

## **A Year After Bangladesh's Uprising: Fragmented Politics and Disunity**

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### **Summary**

*The July 2024 uprising marked a turning point for Bangladesh. It became a chance to reckon with the legacy of Sheikh Hasina's long and divisive rule and to usher in a new political and social order grounded in consensus and solidarity. However, the political situation post-revolution has become more polarised and fragmented. Key political actors continue to prioritise short-term interests over inter-party cooperation. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which is in a position of strength, appears intent on leveraging anti-incumbency by seeking political power over systemic reforms. Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizen Party are prioritising reforms and campaigning to consolidate greater support. The Awami League, while sidelined, has continued its activities in other ways to mobilise supporters and remain politically relevant. For now, the fragmented and chaotic political arena looks likely to continue.*

Bangladesh's July 2024 uprising was a pivotal moment in the country's legacy of citizen mobilisation. The movement showcased how a decentralised and youth-led movement can alter the trajectory of national politics, reshape the country's political landscape and set the terms of political debate.<sup>1</sup> Although it started in opposition to the quota issue, it eventually drew large numbers of people, particularly from 'Generation Z', who mobilised against the state's brutal response to the demonstrations.<sup>2</sup> That anger and resentment against then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's rule had been steadily building was clear. It was also fuelled by economic hardship and the perception that the country's growth had been uneven, exclusionary and disconnected from the everyday realities of much of the population.<sup>3</sup>

The uprising, moreover, laid bare the flaws of the existing political and socio-economic order by casting them in moral terms and promoting a collective stake to democracy. Through their expression of dissent, protesters sought to demonstrate that democracy is not a singular or monolithic entity confined to those in power. The scale of what was achieved reflected both the determination of the youth to challenge the status quo and the capacity of collective action to disrupt entrenched (authoritarian) political structures.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shamsuddoza Sajen, 'August 03, 2024: A nation united under one demand', *The Daily Star*, 4 August 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/the-july-rocked-bangladesh/news/august-03-2024-nation-united-under-one-demand-3953981>.

<sup>2</sup> Ali Riaz, 'Bangladesh student protests are more than about reducing public service job quotas', *Benar News*, 17 July 2024, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/more-to-mass-protests-than-quotas-07172024190156.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Alex Travelli and Shayeza Walid, 'How a country's economy was siphoned dry', *The New York Times*, 4 December 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/04/business/bangladesh-banks.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Maisha Islam Monamee, 'How the July revolution reshaped Bangladesh's youth', *The Daily Star*, 20 February 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/anniversary-supplement-2025/future-forged-youth-the-helm/news/how-the-july-revolution-reshaped-bangladeshs-youth-3827031>.

An interim government under the leadership of Dr Muhammad Yunus was set up on 7 August 2024 to be in charge during the transition period until polls are held.<sup>5</sup> The government was also given the task of introducing a robust reform agenda and preparing the ground for elections.<sup>6</sup> While the regime received broad-based support in its early days, the enthusiasm and aspiration for transformative change appears to have faded. Instead, the country now faces uncertainty, political fragmentation and instability.

## Political Inexperience Hinders Reform Efforts

The Yunus-led interim government was established with a mandate to implement urgent reforms and oversee free and fair elections.<sup>7</sup> For the students who led the uprising, this administration was expected to confront the country's deeply politicised and dysfunctional institutions in order to prevent a return to the entrenched practices of the past. At the same time, however, the legitimacy of an unelected regime undertaking such far-reaching reforms remained a subject of contention.

It was in this context that Yunus stated in his national address in September 2024, "We seek reforms. Our sincere request is that you not retreat to the spectators' gallery after entrusting us with the heavy responsibility of reforms. Stay with us. We will reform together. It is everyone's responsibility. Bring reform to your own field."<sup>8</sup>

Widely recognised for pioneering microfinance and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, Yunus brought with him international credibility and the image of a reform-minded technocrat.<sup>9</sup> His long-standing rivalry with the Awami League meant that his appointment was also politically charged and a break from dynastic politics in the country. Within weeks, Yunus announced the creation of six reform commissions (which increased to 11) that would tackle chronic weaknesses in governance, including the judiciary, election system, police, public administration, anti-corruption mechanisms and the constitution.<sup>10</sup> The inclusion of international bodies, such as the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, alongside domestic experts reflected an effort to anchor the process in both local knowledge and global expertise. These initiatives were widely viewed as an attempt to confront the institutional decay that many associated with the democratic backsliding of the Hasina years.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Samira Hussain and Flora Drury, 'Yunus sworn in as interim Bangladesh leader', *BBC*, 8 August 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyg7we8xvno>.

<sup>6</sup> 'A new era in Bangladesh? The first hundred days of reform', International Crisis Group, 14 November 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/bangladesh/344-new-era-bangladesh-first-hundred-days-reform>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Staff Correspondent, 'Yunus charts a path to reforms', *The Daily Star*, 12 September 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/yunus-charts-path-reforms-3700751>.

<sup>9</sup> 'Muhammad Yunus', The Nobel Prize 2006, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2006/yunus/facts/>.

<sup>10</sup> Wahiduzzaman Noor, 'One year after the Revolution: Reform, Reconciliation, and the Road Ahead for Bangladesh', *South Asian Voices*, 6 August 2025, <https://southasianvoices.org/pol-m-bd-n-bangladesh-reform-reconciliation-08-06-2025/>.

<sup>11</sup> 'After the Monsoon Revolution: Roadmap to lasting security sector reform in Bangladesh', *Human Rights Watch*, 27 January 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/01/27/after-monsoon-revolution/roadmap-lasting-security-sector-reform-bangladesh>.

However, the commissions quickly ran into obstacles. Their membership was criticised for lacking diversity, being dominated by Bengali Muslim men, which undermined claims of broad-based legitimacy and representation.<sup>12</sup> More significantly, while their reports produced detailed recommendations, none have been formally adopted. Instead of becoming a foundation for political renewal, the commissions now symbolise the challenges of translating ambitious proposals into durable change.<sup>13</sup>

Expectations from the interim government to introduce structural reforms, including political and constitutional changes, greater accountability, restoration of the rule of law and democracy, tackling corruption and judicial independence, have largely not been met. This setback reflected the interim government's limited authority as an unelected transitional administration and the difficulty of achieving cooperation in a fractured political environment.<sup>14</sup> Its lack of political experience, especially when navigating entrenched party interests, has complicated efforts to build consensus for reform.<sup>15</sup>

## Increased Polarisation and Lack of Consensus

The unity that emerged among various political actors during the uprising against the Awami League has largely fragmented in the aftermath of August 2024. This has left little common ground for building consensus or maintaining inter-party cooperation on foundational issues concerning the structure of the state and the set-up of the electoral and political process. Issues such as proportional representation, reducing prime ministerial terms, or establishing a National Constitutional Council to manage appointments initiated by the National Consensus Commission (NCC), have become sources of polarisation.<sup>16</sup>

Under Hasina, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami were systematically targeted through corruption allegations, legal proceedings and mass arrests, with several prominent members receiving high-profile convictions aimed at weakening their organisational capacity.<sup>17</sup> Both parties are now seeking to regain political ground by expanding their influence and securing their strategic interests.<sup>18</sup> The shifting political

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<sup>12</sup> 'Ensure diversity in the reform commissions', *The Daily Star*, 25 October 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/editorial/news/ensure-diversity-the-reform-commissions-3736201>.

<sup>13</sup> Nural Amin, '47 recommendations to reinforce ACC', *Prothom Alo*, 16 January 2025, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/h92ersiyyb>.

<sup>14</sup> Sreeradha Datta, 'From uprising to uncertainty: Bangladesh's fragile transition to stability', ISAS Brief No. 1273, 18 August 2025, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/from-uprising-to-uncertainty-bangladeshs-fragile-transition-to-stability/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> TBS Report, 'Political parties express dissatisfaction over Consensus Commission discussions', *The Business Standard*, 23 June 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/politics/political-parties-express-dissatisfaction-over-consensus-commission-discussions>.

<sup>17</sup> 'Bangladesh opposition leaders held before anti-government rally', *Al Jazeera*, 9 December 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/9/top-bangladesh-opposition-leaders-among-hundreds-arrested>.

<sup>18</sup> The Awami League has been sidelined through a ban on all its activities under the amended Anti-Terrorist Act until the pending proceedings on alleged war crimes committed by the party are not completed by the International Crimes Tribunal, <https://verfassungsblog.de/category/aaa-general/en/>.

landscape has created new opportunities for these actors to reassert themselves, rebuild party structures, mobilise supporters and strengthen their organisational presence.<sup>19</sup>

Their re-emergence and participation in the reform process, however, have been marked by conflicting positions. The BNP has been less supportive of systemic reforms proposed by the NCC, preferring instead to avoid significant structural changes to existing institutions.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the party has opposed changing the current first past the post system to a proportional representation system since the former favours larger parties and smaller parties face challenges to gain representation.<sup>21</sup> The BNP is currently positioned as the most organised political force in the country and appears intent on leveraging this moment to consolidate its gains and press for national elections under the existing first past the post system.

On the other hand, proportional representation voting is better suited for multi-party democracy since as an electoral system it provides smaller political actors with better opportunities to receive political representation. Jamaat-e-Islami and the newly formed and student-led National Citizen Party (NCP), have urged for systemic reforms, including introducing the proportional representation structure before elections are convened.<sup>22</sup>

The BNP's push for early elections is closely tied to its stake in the two-party system that has shaped Bangladeshi politics since 1991.<sup>23</sup> Alongside the Awami League, the BNP enjoys nationwide support, with both parties commanding a combined vote share of approximately 60 per cent. While Jamaat-e-Islami and the Jatiya Party remain significant players within the electoral landscape, particularly in specific regional strongholds, neither has been able to displace the dominance of the two main parties or independently form government.<sup>24</sup> In Jamaat's case, its historical association with the Pakistan army during the 1971 Liberation War continues to cast a long shadow, limiting its appeal among segments of the electorate. In response to this political reality, Jamaat-e-Islami has intensified its public outreach and grassroots mobilisation efforts. It has positioned itself for a longer-term strategy and favours a delay in elections to broaden its support base.<sup>25</sup>

The NCP has also pushed for systemic reforms instead of early elections for two reasons. First, its emergence as a new political entity composed of politically inexperienced youths

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<sup>19</sup> 'Press Release', Bangladesh Nationalist Party-BNP, <https://www.bnepbd.org/programs&pressReleases/68906e5e0b92e8fa95ae5f6f>.

<sup>20</sup> 'BNP opposes Jamaat's demand for Proportional Representation (PR) system', *AIBS News* 24, 20 August 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1916218441927166/posts/4221130494769271/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> TBS Report, 'NCP demands justice, reforms before election: warns of renewed street protests if July Charter not announced soon.', *The Business Standard*, 7 July 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/politics/ncp-demands-justice-reforms-election-warns-renewed-street-protests-if-july>.

<sup>23</sup> Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman, 'Introduction', in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*, edited by Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman (New York: Routledge, 29 January 2016), p. 4, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781315651019/routledge-handbook-contemporary-bangladesh-ali-riaz-mohammad-sajjadur-rahman>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> News Agencies, 'Bangladesh's largest Islamist party rallies for fair elections', *Al Jazeera*, 19 July 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/19/bangladeshs-largest-islamist-party-rallies-for-fair-elections>.

with no prior governing record places it in a position similar to that of other smaller political parties.<sup>26</sup> As a result, student leaders have turned to demonstrations and rallies as a means of building momentum, expanding their support base and establishing the NCP as a credible political force. The NCP is also seeking to leverage its involvement during last year's revolution to secure political support. Second, the NCP has aligned with conservative religious groups, particularly through the involvement of Chhatra Shibir (the youth wing of Jamaat-e-Islami) in the uprising, and this alliance has perhaps influenced its preference for delayed elections and broader systemic reforms.<sup>27</sup>

This has been publicly acknowledged by the party's members. Sarjis Alam, one of the main coordinators during the revolution, said while attending the member's council of Islami Chhatra Shibir, "We have found Islami Chhatra Shibir as allies in 2024. They have supported us both directly and indirectly by being present on the streets, offering advice and playing the role of allies in crucial steps. From our side, we want to make it clear that the truth can never be suppressed – it is only a matter of time before it is revealed."<sup>28</sup> Given its lack of institutional grounding, novelty in politics and the fragility of its emerging alliances, the NCP appears intent on ensuring that any future political process is underpinned by reforms that safeguard against manipulation and do not place new entrants like itself at a structural and institutional disadvantage.

These developments and alignments suggest that the post-uprising political arena is marked less by a focus on forging a consensus on reform than by competing agendas as parties prioritise the advantages afforded to them in the face of an uncertain conclusion to the transition.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the situation on the ground remains fluid and unpredictable.<sup>30</sup> That the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, once occasional allies, have fundamental differences over reforms and their enforcement is telling of how the gap between political actors is becoming difficult to bridge.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, the divisions between the parties lie not only in the content and enforcement of reforms but also in the preferred method of grounding their source of legitimacy and rendering their mandate operational. The BNP favours parliamentary procedure, whereas the NCP calls for a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution, and Jamaat-e-Islami

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<sup>26</sup> 'Integrity, unity, progress: National Citizen Party (NCP)'s promise!', Jatiya Nagorik Party, <https://jatiyonagrikparty.com/>.

<sup>27</sup> Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy and Madhurima Pramanik, 'The rise of the NCP and Bangladesh's descent into chaotic politics', Observer Research Foundation, 7 June 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-rise-of-the-ncp-and-bangladesh-s-descent-into-chaotic-politics>.

<sup>28</sup> Star Digital Report, 'Shibir played role of allies in July-August uprising: Sarjis', *The Daily Star*, 31 December 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/shibir-played-role-allies-july-august-uprising-sarjis-3788651>.

<sup>29</sup> 'Bangladesh grapples with fraught politics a year after former PM Hasina fled', *The Straits Times*, 5 August 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/bangladesh-grapples-with-fraught-politics-a-year-after-former-pm-hasina-fled>.

<sup>30</sup> Julhas Alam, 'A year after a bloody uprising, Bangladesh is far from political stability', *AP News*, 4 August 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/bangladesh-yunus-hasina-zia-politics-uprising-jamaat-f68cacfad0cfd31e33cccb497a564228>.

<sup>31</sup> Mubashar Hasan, 'Resurgence of Jamaat-e-Islami shifts Bangladesh politics to the right', *The Diplomat*, 19 August 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/08/resurgence-of-jamaat-e-islami-shifts-bangladesh-politics-to-the-right/>.

advocates a direct referendum.<sup>32</sup> These divergent preferences reveal the absence of a shared framework for executing and, ultimately, realising reform.

## Accountability or Retribution?

Bangladesh's transitional period has also been marked by a strong accountability agenda which has been met with polarised reactions. The interim government, in cooperation with the Bangladesh army, launched 'Operation Devil Hunt', leading to the arrest of more than 10,000 people, including Awami League members and affiliates.<sup>33</sup> Among those detained is Mohammad Atiqul Islam, the former mayor of North Dhaka, who faces at least 68 separate charges of attempted murder and murder during the uprising, although more than half of the incidents in question occurred while he was reportedly abroad.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, many of the party's lawmakers, ministers and senior leaders have fled the country, and it remains unclear to what extent those arrested wielded significant influence or decision-making authority within the party's command structure.

While accountability for the grave human rights violations perpetuated during last year's uprising is imperative, concerns have been raised that many of the arrests and detentions of political adversaries appear arbitrary and politically motivated. While accountability for the crimes committed during the uprising are necessary, the government's methods to exact justice raise difficult questions about how patterns of retributive politics may persist rather than give way to a more tolerant and inclusive political culture.<sup>35</sup> Progress on the reform agenda is likely to remain limited unless this cycle is addressed (or redressed) since any political process rooted in selective or retributive justice risks deepening existing divisions and undermining the very legitimacy the interim government seeks to establish.

The challenges of moving beyond entrenched patterns of retaliation and retribution towards reconciliation and consensus have also been hindered by the Awami League's conduct following its ouster.<sup>36</sup> It maintains that its handling of the July 2024 uprising was proportionate and that it was unlawfully removed from power – a position articulated by Hasina in her first public statement after leaving the country, in which she called for protesters to be investigated and punished.<sup>37</sup> Since then, the party has sought to mobilise segments of its support base. This has led to renewed tensions and clashes with rival groups, most notably in Gopalganj in July 2025.

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<sup>32</sup> Saqlain Rizve, 'One year after Sheikh Hasina's fall: How is Bangladesh holding up?', *The Diplomat*, 5 August 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/08/one-year-after-sheikh-hasinas-fall-how-is-bangladesh-holding-up/>.

<sup>33</sup> Imran Ahmed, 'Interim government in Bangladesh: Struggle for stability', ISAS Brief No. 1212, 21 February 2025, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/ISAS-Brief-1212.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> 'Bangladesh: Year since Hasina fled, rights challenges', *Human Rights Watch*, 30 July 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/30/bangladesh-year-since-hasina-fled-rights-challenges-abound>.

<sup>35</sup> Debasish Nandy et al., 'The Culture of Political Violence and Punishment in Bangladesh: The Role of Political Parties and Civil Society', *Economic and Political Weekly*, <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/culture-political-violence-and-punishment>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> 'Bangladesh: Sheikh Hasina gives first statement since ouster', *Deutsche Welle*, 13 August 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-sheikh-hasina-gives-first-statement-since-ouster/a-69931931>.



Rather than signalling any willingness to acknowledge past excesses or engage in dialogue, its current posture reflects a refusal to find common ground. This inevitably obstructs efforts to move the political process forward. In such a polarised and volatile environment, where political actors remain entrenched in adversarial positions and prioritise narrow interests over national consensus, the prospects for depolarisation remain limited.

## Conclusion

For many Bangladeshis, the July 2024 uprising was a moment of hope and renewed optimism. Over its fifteen years in power, the Awami League presided over mounting political tensions, the erosion of democratic freedoms and the rule of law and the politicisation of state institutions. The interim government's wide-ranging and ambitious reform agenda was intended to safeguard against a return to the political conditions that characterised the previous era, before convening national elections. However, divergent views among key political actors on the scope, content and implementation of reforms, as well as on the timing of elections and fundamental questions about state structure, have hindered inter-party consensus and contributed to growing polarisation and fragmentation.

Indeed, patterns of cooperation and division among political actors appear to be shaped less by principle or shared vision than by self-interest and strategic positioning aimed at gaining every advantage in a fluid and uncertain political landscape. Although the interim government has announced that elections will be held in February 2026, it is difficult to assess how Bangladesh will move forward during this turbulent period. While the prospect of elections in the near future fuels self-interested politics and deepens polarisation, this very polarisation could ultimately undermine the conditions necessary for the elections to take place at all. Time will tell. However, for now, the promise of democratic renewal remains entangled in competing interests, unresolved grievances and a political climate too fragmented to offer clarity on what lies ahead.

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