

Research Article

Resetting the Compass: Bangladesh's Road to Participatory and Fair Elections

Zahurul Alam* 

School of Business, Canadian University of Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

Elections are a cornerstone of democratic governance, enabling citizens to participate in political decision-making and hold leaders accountable, yet in Bangladesh this function has increasingly been undermined by persistent concerns over transparency, institutional neutrality, and inclusivity. As the country approaches its next parliamentary elections scheduled for February 12, 2026, serious questions have emerged regarding the preparedness and integrity of the electoral system, placing the current electoral crisis within a broader public policy and institutional governance context marked by political exclusion, administrative opacity, and security sector inaction. Central to this crisis is the Election Commission's suspension of the Awami League (AL), one of the two major political parties, a decision that effectively bars it from electoral participation and has triggered widespread political and public resistance, thereby calling into question the competitiveness and legitimacy of the forthcoming polls. The controversy has been further intensified by the Chief Election Commissioner's announcement of a dual referendum on political reforms in the absence of stakeholder consensus or meaningful public dialogue, underscoring the fragility of democratic institutions when administrative bodies become politicized or insufficiently accountable. Drawing on qualitative evidence from documented political violence, attacks on media and civil society, and interviews with key stakeholders, the analysis demonstrates how institutional inaction, particularly by law enforcement and election management bodies, has fostered an environment conducive to mobism, repression, and fear, with far-reaching socio-economic consequences for governance, economic growth, civic participation, and minority protection. Collectively, these dynamics threaten to reduce Bangladesh's democratic framework to a monolithic system characterized by shrinking civic space, weakened checks and balances, and declining public trust, underscoring the urgent need for participatory, transparent, and inclusive electoral reforms, the depoliticization of state institutions, and the restoration of civic freedoms to ensure democratic legitimacy and institutional resilience.

Keywords

Bangladesh, Elections, Inclusivity, Awami League, Election Commission, Caretaker Government, Democratic Legitimacy, Political Reform

*Corresponding author: zalam111@yahoo.com (Zahurul Alam)

Received: 15 December 2025; **Accepted:** 8 January 2026; **Published:** 27 January 2026



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2026. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh has followed a parliamentary electoral tradition aimed at representing citizens' choices. Over the decades, elections have become both a mechanism of legitimacy and a site of intense political contestation. Periodic allegations of manipulation, partisan influence, and institutional capture have challenged the credibility of past polls.

The 2024-25 political upheavals, including mass protests, constitutional disputes, and formation of an interim government, have intensified concerns about electoral integrity ahead of 2026. The suspension of the Awami League (AL), one of the largest political parties, from contestation raises fundamental questions about inclusion, competition, and democratic representation.

This paper assesses Bangladesh's readiness for the 2026 elections by applying a normative framework of electoral credibility recognized by scholars and international bodies. It identifies institutional and political deficits, examines comparative global and regional experiences, and proposes actionable reforms. The analysis focuses on systemic issues that compromise electoral processes and legitimacy in Bangladesh.

"Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh has followed a parliamentary electoral tradition aimed at representing citizens' choices. Over the decades, elections have become both a mechanism of legitimacy and a site of intense political contestation [1]. Periodic allegations of manipulation, partisan influence, and institutional capture have challenged the credibility of past polls [2].

The 2024-25 political upheavals, including mass protests, constitutional disputes, and formation of an interim government, have intensified concerns about electoral integrity ahead of 2026. The suspension of the Awami League (AL), one of the largest political parties, from contestation raises fundamental questions about inclusion, competition, and democratic representation [3].

This paper assesses Bangladesh's readiness for the 2026 elections by applying a normative framework of electoral credibility recognized by scholars and international bodies. It identifies institutional and political deficits, examines comparative global and regional experiences, and proposes actionable reforms. The analysis focuses on systemic issues that compromise electoral processes and legitimacy in Bangladesh [4].

2. Theoretical Framework

To analyze the credibility and legitimacy of elections in Bangladesh, this chapter outlines the key conceptual pillars that define a democratic electoral process. These include definitions of essential electoral principles and a discussion on how these interrelate to form a credible and legitimate electoral environment. The framework draws from international standards (e.g., UN, IPU, OSCE/ODIHR), academic literature, and comparative democratic practice [5-7].

2.1. Definitions: Foundations of Electoral Credibility

Understanding electoral legitimacy requires unpacking a set of core concepts that, taken together, form the normative and procedural foundation of democratic elections [8, 9].

2.1.1. Participatory Elections

Participatory elections are those in which all eligible citizens and political stakeholders can freely engage in the electoral process, including voting, contesting, campaigning, and observing [10, 11]. Participation goes beyond voter turnout. It involves open registration, access to candidacy for all qualified individuals, and an enabling environment where citizens can voice opinions without fear or obstruction [12]. A truly participatory election requires the inclusion of minority groups, women, and historically marginalized populations [13, 14].

2.1.2. Inclusive Elections

Inclusivity refers to the structural and procedural mechanisms that ensure no group: political, ethnic, religious, or social, is systematically excluded from the electoral process [15, 16]. An election is not inclusive if significant political parties are barred, or if voting procedures disadvantage certain demographics (e.g., disabled voters, linguistic minorities, displaced persons) [17, 18]. Inclusiveness is highlighted as a precondition for peace-building in transitional democracies [19].

2.1.3. Free Elections

Participatory elections are those in which all eligible citizens and political stakeholders can freely engage in the electoral process, including voting, contesting, campaigning, and observing [10, 11]. Participation goes beyond voter turnout. It involves open registration, access to candidacy for all qualified individuals, and an enabling environment where citizens can voice opinions without fear or obstruction [12]. A truly participatory election requires the inclusion of minority groups, women, and historically marginalized populations [13, 14].

2.1.4. Fair Elections

Fairness refers to equality of opportunity for all political actors in terms of access to media, public resources, electoral institutions, and dispute resolution mechanisms [19]. This requires an impartial Election Commission, non-discriminatory laws, and balanced constituency boundaries. The Venice Commission (Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, 2002) stresses that unfair advantages, like misuse of state machinery or unequal media access, can invalidate otherwise peaceful elections [19].

2.1.5. Impartial Elections

Impartial elections are those administered by a neutral body that does not favor any political entity and is trusted across the political spectrum [17, 21, 22]. Each of the above dimensions is interdependent. Elections cannot be credible if they are not participatory; they cannot be fair without being free; they cannot be inclusive if major political forces are excluded [12]. A deficiency in one area often compromises the entire electoral process. For Bangladesh, where electoral boycotts, political violence, and administrative manipulation have plagued past elections, fulfilling all six criteria is not only desirable, it is essential for democratic continuity [19, 23].

2.2. Interrelationship of Electoral Principles and Analytical Framework

The concepts outlined in Section 2.1 do not operate in isolation; rather, they are mutually reinforcing dimensions that collectively determine electoral credibility and legitimacy. Democratic theory and international electoral standards emphasize that elections are credible only when participatory, inclusive, free, fair, and impartially administered simultaneously [5, 6, 9]. A weakness in any one dimension can undermine the integrity of the entire electoral process, even if other elements appear formally intact.

Participation and inclusivity constitute the entry points of electoral legitimacy. Without broad participation and the inclusion of all significant political actors and social groups, elections risk becoming procedural exercises devoid of democratic substance [8, 15]. In contexts where opposition parties boycott elections or where segments of the population are systematically marginalized, electoral outcomes may lack societal acceptance regardless of turnout figures or technical efficiency [19]. Thus, participation and inclusivity are foundational to public confidence in electoral outcomes.

Freedom and fairness, by contrast, shape the competitive quality of elections. Free elections ensure that voters and political actors can express preferences without fear, while fair elections guarantee that competition occurs on an equal playing field [6, 20]. These principles are closely interlinked: elections cannot be fair if voters are coerced or if opposition campaigns are obstructed; likewise, freedom loses meaning if state resources, media access, or legal frameworks are manipulated to favor incumbents [9, 19]. Empirical studies in hybrid and transitional regimes demonstrate that controlled or “managed” elections often preserve formal freedoms while undermining fairness through institutional bias and administrative interference [7, 23].

Impartiality functions as the institutional anchor that sustains all other dimensions. An election management body that lacks independence or public trust can compromise participation, restrict freedom, distort fairness, and facilitate exclusion [17, 22]. International best practices consistently identify the neutrality of election administration and dispute resolution mechanisms as decisive for electoral legitimacy, particularly

in polarized political environments [6, 19].

Based on these interrelationships, this study adopts an integrated analytical framework in which electoral credibility is assessed through the combined performance of five core dimensions: participation, inclusivity, freedom, fairness, and impartiality. Rather than evaluating elections solely by outcomes or procedural compliance, the framework emphasizes process-based legitimacy and contextual democratic quality. Applied to Bangladesh, this framework enables a systematic assessment of how recurring challenges, such as opposition exclusion, political violence, administrative bias, and contested election management, interact to affect electoral legitimacy. By operationalizing these dimensions across different electoral cycles, the study seeks to explain not only whether elections occurred, but whether they were democratically meaningful and publicly credible [19, 23].

3. The February 2026 Elections: A Democratic Litmus Test

The general election scheduled for 12 February 2026 represents more than a procedural exercise: it is a pivotal moment for Bangladesh’s democratic trajectory. In the aftermath of massive political realignment triggered by the July 2024 uprising, the forthcoming polls are widely viewed as a test of whether Bangladesh can transition from crisis to democratic consolidation. Beneath this event lie questions of institutional legitimacy, political inclusion, civil liberties, and public confidence. The strength of the electoral process will shape not only the composition of the next legislature but also the broader stability, governance effectiveness, and citizen trust in democratic institutions.

3.1. Political Context and Interim Government

The interim government, a transitional authority without direct electoral mandate, has taken central responsibility for preparing the country for elections. Its establishment followed mass movements that ended a long incumbency, and it was initially welcomed by segments of society seeking reform. However, issues have arisen related to constitutional legitimacy, political neutrality, and institutional distancing from established channels of democratic accountability.

Important contextual aspects include:

3.1.1. Democratic Inclusivity

The removal of a major political force risks undermining the representativeness of the electoral contest. Millions of citizens identify with the Awami League’s historical leadership and its central role in Bangladesh’s political landscape. Its absence diminishes the plurality of voices and limits meaningful choice.

3.1.2. Public Credibility and Participation

Data from recent public opinion reports show a desire for a competitive environment, but such results are contingent on genuinely inclusive elections.

3.1.3. Political Rhetoric and Dispute

The Awami League has actively rejected the current election schedule as illegitimate and biased, demanding that restrictions be lifted, so their participation is possible, and that the interim administration be replaced with a neutral caretaker government before elections.

3.1.4 Awami League's Suspension and Ban

As of late 2025, the Awami League, historically Bangladesh's dominant political party, remains banned and suspended from political activity and contestation by the Election Commission under interim arrangements.

3.1.5. Administration and Reform

The interim government initiated a July National Charter detailing extensive institutional reforms to governance, judiciary, anti-corruption mechanisms, and electoral systems; these reforms are politically contested and yet to be fully implemented.

3.1.6. Supreme Court Judgment

In November 2025: the Supreme Court reinstated the caretaker government mechanism, previously abolished, *but its application was restricted to elections beyond 2026, creating legal ambiguity and raising questions about the operationalization of constitutional protections.*

These developments illustrate a transition phase where exercises of power are legally and politically contested, complicating the authority and neutrality of transitional institutions. The credibility of the elections will partly hinge on how these transitional arrangements are perceived by political actors and the electorate.

3.2. Exclusion of Major Parties and Its Implications

Reports indicate episodes of political violence, including attacks on political figures and clashes in areas such as Gopalganj, Dhaka and other places, raising concerns about whether the security environment will deter free participation.

Broader civil liberties: freedom of association, speech, and press, influence electoral participation. Credible elections require that citizens and political actors can engage without fear of repression or censorship.

Deep political polarization, manifested in conflicting narratives about governance legitimacy and exclusionary politics, challenges the ability to conduct a consensus-based election. Widespread protests against the ban of the Awami League,

and movements advocating inclusive processes, reflect broader public unease.

Taken together, these factors illustrate the complex interplay of political, institutional, and societal conditions that will determine whether the 2026 elections enhance or weaken democratic legitimacy. The election can be transformative only if these structural risks are addressed through inclusive negotiations, institutional reforms, and guarantees of neutral administration.

The absence of major parties can reduce electoral competitiveness and popular engagement, leading to lower turnout, increased apathy, and questioning of mandate legitimacy. Moreover, international standards on credible elections emphasize that participation of principal political actors, including both government and opposition blocs, is fundamental to democratic choice and legitimacy.

3.3. Challenges to Credibility, Participation, and Institutional Trust

Credibility is not solely about holding a poll on a scheduled date; it depends on whether the process meets international norms of freeness, fairness, inclusivity, impartiality, and transparency. Several challenges in the context of Bangladesh's 2026 election reflect these dimensions:

3.3.1. Institutional Neutrality

The perception of impartiality of the Election Commission and interim authorities is central to electoral credibility. Pre-election assessments by organizations such as the International Republican Institute (IRI) and ANFREL have noted ongoing fragilities in institutional preparedness, political violence, and lingering distrust of local officials and security forces, highlighting areas requiring urgent attention to strengthen credibility.

3.3.2. The 2026 Elections Stand as a Critical Litmus Test for Bangladesh's Democratic Resilience

With the backdrop of political transformation, disputed institutional legitimacy, and exclusionary practices, the prospects for credible elections are both a challenge and a potential turning point. The ability of the process to uphold universal electoral standards, including meaningful participation of all major political actors, institutional impartiality, and secure civic space, will decisively influence Bangladesh's democratic trajectory and public confidence.

3.4. The Challenge of Establishing a Level Playing Field

Ensuring a level playing field remains one of the foremost challenges for the Interim Government in the lead-up to the February 2026 parliamentary elections. This challenge is particularly pronounced given the continued suspension of the

Awami League (AL) and the apparent preferential treatment extended to selected political actors. For the elections to be perceived as credible, this democratic benchmark must be upheld.

A level playing field in the electoral context refers to an environment where all political parties, candidates, and voters enjoy equal and fair opportunities to participate and compete. It requires the absence of undue advantages arising from state authority, media control, legal asymmetries, or financial superiority. In a nutshell its *core components* include the following:

- 1) Equal Media Access: All political entities must receive balanced coverage across both state-owned and private media platforms.
- 2) Neutral Administration: The Election Commission and all relevant public institutions must function impartially and transparently.
- 3) Equitable Campaigning Rights: Parties and candidates should be free to organize rallies, use campaign materials, and engage in digital outreach without arbitrary restrictions.
- 4) Protection from Intimidation: Voters, candidates, and campaign workers must be safeguarded from threats, violence, or coercion.
- 5) Transparent Campaign Financing: Finance laws must be applied uniformly, with no preferential access to state or private resources.
- 6) State Resource Neutrality: Incumbent authorities must not exploit public institutions, personnel, or funds for electoral gain.

The integrity of an electoral process is severely compromised in the absence of equal conditions for participation. When dominant parties benefit disproportionately through access to state machinery, legal instruments, or media control, the legitimacy of the outcome is called into question, and public trust in democracy erodes.

In the context of Bangladesh, recent electoral cycles have raised acute concerns over the lack of a level playing field, particularly due to:

- 1) Partisan deployment of law enforcement agencies;
- 2) Unequal access to media platforms;
- 3) Administrative actions leading to the exclusion or disqualification of key opposition parties;
- 4) Perceived bias within the Election Commission.

3.5. Timeframe and Electoral Preparedness

A credible electoral process also requires sufficient preparation time. Political parties must be allowed adequate space to conduct internal candidate selection, design and deploy campaign strategies, and meaningfully engage the electorate. The current timeline toward a February 2026 election, coupled with already fast-approaching nomination deadlines, risks compressing these essential processes. This raises legitimate concerns about whether the election schedule is designed to afford strategic advantage to select actors, undermining

broader democratic participation.

4. Bangladesh's Current Electoral Context

The election on 12 February 2026 will be the first since the political upheaval of August 2024, when widespread protests led to the end of the Awami League's rule and the formation of an interim government led by Muhammad Yunus.

Political actors must operate without fear of reprisal. However, ongoing polarization and instances of political violence, such as the shooting of political leader Osman Hadi, illustrate an insecure pre-poll environment.

Impartial and Independent Institutions

The Election Commission's neutrality is central. Yet, Bangladesh's electoral institutions have faced recurring allegations of partiality and past scandals, including mismanagement and misconduct, which have eroded trust.

Restoration of Constitutional Rights

For AL's participation to be meaningful, its leaders and supporters must be assured of equal legal status, including lifting bans, withdrawing politically motivated cases, and ensuring freedom of association.

The Case for Inclusive Participation

The Awami League's participation is essential for the electoral outcomes to reflect a broad political consensus. AL has historically commanded significant popular support; in the last competitive polls it contested, it led major victories, shaping national policy and governance. Removal of such a major actor invites questions about the representativeness of the electoral mandate.

Critics of the current schedule have argued that elections without AL would fail to reflect the will of a large segment of the electorate and risk precipitating political unrest. AL insists that lifting restrictions on its leaders, releasing political prisoners, and establishing a neutral caretaker government are preconditions for participating in the election, framing the present schedule as illegitimate. Without AL, voter turnout could suffer, and legitimacy might rest on procedural mechanics rather than substantive representation.

Institutional Trust and Electoral Reform

Independent assessments point to weaknesses in Bangladesh's governance scores. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's Global State of Democracy framework, Bangladesh has exhibited declines in representation and credible elections in recent years.

In response, the interim government established the National Consensus Commission, aiming to translate broad reform recommendations, including electoral and judicial reforms, into practice. Alongside this, international partners like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) are working with the Bangladesh Election Commission to strengthen capacity, civic education, and women's political participation, indicating global support for democratic norms.

The International Republican Institute (IRI) also underscored the fragile nature of the pre-election environment in its pre-election assessment mission, noting isolated violence, questionable neutrality of local officials, and lingering distrust as challenges that need addressing well before election day.

Transitional Mechanisms: Caretaker Government

Given the present impediments, some analysts argue that the President should exercise constitutional authority to install a truly neutral caretaker government to oversee electoral preparation. Such a mechanism could:

- 1) Temporarily transfer executive functions to non-partisan figures;
- 2) Oversee reconstitution of the Election Commission with respected, neutral appointees;
- 3) Facilitate the release or suspension of politically controversial cases to allow full participation; and
- 4) Provide breathing room for parties to prepare meaningfully.

The idea of caretaker governance is not novel in Bangladesh's history; it has been used in previous political transitions to enhance electoral credibility when sitting governments could not command trust from all stakeholders.

Risks of Proceeding Without Inclusivity

Proceeding with elections under current conditions risks:

- 1) Domestic instability, if significant portions of the populace feel disenfranchised;
- 2) International scrutiny, as credible observers may refuse to endorse a process lacking major party participation; and
- 3) Weak mandate for the incoming legislature, undermining long-term governance capacity.

Indeed, the Bangladesh Election Commission itself has described the upcoming polls as among the most "risky" in its history, acknowledging unpredictable challenges amid political uncertainty.

Systemic Constraints and Political Exclusion: The Roadblocks to a Participatory Electoral Process

Our research and observation have entailed us synthesize the empirical evidence, institutional assessments, and political context presented in earlier sections to derive core findings about Bangladesh's electoral readiness and democratic resilience. The analysis identifies structural deficits, institutional vulnerabilities, and political dynamics that collectively influence the credibility of the February 2026 election and broader democratic sustainability.

Institutional Gaps and Structural Deficits

A central finding of this study is that Bangladesh's electoral institutions, especially the BEC, exhibit persistent structural gaps that undermine public confidence and electoral integrity.

Legal and Constitutional Ambiguities

Although the 1972 Constitution and subsequent laws provide a foundation for electoral management, key provisions governing the independence, tenure, and neutrality of the BEC lack specificity and enforcement mechanisms. For example:

- 1) Appointment processes are not sufficiently insulated

from partisan influence, resulting in periodic allegations of bias.

- 2) The absence of a binding electoral code and detailed procedures for dispute resolution creates discretionary space that incumbents may exploit.

These ambiguities contrast with the experiences of other emerging democracies, for instance, Ghana and Kenya, where constitutional reforms explicitly delineating appointment mechanisms and institutional autonomy have bolstered electoral credibility.

Administrative Capacity Constraints

Empirical evidence indicates that while the BEC has made technical improvements (e.g., use of digital voter lists and training programs), administrative systems remain under-resourced and unevenly implemented at local levels. In past elections, irregularities in polling procedures, inconsistencies in voter lists, and ad hoc logistical failures were reported repeatedly by observers. These patterns reflect persistent capacity constraints that can exacerbate public distrust.

Institutional Trust Deficits

Data from public opinion surveys (e.g., Transparency International Bangladesh, 2023) show declining trust in electoral institutions. A majority of respondents expressed skepticism about the BEC's neutrality, particularly in politically charged contexts. Institutional trust is a predictor of democratic stability: when citizens lack confidence in electoral arbiters, the legitimacy of outcomes, regardless of procedural correctness, is weakened.

Institutional gaps are not merely technical; they have constitutional and political repercussions. Without rectifying these weaknesses, electoral processes risk perpetuating cyclical crises of legitimacy and eroding the social contract between citizens and the state.

Political Risks and Competitive Dynamics

A second major finding relates to political risks arising from restricted competition, limited inclusivity, and polarized party dynamics.

Exclusion of Major Parties and Mandate Legitimacy

The exclusion of the Awami League (AL), historically one of Bangladesh's principal political parties, from participation in the 2026 electoral process constitutes a critical blow to competitive pluralism. Political exclusion undermines representative legitimacy because:

- 1) It denies significant segments of the electorate the opportunity to express political preference through established party affiliations.
- 2) It decreases voter engagement and turnout, as evidenced by lower participation in past boycotted elections (e.g., 2014), which were widely seen as lacking competitiveness.

Political science literature emphasizes that legitimacy depends not just on the presence of elections but on meaningful competition, a concept rooted in Dahl's (1971) theory of "polyarchy". When key actors are excluded, the "electoral realm" no longer reflects the full spectrum of political choice.

Uneven Level Playing Field

Political competitiveness also hinges on equal access to campaign resources, media platforms, public forums, and security protections. In Bangladesh's current context:

- 1) Restrictions on assembly and speech have been documented by civil society and international monitors.
- 2) Uneven media coverage, especially by state-aligned outlets, advantages certain political actors over others.
- 3) Administrative controls (e.g., issuance of permits, policing of rallies) have been deployed in ways perceived as asymmetrical.

These patterns jeopardize the fundamental fairness of the electoral contest and increase the likelihood of grievances, post-electoral disputes, and de-legitimization of results.

Polarization and Public Protest Dynamics

Political polarization, the accentuation of ideological divides and mutual distrust, increases systemic fragility. In Bangladesh:

- 1) Public protests against party exclusions have been widespread, reflecting grassroots discontent with top-down electoral scheduling.
- 2) Social media analytics demonstrate heightened partisan sentiment and fragmentation, often correlating with offline mobilization.

In fact, high polarization, absent robust institutional mediation, correlates with lower effectiveness of democratic conflict resolution and increased risks of instability.

Public Trust, Participation, and Democratic Legitimacy

A third key finding relates to the complex interplay between public trust, participation rates, and overall democratic legitimacy.

Voter Engagement and Perceived Efficacy

International election observation missions serve multiple functions: they assess procedural adherence, signal confidence (or lack thereof), and provide comparative benchmarks. In contexts where elections are contested domestically, credible international assessment can either reinforce legitimacy or substantiate concerns. Bangladesh's relative absence of comprehensive early observer agreements for 2026 has generated unease among partners who traditionally support democratic processes.

Democratic legitimacy arises from both the supply side (institutional integrity and fairness) and the demand side (citizen trust and participation). When either is eroded, democratic governance is weakened.

Integrated Analysis: Interdependencies and Risks

The findings above are interdependent:

- 1) Institutional gaps feed political distrust, which in turn depresses public participation.
- 2) Exclusionary politics amplify polarization, which intensifies skepticism about election integrity.
- 3) Eroded civic space constrains public agency, limiting the depth of democratic engagement.

Together, these dynamics pose systemic risks: low turnout,

contested results, heightened post-electoral conflict, and attrition of Bangladesh's hard-earned democratic capital. Democratic legitimacy is intimately tied to whether citizens believe their participation matters. When elections are perceived as predetermined or exclusionary:

- 1) Turnout declines, as seen in multiple regional and global contexts where institutional trust is low.
- 2) Political alienation increases, especially among youth populations and marginalized groups.

In Bangladesh, a proportion of the electorate has expressed skepticism about whether elections under current conditions would influence governance outcomes meaningfully. This phenomenon undermines the very foundation of participatory democracy.

Civic Space and Media Freedom

A robust civic space, where civil society, independent media, and public dialogue thrive, is a prerequisite for informed participation. Declines in press freedom rankings and documented pressure on civic actors translate into information deficits and reduced capacity for citizens to make informed choices.

International Perception and External Validation

In an increasingly interconnected world, national elections are not judged solely by domestic standards. International perception plays a crucial role in shaping how electoral processes are viewed, both by a country's own citizens and by the global community. For Bangladesh, the February 2026 elections are under close watch, as past electoral controversies have drawn international scrutiny.

Why International Perception Matters?

Legitimacy and Recognition

- 1) When elections are perceived as credible by international actors, including the United Nations, Commonwealth, EU, regional organizations (like SAARC), and major development partners, they confer external legitimacy on the resulting government.
- 2) Conversely, widespread international criticism, especially from trusted institutions like the EU or Commonwealth observers, can weaken a regime's credibility abroad and at home.

Aid, Trade, and Diplomacy

- 3) Bangladesh remains heavily reliant on foreign trade, aid, and diplomatic goodwill. Donor confidence is often linked to governance indicators, including political stability and democratic integrity.
- 4) A flawed or exclusionary election could lead to reduced international support, stricter diplomatic engagement, or even sanctions in extreme cases (as seen in Myanmar or Zimbabwe).

Investor Confidence and Economic Implications

Political instability or contested elections deter foreign direct investment (FDI). A report by UNCTAD (2023) noted that perceptions of governance risk are now a top concern for investors in South Asia. Bangladesh, with ambitions to be-

come a higher-middle-income country by 2031, must therefore project electoral stability to retain economic momentum.

Role of International Observers

Election Observation Missions (EOMs) from organizations like the European Union, Commonwealth, Carter Center, and Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) typically assess:

- 1) Compliance with international standards.
- 2) Political environment and inclusivity.
- 3) Administrative transparency and dispute resolution mechanisms.

Bangladesh's past elections (e.g., 2014, 2018) received limited or critical observation reports, contributing to questions over legitimacy. For 2026, concerns persist due to absence of formal invitation to observers till late in the process, and restrictive laws limiting foreign access to polling stations. On the other hand exclusion of major parties could reduce observer presence or affect their ability to assess competitiveness.

The Risks of Negative Validation

If international observers declare the 2026 elections non-compliant with core democratic standards, especially regarding inclusivity and freedom, it could:

- 1) Undermine the credibility of the incoming government.
- 2) Fuel internal political unrest.
- 3) Deter development partnerships and external investments.

Bangladesh's election is not merely a domestic event, but a global signal of its commitment to democratic norms. Ensuring transparency, inclusion, and fairness is therefore not just a matter of internal integrity, but of international consequence. Engaging observers early, addressing structural flaws, and allowing full participation of all major actors is essential to secure both domestic trust and international validation.

Conclusion: Resetting Bangladesh's Democratic Trajectory

The February 2026 parliamentary elections stand as a critical turning point in Bangladesh's democratic evolution. After decades of electoral turbulence, political polarization, and institutional erosion, the upcoming elections offer either a pathway to renewed democratic legitimacy or the risk of further entrenching authoritarian drift and civic distrust. This paper has examined the conceptual, structural, and procedural dimensions of electoral integrity in Bangladesh, with particular focus on participation, inclusion, fairness, freedom, impartiality, and credibility. All these remain imperatives for sustainable democratic governance in this country.

The exclusion of major political actors, especially the Awami League, from the electoral process under the current interim government raises profound questions of legitimacy. An election where one of the two dominant political forces is absent or barred cannot be deemed genuinely participatory or representative. Likewise, an Election Commission lacking public confidence, operating without legal and institutional safeguards, cannot credibly administer a contest that reflects the will of the people.

Evidence from international norms, comparative electoral frameworks, and historical precedents all affirm one central

truth: democracy thrives only when citizens trust the process. When that trust erodes, so does the legitimacy of governance. This trust cannot be manufactured through rhetoric or post-election justification. It must be built through transparent systems, legal clarity, institutional neutrality, and genuine political pluralism.

The analysis has shown that Bangladesh has a rich electoral heritage, yet one that has been repeatedly compromised by manipulation, political violence, and institutional capture. If the 2026 elections follow the same path, prioritizing expedience over equity, consolidation over competition, then the long-term democratic project of Bangladesh may suffer irreparable damage.

This moment, therefore, demands political courage, constitutional clarity, and a renewed national consensus on electoral integrity. The solutions, including reconstituting the BEC, ensuring a level playing field, expanding civil liberties, and potentially instituting a neutral caretaker administration, are within constitutional and practical reach, but require urgent action.

Only through such bold, inclusive, and principled steps can Bangladesh reset its democratic compass and reclaim the spirit of participatory governance that inspired its birth as a nation.

Recommendations: Building a Sustainable Electoral Future for Bangladesh

To address the democratic crisis and ensure a credible, participatory, and inclusive election in 2026 and beyond, the following enhanced and actionable recommendations are proposed. These are organized across institutional, legal, and political dimensions to enable immediate, mid-term, and long-term reforms.

1) Institutional Reforms

Reconstitution of the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC):

Appoint a new, neutral, and trusted Commission through an all-party consultative process, potentially overseen by an independent Search Committee with civil society representation.

Revise the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Appointment Act (2022) to introduce transparency, checks, and eligibility criteria based on integrity and non-partisanship.

Strengthening BEC Capacity and Autonomy:

Ensure BEC financial independence by placing its budget outside direct executive control.

Provide it with full authority over electoral security, logistics, and technology deployment.

Institutionalize training, monitoring, and accountability of returning officers and electoral staff.

Transparent Voter List and Digital Infrastructure:

Update the voter list with biometric verification and *independent audits*.

Strengthen cybersecurity of electoral systems to prevent digital manipulation.

2) Legal and Constitutional Reforms

Restoration or Reinvention of Caretaker Government Mechanism:

Consider a neutral election-time government framework for February 2026 Elections.

Define clear powers and limits to such a mechanism, avoiding past abuses while preserving fairness.

3) Legal Safeguards for Political Participation

Repeal or revise laws used to arbitrarily ban, silence or harass opposition parties and leaders (e.g., under the Special Powers Act).

Ensure equal access to public venues, media, and electoral funding for all parties.

4) Judiciary and Law Enforcement Accountability

Protect judicial independence in electoral litigation and ensure non-partisan behavior of police and security forces.

Establish a judicial electoral complaints mechanism with binding powers.

5) Political and Civic Engagement

Political Dialogue and National Consensus Building:

Convene a multi-party roundtable under the President or a trusted mediator (domestic or international) to negotiate a path forward, especially on election-time governance and EC reform.

Include civil society, women's groups, youth, and minorities in this process.

Voter Awareness and Media Freedom:

Launch a nationwide voter education campaign on rights, procedures, and anti-disinformation awareness.

Guarantee media freedom and pluralism, including the right of opposition to access state media equally.

International Engagement and Monitoring:

Invite international observers and electoral assistance missions from credible multilateral and regional bodies (UN, EU, Commonwealth, OIC).

Implement international recommendations from prior electoral cycles.

6) Cross-cutting Recommendation

Establish a National Electoral Reform Commission post-2026 elections with cross-party and civic representation to design future-proof reforms.

These recommendations are not only technically feasible but politically necessary. Without their timely implementation, the February 2026 elections may risk becoming a symbol of democratic failure rather than renewal. Their adoption could restore trust, enhance legitimacy, and place Bangladesh firmly back on the path of democratic consolidation.

Abbreviations

AL	Awami League
ANFREL	Asian Network for Free Elections
BEC	Bangladesh Election Commission
EC	Election Commission
EOMS	Election Observation Missions
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union

IRI	International Republican Institute
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Author Contributions

Zahurul Alam is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Riaz, A. (2016). Democratic challenges in Bangladesh. *Journal of South Asian Studies*.
- [2] International Crisis Group. (2018). Bangladesh's Political Crisis.
- [3] Levitsky, S., & Way, L. (2010). *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Diamond, L. (2008). *The Spirit of Democracy*.
- [5] UNDP. (2019). *Democracy and Electoral Governance*. United Nations Development Programme.
- [6] OSCE/ODIHR. (2003). *Election Observation Handbook*. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.
- [7] IPU. (2006). *Democracy and Electoral Standards*. Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- [8] Schedler, A. (2002). Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation. *Journal of Democracy*.
- [9] Elklit, J., & Reynolds, A. (2005). A Framework for the Systematic Study of Election Quality. *Democratization*.
- [10] Norris, P. (2014). *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*. Cambridge University Press.
- [11] IDEA. (2021). *Electoral Participation*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- [12] Diamond, L., & Morlino, L. (2005). Assessing the Quality of Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*.
- [13] UN Women. (2019). *Women's Political Participation*.

- [14] ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. (2020). Electoral Integrity and Election Management Bodies.
- [15] Kumar, K. (1998). Postconflict elections, democratization, and international assistance. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- [16] International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). (2016). International Electoral Standards: Guidelines for reviewing the legal framework of elections. International IDEA.
- [17] UN. (2005). Principles for Election Management. United Nations.
- [18] European Commission. (2022). Electoral Inclusivity Report.
- [19] Reilly, B. (2002). Electoral Systems for Divided Societies. *Journal of Democracy*.
- [20] Freedom House. (2023). Freedom in the World 2023: Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy.
- [21] OSCE/ODIHR. (2014). Handbook for the Observation of Election Dispute Resolution. Warsaw: Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.
- [22] Reilly, B. (2002). Post-Conflict Elections: Constraints and Dangers. *International Peacekeeping*, 9(2), 118-139.
- [23] Andreas Schedler, Elections Without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulation, *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 2002.