

BANGLADESH - WATCHLIST

OVERVIEW OF CURRENT SITUATION¹

While the general acceptance of the democratic system is high, politically motivated violence has increased and threatens political stability. Radical Islamic groups have extended their activities, which culminated in a simultaneous explosion of 400 bombs in almost all districts of the country on August 17, 2005. The government has reacted with operations of special security forces against the decline of law and order that resulted in human rights violations.

There is universal suffrage and the right to campaign for elected office. The general elections of 1991, June 1996, and 2001 were assessed as “free and fair”. The polarization of the political system with two main antagonists, the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the main opposition party, the Awami League (AL), has obstructed all political progress. Endemic corruption, a weak rule of law, limited bureaucratic transparency, and political polarization have combined to undermine government accountability. The effectiveness of parliament is severely hampered by the fact that whichever party is in opposition routinely boycotts parliamentary proceedings.

Civil liberties are set forth in the constitution, but they are scarcely protected with consistency. The freedom of the press is seriously infringed.

MOST RECENT TRENDS

In October 2006, Prime Minister Begun Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) resigned after massive protests against her government. The parliament was dissolved on October 28, 2006. The caretaker government, personally led by President Iajuddin Ahmed, announced that according to the constitution, elections were required to take place within 90 days from when the previous parliament was dissolved. It extended the army’s power of detention and arrest. The Electoral Commission (EC) announced in December 2006 that the election would take place on Jan. 22, 2007.

According to Amnesty International (AI), hundreds of people were killed or injured in violent clashes between the former ruling alliance led by the BNP and opposition activists led by the Awami League (AL) in the months following Khaleda Zia’s resignation. AI also reported that the extended power of detention and arrest led to an excessive use of force by the army and the police against the protestors.

On January 3, 2007 an alliance of 14 parties led by the AL announced that it would “boycott and resist” the parliamentary election scheduled for January 22, 2007 although it had announced in December 2006 that it would participate. As a consequence, 2,370 out of 3,935 candidates withdrew their nomination following the boycott, and international observers announced that they would not observe the election. The opposition alliance claimed that the current situation would not allow the holding of free elections. It accused the caretaker government, which oversees the organisation of the elections, of bias towards the BNP. It called for a politically neutral EC, the resignation of the head of the

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caretaker government Iajuddin Ahmed, a reform of existing voter lists and the postponement of the election date.

As a response to the boycott, the United Nations suspended technical support for the elections in Bangladesh, expressing concern about the deteriorating situation in the country. The UN stated that the boycott by a major opposition alliance jeopardized the legitimacy of the country's electoral process. It also urged the army to remain neutral and called on political parties to refrain from further violence.

On January 11, 2007 Ahmed imposed a curfew and state of emergency, suspended the election and then resigned as caretaker prime minister. It is widely believed that the armed forces encouraged Ahmed's resignation as head of the caretaker government. He was replaced by Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former central-bank governor and World Bank official, who vowed a crackdown on violence and corruption. The national-security chief and the attorney-general, among other officials, have been ousted. Several former government ministers from both the Awami League and the BNP were arrested on unspecified charges.

The High Court ruled on January 29, 2007 that the EC must suspend all election activities until the controversial issue of voter registrations had been cleared up. Shortly thereafter, the head and members of the controversial body resigned their posts. On February 4, 2007, a new EC head was appointed by the caretaker government.

The state of emergency has made itself felt in various ways. Around 60, 000 troops have been deployed throughout the country, ostensibly to restore order. Security forces have arrested around 33, 000 people.

ASSESSMENT

Bangladesh participated in the Warsaw, Seoul and Santiago Ministerials.

With high levels of violence and strong and longstanding political polarization, democracy in Bangladesh was already showing serious deficits in 2006. Currently, the political system has collapsed as the army used its influence to stop elections which, according to international observers, were likely to have been rigged by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to secure itself another term. Even if the army were to support a return to democratic procedures and the reform intentions of the current administration materialized, it will take time to correct the voter list, issue voter-identity cards, set up a new independent election commission, and purge the bureaucracy. This is widely regarded as not being achievable before the July monsoon, which pushes polls back to the final quarter of 2007. Until then, political rights remain seriously infringed and democratic procedures suspended.

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STATISTICS AND INDICATORS

World Bank Institute Governance Indicators 2005	Score	Key
Voice and Accountability	31.4	Range 0-100 (Lower value indicates weak voice and accountability; higher value indicates strong voice and account)
Political Stability and Absence of Violence	6.6	Range 0-100 (Lower value indicates weak political stability and high violence; higher value indicates opposite)
Government Effectiveness	21.1	Range 0-100 (Lower value indicates weak government effectiveness; higher value indicates strong govt. effectiveness)
Regulatory Quality	14.9	Range 0-100 (Lower value indicates weak regulatory quality; higher value indicates strong regulatory quality)
Rule of Law	19.8	Range 0-100 (Lower value indicates weak rule of law; higher value indicates strong rule of law)
Control of Corruption	7.9	Range 0-100 (Lower value indicates weak control of corruption; higher value indicates strong control of corruption)

Freedom House: Freedom in the World 2007	Score	Key
Political Rights	4	Range 1-7 (Lower value indicates good system of political rights; higher value indicates bad system political rights)
Civil Liberties	4	Range 1-7 (Lower value indicates good system of civil liberties; higher value indicates bad system civil liberties)
Status	PF	3 Categories: F (Free); PF (Partly Free); NF (Not Free)

Corruption Perceptions Index 2006	Score	Key
Total Score	2.5	Range 0-10 (lower value indicates high corruption; higher value indicates lower values of corruption)
Rank	156	163 countries

Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2006	Score	Key
Stateness	7.3	Range 0-10 (Lower value indicates negative democratic development; higher value indicates positive democratic development)
Political Participation	7.0	
Rule of Law	6.3	
Stability of Democratic Institutions	7.0	
Political and Social Integration	5.3	
Total Score Political Transformation	6.55	Range 0-10 (Lower value indicates negative democratic development; higher value indicates positive democratic development) / Arrow shows trend in democratic development (↑Improved; ↓Worsened)
Total Score Political Management	4.73	Range 0-10 (Lower value indicates lower quality of political management; higher value indicates higher quality of political management)