

BALLOTS, BATTLES AND DEMOCRACY

The road to 13th parliamentary elections

Bangladeshis won a decisive victory in the national elections of December 7, 1970, the first general polls held in Pakistan. The Awami League secured a clear mandate to govern, but the military junta refused to transfer power. Instead, Pakistan imposed war on the people of East Pakistan. In response, the people of this land resisted, fighting the Pakistani forces and their local collaborators in a brutal nine-month struggle that culminated in the birth of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971. Since independence, the country has experienced 54 years of democracy, marked by both turbulence and resilience. The Constitution of 1972 established a multiparty parliamentary system, and in March 1973 Bangladesh held its first parliamentary election as an independent state. That election marked the beginning of a political journey that has since seen 12 parliamentary contests, reflecting shifts in governance, popular will, and democratic struggle. As the nation prepares for its 13th parliamentary election on February 12, 2026, what follows is a snapshot of the previous 12 elections, tracing how Bangladeshis have shaped their destiny at the ballot box.



Bangabandhu takes oath as prime minister after the 1973 elections.

1973 GENERAL ELECTIONS
DATE: March 7, 1973
CONTESTING PARTIES: 14
SEATS WON:
Awami League: 293
Bangladesh Jatiya League: 1
Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal: 1
Independents: 5



President Ziaur Rahman preparing to cast vote in 1979 elections.

1979 GENERAL ELECTIONS
DATE: February 18, 1979
In early 1975, Bangladesh's parliamentary system was replaced by the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BKSAL). Months later, on August 15, 1975, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated, and Khondaker Mustaq Ahmed assumed the presidency. The country then entered a turbulent phase marked by coups and counter-coups. In April 1977, Ziaur Rahman took over as president. Under his rule, martial law was imposed and the constitution suspended. Zia later held a referendum in 1977 and, in 1978, oversaw Bangladesh's first direct presidential election. That same year, he founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Religion-based parties were allowed to contest elections for the first time. In 1979, Bangladesh held its second parliamentary elections under the presidential system, marking another shift in the country's political trajectory.

CONTESTING PARTIES: 29
SEATS WON:
BNP: 207
Awami League: 39
Bangladesh Muslim League-Islamic Democratic League: 20
Bangladesh Gono Front: 8
Awami League (Mizan): 2
Bangladesh Jatiya League: 2
Bangladesh Gono Front: 2
National Awami Party (Muzaffar): 1
Bangladesh Samyabadi Dal (Marxist-Leninist): 1
Jatiya Akota Party: 1
Bangladesh Ganatantrik Andolan: 1
Independents: 16

dissolved parliament on December 7. The subsequent parliamentary election was widely regarded as one-sided, as opposition alliances led by the BNP and the Awami League boycotted the polls.

CONTESTING PARTIES: 8
SEATS WON:
Jatiya Party: 251
Combined Opposition Party: 19
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Siraj): 3
Bangladesh Freedom Party: 2
Independents: 25

1991 GENERAL ELECTIONS
DATE: February 27, 1991



Front page of The Daily Star on election day in 1991.

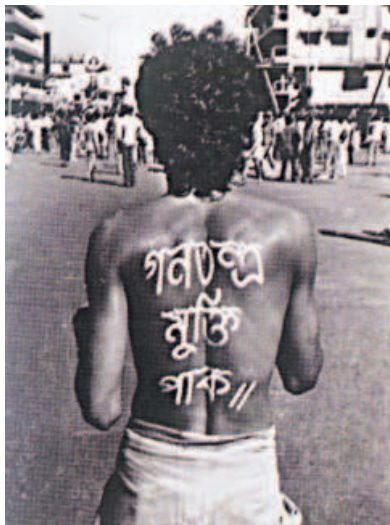
1986 GENERAL ELECTIONS
DATE: May 7, 1986
In May 1981, President Ziaur Rahman was assassinated in Chattogram. Hussain Muhammad Ershad seized power in 1982 and declared himself president in 1983. The third parliamentary election was held under Ershad's martial law regime and was widely seen as one-sided, as the BNP boycotted the polls, though the Awami League and Jamaat-e-Islami participated.



New cabinet takes oath after 1986 elections

CONTESTING PARTIES: 28
SEATS WON:
Jatiya Party: 153
Awami League: 76
Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh: 10
National Awami Party: 5
Communist Party of Bangladesh: 5
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Rab): 4
Bangladesh Muslim League: 4
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Siraj): 3
Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League: 3
Workers Party of Bangladesh: 3
National Awami Party (Muzaffar): 2
Independents: 32

1988 GENERAL ELECTIONS
DATE: March 3, 1988



Noor Hossain, an iconic pro-democracy activist, was shot to death by police in 1987.

The parliament formed through the 1986 elections provided legal legitimacy to Ershad's rule, but his government's political legitimacy remained contested, as most opposition parties refused to recognise it. By late 1987, the movement against Ershad intensified. Ershad declared a state of emergency on November 27 and

party-neutral caretaker government became a major flashpoint in Bangladesh's political conflict. The opposition launched a series of protest programmes and eventually resigned from parliament. In November 1995, parliament was dissolved. Elections were scheduled for February 1996 without a caretaker government. As the opposition boycotted the polls, the election turned into a one-sided contest.

CONTESTING PARTIES: 43
SEATS WON:
BNP: 278

Islami Oikkya Jote: 1
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Rab): 1
Independents: 1

Jatiya Party (Ershad): 34
Workers Party: 6
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Inu): 5
Jatiya Party (Manju): 2



BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia casting her vote at Adamji Cantonment College in 2001.

2001 GENERAL ELECTIONS
DATE: October 1, 2001

For the third time, elections were held under a party-neutral caretaker government. These polls were the first to take place after an elected government had successfully completed its full term in office. The BNP-led four-party alliance, which included Jamaat, contested the election as a coalition.

CONTESTING PARTIES: 54
SEATS WON:
BNP: 193
Awami League: 62
Jamaat: 17
Jatiya Party (Ershad) [Including Islami Jatiya Oikya Front]: 14
Jatiya Party (Naziur): 4
Islami Oikya Jote: 2
Krishak Sramik Janata League: 1
Jatiya Party (Manju): 1
Independents: 6

2008 GENERAL ELECTIONS
DATE: December 29, 2008
In 2006, disputes over leadership of the caretaker government triggered a political crisis, forcing the postponement of the January 22, 2007 polls and the declaration of a state of emergency. Elections were eventually held in December 2008 under a caretaker administration, with the Awami League contesting under the Grand Alliance and the BNP with its four-party alliance.

CONTESTING PARTIES: 38
SEATS WON:
Awami League: 230
BNP: 30
Jatiya Party: 27
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Inu): 3
Workers Party of Bangladesh: 2
Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami: 2
Liberal Democratic Party: 1
Jatiya Party-BJP: 1
Independents: 4

2014 GENERAL ELECTIONS
DATE: January 5, 2014
The 2014 polls were another one-sided election, held amid an opposition boycott. The opposition had demanded elections under the caretaker government system, which the Awami League-led government had unilaterally annulled following a court order. First time, the election was conducted without dissolving parliament. Awami League won 153 seats unopposed – two more than the number required to secure a parliamentary majority and form government.

CONTESTING PARTIES: 12
SEATS WON:
Awami League: 234

Bangladesh Tarikat Federation: 2
Bangladesh Nationalist Front: 1
Independents: 16

2018 GENERAL ELECTIONS
DATE: December 30, 2018
Bangladesh returned to a form of participatory election – but under very different circumstances. The main opposition parties were barely visible on the campaign trail, as their leaders and activists faced harassment, intimidation, and attacks, while police carried out mass arrests of thousands of opposition members. The polls were marred by allegations of ballot-box stuffing on the night before voting.

CONTESTING PARTIES: 39
SEATS WON:
Awami League: 258
Jatiya Party (Ershad): 22
BNP: 6
Ganofourm: 2
Workers Party: 3
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal Inu: 2
Bangladesh Tarikat Federation: 1
Jatiya Party (Manju): 1
Bikalpa Dhara: 2
Independents: 3

2024 GENERAL ELECTIONS
DATE: January 7, 2024



Sealed ballots lie on the floor following a clash at Koiyagram Government Primary School in Patiya, Chattogram, during the January 7, 2024 polls.

The 2024 election was effectively one-sided, as major opposition parties, including the BNP, boycotted the polls. To project an appearance of competition, the Awami League fielded independents, many of whom were party insiders. The Sheikh Hasina-led government was dethroned in the wake of a student-led mass uprising on August 5.

CONTESTING PARTIES: 28
SEATS WON:
Awami League: 224
Jatiya Party (Ershad): 11
Workers Party: 1
Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Inu): 1
Kalyan Party: 1
Independents: 62