



Bangladesh Elections

February 2019

Background

General elections were held in Bangladesh on 30 December 2018 to elect members of the Jatiya Sangsad, often referred to simply as the Sangsad or JS and also known as the House of the Nation, the supreme legislative body of Bangladesh. The current parliament of Bangladesh contains 350 seats, including 50 seats reserved for women. Elections are held every five years unless the parliament is dissolved before that time.

The result of the 2018 election was a landslide victory for the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina. The elections were marred by violence and claims of vote rigging. Opposition leader Kamal Hossain rejected the results, calling it "farical" and demanding fresh elections to be held under a neutral government. The Bangladesh Election Commission said it would investigate reported vote-rigging allegations from "across the country." The election saw the use of electronic voting machines for the first time.

The previous general elections in January 2014 were boycotted by the main opposition alliance, led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and three-time former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. As a result, the Awami League led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina won a landslide victory, taking 234 of the 300 seats in an election that saw 153 seats uncontested. Preliminary results for the 2018 election indicate a that the Awami League led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina now have control of 288 of the 300 seats.

Concerns Expressed Prior to Election Day

The United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures – December 22, 2018

- UN experts have expressed alarm about political violence, restrictions on freedom of expression and the rise of religious fundamentalism in Bangladesh ahead of general elections on 30 December.
- "In the run-up to the vote, religious minorities, especially Hindus, fear renewed targeting," said the experts. "Unfortunately, these fears have a strong basis," they said, adding reports indicate that around 380 members of minority groups have been attacked in the first half of 2018.
- Security forces have reportedly arrested and intimidated opposition figures and dissenting voices, the experts said. Members and supporters of opposition parties have been arrested, killed and disappeared. Reports state that supporters of the ruling party were involved in some of the incidents. "Even one of the Election Commissioners has expressed the view that he does not believe there is any level playing field at all in this election," they said.

U.S. State Department – December 21, 2018

Robert Palladino, Deputy Spokesperson – U.S. Department of State – issued the following press statement prior to the election in Bangladesh:

*The United States is disappointed by the Government of Bangladesh's inability to grant credentials and issue visas within the timeframe **necessary to conduct a credible international monitoring mission to the majority of international election monitors from the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)**, which the United States funded through the National Democratic Institute. As a result, **ANFREL was forced to cancel its observation mission for the December 30 national election**. The lack of an international observation mission makes it even more important for the Government of Bangladesh to complete the accreditation of all the local NGOs that constitute the Election Working Group, which includes some funded by USAID, so they can conduct the vital work of monitoring the election.*

***In the lead up to any democratic election there must be space for peaceful expression and assembly; for independent media to do its job covering electoral developments; for participants to have access to information; and for all individuals to be able to partake in the electoral process without harassment, intimidation, or violence.** We encourage the Government of Bangladesh to uphold its commitment to a democratic process by ensuring all Bangladeshis are free to peacefully express themselves and participate in December 30 election.*

Concerns With Elections

- Between December 9 and 12, 2018, 47 incidences of violence were reported, in which eight people were killed and 560 were injured.
- According to the BNP Office, as of 26 December 2018, at least 12,923 people (mostly BNP, Jatiya Oikya Front and 18 Party Alliance activists) had been injured in 2,833 attacks on opposition candidates.
- Between November 8th and December 25th at least 1,574 cases were filed against BNP officials in different districts.
- During the same period, 15,568 activists were arrested. According to The Daily Star, at least 56 candidates, mostly from the BNP, were attacked, with around 1,190 people injured and over 800 BNP-Jamaat officials were arrested between December 10 and 28.
- On December 29th, the day before the elections, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission suspended 3G and 4G connections across the country until after the elections.

On January 3, 2019, Human Rights Watch stated that

An independent and impartial commission should investigate the serious allegations of abuses in the Bangladesh elections, Human Rights Watch said today. The allegations include attacks on opposition party members, voter intimidation, vote rigging, and partisan behavior by election officials in the pre-election period and on election day.

After a campaign marred by violence, mass arrests of the opposition, and a crackdown on free speech, the election commission announced that the ruling Awami League won the December 30, 2018 election, returning Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to a third consecutive term, with the ruling party winning 288 of the 298 parliamentary seats contested. The prime minister said the election was "free and fair," while the opposition described the election as farcical.

On February 12, 2019, The House Committee on Foreign Affairs made an inquiry to Secretary Pompeo on the Bangladesh Elections

Representative Eliot L. Engel, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs; Representative Michael T. McCaul (R-TX), the Committee's Ranking Member; Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA), the Chairman of the Asia and Pacific Subcommittee; Rep. Ted Yoho (R-FL), the Ranking Member of the Asia and Pacific Subcommittee; Rep. Andy Levin (D-MI); and Rep. Ann Wagner (R-MO) called on the Trump Administration to address threats to democracy in Bangladesh with the following letter:

We are gravely concerned by the negative trajectory of democracy in Bangladesh and request an outline of how the Department intends to respond to this trend, particularly in light of serious allegations that the outcome of the December 2018 elections lacked credibility. As you know, supporting democracy, rule of law, and human rights in the Indo-Pacific region is critical to advancing U.S. interests, and reports of widespread irregularities in Bangladesh's recent elections seriously threaten those important interests.

Bangladesh has a strong and proud democratic tradition, so we were particularly dismayed that the campaign leading up to the election was marred by violence, mass arrests, and a crackdown on free speech. The Awami League claimed 96 percent of the seats contested -- more than the party and its allies won in 2014, when a key opposition party boycotted the general election and the Awami League ran unopposed in more than half of the seats contested.

Although the government-appointed election commission has claimed the election was legitimate, we believe the allegations of widespread rigging and voter suppression must be taken seriously. According to press accounts, when polls across the country officially opened, reporters found that some ballot boxes looked suspiciously full. There are reports that Awami League activists barred some people from voting, claiming that the polling stations were closed for lunch or had run out of ballots. Some voters were even told their votes had already been cast. To make matters worse, the Government of Bangladesh failed to grant credentials and issue visas to most international election monitors, including those funded by the United States.

There will be a series of elections taking place this year in Asia, including in Afghanistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. It is crucial that the United States demonstrate its continued commitment to and respect for democratic institutions, beginning with Bangladesh.

Appropriations Strategy – FY2020

Potential Report Language Request

The Committee wants to commend Bangladesh for the role they have played in addressing the Rohingya refugee crisis. However, the committee remains concerned over the fact that space for open, democratic dialogue in Bangladesh appears to have diminished due to a combination of government action and targeted, extremist attacks. More importantly, during the period of time leading up to the 2018 National Elections in Bangladesh, serious allegations of abuses were reported, including attacks on opposition party members, voter intimidation, vote rigging, and partisan behavior by election officials in the pre-election period and on election day.

The Department and USAID are directed to provide the Committee with a full report on attacks on opposition party members, voter intimidation, vote rigging, and partisan behavior by election officials in the pre-election period and on election day during the Bangladeshi national elections in December 2018, and the impact of USAID programs to support open democratic processes, human rights, and a holistic approach to counter violent extremism (CVE) in Bangladesh within 120 days of enactment of this legislation.

Contact Information

John Ariale, Principal
Husch Blackwell Strategies
202-236-4835
jariale@hbstrategies.us