



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

## The future of elections in Bangladesh

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It conducts elections for various positions, including the president, vice-president, 543 Lok Sabha and 323 Rajya Sabha members, and state legislative assembly members across almost 29 states and territories. For instance, in Assam, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh, 120, 294, and 403 Vidhan Sabha (state legislature) members are elected respectively. Additionally, there are 250,000 local bodies at different tiers or territorial units, and 3 million representatives for these units are elected, including one million females. All these primary elections are managed at the national and state levels by Election Commissions with the assistance of state and federal-level bureaucracy. The elections are held in two or three stages. Primary elections are popular elections managed by election commissions under stringent electoral laws, with civil bureaucracy remaining at the helm. Secondary elections are held within the respective houses to select and appoint political executives at all levels, from the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha to the Gram Panchayats. The President is elected by three houses of parliament—the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, and Vidhan Sabha. Mayors, Chairpersons, Sarpanches, and Pradhans of respective institutions are elected by the members and councilors, and it is the prerogative of the chief executive to choose his/her executive council.

There are positions similar to speakers in each local government unit all over India, and leaders of the opposition party or group inside all the local bodies are also formed, similar to the national and state legislatures. Like the Prime Minister at the center and Chief

Ministers at the states, Mayors, Pradhans, and Chairpersons of local government bodies are entitled to form their cabinets and executive councils. For a detailed historical analysis of Elections in India, see Pranroy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala (2019).

### WHAT CAN BANGLADESH LEARN?

Stringent electoral laws and their strict application are crucial. While we have good laws, their application is in shambles.

Transparency and the rule of law at all stages of the electoral process are key to credible elections. However, our law enforcers, civil administration, and even the magistrates deployed in the field do not feel accountable, fail to maintain transparency, and lack the courage to protect victims by implementing the law.

A sound party system with democratic practices is absent. While political parties preach democracy, they hardly practice it within the party. Party leaders are not democratically elected, and the top party bosses are often permanent and hereditary. There has been hardly any change in top leadership positions of political parties for generations. In many cases, they groom their wives, children, and near relatives for future political inheritance. The nomination system in competing parliamentary seats is equated with business deals, and many nominations are bought and sold.

Members of parliament spend nominal time in legislative deliberations. They enjoy the prerogative of unlimited personal economic gains through business, lobbying for contracts, and gaining appointments for themselves and others. A modest reflection of their economic gains is evident in the declaration forms

of 'wealth statement' in election applications (Majumder, 2024).

Persons on the Government payroll should be non-partisan, independent professionally, impersonal, and neutral. They should serve the state, not any political party. However, gradually, the state machinery is becoming party machinery, aiming at personal extra gains.

There is no alternative to an independent and impartial judiciary with the right courage and high moral and common ethical standards. However, these are often missing in the lower judiciary, and the higher judiciary does not take measures to prevent it.

Law-abiding, non-violent, and politically conscious citizenship is also in the process of extinction from Bangladeshi society. Civil society is also in decline. Showing courage in public affairs is regarded as foolishness, and protest is often rewarded with punishment.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL REFORM

**Electoral reform**  
Our 'winner-takes-all' simple majoritarian electoral system needs to change, and the adoption of 'proportional representation' (PR) may ease the aggressive political character to some extent. Under the current majoritarian system, we are continuously ruled by the minority, which turns into a brute majority. We understand that democracy is the 'rule of the majority.' Historically, our election statistics regarding the rate of voter turnout and the general impression of neutrality and accuracy of vote counts are never beyond question. Out of 12 elections, only four

(1991, 1996, 2001, and 2008) earned reasonable credibility. Even statistics from those four elections show that minority votes prevailed over the majority.

In 1991, the BNP formed the government by securing 30.81% of the popular vote and 140 (46%) seats. The AL was in the opposition with 30.08% of the popular vote and 88 (29%) parliamentary seats. The same trend was seen in 1996, 2001, and 2008. In 1996, the AL formed the government with 37.44% of the vote and 146 (49%) seats, while the BNP sat in the opposition with 33.61% of the vote and 116 (39%) parliamentary seats. The 2001 election is even more depressing. The BNP formed the government with 40.97% of the vote, while the AL sat in the opposition with 40.13% of the popular vote. The vote difference between BNP and AL was 0.84, but the seat difference was 131 (44%). In 2008, the AL got 48.90% of the votes and won 230 seats (76.66%), while the BNP-Jamat combine polled 37.20% of the votes and secured only 32 (10.66%) seats. The difference in votes was 11.7%, but the seat difference was 198 (66%).

Under the PR system of election, such disparities would be less likely to occur. All parties would ensure parliamentary seats in proportion to their vote share. Every vote would count and affect election results. Voters would vote for policies rather than individuals, and practices like vote buying and rigging would be discouraged. Out of the 193 UN member countries, 97 major democracies practice the PR system, adopting many different methods. The PR system has brought significant changes to the polling system. Nepal and Sri Lanka practice limited PR systems in conducting their elections.

## Without the restoration of democracy press freedom remains unattainable

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A survey by the Centre for Governance Studies found most outlets supportive of the government are owned by businesses using their media ownership as a means of furthering other commercial interests.

These outlets largely survive on state patronage in various forms or subsidies from their owners, who consider them an investment for furthering other interests including political ambitions. About a dozen owners of media companies participate in the just concluded parliamentary elections and their outlets' reporting was markedly different from others, either by disproportionate coverage of or apparent bias towards respective owners. Government ministers and leaders of the ruling party, however, have consistently argued that media plurality is proof of media freedom in Bangladesh. In reality, most of these outlets thrive on state patronage, shaping a media landscape heavily influenced by the ruling party and stifling independent voices.

The recent questionable election outcome is poised to further consolidate

Bill, and criticized for its restrictiveness, heightens fears of additional encroachments on freedom of expression. Concerns have been expressed at the fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the United Nations Human Rights Council over the potential abuse of the CSA and at least two countries - Canada and Belgium - have called for repealing it. Additionally, the proposed Regulation for Digital, Social Media, and OTT Platforms raises concerns about replicating the restrictive nature of the abolished DSA, exacerbating worries over media freedom.

Indeed, the citizens' empowerment provided by technological advancement and global open platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Instagram, and many others have also derived increased risks of harm to vulnerable groups by the spread of misinformation, fake news, and cybercrime. While governments worldwide grapple with these challenges posed by the digital age, there is a pressing need for a balanced approach that protects vulnerable groups without compromising freedom of expression. Initiatives like the Online Safety Bill in the United Kingdom and the European Media Freedom Act in the European Union serve as examples of this balanced approach.

The Online Safety Bill in the United Kingdom contains safeguards for news publisher content and wider journalistic content when it is shared on social media platforms. The European Union is also in the process of enacting the European Media Freedom Act aimed at 'better protect editorial independence, media pluralism, ensure transparency and fairness and bring better cooperation of media authorities through a new European media Board.' The EU Commission says that the act includes unprecedented safeguards for journalists to perform their jobs freely and safely.

As the financial landscape of journalism transforms, the concept of journalism as a public good gains traction. UNESCO suggests three urgent measures to safeguard journalism: public financing for trustworthy news outlets, enhanced support for genuine public service media, and increased donor aid and philanthropic investments in news production.

In Bangladesh, however, these issues can only be adequately addressed within a democratic framework, which is absent at present. The tainted renewal of the Awami League regime further distances the dream of a free press, emphasizing the urgent need for the restoration of democracy.



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

unchecked power, tightening the government's control over the media. It was common knowledge that editors/producers of television talk shows are used to getting frequent advisories on who can and cannot be invited. Private business houses were advised not to place advertisements in newspapers critical of the government. However, these practices are unlikely to end soon. The newly appointed State Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mohammad Ali Arafat has already warned that the government was planning to establish a framework to ensure accountability for spreading what it determines 'disinformation and rumors', though recent scrutinies by several fact-checking groups have identified pro-government groups as the most sources of generating and spreading disinformation.

The controversial Cyber Security

### ডিজিটাল ব্যাংকিং-এর সকল সেবা

#### সেবাসমূহ

- মোবাইল গ্র্যাপস
- ইন্টারনেট ব্যাংকিং
- ই-একাউন্ট (নিজের একাউন্ট নিজে করি)
- ডেবিট কার্ড

২৪/৭ এখন বাংলাদেশ ডেভেলপমেন্ট ব্যাংক পিএলসি.তে

- বিকাশ ও নগদে টাকা পাঠান ফ্রিতে
- NPSB এর মাধ্যমে মুহূর্তেই টাকা পাঠান অন্য ব্যাংকে
- ক্রেডিট কার্ডের বিল পে-করুন
- ইএফটিএন ও আরটিজিএস সেবা নিন
- এ চালান সিস্টেম (ACS) এ আয়কর, ভ্যাট, ট্যাক্স ও পাসপোর্টের ফি জমা দিন
- NESCO, DPDC ও BGDCL এর বিল সেমেন্ট করুন
- সকল অপারেটরে মোবাইল রিচার্জ করুন

বাংলাদেশ ডেভেলপমেন্ট ব্যাংক পিএলসি.

(একটি রাষ্ট্র মালিকানাধীন বাণিজ্যিক ব্যাংক)

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