

# What democracy indices say about Bangladesh



**BLACK, WHITE & GREY**  
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**ALIRIAZ**

Bangladesh's ranking in the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) has gone down two notches: to 75 in 2023 from 73 in 2022, among 167 countries. This should not come as a surprise. According to the annual report published earlier this week, the EIU has continued to list the country among "hybrid regimes" since 2008. But does it tell the whole story? How should we read the ranking? Observers of Bangladesh's politics and governance have been underscoring the country's downward spiral away from the fundamental elements of democracy for almost a decade. Media coverage, particularly in the latter half of 2023, repeatedly mentioned that the country's governance has increasingly become autocratic.

Four international organisations are the most prominent that track the global state of democracy. They are Washington-based Freedom House, London-based Economist Intelligence Unit, Gothenburg-based Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), and Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). While the first three are private organisations, either attached to a university or operating independently, the fourth one is an intergovernmental organisation which has a goal of "advancing democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and an enabler of sustainable development, through support to the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels." The fifth organisation that also examines the state of democracy is the Gütersloh, Germany-based Bertelsmann Foundation. The transformation index of the foundation is published every two years.

democratisation and democratic backsliding, the rankings and incisive exploration of various aspects of each country's democratic quality offered by these five organisations are considered as standard. The reports and data of these organisations not only shape academic discourses, but also influence policymakers to some extent.

As such, these rankings and assessments draw attention and engender discussion. Media reports in Bangladesh published after EIU annual rankings were quite natural. The ranking is based on scores of five elements of democracy: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. It should be noted that the report analysed the data before the 2024 general election, while mentioning what was in the making in the name of the election. It stated, "Unsurprisingly, elections in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Russia—where opposition forces are subject to state repression—will not bring regime change or more democracy."

For understandable reasons, reporters and analysts have highlighted the comparison between 2022 and 2023 scores and noted that the country's standing has rather degraded. One must not only look at the country's standing vis-a-vis others, but also at the components where the country's scores have declined. As for the overall score, a three-year comparison shows that its score was 5.99 in 2021 and 2022, which has come down to 5.87 in 2023. The major decline has been in the civil liberties score: after remaining static at 5.29 for two years, in 2023 it has decreased to 4.71. Based on these scores, the EIU has continued to categorise Bangladesh as a "hybrid regime"—a system that provides a facade of democracy but is essentially authoritarian.

While the EIU's assessment of the country's quality of democracy is important, it should not be seen in isolation from how the country has featured in other institutions' evaluations. Freedom House's 2024 report is yet to be published, but the 2023 report, which examined the state of civil and political rights among other elements, categorised

predictive of the 2024 election. If the EIU's assessment of the overall state of democracy and dwindling civil liberties is consistent with Freedom House's assessment and reflects the ground reality, one may also raise some concerns whether it provides a complete picture pointing to the assessment of other organisations. BTI's 2022

further elaboration as to where the country stands regarding the overall situation. Referring to these scores, the Bangladesh Case Study by Emma Kenny, published by International IDEA, pointed to one aspect which warrants our close attention—that is, judicial independence. Kenny writes, "One particular area of concern

The International IDEA's concern about the judiciary is also reflected in the scores on overall rule of law provided by the World Justice Project (WJP). According to WJP, Bangladesh scored 0.38 in 2023. The score has been on a downward trend since 2015, when it scored 0.42. The score was 0.39 in 2022, 0.40 in 2021, 0.41 in 2020. Kenny further notes, "Indeed, court proceedings at all levels have increasingly become weaponized to serve political ends." One can immediately recall the pace of delivering verdicts against BNP leaders and activists ahead of the sham election held on January 7 this year. Similarly, in the past months, global leaders have expressed concerns about the treatment meted to Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus. They have called upon the country to stop "continuous judicial harassments."

One need not be reminded that a judiciary under the control of the executive branch is a hallmark of autocracy. In countries where democracy eroded and autocrats rose, be it Bolivia or Cambodia or Turkey, the judiciary has been used against political opponents, journalists and members of civil society. In the oft-quoted book titled *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt describe the judiciary as one of the referees and write, "Capturing the referees provides the government with more than a shield. It offers a powerful weapon, allowing the government to selectively enforce the law, punishing the opponents while protecting the allies."

As for the overall assessment of democracy, we can recall how the 2023 annual report of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute classified Bangladesh, describing it as an "electoral autocracy." Bangladesh was ranked 155th in the Liberal Component Index, 165th in Egalitarian Component Index, 142nd in Participatory Component Index, and 145th in Deliberative Component Index.

Bangladesh's declining score in the EIU Democracy Index should provide an opportunity to discuss not only how EIU has rated Bangladesh, but also how others have characterised the country's state of democracy—or lack thereof.

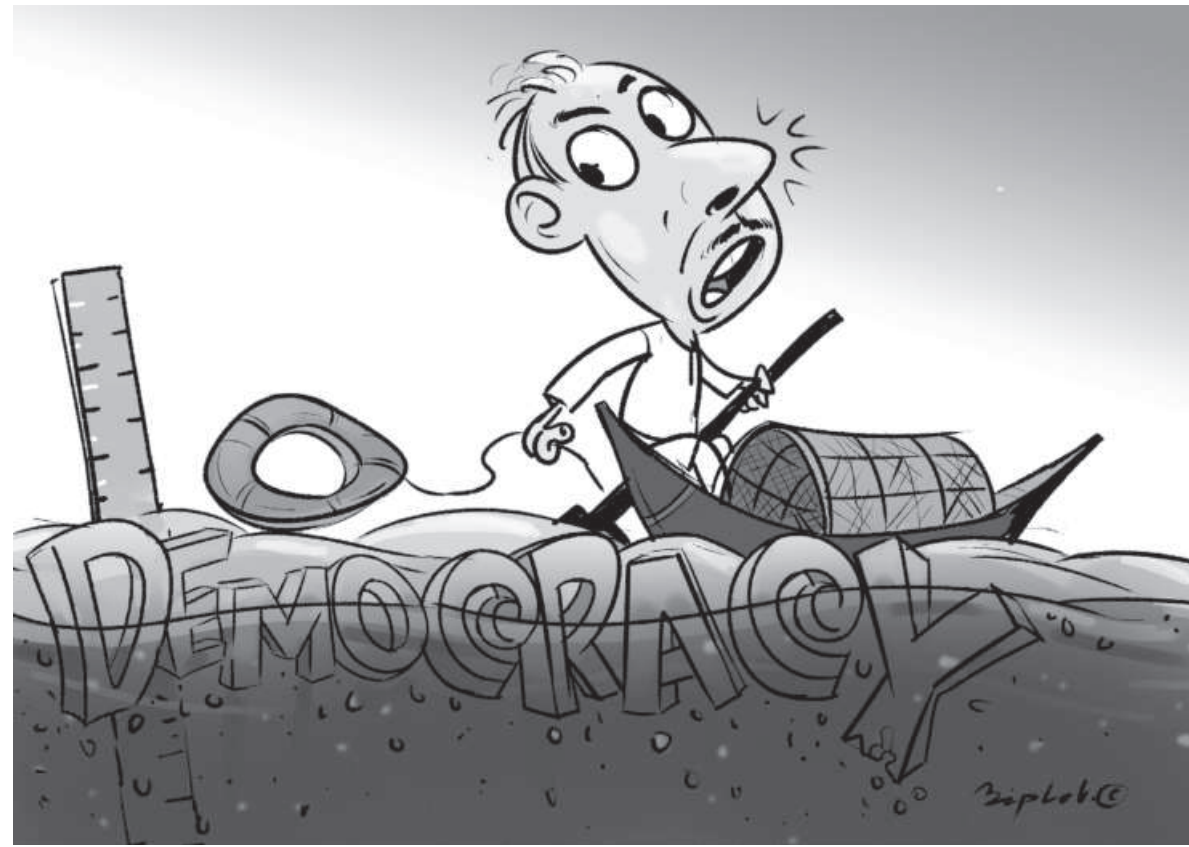


ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

Bangladesh as one of "partly free" countries. Notables are the political rights and civil liberties scores: 15 out of 40, and 25 out of 60, respectively. Bangladesh's total score was a meagre 40 out of 100. Further disaggregation painted a grim picture. For example, the score on the question "Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?" was one of four. In a similar vein, the country scored one out of four on the question "Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?" In some measures, it was not only about the past two elections, but it was also

report described Bangladesh as a "moderate autocracy" with a score of 4.25. We may wait to see what score the Transformation Index assigns in its forthcoming report. The International IDEA's Global State of Democracy 2022 report, published in November 2022, described the country as an "autocracy." In 2023, the International IDEA moved away from classifying regimes on an overall basis, but measured and ranked country performance in four categories of democratic performance: representation, rights, rule of law, and participation. In these categories, Bangladesh's rank among 174 countries were 125, 134, 135, and 115, respectively. It needs no

is Judicial Independence, steadily weaponized by both dominant parties to consolidate power. Indeed, Bangladesh's measures of Judicial Independence have suffered serious declines in the last five years, placing it among the lowest performing in South Asia. These declines have been coupled with decreases in Representation (and particularly Elected Government) measures over the past decade. Part of these declines can be traced back to the 2014 and 2018 elections, which resulted in a weakened parliament lacking effective opposition, and centralized power in the hands of AL in what some critics argue resembles a one-party state."

# How many Indigenous authors can you name?



**Mathews Chiran**, who belongs to the Indigenous Garo community in Bangladesh, is a development practitioner.

**MATHEWS CHIRAN**

Let me begin with the famous quote often attributed to anti-Apartheid icon Nelson Mandela: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."

This quote underscores the deep connection between language and culture, highlighting the significant role language plays in our lives. When a language is lost, a culture is also lost. Unfortunately, despite the rich diversity of ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples in Bangladesh, efforts to promote Indigenous languages and literature have been insufficient. Take, for example, the annual Amar Ekushey Book Fair. While Bangla Academy has been organising the fair since 1978, there has been a noticeable lack of initiatives to promote Indigenous literature, such as the absence of a dedicated corner for Indigenous authors. As a result, many of us are unfamiliar with Indigenous folktales or historical narratives, and few can name Indigenous writers.

Despite these challenges, there are some publications which are actively promoting Indigenous cultures. One such example is Thokbirim, a publication owned by a member of the Garo community. Thokbirim sets up a stall every year at the "Little Mag" corner of the fair, showcasing books by Indigenous writers. Additionally, the publication organises the "Garo Book Fair" in Dhaka, providing a platform for Indigenous authors. However, these initiatives lack proper support and sponsorship from relevant authorities.

Furthermore, there is a lack of



The Thokbirim stall at the Little Mag corner of Amar Ekushey Book Fair showcases books by Indigenous writers every year. PHOTO: COURTESY

recognition for Indigenous writers and publishers at national events like the Amar Ekushey Book Fair. While awards are given to the best writers and publication houses, there are no separate awards for Indigenous contributors.

If we look at other countries, we can learn how to create an environment conducive to the thriving of Indigenous writers. The Blak & Bright First Nations Literary Festival, based in Melbourne, Australia, is a prominent festival that celebrates and showcases the rich diversity of Indigenous Australian literature, storytelling, and cultures. The festival programme features a diverse range of events, including author talks, panel discussions, readings, workshops, performances,

and exhibitions that go on for several days. Attendees get to engage with Indigenous authors and artists, explore Indigenous storytelling traditions, and participate in discussions about Indigenous literature and cultures.

Where are such festivals in our country? Who will support them here? Indigenous writers in our

country need more platforms to express their views and contribute to the literary world, adding diversity. According to the cultural affairs ministry's latest annual report, there are 10 institutions in the country dedicated to promoting the cultures of ethnic minorities. While this is a commendable effort, these institutions primarily focus on celebrating festivals and conducting workshops at the local level. Much more needs to be done to spread awareness of Indigenous cultures on a national scale.

The issue of language extinction is also a pressing concern for its lack of patronisation. According to the International Mother Language Institute (IMLI), 14 ethnic languages in Bangladesh are on the verge of extinction. If this trend continues, the

cultural diversity of our country will be greatly diminished.

The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) warns that more than half of the world's languages could become extinct by 2100, with Indigenous languages being particularly at risk. Language is central to the identity of Indigenous peoples, and when languages are lost, so too are Indigenous cultures. Therefore, realising the situation, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the period of 2022-2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages to draw global attention to the critical situation of

many Indigenous languages and to mobilise stakeholders and resources for their preservation, revitalisation, and promotion.

Also, as a part of celebrating International Mother Language Day this year, Unesco declared its theme to be "Multilingual education is a pillar of intergenerational learning." The theme talks about the importance of multilingual education in the transfer of knowledge and cultural heritage between generations, and it will be possible if we allow the mother tongues of Indigenous peoples to

find its expression in different forms such as literature.

The existence of Indigenous peoples is at stake in every aspect globally. The Bangladesh government needs to take some immediate and proactive measures to counter this at home. To this end, it is imperative that Indigenous literature and languages are promoted at national festivals and events. By doing so, we can encourage new writers and publishers, preserve cultural diversity, and ensure the survival of Indigenous languages for future generations.

## CROSSWORD

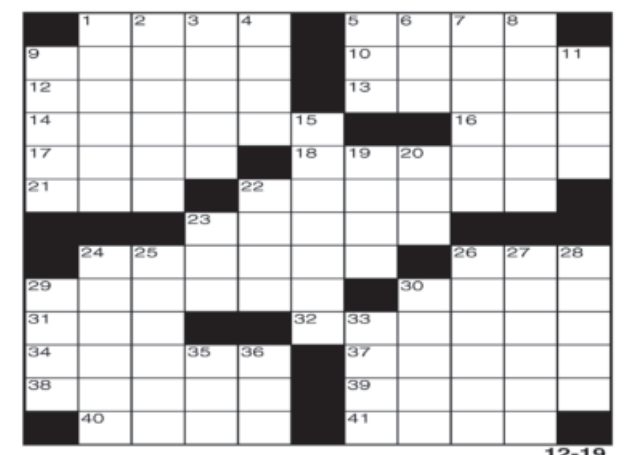
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 1 Clutter
- 5 Course sport
- 9 Chop up
- 10 Grownup
- 12 Atmosphere component
- 13 Brown shade
- 14 Darkroom output
- 16 Bed-and-breakfast
- 17 Solitary
- 18 Garden growths
- 21 Before, to bards
- 22 Barbers
- 23 Light bender
- 24 Salad makeup
- 26 Simple card game
- 29 Mars, for one
- 30 Pilaf grains
- 31 Jar part
- 32 Work periods
- 34 Labor group
- 37 Fancy neckwear
- 38 Long look
- 39 Lewd looks
- 40 Winter glider
- 41 Finishes

### DOWN

- 1 Bathroom fixture
- 2 Car part
- 3 Teatime treat
- 4 Dispatched
- 5 Neon or helium
- 6 Poem of praise
- 7 Wollfish
- 8 Spark producers
- 9 Syrup choice
- 11 Brown shades
- 15 Quick runs
- 19 Highlands girl
- 20 USN bigwig
- 22 Pine or palm
- 23 Writing tool
- 24 Brilliant flashes
- 25 Tire type
- 26 Reacted to a sting
- 27 Cast members
- 28 Work breaks
- 29 Added to
- 30 Out of bed
- 33 Story
- 35 Bauxite, for one
- 36 Homer's neighbor



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.