[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Bangladesh Faces Challenges in Current Democratic Transition

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Introduction

In July and August of 2024, a student-led movement in Bangladesh protesting the government's job quota system escalated into a nationwide uprising. The protest was fueled by widespread public dissatisfaction with the ruling Awami League (AL) government's handling of economic hardship, corruption, and political repression. The Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, who was once regarded as a democratic exemplar[1], has been characterized as a dictator due to her administration's execution of three farcical elections, the suppression of freedom of expression, and the deterioration of democratic institutions. This has led to the transformation of the nation into an electoral autocracy[2]. The protests escalated into violent confrontations with government forces and AL-activists, resulting in a total of nearly 1,400 fatalities and more than 20,000 injuries. The government's loss of legitimacy was precipitated by its violent repression of protesting crowds and its perpetration of mass killings. When hundreds of thousands of students initiated a "March to the Prime Minister's House," the army declined to intervene. On August 5, the sixteen-year rule of Sheikh Hasina came to an end with her departure from the country to India.

Following the dissolution of the government, an Interim Government was established, characterized by its technocratic and politically inclusive nature. This IG was led by Dr. Muhammad Yunus, a Nobel Peace laureate who is widely recognized for his contributions to financial inclusion, particularly through his initiative known as "the 3-zero theory[3]" (referring to the reduction of carbon emissions, poverty, and unemployment). Dr. Yunus was appointed as the chief advisor to the interim government of Bangladesh. The IG's establishment was formally initiated on 8 August 2024 with the overarching objective of implementing the three major tasks: 'Reform, Trial and Election'. At this juncture, a number of reforms had already been initiated in many areas. The establishment of a tribunal against crimes against humanity has been confirmed. The IG has formally announced the designated period for the national election. There is considerable controversy among political parties

[1] Shuva Das. 2024.04.04."Sheikh Hasina's Rule in Bangladesh: The Road to Authoritarianism", Oxford Political Review. https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2025/04/04/sheikh-hasinas-rule-in-bangladesh-the-road-to-authoritarianism
[2] Omar Zahid. 2024.07.29." Has Bangladesh Become a One-Party 'Electoral Autocracy?"", The Global Policy Institute. https://gpilondon.com/publications/bangladesh-electoral-autocracy
[3] Yunus Centre. 2017.11.02. "A World of Three Zeros", https://www.muhammadyunus.org/post/1671/a-world-of-three-zeros

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regarding the optimal timeframe for the upcoming election. Some parties advocate for an immediate election, followed by the implementation of reforms and a trial. In contrast, others argue that prior to the election, reforms should be implemented in the areas deemed most critical.

Meanwhile, The IG has reached the one-year mark. Initially, the IG enjoyed significant public support. Nevertheless, the discernible advancement in administrative and systemic reforms remains negligible. Consequently, over time, the public has developed a pervasive sense of doubt and dissatisfaction, largely attributable to the government's sluggish response. BIGD's public pulse survey indicated that the optimism, which existed in August 2024, regarding the country's political future is gradually diminishing. In July 2025, 42% of the respondents felt that the country was heading in the right political direction, compared to 56% in October 2024 and 71% in August 2024[4]. This report will explore and analyze the ongoing situation in Bangladesh with respect to achievement of democratic goals.

The Challenges that the Interim Government (IG) Successfully Overcome

In accordance with the objectives of the July 24 uprising, the IG has implemented numerous initiatives to affect positive changes; however, the progression of these initiatives has been inconsistent. The following is a concise synopsis of several notable domains.

The IG encountered a state of economic vulnerability at its inception, marked by inflation, diminishing reserves, and a banking sector under strain. Bangladesh's economy was in a precarious state, with foreign exchange reserves at risk of depletion, the taka exhibiting significant devaluation, inflation persisting, and the banking sector grappling with nonperforming loans and chronic mismanagement[5]. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter and to formulate recommendations, the IG has established an economic white paper committee. This committee comprises prominent economists from across the country. The public has expressed approval of the austerity measures that have been implemented, which entails the cancellation and reduction of public project costs based on their significance[6]. In response to IG's request, expatriates have increased their use of formal remittance channels[7]. These measures were widely acknowledged for their role in stabilizing the economy.

Immediately after the interim government's assumption of office, the calamitous flood situation transpired in the southern and northern regions of the country, resulting in substantial destruction to crop production. The disaster affected over 5.8 million people individuals, with more than 500,000 seeking refuge in temporary shelters. This event exemplifies the collaborative efforts of government entities, private organizations, civil society and individuals in providing assistance to those affected by the flood. The government's efforts were supplemented by community-led initiatives[8]. This was a significant development that rapidly garnered public confidence in the IG.

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[4] BRAC Institute of Governance and Development.2025.07."Pulse Survey July 2025" https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/the-foundation-project_about/pulse-survey-july-2025/

[5] Abul Kashem. 2025.08.08."Economy saved from brink", The Business Standard. https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/economy-saved-brink-1207151

[6] Dr Moazzem.2025.03.22." Interim govt curbing extra projects and overseeing costs, reducing public investment", Centre For Policy Dialogue. https://cpd.org.bd/interim-govt-curbing-extra-projects-and-overseeing-costs-reducing-public-investment/

[7] United News of Bangladesh.2025.07.12." Reforms, higher incentives push remittances to $30b", New Age. https://www.newagebd.net/post/economy/269877/reforms-higher-incentives-push-remittances-to-30b#google_vignette

[8] DW News.2024.08.27" How is the new interim government dealing with the devastating floods in Bangladesh?". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-vNWOOqCJg

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National dialogues were initiated with the participation of civil society and experts on pertinent issues. The formation of approximately fifteen reform committees has been observed, with the stated objective of facilitating discussions and decision-making process concerning a wide range of issues, including electoral systems, anti-corruption measures, judicial independence, law enforcement, public health, labor policies, press freedom, women's affairs and decentralization. Each of the aforementioned committees initiated a series of several discussions, and some of them conducted public opinion surveys and sought the input of experts' opinion. Ultimately, they submitted a report to the IG. All of the aforementioned reports have been published on the government website and are accessible to the public[9]. However, following the attainment of independence, various commissions have been established and subsequently disbanded, and a substantial volume of reports has accumulated on the desks of the heads of state. Nevertheless, the nation has remained stagnant due to the lack of a comprehensive and sincere commitment to implementation. It is imperative that these commitments be addressed prior to the election, and that the formulation of potential recommendations commence immediately.

IG has established a tribunal for crimes to address crimes against humanity by amending the existing law on International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). The court's establishment during the AL government was a response to public demands for the punishment of war criminals. A second phase of proceedings was initiated in 2024 before the ICT to address alleged crimes against humanity during the protests that transpired in July and August of 2024. The tribunal has already issued three arrest warrants for Hasina and other accused parties[10].

The Key Challenges Facing the Interim Government (IG)

The collapse of the Sheikh Hasina government precipitated a significant rise in public concern regarding the state of law and order. The administration and police exhibited a marked lack of organization, as many officials sought refuge or adopted clandestine identities, driven by the apprehension of impeding public outrage in response to past abuses. In the aftermath of the disorder, local youth organized themselves into defense squads in response to the looting of property by miscreants. Meanwhile, the Army assumed temporary responsibility for the security of police stations. The escalation of criminal activity, including clashes, extortion, robbery, and terrorism, culminated in the initiation of "Operation Devil Hunt" by the Army, which resulted in the arrest of over 30,000 individuals engaged in criminal activity. Nevertheless, the IG has been the subject of criticism for its alleged failure to prevent mob justice, whereby incensed crowds retaliate against accused individuals without the benefit of a fair trial, thereby weakening the foundation of the justice system.

Furthermore, mob violence was directed at national symbols underscoring the gravity to the situation. The Dhanmondi 32 area was demolished, sculptures commemorating the Liberation War were destroyed, and approximately 2,000 teachers were forced to resign due to mounting pressure from mobs. The severity of the attacks has escalated, as evidence by an incident in August 2024, when

[9] অডিটর জেনারেলের কার্যালয়, বাংলাদেশ 2025.07.09 "সংস্কার কমিশনের প্রতিবেদন।" https://cao.gov.bd/site/files/7dcbcf43-344b-4aa3-8c95-dde73b542cde/Report-of-Reform-Commissions

[10] Hannah Ellis-Petersen.2025.07.10."Bangladesh's ousted Sheikh Hasina charged with crimes against humanity." The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/10/bangladesh-ousted-sheikh-hasina-charged-with-crimes-against-humanity

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AL supporters set fire to an Army vehicle in Gopalganj. Subsequently, during a National Citizen Party rally in the same location, armed Awami League activists initiated an attack with weapons and improvised explosive devices, effectively overpowering the police and setting fire to vehicles, thereby posing a threat to NCP leaders. Eventually, the reinforcements were able to successfully disperse the attackers, resulting in four fatalities and 50 injuries.

According to the most recent report by Human Rights Watch, the interim government has employed arbitrary detention as a tool to target perceived political opponents and has yet to implement systemic reforms to ensure the protection of human rights. The IG is currently grappling with a series of significant challenges, including a worrisome escalation in mob violence, political violence, and the harassment of journalists by political parties and other non-state actors, such as religious hardliners who are antagonistic towards women's rights and LGBT individuals.

The members of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the most popular party, who anticipate holding power in the next electoral cycle, began most heinous crimes that the AL members had been doing, viz. extortion, rent-seeking, illegal possession, physical force. According to Ain-o-Salish Kendra (ASK), 329 of the 349 incidents of political violence that resulted in 87 fatalities and 3,929 injuries were linked to BNP and its affiliated organizations[11]. During this period, BNP has initiated disciplinary proceedings against 5000 of its leaders and activists for a variety of infractions[12]. Nevertheless, the situation remains uncontrolled, and it has had a deleterious effect on the country's law and order situation.

Following the dissolution of the AL-government, the police force exhibited a notable lack of capacity, which was subsequently exploited by religious minorities, particularly the Hindus and Ahmadis, who were subjected to violence by mobs. The acts of violence encompassed physical assault, property theft, and acts of vandalism against Hindu temples and Mazars in various regions the country. On 19 August 2024, the leaders of the minority groups reported during a press conference in Dhaka that there had been 2010 incidents of communal violence during that period[13]. The issue was marred by a significant circulation of disinformation through Indian television, newspapers, and social media. The dissemination of false information was initiated and perpetuated by prominent BJP leaders and members of the government of India. In a statement delivered to the nation's lawmakers, India's Foreign Minister Mr. Jaisankar articulated the nation's profound disapproval of what it has characterized as a "systematic pattern of desecration". This condemnation followed the recent series of attacks on religious minority communities and temples in Bangladesh. In regard to recent events in India, certain international communities have also expressed censure of the Interim Government. A considerable amount of disinformation disseminated by the Indian media was subsequently debunked by news scanners[14]. The nine fatalities that transpired during the period of unrest have been attributed to political retribution, rather than predominantly influenced by religious or communal motivations[15].

[11] Sajjad Hossain.2025.07.13."BNP struggles in rein in the rogues." The Daily Star. https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/bnp-struggles-rein-the-rogues-3938161

[12] Daily Observer.2025.07.05."BNP has taken action against 5,000 party activists for misdeeds: Rizvi" https://www.observerbd.com/news/532787

[13] The Daily Star.2024.09.09."2,010 communal attacks in Bangladesh since August 4 to 20: Oikyo Parishad" https://www.thedailystar.net/news/news/2010-communal-attacks-bangladesh-august-4-20-oikyo-parishad-3706731

[14] BSS.2024.12.11." Rumour Scanner: 72% of accounts spreading anti-Bangladesh misinformation located in India" Dhaka Tribune. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/367788/rumour-scanner-72%25-accounts-spreading

[15] Aaqib Md Shatil.2024.10.30." Claims of sectarian motives in nine Hindu deaths falter under scrutiny" Netra News. https://netra.news/2024/little-evidence-of-communal-motives-in-9-hindu-mens-deaths/

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The provisional administration has enacted a temporary ban on the Awami League, the political party founded in 1949 and responsible for significant political movements in East Pakistan, including the Bangladesh Liberation War. The aforementioned ban on Awami League will remain effect until the party leaders have faced trial for abuses committed during their 15-year rule. In October 2024, the Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL), the student wing of the AL was banned. BCL has gained notoriety for its alleged involvement in egregious criminal activities, including torture, murder, rape in the campuses and outsides. A debate has emerged among scholars regarding the potential prohibition of AL and BCL. Human Rights organizations have characterized the incident as a violation of fundamental rights. The HRW reported that there is widespread anger against the Awami League for the numerous abuses committed during Hasina's rule. Those accused of perpetrating crimes under Hasina's administration must be subjected to appropriate legal proceedings. However, the imposition of a ban on a political party constitutes an excessive restriction on fundamental freedoms, reminiscent of the previous government's abusive clampdown on political opponents. The Awami League, with its historical affiliation with the nation and its leadership role in the independence struggle, cannot be readily legislated out of existence, despite its eventual transition to an authoritarian regime.

The IG has been encountered a notable degree of non-cooperation from its proximate neighbor. The overthrow of Sheikh Hasina was not initiated by a military coup or administrative conspiracy; rather, it was the result of a mass movement. Nevertheless, India has provided refuge to Hasina and numerous AL-leaders. The IG made an urgent appeal to India, urging the cessation of alleged anti-Bangladesh activities perpetrated by members of the AL from exile[16]. Bangladesh, being the closest neighbor, is dependent on India for a multitude of goods, including food stuffs and daily necessities. Following the termination of the relationship between Sheikh Hasina and India, India abruptly ceased the provision of commodities and imposed a prohibition on the transshipment of Bangladeshi garments to Europe and America via their port[17]. Months later, a new prohibition was imposed on seven export items using their land ports[18]. Moreover, the restrictions imposed have also affected Bangladeshi individuals seeking medical care or visiting relatives residing in the country. Furthermore, the ongoing tensions in border regions have been attributed to the forcible displacement of Muslim populations into Bangladesh[1920]. The government of Bangladesh formally requested that the government of India extradite the former Prime Minister to face trial. However, India has not yet responded to this request in the seven months since it was made[21]. In order to establish peace in the country and in the region, it is essential that the leaders of two nations cooperate each other.

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[16] Snehamoy Chakraborty.2025.08.21." Bangladesh interim govt accuses India of sheltering Awami League, Delhi denies charge."The Telegraph online. https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/bangladesh-interim-govt-accuses-india-of-sheltering-awami-league-delhi-denies-charge-prnt/cid/2118945#goog_rewarded

[17] The Economic Times.2025.04.10." India terminates transshipment facility for Bangladesh; move may benefit apparel cos competing against Dhaka". https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-terminates-transshipment-facility-for-bangladesh-move-may-benefit-apparel-cos-competing-against-dhaka/articleshow/120137518.cms

[18] The Business Standard. 2025.05.17." India halts import of Bangladeshi garments, processed foods via land ports". https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/india-now-restricts-land-port-imports-garments-fruits-and-other-select-items-bangladesh

[19] Human Rights Watch.2025.07.23." India: Hundreds of Muslims Unlawfully Expelled to Bangladesh" https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/23/india-hundreds-of-muslims-unlawfully-expelled-to-bangladesh

[20] Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman. 2025.06.19." India illegally deporting Muslim citizens at gunpoint to Bangladesh, say rights groups" The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jun/19/india-deporting-indians-muslim-citizens-bangladesh-say-rights-groups-border

[21] BSS News.2025.08.04." Dhaka yet to receive India's response on Hasina's extradition: Touhid" https://www.bssnews.net/news-flash/298853

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Recommended Actions for the Interim Government (IG) to Overcome Immediate Challenges

"State reform" is a comprehensive agenda, encompassing changes to laws, institutions, and functions across governance, elections, the judiciary, bureaucracy, citizens' empowerment, freedom of expression, and civil and political rights. However, the ambitious reform initiative launched by the interim government is unlikely to be fully realized within the confines of a constrained mandate and timeframe. In light of the prevailing circumstances, it is incumbent upon the government to prioritize and implement reforms deemed to be of the utmost importance prior to the upcoming elections. It is imperative to prioritize the implementation of fundamental reforms to ensure the autonomy, impartiality, and inclusivity of forthcoming electoral processes. While there are some issues that require attention, they are more general in nature and must be addressed for the benefit of national cohesion and the general interest.

The national consensus commission has finally drafted 'The July Charter' which is a 'new political settlement' in Bangladesh, being developed by consultation with over thirty political parties, with the exception of the Awami League. The significant accomplishment is that the political parties have reached a consensus on 84 proposals, which are projected to implement satisfactory reforms to the constitution, state structure, parliament, elections, and the judiciary. However, there is a divergence of opinions regarding the implementation of these proposals. The commission is currently engaged in ongoing dialogues with constitutional experts. Conversely, the most glaring oversight in this regard pertains to the conspicuous neglect of the issue concerning the reform of political parties. The initiation of internal reforms by political parties would facilitate the attainment of substantial progress on salient issues, including the enhancement of women's representation in parliament, the delineation of distinct roles between the party president and the prime minister, and the establishment of a more robust separation of powers.

Within the exception of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the other political parties-including Jamat-e-Islami and the National Citizen Party (NCP)-are in support of the proportional representation (PR) system. It has been asserted that the prevailing electoral system has demonstrated deficiencies in its capacity to adequately represent the interest of the public. Conversely, the BNP has chosen not to endorse the PR system. The application of PR system in the Upper house of Parliament has the potential to serve as a contentious issue during negotiations with political parties.

The National Citizen Party (NCP) has advocated for the establishment of a new constitution and the formation of a Constitutional Assembly. The NCP asserts that elections to such an assembly represent the sole viable solution to the prevailing political crisis. The statement further asserts the imperative of Constituent Assembly elections in safeguarding democratic principles and honoring the sacrifices made by the populace. The aforementioned points are expected to be resolved in a timely manner, as they have garnered the attention of constitutional experts.

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Awami League government, social media platforms have become a vehicle for discrediting the Liberation War of 1971 and the role of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. While his governance from 1972–1975 was the subject of considerable criticism, his central contribution to the independence movement is indisputable. As was the case in India with Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah in Pakistan, recognizing Bangabandhu as a unifying national icon is vital for maintaining cohesion. In the context of this transition, it is incumbent upon the Interim

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Government to ensure that vested interests do not manipulate history for narrow, short-term gains. Bangabandhu's legacy merits transcending partisan politics and ideology.

The upcoming election in Bangladesh is viewed as a critical juncture for the nation's democratic and stabilized future. Nevertheless, the general public continues to repose a significant degree of trust in Professor Mohammad Yunus and his government. A recent survey administered by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) revealed that 70 percent of respondents expressed confidence in the fairness, freedom, and impartiality of the upcoming national election under the IG[22]. Concurrently, the IG and political parties have nearly reached a consensus on the July National Charter, which is a 'new political settlement' on how the country's institutions are to be reformed to establish democracy and good governance where equality, human dignity, and social justice are ensured for all.■

[22] Brac Institute of governance & development.2025."Pulse Survey July 2025" https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/the-foundation-project_about/pulse-survey-july-2025/

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