

# 2026: A year of repair, not miracles



**Asif Bin Ali**  
is doctoral fellow at Georgia State University.  
He can be reached at abinali2@gsu.edu.

ASIF BIN ALI

A new year often starts with personal reflection. Each of us reflects on what went wrong, what we endured, and what we hope to change. Every Bangladeshi has their own story of loss, small gains, and ongoing struggles. While I can't relay each individual's story, I can try to tell our shared one: what went wrong for us as a country last year, what went right despite the challenges, and what we can reasonably expect from 2026.

A year before, on August 5, 2024, the Hasina government was ousted. It was not a sudden storm but the delayed result of over a decade-long suppressed anger. Many of us hoped that something fundamental might change. We hoped that the republic was getting a second chance.

To be fair, some hopeful things did happen. We saw political parties sit in the same room, discussing a framework for transition. On television talk shows and social media, people began uttering aloud the names of individuals and institutions that many would only whisper about at home earlier. Family members of enforced disappearance victims sat in front of cameras and told the country what had happened to their dear ones. It did not bring anyone back, but it broke the silence. It reminded us that this country still has a bit of conscience left.

But the promise of better law and order quickly collided with the reality of weak institutions. We saw a political leader shot in the head in broad daylight. Revenge attacks turned entire localities into zones of fear. In the name of protecting religion, angry groups beat and burned people alive. Shrines and homes were once again targeted in 2025, becoming convenient outlets for intolerance and political frustration. Newspapers and cultural organisations were attacked and set on fire, as if silencing newsrooms and burning cultural centres could somehow fix the country's crisis.

In some cases, the state did act. There were events when police intervened quickly to save targeted minorities or disperse violent crowds. However, in most cases, we saw a state that often stood on the edge of the scene rather than at the centre. A sense grew



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

that the interim government was reacting to events rather than shaping them—a vacuum filled by a familiar cast of actors, including local strongmen, religious demagogues, as well as political businessmen and ideological entrepreneurs, who push ideologies on digital platforms to gain followings. They have learned that a few charged words on Facebook or a fiery speech at a rally can be converted into very concrete gains on the ground. The language of sanity and logic was frequently drowned out by the louder sound of anger and past humiliation.

This brings us to the core problem that 2026 will have to confront: the collapse of

public trust in state institutions. During its tenure, Awami League abused institutions such as the judiciary, police and civil administration. Most of the time, the opposition responded by attacking the ruling party and questioning the institutions. But during the July uprising and its aftermath, the institutions themselves came under attack. In other words, the institutions were abused from above and delegitimised from

below. The result is a country where many people no longer believe that going to court or filing a complaint will lead to justice. Instead, they look for "big brothers" who can solve a problem through pressure, money, or violence, regardless of their motive for doing so. Groups with muscle, money and social media influence are happy to play that role. They mobilise under the banners of religion, nationalism, or justice, and take the law into their own hands. Violence on the street becomes an informal dispute-settlement mechanism.

Against this background, what can we reasonably expect from 2026? By February-

March, we hope to see a democratically elected government in office. No one should romanticise the task that the new government will face. It will inherit a society where political fatigue lives alongside political rage, where some actors quietly believe that they benefit more from instability than from calm, and where divisions along lines of nationality, religion, ideology, and class have deepened rather than softened.

But beyond elections, one expectation stands above the rest. The next government must treat rebuilding institutions as its central task, not as a decorative slogan. Restoring the credibility of the judiciary, the police, and the civil administration is not a technical reform programme; it is a survival strategy for the

state. That means the government should remove political elements or influence from the routine business of state institutions as much as possible, enforce written protocols and laws, and promote individuals based on competence rather than party loyalty. People should find themselves in a system where they no longer have to rely on informal phone calls to access and receive public services. If ordinary citizens start to believe that a court case, a formal complaint, or a visit to a police station will be handled according to law rather than according to party colour, half the journey towards stability will already be made.

Stability in this sense is not a substitute for forced order imposed through fear. Bangladesh does not need the kind of "stability" where dissenting voice and opposition is beaten off the streets, and journalists are forced into silence. The stability we need in 2026 is different: predictable institutions, fair procedures, and a basic sense of safety for all communities. A Hindu family in a small town, an Ahmadiyya mosque in a village, a Christian hospital in a remote district, an Indigenous community in the hills, a Bihari camp, a secular blogger, a conservative imam, a labour organiser in an export factory, a business owner in a district town—all of them should feel that the state protects their right to exist and speak rationally, even when they disagree with each other.

If the next government fails to restore stability and rebuild trust in institutions, the country will face a grim future. Street clashes will become routine. Politics will turn into a permanent emergency rather than a method of governance. Talented young people will quietly leave the country for better opportunities. Those staying behind will try to adapt to a life where insecurity is normal. This is not the future anyone can possibly ask for.

As citizens, we make choices every day. We choose which leaders to support, which stories to share online, and whether to hold onto anger or revenge. We also decide which lines we won't cross. If we want strong institutions instead of angry groups, our actions, both online and offline, need to reflect that, even when we're upset.

Perhaps, the best way to look at 2026 is not as a magical turning point, but as a year for patient repair. We won't see all our dreams come true in just 12 months. What we can hope for is simpler: that people in power and regular citizens try to work together and rebuild some basic safety and trust by fixing our broken institutions.

## Democracy cannot survive when its defenders are set on fire



**Rushad Faridi**,  
PhD, is assistant professor at the Department  
of Economics at the University of Dhaka. He  
can be reached at rushad.16@gmail.com.

RUSHAD FARIDI

"I can't breathe anymore. There's too much smoke. I'm inside. You are killing me." This was the social media post made by *The Daily Star's* Zyma Islam in the early hours of December 19. When I first saw the post, it sent a chill down my spine. I could not believe my eyes. Was this really happening?

Two media buildings, located within a few hundred yards of each other, were set ablaze that night. They housed Bangladesh's two most influential daily newspapers: *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*. These were not some secretive arson attacks. They happened right in front of thousands, both on the streets and those watching live on social media. The journalist I quoted was trapped inside along with some of her colleagues.

Although they were eventually rescued by the firefighters and security forces, the event left a deep scar on the nation's collective psyche. The reason for this lunacy is so absurd, so detached from logic, that no sane observer can plausibly connect cause and consequence.

In every measurable sense, these papers' circulation, reach, credibility, and agenda-setting powers are unrivalled pillars of Bangladesh's news industry. For decades, they have shaped public discourse, built narratives around national events, and set the professional standards by which journalism in Bangladesh is judged. Even those who resent their editorial stance routinely rely on their coverage for verification of facts, simply because hardly any comparable alternative exists that combines professionalism, consistency, and institutional memory. That is precisely why they were under attack.

Both *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star* are unapologetically liberal and secular in orientation. From their inception, this has earned them the hostility of ultra-conservative factions that see secularism not as a constitutional principle but as an existential threat. At the same time, it would be disingenuous to pretend that these papers have always practised immaculate

impartiality. There were moments where their coverage in certain respects didn't meet the lofty standard set for journalism.

But complete neutrality in journalism is an illusion, not a realistic benchmark. In every society, media institutions reflect values, worldviews, and editorial judgments. The relevant question is not whether absolute impartiality exists, but whether professional standards, fact-checking, source verification, and editorial accountability are upheld. On that score, these two dailies do not merely meet the threshold; they exceed it. That is why they became indispensable institutions rather than partisan actors.

Their credibility did not shield them from power. In fact, it made them frequent targets. Every government in Bangladesh has resented these newspapers for one reason or another, but the hostility reached its zenith during Sheikh Hasina's rule (2009–2024). Her regime, marked by systemic corruption, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and the decimation of democratic institutions, found its most persistent critics in these two outlets.

Hasina made her contempt explicit. She publicly stated that she avoided reading *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*. Their reporters were routinely barred from attending press briefings. Their editors, Matiur Rahman and Mahfuz Anam, faced lawsuits, intimidation, and financial strangulation. Advertising pressure was applied through state influence over major companies. There were even credible fears that the regime wanted to engineer a hostile takeover of these papers, echoing how India's major business groups aligned with the Modi government absorbed influential media outlets.

Their "crime" was simple: they reported corruption and human rights abuses when silence was the safer option. Here lies the central paradox. Sheikh Hasina was arguably New Delhi's most reliable partner in South Asia. Her government systematically addressed India's security and strategic

concerns, often at the expense of Bangladesh's own democratic accountability. In return, India provided unwavering diplomatic cover, shielding Hasina's brutal dictatorial regime from international scrutiny, particularly from Western powerful countries.

Even after Hasina's fall in August 2024, India continued to provide her material and political support. Hasina fled to India and has since been allowed to issue vitriolic statements

or facilitating her return. These dynamics have also emboldened local radical actors. Younger political figures, student wings such as Bangladesh Islami Chhatrashibir, and even emerging groups like the National Citizen Party (NCP) have adopted openly confrontational rhetoric towards India.

But getting back to the point, if the two newspapers were Hasina's most consistent critics, and she sought to hurt or attack them



**If *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star* were Hasina's most consistent critics, and she sought to hurt or attack them repeatedly, how could they also be "pro-fascist" or "pro-India"? This claim collapses under basic scrutiny.**

FILE PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

against Bangladesh's interim government frequently. Numerous Awami League leaders and former ministers are also reportedly residing in India, often appearing on Indian talk shows and digital platforms to denounce the current political transition. There is also a pervasive though unsubstantiated belief in Bangladesh that India's intelligence agency, RAW, which allegedly penetrated multiple sectors of Bangladesh during Hasina's rule, is now collaborating with fallen Awami League operatives to destabilise the country.

Moreover, under the laws of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina has been convicted in absentia and is therefore legally liable to face justice in the country. Yet India has shown no indication of cooperating with any extradition process

repeatedly, how could they also be "pro-fascist" or "pro-India"? This claim collapses under basic scrutiny.

Yes, there were moments when these papers softened their criticism of Hasina, but those were dictated by a survival instinct, not any ideological alignment. A regime that weaponised laws, courts, regulators, advertisers, and police left little room for open defiance. Even then, these newspapers continued to expose major corruption scandals and rights violations, often at great institutional risk.

So, what their current branding as "acolytes" of Hasina or India actually reflects is something more dangerous: manufactured hatred.

Following Hasina's fall, some Islamist parties, long suppressed under the guise of a "war on terror," re-entered public life with renewed confidence. Social media influencers sympathetic to extremist views pushed a toxic narrative: that *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star* were ideological extensions of Indian hegemony, allegedly poisoning Muslim minds through secular liberalism. These narratives blended fragments of truth with deliberate falsehoods. In a society plagued by illiteracy, algorithmic amplification, and rising religious radicalism, such claims spread rapidly. Over time, a segment of the population was led to view these newspapers in adversarial terms, creating an opening that vested interest groups were quick to exploit.

The assassination of Sharif Osman Hadi became the spark. Though there is no evidence linking the newspapers to the killing, they became symbolic targets. Burning down major narrative-building institutions accomplishes multiple goals, including weakening ideological enemies, undermining the democratic process, and creating fear and chaos in the country.

Perhaps most disturbing was the role or absence of the state. Security forces were deployed late, despite prior intelligence indicating imminent violence after Hadi's assassination. The inaction suggested either gross incompetence or tacit consent. Some observers are quite confident that certain elements within the interim government were themselves involved in this planned inaction. The major reason, one may imagine, is their alleged alignment with political actors who stand to lose ground or power in a proper democratic transition.

Meanwhile, threats and mob violence continue. These are not isolated events. They are symptoms of a state losing its monopoly over violence while the country is being destabilised in the process. In this struggle for power, ideology, and control, there is only one consistent loser: Bangladesh. Businesses stall. Investment retreats. Social trust erodes. Institutions crumble.

Right now, what we need is not more manufactured enemies, but a free, fair, and timely election leading to the return of democratic governance rooted in accountability and pluralism. Silencing narratives will not save Bangladesh or restore faith. Only democracy and the rule of law can. And democracy cannot survive when its most ardent defenders—newspapers like *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*—are set on fire.