

Bangladesh between Engineered Elections and Geopolitical Realignment

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Dear friends,

The 2026 elections in Bangladesh have ignited considerable debate. While segments of the middle and upper-middle classes lauded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) symbolic triumph over Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI), the election was markedly more complex than a routine political event. It has raised profound questions concerning the evolving political landscape, referred to as a 'new settlement', within Bangladesh.

The election underscored a second phase in the nation's political development: it effectively served as a referendum on proposed constitutional reforms that have the capacity to modify Bangladesh's fundamental identity and its secular character by revising the principles established after the 1971 Liberation War.

The regime change in July 2024 was not merely a response to the absence of democracy but a strategic realignment of the state to fulfil the objectives of the grand imperial project, global capital, and geopolitical strategy. The interim government initiated the 'reset button' under the guise of reforms and the **July Charter**.

Any substantive analysis of Bangladesh's political crisis must take into account militarisation, political Islam, the influence of geopolitics within the framework of neoliberal capitalism, and the class question – especially pertaining to the economic demands and struggles of the labouring populations seeking emancipation from exploitation.

Election Engineering through the State Apparatuses

Election engineering becomes possible when state institutions are politically embedded and lack operational independence. In 2026, election engineering occurred on a massive scale. Administrative neutrality was frequently questioned because the independence of the police and law enforcement agencies remained contested.

The entire police force collapsed during the July political regime change, as police stations were attacked and police officials were killed. Subsequently, the recruitment process under the interim government supported the appointment of individuals ideologically aligned with its mandate to structure the July Reform.

The Election Commission, although constitutionally autonomous, operated within a framework in which appointments, promotions, and institutional authority were influenced by partisan considerations organised

primarily by the two main political parties, the BNP and BJI. The secular-nationalist Awami League was not allowed to participate in the election.

Electoral crises and political dynamics were carefully engineered by development apparatuses, including NGOs and the civil bureaucracy, that built Bangladesh's state. Industrial expansion under private ownership from 1975 to 1990, under military regimes, laid the foundation. Subsequently, the 'NGOisation' of development under democratic governments embedded civil society alongside state power in governance.



Joydeb Roaja, Go back to Roots, n.d.

Depoliticising Democracy through the ‘Minus Two’ Formula

Another mode of pre-election engineering is the ‘minus two’ formula, aimed at depoliticising politics by sidelining Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, leaders of Bangladesh’s two main political parties – the Awami League and BNP, respectively. Instead, the 2024 caretaker government promoted anti-corruption rhetoric and good governance, positioning Muhammad Yunus – a pioneer of microfinance and winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize – as a capable political leader during the state of emergency.

This project was mobilised by NGOs, donor-backed civil society organisations, and corporate media. Paradoxically, the leadership of two leading NGOs, BRAC (which became a transnational NGO because of its intense involvement in Afghanistan), founded by Fazle Hasan Abed, and Grameen Bank, founded by Muhammad Yunus, are deeply embedded in family power networks. Yunus was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 and Abed was knighted by the British Crown in 2010.

The State Department’s annual human rights **reports** on Bangladesh consistently framed the Hasina government in terms of democratic deficits, providing international cover for the transition. Equally significant was the blocking of Bangladesh’s BRICS membership bid, which would have reduced its dependence on IMF conditionalities – a trajectory that ran directly counter to US strategic interests in the region.

Seen this way, the ‘minus two’ formula is less a reform than a structural intervention. It exposes patron-client NGO networks that drive market reforms and global integration, on the one hand, and, on the other, validates technocratic governance by depoliticising real politics.



Quamrul Hassan, Untitled, n.d.

Political Transition and the Legitimisation of Fundamentalism

Since 1975, Bangladesh's political economy has been shaped by neoliberal restructuring and strategic alignment with global power structures. Political Islam and military influence have become central to state formation, prefiguring contemporary tensions. From 2024–2026, the imperialist project leveraged opposition to the Awami League as part of a strategy to normalise the religious fundamentalist BJI.

Different social groups – the urban educated middle class, the rural and urban working poor, and Islamist political factions historically linked to the defeated forces of 1971 – expressed dissatisfaction with the governance of the Awami League regime in ways that reflected their societal positions. The urban middle class articulated discontent through liberal political frameworks. Concerns over corruption, institutional inefficiency, graduate unemployment, banking irregularities, and mega-project mismanagement intensified frustration. Lack of transparency in recruitment and promotion, coupled with restrictions on freedom of expression, further fuelled resentment. Many middle-class actors are also beneficiaries of Bangladesh's NGO-centred political economy. During the July–August 2024 mobilisations, segments of civil society, NGOs, and the intelligentsia acted, in part, from this class position.

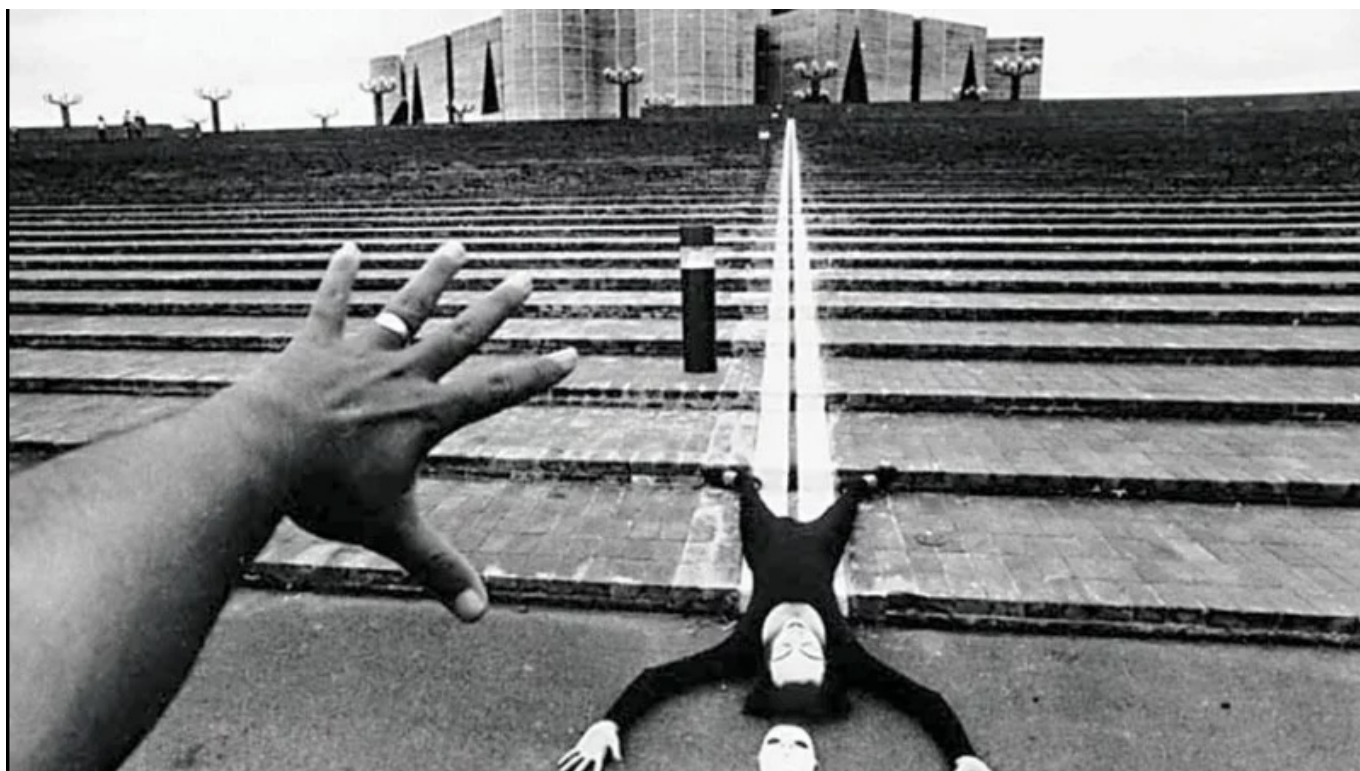
Bangladesh's electoral politics is dominated by majoritarian factions. The Muslim majority, socially and ideologically shaped by Islam, regards faith as central to identity, a dynamic reinforced by political Islam. For decades, political Islam has intersected with civil society networks, partly due to substantial funding to NGOs from USAID and West Asian sources. Meanwhile, sections of zakat and charitable contributions have supported educational expansion through madrasas. Currently, approximately one in three children attend a madrasa, and over the past three decades, the number of such institutions has increased nearly eightfold.

The rehabilitation of BJI was not incidental to this process but central to it. The emergence of Bangladesh was rooted in Cold War anti-colonial movements. The 1972 Constitution and formation of the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League marked a shift to secularism and state-centred socialism.

BJI has a documented history of opposing the 1971 Liberation War, and the party was deregistered in 2013 following a Bangladesh High Court ruling that its charter violated the constitutional principle of secularism. Several of its leaders were convicted by the International Crimes Tribunal for atrocities committed in 1971.

The 2024 transition reversed this: BJI was re-registered and permitted to contest the 2026 elections, and the constitutional reform process has now revised the secular character of the state that was established after 1971. The strategic logic here is not ideological alignment with political Islam but instrumental calculation. A 'moderate Islamic state' with BJI as a legitimate political actor serves US regional interests more reliably than a secular-nationalist government with independent developmental ambitions and deepening military ties with China.

The delegitimisation of the Awami League through anti-corruption rhetoric created a political vacuum that BJI, with its organised base in madrasa networks and Gulf-funded civil society, was well positioned to occupy. The 2024 regime change has therefore elevated BJI as an effective and legitimate political party, opening the door to reshaping Bangladesh as a 'moderate Islamic state'.



Anwar Hossain (Bangladesh), *Bangladeshi mime artist Partha Pratim Majumder performing in front of the National Parliament House / Jatiyo Sangsad Bhaban, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, 1985.*

Geopolitical Realignment and the Indo-Pacific Context

Bangladesh occupies a critical geopolitical position. Bordering Myanmar, the country faces a humanitarian crisis involving nearly one million refugees, further complicated by ongoing insurgencies between the Arakan Army and Myanmar's government.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has made significant inroads in Bangladesh. Through the BRI, and under the Hasina government, Bangladesh independently constructed the Padma Bridge Rail Link Project connecting Dhaka to Jessore, challenging the World Bank and, indirectly, the United States.

According to **SIPRI**, China supplied roughly 72% of Bangladesh's arms from 2019 to 2023, making it the second-largest global recipient of Chinese weapons. In May 2024, Bangladesh and China conducted their first joint military exercise, 'Golden Friendship 2024', focused on UN peacekeeping and counter-terrorism, alongside a deal to establish a drone manufacturing plant.

The Hasina government demonstrated a capacity to negotiate sustained development through calibrated military partnerships and regional diplomacy. Access to material and financial support from BRICS would have further strengthened Bangladesh's position, enabling it to sustain growth and secure more favourable terms with the IMF. However, Bangladesh's inclusion in BRICS was effectively blocked by United States geopolitical strategy in the region.



Zainul Abedin, Muktijuddho, n.d.

Sidelining of the Workers and Peasants

Peasants and workers were largely absent from the 2024 regime change. Trapped between the formal and informal sectors, they gain media attention only when they occupy streets to protest factory closures and face police violence, or when climate displacement forces them to be trafficked and to undertake dangerous migration, such as crossing the Mediterranean from Libya or Tunisia to Europe. This absence was not accidental.

The political transformation of 2024 was structured around the demands of the urban middle class and organised political Islam, not the labouring majority. The case of the port workers makes this concrete. On 8 February, five Chittagong port workers were detained for protesting the interim government's decision to lease the port terminal to DP World, a Dubai-based logistics corporation with extensive ties to Gulf capital and Western financial networks. Ten days after the election, they remain detained with no political response from the parties that claimed to represent democratic change. Their protest was not about abstract democratic principles; it was about who controls Bangladesh's public assets and in whose interest. That question is precisely what the 'new settlement' was designed to foreclose.

Warmly,

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