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Freedom in the World 2025 - Bangladesh

Partly Free 45 / 100

Political Rights 16 / 40

Civil Liberties 29 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

40 / 100 Partly Free

A country or territory's Freedom in the World status depends on its aggregate Political Rights score, on a scale of 0–40, and its aggregate Civil Liberties score, on a scale of 0–60. See the methodology.

Overview

In August 2024, the ruling Awami League (AL), which consolidated its control by harassing political opponents and co-opting state institutions during its 15 years in power, was overthrown in a student-led uprising. With the backing of the military and student protesters, an interim government led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus took power. During the first five months of the interim government's tenure, it reopened political and civic space and began to reform state institutions, but violence and political retribution remained problems.

Key Developments in 2024

 In January, the AL and Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina were reelected to their fourth straight term in office. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other key opposition parties boycotted the polls. The elections saw low turnout and were widely viewed as illegitimate because of the lack of genuine competition and the pre-election repression of the opposition.

- On August 5, Hasina resigned after the AL government's violent crackdown on student-led protests led to a broad-based uprising against its rule. Hasina fled to India and many senior AL officials went into hiding, and the parliament was dissolved. At the request of the students and with the consent of the military, an interim government composed of civil society leaders, academics, and other notable citizens took power, with Muhammad Yunus as its chief advisor.
- Following Hasina's resignation, political space opened considerably.
 The interim government unbanned the political party Jamaat-e-Islami
 (JI) and registered additional parties. However, the former ruling party faced growing restrictions.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national 1 / authority elected through free and fair elections?

A largely ceremonial president, who serves for five years, is elected by the legislature. Mohammed Shahabuddin was elected president in February 2023, replacing President Mohammed Abdul Hamid, whose term had expired. He retained his position after Hasina resigned amid a popular uprising in August 2024.

The leader of the party that wins the most seats in the unicameral National Parliament assumes the position of prime minister and wields effective power. Sheikh Hasina began her fourth term as prime minister in early 2024 following the AL's overwhelming victory in the January parliamentary elections. While those elections saw fewer deaths and instances of documented fraud than recent national elections, they were still undermined by acts of violence and partisan electoral management.

In August 2024, Hasina resigned and fled Bangladesh following two months of student-led protests. Many senior AL officials went into hiding, and the parliament was dissolved. At the request of the students, an interim government led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus took power.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected 1 / through free and fair elections?

The National Parliament is composed of 350 members, 300 of whom are directly elected. Political parties select a total of 50 women members based on the parties' share of elected seats.

In the January 2024 parliamentary elections, nearly all seats in parliament were won by either the AL or its allies, including nominally independent

candidates that were loyal to the ruling party. The BNP and most opposition parties boycotted the elections. The elections saw low turnout and were widely viewed as illegitimate due to the lack of genuine competition and the pre-election repression of the opposition.

In August, the parliament was dissolved after Hasina resigned. At the request of the students and with the consent of the military, an interim government composed of civil society leaders, academics, and other notable citizens took power, with Muhammad Yunus as the body's chief advisor. During their first five months of governing, Yunus and the interim government announced their intent to reform state institutions before holding new parliamentary elections, and elections to select new members of parliament had not been held by the end of 2024.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management 4 bodies?

Opposition parties and outside observers have long criticized the independence of the Election Commission (EC) and its ability to investigate complaints. Some foreign governments and international organizations withdrew financial assistance to the EC over these concerns. The AL government named new EC members in 2022, but the BNP and most opposition parties rejected the independence of the new EC and boycotted elections that took place under its supervision. During the January 2024 parliamentary elections, international observers noted some improved outcomes, particularly with regard to preventing election violence, but noted that the process was still marred by partisan administration.

In November 2024, the interim government appointed new election commissioners and formed an independent commission to advise on electoral reform.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, 3 / and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of 4 these competing parties or groupings?

Bangladesh has a multiparty system in which power has historically alternated between AL- and BNP-led coalitions; third parties have traditionally had difficulty achieving traction. Both parties are led by family dynasties and have little internal democracy.

Under the AL government, the BNP and other opposition parties faced operational restrictions, particularly during elections. Prior to

parliamentary elections in January 2024, the BNP was initially able to organize large protests, but political space closed significantly following the opposition's decision to boycott the elections and deploy strikes and blockades to protest the process. Between the end of October 2023 and January 2024, nearly 25,000 BNP members had been reportedly imprisoned; at least eight had died in custody by the end of 2023.

The EC also denied registration to new political parties and restricted the activities of the Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which was permitted to hold public rallies but not participate in elections. JI leaders have been prosecuted by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a domestic government body formed in 2009 to investigate crimes committed during Bangladesh's independence war, which has been widely criticized for violating due process. During protests in July and August of 2024, the AL government fully banned JI.

After Hasina's resignation, political space opened considerably. The interim government unbanned JI and registered additional parties. However, the former ruling party faced growing restrictions. Some critics of the former government advocated to ban and the AL and revoke its registration. AL leaders were arrested for crimes based on little evidence, hindering the party's activities, and the AL's student wing was banned. The ICT opened a probe on Hasina and other AL leaders for "genocide and crimes against humanity."

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because the interim government lifted the previous administration's ban on Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami and has allowed greater space for political parties to form and operate.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its 1 / support or gain power through elections?

The interim government has lifted restrictions on key political parties that opposed the AL and allowed new parties to register. Although Muhammad Yunus has said reforms are needed before new elections can be held, the BNP and other former opposition parties largely continued to support the interim government. However, violence, hostile rhetoric, and seemingly partisan judicial actions targeting the AL and its members indicate that the party might face extralegal barriers to participate in the next elections.

Under the AL government, the BNP was weakened by regular harassment and arrests of key members that significantly harmed its ability to challenge the ruling party in elections. The BNP boycotted national and local elections in recent years. In the two months prior to the January 2024 parliamentary elections, the BNP estimated that millions of

opposition activists faced court cases and thousands more were jailed, including the BNP's secretary general.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

Since 1991, the AL and BNP have dominated politics and limited political choices for those who question internal party structures or hierarchy, or who would create alternative parties or political groupings. While it held power between 2008 and 2024, the AL's extensive control over state resources at the national and local level gave it significant coercive economic power to influence the political behavior of public sector employees, business actors, and citizens who fear retaliation. The BNP's use of strikes and blockades during electoral periods, notably in 2014 and 2024, often resulted in violence that hindered citizens' ability to participate.

Under the interim government, restrictions on party registration and political organization were lifted. The BNP's senior leaders welcomed the creation of a student party and opposed banning the AL. However, after Hasina's resignation, AL leaders and members faced significant violence and legal harassment. Additionally, the interim government granted police powers to the military to restore order, creating fears of weakened civilian control over the rule of law.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full 4 political rights and electoral opportunities?

In the National Parliament, 50 seats are allotted to women, who are elected by political parties based on their overall share of elected seats. Women have led both main political parties. Nevertheless, societal discrimination limits female participation in politics in practice. Men are likelier to be selected as candidates, and women are often relegated to serving in the less influential women's wings of their parties. Women also face social pressure to refrain from political activity. Religious, ethnic, and other marginalized groups remain underrepresented in politics and state agencies.

LGBT+ people are also limited in their ability to participate in politics, though they have won office. In 2021, the town of Trilochanpur elected as its mayor a member of the *hijra* community, whose members identify as neither male nor female and are classified as having a distinct gender identity in Bangladesh.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative 1 / representatives determine the policies of the government? 4

While the interim government enjoyed strong public support in 2024, its members are unelected, and it did not set a date for new elections.

Under the AL government, a dearth of opposition representation significantly reduced parliament's ability to scrutinize government policies, budgets, and proposed legislation. The AL government's legitimacy was also undermined by the conduct of national elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024, which were marred by violence, intimidation, and allegations of fraud.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 1/4

Corruption is widespread. Under the AL government, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) was ineffective and subject to overt political interference. Anticorruption efforts were weakened by politicized law enforcement and subversion of the judicial process, and the AL government pursued politicized corruption cases against BNP leaders. Media outlets and civil society faced restrictions and were unable to fully expose government corruption.

In 2024, The interim government created an independent commission to advise on reforming the ACC. The interim government also began overturning unsupported corruption cases against BNP leaders, including against chairwoman Khaleda Zia. However, new corruption cases targeted former AL government officials, and reports of corruption in government service delivery continued under the interim government.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 2/4

The interim government stated its intention to address governmental transparency and accountability, but did not make significant strides in addressing these issues in 2024. Under previous governments, endemic corruption and criminality, weak rule of law, limited bureaucratic transparency, and political polarization undermined government accountability. The 2009 Right to Information Act (RIA) mandates public access to all information held by public bodies and overrides secrecy legislation. Although it has been unevenly implemented, journalists and civil society activists have had some success in using it to obtain information from local governing authorities.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

Are there free and independent media? 2/4

Under the AL government, journalists and media outlets faced many forms of pressure, including frequent lawsuits, harassment, and serious or deadly physical attacks. This included arrests and physical assaults of journalists for critical reporting on the government, enabled by a climate of impunity for attacks on media workers. Little progress was made to ensure justice for a series of blogger murders since 2015, and dozens of bloggers remained in hiding or exile. During protests in July and August of 2024, journalists were killed and injured by government allies and protesters.

Media space opened considerably under the interim government. A range of views, including criticism of political leaders and parties from across the political spectrum, were represented in the press.

The interim government announced it would replace the controversial Cyber Security Act (CSA), which the AL government used to arrest political opponents for online speech, with a new law that includes more safeguards for free expression, though human rights groups raised concerns about the new law's provisions.

Additionally, Reporters Without Borders found that allegedly pro-AL journalists have also faced "systematic judicial harassment," including charges of murder for deaths during the protest movement in July and August. Credentials were revoked from some purportedly pro-AL journalists, and journalists continued to engage in some self-censorship when covering sensitive political or religious topics.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to an opening of the media environment since the August ouster of Sheikh Hasina's government, though some government control of the media remains and a degree of self-censorship among journalists persists.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or 2 / nonbelief in public and private? 4

Islam is designated as the official religion, though the constitution also designates secularism as a fundamental principle. Although religious minorities have the right to worship freely, they occasionally face legal repercussions for proselytizing or alleged blasphemy. Those with secular or nonconformist views can face societal opprobrium and attacks from hardline Islamist groups. Members of minority groups—including Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and Shiite and Ahmadiyya Muslims—face harassment and violence, including occasional mob violence against their houses of worship. Violence against religious minorities has been deliberately provoked on social media. In recent years, Hindu homes, businesses, and temples have been vandalized or destroyed.

The interim government has struggled to protect these groups. In the first two weeks after Hasina's resignation, there was a spike in attacks on houses and businesses, as well as at least two deaths, in minority, primarily Hindu, communities across Bangladesh. The interim government claimed most of this violence was politically motivated, rather than communal. Hindu groups held large rallies calling for more protection from the interim government. In November, further violence flared following the arrest of a Hindu priest for sedition.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free 2 / from extensive political indoctrination?

Under the AL government, Bangladesh's academic institutions faced frequent threats from a variety of actors, resulting in reduced autonomy and rising self-censorship. Faculty hiring and promotion were often linked to support for the AL. Campus debate was often stifled by the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the party's student wing, which suppressed dissent and attacked government critics on and off campuses. During antigovernment protests in July and August of 2024, the BCL attacked and allegedly killed student protesters. After Hasina's resignation, pro-AL policies on campuses ended, and the BCL was banned. However, students also forced the resignation of supposedly pro-AL university administrators and faculty without due process and have allegedly killed BCL members.

Islamist groups have growing influence on government policy and standards, compelling changes to educational content they deem "atheistic" in widely used Bengali-language textbooks. Separately, Islamic extremists have attacked secular professors.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because a group linked to the former ruling party exerted less influence over faculty and students in universities after the interim government was installed.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or 2 / other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4

Under the previous AL government, many Bangladeshis were afraid to express their political opinions and fear of state retribution for political views or affiliations has decreased under the interim government. However, individuals with past or current affiliations with the AL have been harassed, expelled from their jobs, and killed. Although the interim government has condemned these actions, it has been unable to fully control political retribution. Critics of the interim government have faced isolated incidents of violence.

Open discussion of sensitive religious issues is constrained by fears of harassment and violence from religious fundamentalists. Religious

fundamentalists have retaliated against those who publicly discuss LGBT+ rights, atheism, or criticism of Islamist movements.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 2/4

Constitutional rights of assembly and association were upheld inconsistently under the AL government. Protesters were frequently injured and occasionally killed during clashes in which police use excessive force. During the protest movement that spanned July and August of 2024, as many as 1,500 people were reportedly killed.

Under the interim government, some protests and political gatherings have occurred without state restriction. However, there were instances in which AL gatherings and supporters were attacked and were not protected by the police.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?

Under the AL government, many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operated without onerous restrictions. However, the use of foreign funds was closely monitored, the government had broad authority to deregister NGOs, and bureaucratic corruption hampered project implementation. Democracy, governance, and human rights NGOs were regularly denied permission for proposed projects and faced harassment and surveillance, actions which increased in 2023 as the parliamentary elections approached. Human rights activists were occasionally arrested. Pressure and intimidation from Islamist groups also limited NGO activities on some issues such as LGBT+ rights and protection for religious minorities.

Under the interim government, NGOs reported operating without fear of surveillance or state reprisal, but bureaucratic barriers to operations, including corruption, continued.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or 2 / labor organizations?

Legal reforms in 2015 eased restrictions on the formation of unions. However, union leaders who attempt to organize or unionize workers continue to face dismissal or physical intimidation. Labor rights organizations also face harassment. Worker grievances fuel unrest at factories, particularly in the garment industry, where protests over wages and working conditions are common. Protesting workers often face violence, arrest, and dismissal. In 2023, the government eased some restrictions on unionizing, but the International Trade Union

Confederation's 2024 Global Rights Index still ranked Bangladesh as one of the worst countries in the world for worker rights.

Following the end of the AL government, worker protests proliferated. Garment workers, rickshaw drivers, schoolteachers, doctors, and other groups protested pay, safety, and other issues. Under the interim government, labor advocacy was depoliticized and expanded, though little progress was made on the overall standards of worker rights and some protests still faced police violence. The interim government formed a labor reform committee to recommend changes that would enhance labor rights.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because restrictions and political pressure exerted on workers by the Hasina-led government decreased following its collapse in August.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 2/4

Under the AL government, politicization of and pressure against the judiciary was rampant. The Ministry of Law controlled promotions, postings, and transfers of subordinate court judges. Judges faced political pressure over their rulings and judicial appointments at all levels were highly politicized.

Under the interim government, state pressure on the judiciary has eased. The chief justice and other high court judges considered loyal to the AL government were replaced after either resigning or being forced out. The judiciary dropped criminal charges against opposition figures that were considered politically motivated. The interim government formed a commission to advise on reforms to expand the judiciary's independence. However, coercive pressure on the court system by protesters poses a challenge to full judicial independence and nonpartisan rule of law.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because the interim government has taken steps to initiate judicial reform and increase judicial independence following the collapse of the Hasina-led government, which had exerted significant pressure on the judiciary.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1/4

Under the AL government, individuals' ability to access the justice system was compromised by endemic corruption within the courts and severe case backlogs. Pretrial detention was often lengthy, and many defendants lacked counsel. Suspects were routinely subject to arbitrary arrest and detention, demands for bribes, and physical abuse by police. Criminal cases against AL activists were regularly withdrawn while cases against

BNP activists moved forward, undermining the judicial process and entrenching a culture of impunity.

Under the interim government, many politicized cases and convictions against dissidents, opposition politicians, and alleged extremists have been dropped or overturned. Two committees were formed to review politically motivated cases initiated under the previous government. Political prisoners were released from secret jails. However, AL members and leaders were charged in cases based on little or no evidence that were widely considered political.

Chief Advisor Yunus stated the interim government's intent to repeal or reform laws that were abused under the AL government. The interim government formed a police commission to advise on reforms, but did not address several controversial laws and institutions in 2024. The 1974 Special Powers Act permits arbitrary detention without charge, and the criminal procedure code allows detention without a warrant. A 2009 counterterrorism law includes a broad definition of terrorism and generally does not meet international standards.

Under the AL government, concerns were repeatedly raised that the ICT's procedures and verdicts did not meet international standards for victim and witness protection, the presumption of innocence, defendant access to counsel, and the right to bail. The tribunal regularly imposed death sentences. While the interim government amended the ICT's rules and procedures, concerns remained about its ability to hold fair trials.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and 2 / freedom from war and insurgencies?

Under the AL government, security forces faced persistent accusations of extrajudicial killings, abductions, torture and other human rights abuses, including during operations to counter the drug trade, organized crime, and terrorism. In 2021, the US government placed sanctions on several leaders of Bangladesh's elite security force, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). The interim government was unable to enact systemic reform of Bangladesh's security state in 2024, and reports of custodial deaths and extrajudicial killings continued.

While terrorist activity from Islamic militants has remained minimal since the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery attack, extremist plots and counterterrorism actions continue to occur.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of 1 / various segments of the population?

Members of ethnic and religious minority communities and other historically marginalized groups face some legal discrimination, as well as harassment and violations of their rights in practice.

Over a million ethnic Rohingya people fleeing Myanmar have entered Bangladesh since the 1990s, with a recent influx occurring in 2017. The vast majority do not have official refugee status and have limited access to health care, employment, and education. Repatriation efforts have failed, and the Bangladeshi government has implemented punitive policies in the camps including periodically disrupting mobile service and shutting unsanctioned schools.

In 2020, authorities began transferring refugees to the flood-prone island of Bhasan Char, which had an approximate refugee population of 35,000 as of April 2024. Refugee camps on the mainland are affected by gangrelated violence and other forms of lawlessness that continued to kill refugees in 2024. Thousands of refugees per year flee Bangladesh on dangerous sea routes where many drown. The interim government created a position for a high representative for Rohingya affairs to advise the government.

A criminal ban on same-sex relations is rarely enforced, but societal discrimination remains the norm, and LGBT+ individuals are regularly attacked. A number of LGBT+ individuals remain in exile after Islamist militants murdered LGBT+ activist Xulhaz Mannan in 2016. Some legal recognition is available for transgender people, though they face severe discrimination in practice.

Women face social discrimination. Despite rising participation in the labor market, women still constitute less than 50 percent of the labor force. Women suffer sexual harassment and other forms of abuse in the workplace.

Indigenous people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), religious and linguistic minorities, and other ethnic groups remain subject to physical attacks, property destruction, land grabs by Bengali settlers, occasional abuses by security forces, and social discrimination. In September, violence between Bengalis and ethnic minorities in southeast Bangladesh killed four and injured dozens, and in December, the homes of Christians were set on fire.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability 3 / to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4

The ability to move within the country is relatively unrestricted, as is foreign travel, though there are some rules about foreigners traveling into and around the CHT districts as well as into Rohingya refugee camps.

There are few legal restrictions regarding choice of education or employment.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from 4 state or nonstate actors?

Property rights are unevenly enforced, and the ability to engage freely in private economic activity is somewhat constrained. Corruption and bribery, inadequate infrastructure, and official bureaucratic and regulatory hurdles hinder business activities throughout the country. State involvement and interference in the economy is considerable. The 2011 Vested Properties Return Act allows Hindus to reclaim land that the government or other individuals seized, but it has been unevenly implemented. Tribal minorities have little control over land decisions affecting them, and Bengali-speaking settlers continue to illegally encroach on tribal lands in the CHT.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic 4 violence, and control over appearance?

Under personal status laws affecting all religions, women have fewer marriage, divorce, and inheritance rights than men, and face discrimination in social services and employment. Rape, acid throwing, and other forms of gender-based violence occur regularly despite laws offering some level of protection. Domestic violence survivors receive little assistance from government-run shelters or support programs. In 2020, the government introduced the death penalty for rape in response to large protests after a series of high-profile incidents of rape and sexual assault.

Giving or receiving a dowry is a criminal offense, but coercive requests still occur. Bangladesh has one of the world's highest rates of child marriage. Despite a stated government commitment in 2014 to abolish the practice by 2041, in 2017, parliamentarians approved a law that would permit girls under the age of 18 to marry under certain circumstances, reversing a previous legal ban on the practice.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from 2 / economic exploitation?

Socioeconomic inequality is widespread. Working conditions in the garment industry remain extremely unsafe in most factories despite the renewal of a legally binding accord between unions and clothing brands to improve safety practices. Comprehensive reforms of the industry are

hampered by the fact that a growing number of factory owners are also legislators or influential businesspeople.

Bangladesh remains both a major supplier of and transit point for trafficking victims. Women and children are trafficked both overseas and within the country for the purposes of domestic servitude and sexual exploitation, while men are trafficked primarily for labor abroad. A comprehensive 2013 antitrafficking law provides protection to victims and increased penalties for traffickers, but enforcement remains inadequate. In its 2024 *Trafficking in Persons Report*, the US State Department noted that Bangladesh does not fully comply with the minimum standards for combating trafficking but has made improvements, including more investigations and prosecutions in comparison to the previous reporting period.

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