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Research Report

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Bangladesh's Political Realignment after the Parliamentary Elections

Hope for Stability, Concerns about Democratic Pluralism

Tobias Scholz and Leo Wigger

The parliamentary elections held in Bangladesh on 12 February 2026 marked a turning point in the country's recent history. In August 2024, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who had served for a total of 20 years, with one interruption, was removed from office. An interim government led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus subsequently took power. Following two years of political uncertainty, it succeeded in organising elections that were procedurally sound. Bangladesh's political system has thus demonstrated a considerable degree of institutional resilience. At the same time, the election outcome raises new questions regarding the future of democratic pluralism in the country. The decisive election victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) means that one of the country's two historic political family dynasties will remain at the helm of government. The Muslim fundamentalist camp gained vote share, which could negatively impact the role of women in society as well as complicate Bangladesh's renewed rapprochement with neighbouring India.

With the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her flight into exile in India on 5 August 2024, a political era came to an end in Bangladesh. Under Hasina, who was first elected prime minister in 1996, the country's economy experienced remarkable growth. However, during her tenure, corruption also increased, as did restrictions on freedom of expression and press freedom. Hasina ordered a violent crackdown on mass student protests that swept the capital, Dhaka, in July 2024 during her final days in office; police operations are estimated to have caused some 1,400 deaths. Yet this excessive escalation

primarily resulted in Hasina's progressive loss of support within the security forces.

After large parts of the ruling elite had fled abroad, Bangladesh found itself in an unprecedented situation: Among those involved were representatives of the student movement, who negotiated with the country's president on the next political steps. The key outcome was an agreement to establish an interim government headed by the then 84-year-old economist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus. He was regarded as a reliable and credible interim figure. His mandate was to organise new parliamentary elections in Bangladesh



and initiate the first steps towards the constitutional reform demanded by the protest groups, while also conducting a legal review of the Hasina era.

The parliamentary elections as a focal point

For Bangladesh's political order, this created a precarious starting point. The upcoming parliamentary elections soon came to be seen as a critical juncture that would determine the future of democracy in the country. Yunus faced the additional difficulty that his opponents – including Sheikh Hasina, operating from India's capital, New Delhi – increasingly sought to question the democratic legitimacy of the interim government and, by extension, the attempts at reform it had initiated.

As part of its efforts to address the violent suppression of the protests, widely referred to as the July Uprising, the interim government imposed a temporary ban on Hasina's Awami League, thereby reshaping the context for the upcoming elections. The Awami League is one of the country's two dynastically led parties that have been vying for power since Bangladesh gained independence in 1971.

After years of suppression under Hasina, the BNP was now able to build momentum. The BNP's chairperson and former two-time prime minister, Khaleda Zia, was released from house arrest but died two months before the elections. Given her advanced age, her son Tarique Rahman had already been chosen as the BNP's lead candidate at the outset of the election campaign. Having lived in exile in London since 2008, he returned to Bangladesh ahead of the elections.

The BNP's rivals, however, feared a scenario in which governmental authority might ultimately be transferred merely from one authoritarian power elite to another. In the hope of improving their electoral prospects, 11 parties therefore formed an alliance, including the Islamist Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and the National

Citizen Party (NCP), the party of the student protest movement. The students and the religious fundamentalists were united above all by their desire to see an end to corruption and dynastic rule in Bangladesh.

In the elections on 12 February, however, the BNP achieved a major victory. It won 209 of the 299 parliamentary seats contested, securing a two-thirds majority. Voters thus once again opted for one of the two established parties, whose claim to political legitimacy is rooted in their respective roles in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. During the election campaign, the BNP had distinguished itself by invoking such historical references, while simultaneously promising to expand state welfare benefits and ensure greater political stability. Jamaat-e-Islami, for its part, secured 32 per cent of the vote and 68 seats, significantly surpassing its previous best result of 18 seats. The NCP won just 6 seats. Even so, it can point to one significant success: The "July Charter" – which contained proposals for constitutional amendments, as demanded by the student movement – received 68 per cent approval in a parallel referendum. Adopted by a reform commission, the document outlines a series of steps intended to strengthen democratic institutions and limit executive powers.

The comparatively low turnout of just under 60 per cent may suggest that many supporters of the banned Awami League boycotted the elections in protest. Unlike in previous parliamentary elections, there were no acts of violence on polling day, apart from isolated incidents.

A vote for political continuity under new power configurations

The government of the new prime minister, Tarique Rahman, was sworn in on 17 February. After 20 years in opposition, the BNP can draw on experienced party elites, substantial organisational resources and a comfortable parliamentary majority.

As the composition of the new cabinet indicates, Prime Minister Rahman is seek-

ing, on the one hand, to accommodate internal party power centres, while on the other hand signalling a willingness to reform to the student movement. Alongside long-standing party veterans, technocrats and representatives of small parties close to the student camp were appointed. There are also visible efforts to include religious and ethnic minorities. Gender representation, however, remains unbalanced: Among the 25 ministerial posts, there is only one woman.

The appointment of Khalilur Rahman, the former National Security Adviser, as foreign minister signals institutional continuity with the interim government. By contrast, Prime Minister Rahman initiated far-reaching personnel changes in the judiciary and the security sector.

A key indicator of the government's future course will be its commitment to implementing the July Charter. The declaration, which was approved by referendum, continues to have significant mobilisation potential, particularly among students. To date, the BNP has signalled broad support for the Charter in principle, while expressing reservations about certain provisions. These include, in particular, the demand to introduce proportional representation for the upper chamber of parliament. For the BNP, the central dilemma is that some of the proposed constitutional amendments could work to the party's own disadvantage.

After years of high inflation and fiscal pressures, the change of government has generated expectations that growth and social inclusion will be rebalanced, without abandoning the ongoing macroeconomic consolidation initiated following Hasina's fall from power. The interim government had succeeded in provisionally stabilising a financial system weakened by a banking crisis, a high volume of non-performing loans and corruption. It was therefore all the more disconcerting when Prime Minister Rahman decided to remove the central bank governor, who had enjoyed cross-party recognition. Corruption allegations had previously been levelled against the BNP as well. It remains to be seen whether

the party will succeed in credibly distancing itself from this legacy and instead strengthen institutional transparency and democratic processes.

New uncertainties regarding political participation and the role of religion

For the first time in the history of the state of Bangladesh, parties from the Islamist spectrum have become the strongest parliamentary opposition force. A growing Islamisation of the originally ideologically heterogeneous student movement can also be observed. This is reflected, among other things, in the alliance between the NCP and Jamaat, as well as in the electoral successes of Islamist actors at universities.

The parliamentary elections thus point to a profound shift in political identities. After Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971, parties that based their conception of the state primarily on Bengali ethno-linguistic grounds long dominated the political landscape. Increasingly, however, political programmes framed in terms of Muslim religious identity are gaining greater traction, even if they have thus far been unable to secure a national majority.

The Islamist camp is gaining popularity primarily because its stance against corruption and nepotism is perceived as credible. Questions of social inclusion create common ground between students and Islamists. However, the rise of religious fundamentalist currents narrows the political space available to women. Only seven female MPs were directly elected; a further 50 seats are reserved for women and are allocated to parties on a proportional basis.

A key challenge for the BNP government will also be to permanently prevent the use of violence as a means of pursuing political interests. This applies, firstly, to the BNP itself, where conflicts – some of them deadly – have arisen between different party factions since 2024. Secondly, it concerns the need to address the excesses of violence

and nepotism under the Awami League government. Beyond this, politically motivated mob violence remains an unresolved problem in the country.

Dhaka's foreign policy remains a balancing act

The Rahman government will likely orient itself strongly towards the goal of an independent, pragmatic foreign policy aimed at diversification. In doing so, Rahman must consider new bilateral developments in the region that the previous government had not yet faced. Relations with India, Bangladesh's large neighbour, remain strained. Sheikh Hasina, who has been sentenced to death in Bangladesh, has been residing in India since her downfall – where she publicly comments on political developments in Dhaka. The rise in support for Jamaat in regions bordering India is an indication that inter-religious conflicts between Hindus and Muslims could further strain diplomatic relations with the country. The recently revitalised relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan is also likely to complicate dealings with India. In the context of the 1996 Ganga Water Sharing Treaty with New Delhi, now due to expire, there are signs that the water issue will become an increasingly important factor in future regional conflict dynamics.

Whereas Sheikh Hasina supported close cooperation with New Delhi, the BNP advocates a “Bangladesh First” approach, under which it is likely to seek strategic equidistance between India and China. As a result, relations with Beijing could become more important. Participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative and bilateral defence cooperation already make the People's Republic one of Bangladesh's most important partners.

The new BNP government is further expected to focus on economic growth and has made it clear from the outset that it intends to pursue constructive relations

with the United States and Europe. These countries represent Bangladesh's most important export markets for the textile sector as well as key partners in development cooperation. Under the “Bangladesh First” policy, Dhaka is also expected to further diversify its foreign relations and seek partnerships with a wider range of countries, including Russia, Japan, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

Implications for Germany and Europe

Bangladesh is emblematic of a group of strategically important countries in the Global South that are shaped by regional uncertainties, must contend with profound systemic challenges and at the same time maintain relations with Germany's geopolitical rivals. Against this backdrop, Bangladesh remains a complex but important partner for Germany in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

Within Europe, the United Kingdom continues to play a bridging role. It is home to a large Bangladeshi diaspora, and several actors in the new government in Dhaka have biographical ties to the United Kingdom. For Germany, which aims to increase cooperation with Bangladesh, it is initially a positive development that the parliamentary elections in the South Asian country were conducted in an orderly, proper and largely peaceful manner after political upheaval and two politically turbulent years.

As a country with sustained economic growth and a key player in the textile sector, Bangladesh remains above all a reliable trading partner for Germany. In 2024, bilateral trade volume rose to around €9 billion. Germany provides humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees who have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh, thereby making an important contribution to social cohesion and stability within the country. Berlin likewise supports Dhaka in addressing climate change, which affects Bangladesh particularly severely.

Bangladesh is set to lose its status as a “least developed country” as well as the trade and tariff preferences associated with it in the foreseeable future, making active dialogue between the European Union (EU) and Dhaka necessary. Brussels should take into account that the trade agreement concluded in January 2026 between the EU and India makes it more difficult for Bangladeshi textile exports to remain competitive in the European market. Dhaka’s interest in fair conditions for exports to the EU is therefore likely to continue to grow. In this context, the new government in Dhaka will likely focus on securing easier access to the European market, for instance by pursuing GSP+ status for Bangladesh (under the EU’s preferential trade scheme, which grants additional tariff concessions to developing countries) or by negotiating a dedicated trade agreement.



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