political processes has been limited by the state's desire to control political discourse. As Bangladesh moves toward another potential political transition, civil society—especially students and religious leaders—will be crucial in shaping a political culture that embraces liberty and the rule of law.

A Battle Between Autocracy and Democracy

Scarred by episodic cycles of political violence and military interventions, Bangladesh's long-persisting past with turbulence has caused its institutions to be vulnerable to autocratic agendas.

The assassinations of sitting presidents in 1975 (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the Awami League) and 1981 (General Ziaur Rahman), coupled with over 16 years of military rule, have left lasting damage on Bangladesh's democratic structure. While electoral democracy was restored in 1991, it remains fragile, with political power often achieved through force rather than legitimate electoral support. As a result, violent street protests have become the primary method for pressuring the government to meet public demands. Between 2013 and 2017, political violence claimed over a thousand lives, reflecting the vulnerability of civil liberties and the erosion of the rule of law. Moreover, the alarming figures of more than 1,000 extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances since 2009 reveal a troubling trend of human rights violations (Mostofa, 2024).

Bangladesh's democratic development has been plagued by internal divisions, particularly between Islamist and secular factions. Attempts at reconciliation between Jamaat-e-Islami, a conservative Islamist political group, and other opposition parties, including the more secular Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has proven elusive. The internal conflict between secularists and Islamists reflects a broader struggle to define Bangladesh's national identity and political future (Riaz & Fair, 2010). In the years following the 2014 and 2018 elections, the government's repression of political opposition had stifled democratic debate and reinforced authoritarian tendencies. The Awami League (AL)'s reign under Hasina maintained its political dominance by consistently targeting the opposition, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its perceived supporters, as well as by suppressing critical media and civil society voices. Consequently, the current political structure favors the ruling party and limits the space for opposition groups to participate meaningfully in governance. Corruption is widespread, and efforts to combat it have been undermined by politically motivated enforcement. Legal protections for due process are weak, and security forces routinely commit human rights abuses with little accountability (Freedom House, 2023; Transparency International, 2024).

Bangladesh's political future is also shaped by its regional context, particularly its relationship with India. Some analysts argue that Hasina's departure has significant consequences for India's security policy in the region (Roy-Chaudhury & Solanki, 2024). Bangladesh's reliance on Indian support, particularly for security cooperation and economic assistance, positions India as a key player in the country's political future (Ranjan, 2024). However, India's influence could also stoke fears of external interference, particularly if regional powers such as China are perceived as potential infiltrators of their porous borders with Bangladesh. On the international stage, Bangladesh's geopolitical importance as a South Asian emerging economy has made it a partner and recipient of international aid and foreign investment (Rahman, 2020).

The question of identity remains central to Bangladesh's political discourse, particularly in the context of divided religious and ethnic identities. According to legal scholar Dr. Moniruzzaman Mohammad in his presentation, despite Bangladesh's interim government, refugees, ethnic communities and religious minorities continue to face marginalization and oppression due to the state's continuous failure to recognize their rights exacerbating social tensions. Even though the government of Bangladesh has taken concrete steps to address the state of indigenous peoples, the exclusion of various racial and religious minorities from national political discourse has fueled grievances and limited their ability to participate fully in the democratic process (Barikdar, 2023).

Analysis: New Directions for Bangladesh's Incomplete Revolution

[Bangladesh faces an urgent need for political and institutional reforms to address its deeply flawed and corrupt structures.](#)

Under the Hasina government, power was consolidated through appointments of loyalists to key positions. Nobel laureate Mohamed Yunus, now interim leader, was among those targeted by the politicized judiciary. While the caretaker government has enacted positive changes, such as resignations of key officials and asset freezes, these steps are insufficient for long-term reform. Structural changes, including calls to abolish the controversial Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), are essential to addressing human rights abuses. Transitional justice should incorporate a locally-sensitive truth and reconciliation commission, and Bangladesh's youth, who are actively working towards good governance, are key to driving long-term reform. However, a strong framework for transitional justice is vital for achieving lasting peace and stability (Kapur, 2024).

The future of liberty and rule of law in Bangladesh raises several open-ended questions that require further investigation. How can post-authoritarian regimes withstand the remnants of its predecessor's legacies to safeguard democratic transitions? What strategies can international actors employ to ensure that economic assistance effectively supports democratic consolidation instead of hardening divisions?

The ideological divide between Islamist and secular factions within Bangladesh also demands attention. How can these groups collaborate to strengthen democratic institutions while respecting religious and political differences? Moreover, what lessons can be drawn from Bangladesh's experience that could inform the balance between political pluralism and regional security? Finally, the question of how to sustain youth-led political movements and ensure that they do not replicate the authoritarian practices of past regimes remains critical. A deeper understanding of how these movements can foster long-term political and economic stability is essential for envisioning a democratic future for Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Bangladesh's political future stands at a crossroads. The country's democratic experiment faces significant challenges, from internal political divisions to external regional pressures. However, there remain opportunities for building a more inclusive and democratic society, driven by the strength of civil society, youth movements, and international cooperation. Addressing the legal and institutional obstacles to democracy, protecting minority rights, and ensuring the effective use of foreign aid will be key to promoting liberty and the rule of law in Bangladesh. By learning from its past and navigating the complexities of its present, Bangladesh can still aspire to a future where democracy and civil liberties are upheld for all its citizens.

References

- Al Jazeera (2024). The victory of Bangladesh's student movement should not surprise anyone. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/8/5/the-victory-of-bangladeshs-student-movement-sould-not-surprise-anyone>, date accessed 15 October 2024.
- Barikdar, A. (2023). Minority Rights: Global and Bangladesh perspectives (LinkedIn). Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/minority-global-bangladesh-perspectives-antoni-barikdar/>, date accessed 15 October 2024.
- Freedom House. (2023). Freedom in the World 2023: Bangladesh. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bangladesh>, date accessed 15 October 2024.
- Human Rights Watch. (2019). World Report 2019: Bangladesh. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/bangladesh>, date accessed 15 October 2024.
- Kapur, R. (2024). Bangladesh: Finding justice and reconciliation. The Interpreter. Retrieved from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/bangladesh-finding-justice-reconciliation>, date accessed 15 October 2024.
- Kuttig, J., Suykens, B. & Islam, A. (2020). Student Politics and Political Violence in Bangladesh. Conflict Research Group. Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/299792078.pdf>, date accessed 15 October 2024.
- Mostofa, M. A. (2023). An Enquiry into how Political Sufi-Regimes Evolve in Contemporary Bangladesh. Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 68(1), 1-32.
- Mostofa, S. M. (2024). Bangladesh: Turmoil and Transition in a Fragile Democracy. LSE South Asia Centre. Retrieved from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2024/02/26/bangladesh-turmoil-and-transition-in-a-fragile-democracy/>, date accessed 15 October 2024.
- Rahman, M. M. (2024). Foreign Aid and Bangladesh: Donor Relations and Realpolitik. Routledge.
- Ranjan, A. (2024). India's Options in Post-Hasina Bangladesh. Institute of South Asian Studies. Retrieved from <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/indias-options-in-post-hasina-bangladesh/>, date accessed 15 October 2024.
- Riaz, A., & Fair, C. (2010). Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh: Ideology and Pragmatism. Routledge.
- Roy-Chaudhury, R. & Solanki, V. (2024). Bangladesh: domestic turmoil and regional insecurity. International Institute for Strategic Studies. Retrieved from <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/08/bangladesh-domestic-turmoil-and-regional-insecurity/>, date accessed 15 October 2024.
- Transparency International. (2024). Corruption Perceptions Index 2024: Asia Pacific. Retrieved from <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2023-asia-pacific-stagnation-due-to-inadequate-anti-corruption-commitments>, date accessed 15 October 2024

