

Since independence, Bangladesh has gone to the polls twelve times, and another election is now approaching. Across this long journey, one fact stands out: no ruling party has ever lost an election while in office. The Awami League first tasted victory while in office in 1973. Decades later, it returned to power in June 1996. It won again in 2008 and later in three consecutive elections – 2014, 2018, and 2024. Those victories, however, came under a cloud. The 2014 and 2024 contests were condemned as “one-sided” and boycotted by the opposition. The 2018 election carried even darker allegations, with claims that ballot boxes were stuffed the night before voting. Critics branded all three as “sham polls”. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) also had its moments, winning in 1979 and again in the short-lived February 1996 election and in 2001. The Jatiya Party, under military ruler HM Ershad, claimed back-to-back victories in 1986 and 1988 – both boycotted and both one-sided. Amid this cycle of dominance, there were flashes of credible consensus. Four elections – 1991, June 1996, 2001, and 2008 – were held under caretaker or interim governments. Each time, the party that had ruled before the interim or caretaker administration lost, showing that free and fair elections could indeed change power. The broader record, however, tells another story. Bangladesh has endured five one-sided polls – 1986, 1988, February 1996, 2014, and 2024 – each marked by opposition boycotts. The Awami League secured a two-thirds majority five times, the BNP twice outright and once with allies, and the Jatiya Party once.

