

Bangladesh's Election and Referendum: Contesting Reform and Political Futures

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Summary

Bangladesh's election in February 2026 is taking place alongside a national referendum on constitutional reform, making it unlike a routine electoral contest. The vote is unfolding in a political environment that is marked by party exclusions, institutional tensions and competing visions of reform. Together, the election and referendum are shaping a moment that will influence how constitutional change proceeds, how political competition is organised and how the country's future political system evolves.

On 13 November 2025, the interim government in Bangladesh issued the [July National Charter \(Constitutional Reform\) Implementation Order](#), stipulating that the next parliamentary election would be held simultaneously with a national referendum on constitutional reform. The referendum requires voters to cast a single 'Yes' or 'No' vote on a [package of four reform proposals](#). This design has drawn criticism from several political actors, particularly because it condenses complex constitutional changes into a binary choice and limits the space for party-specific dissent.

The July National Charter itself emerged from the recommendations of multiple reform commissions established after the August 2024 transition, which together produced a large set of reform proposals later refined through negotiations facilitated by the [National Consensus Commission](#). The Charter was [signed on 17 October 2025](#) but some political parties declined to endorse it, citing concerns over its legal standing, constitutional implications and the inability to challenge it through judicial channels.

The referendum proposes four broad reforms: the reconfiguration of caretaker governance and constitutional bodies, including the Election Commission; the creation of a [100-member upper house of parliament](#) through proportional representation; the binding of the next elected government to implement [a set of agreed reforms](#); and the [continuation of additional reforms](#) based on party commitments. If approved, the elected parliament would simultaneously function as a [Constitutional Reform Council](#) tasked with completing amendments within a defined timeframe and initiating the establishment of the upper house.

However, apprehension persists around both the design and implementation of the referendum. Critics argue that a single 'Yes' or 'No' vote negates [the complexity of disagreements](#) among the parties on key constitutional questions. A 'Yes' outcome could effectively bypass dissent and bind future governments to the reform agenda as written, while a 'No' outcome could derail the reform process altogether. The referendum, therefore, places significant weight on a simplified public mandate to resolve deeply contested institutional questions.

Uncertainty is further compounded by the broader political environment surrounding the vote. There are concerns about the public's ability to fully understand the technical nature of the reforms, given that multiple proposals have been condensed into four broad categories. At the same time, the [government's active campaigning](#) for a 'Yes' vote has raised questions about neutrality, particularly in light of [the Election Commission directives](#) restricting official interference. This tension has contributed to confusion among the political actors and the electorate about the appropriate boundaries between state authority and the electoral process.

More broadly, the referendum unfolds within an election already shaped by a deeply altered political landscape, including party exclusions, institutional pressures and competing visions of reform. The [enforced absence of the Awami League](#), following the suspension of its registration and activities, has created a significant political vacuum and removed a major electoral force that historically commanded a substantial share of the national vote. This exclusion risks undermining the perceived legitimacy of the electoral process by alienating constituencies, particularly minorities and secular segments, which had long been represented through the party's participation in competitive elections.

Precisely how these constituencies will respond electorally, and which direction their votes may shift in the absence of the Awami League, remains uncertain. In its place, the political landscape has increasingly coalesced around [two emerging blocs](#): a nationalist alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and a religious-conservative alignment centred on Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizen's Party. Across both blocs, the leaders have, nonetheless, converged around support for the referendum. The BNP's chairman, Tarique Rahman, has urged voters to [back a 'Yes' vote](#) as part of the party's broader commitment to political reform despite reservations about [aspects of the Charter](#); Jamaat-e-Islami leaders have similarly framed the referendum as necessary to [avoid an electoral crisis](#) and advance implementation of the July Charter; and the National Citizen's Party, despite refusing to [sign the Charter](#), has also campaigned for a 'Yes' outcome, arguing that [reform remains necessary](#) even if elements of the framework remain unclear.

The outcome of the election on 12 February 2026 will determine not only whether the proposed constitutional changes proceed but also how the legitimacy of the electoral process and the resulting political order is constructed in the post-election period. In this sense, the vote is as much about the credibility of the process as it is about the substance of reform. How the results are accepted, implemented and contested in the days that follow will shape public confidence in both the reforms themselves and the political system that emerges from this election.

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