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Freedom in the World 2024 - Bangladesh

PARTLY FREE

40

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 15 / 40

[Civil Liberties](#) 25 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

40 / 100 Partly Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Overview

The ruling Awami League (AL) has consolidated political power through sustained harassment of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and those perceived to be allied with it, as well as of critical media and voices in civil society. Corruption is endemic, and anticorruption efforts have been weakened by politicized enforcement. Due process guarantees are poorly upheld and security forces

violate human rights with near impunity. Violence and discrimination against religious minorities and refugees, particularly Rohingya who have fled Myanmar, are significant problems.

Key Developments in 2023

- Ahead of parliamentary elections planned for January 2024, the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) along with dozens of other parties declared a boycott of the polls, choosing instead to wage a campaign of strikes and blockades to disrupt the election. In response, the government arrested thousands of BNP members and supporters.
- In September, the government sentenced two leaders of the human rights watchdog Odhikar to prison for allegedly spreading false information. Other international and domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported increased legal and bureaucratic obstructions as the parliamentary elections approached.
- In September, the government replaced the controversial Digital Security Act with the Cyber Security Act, but many critics remained concerned that the new law would be used to stifle online speech in the same ways the old law had been used.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free 1 /
and fair elections? 4

A largely ceremonial president, who serves for five years, is elected by the legislature. Mohammed Shahabuddin Chuppu was elected president in February 2023, replacing President Abdul Hamid, whose term had expired.

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 Wazed began her third term as prime minister in early 2019 following the AL's overwhelming victory in the 2018 elections, which

were marred by violence, credible allegations of fraud, and the exclusion of nonpartisan election monitors.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair 1 / elections? 4

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 December 2018 parliamentary elections, the Grand Alliance, which is led by the AL, won 288 directly elected seats. The BNP-led National Unity Front won 8. Election day and the preceding campaign were marked by political violence, ballot stuffing, and harassment and arrest of government critics and opposition candidates and supporters. After the polls, the BNP alleged that law enforcement and the army were complicit in electoral fraud. Several domestic and international observation missions were unable to observe the elections due to delayed or denied accreditation. In December 2022, the BNP's members of parliament resigned their seats to protest ongoing political obstructions.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the 2 / relevant election management bodies? 4

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 have withdrawn financial assistance to the EC over such concerns. The EC's stewardship of the 2018 parliamentary elections was widely seen as favoring the ruling party.

New EC members were sworn in in February 2022 after a selection process that included dialogues with stakeholders. The BNP and most opposition parties did not participate in the dialogues and have rejected the independence of the newly sworn-in EC. In 2023, local elections took place; many were marked by low turnout and some by violence, but victories for opposition and independent candidates indicated improved EC performance.

In August 2023, authorities released a list of 68 approved election observers ahead of the 2024 polls. Local media outlets reported that they had been unable to confirm that many of those on the list had prior experience or expertise in monitoring elections, while others listed had close links with the AL.

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, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 2 / 4

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. A crackdown on the BNP ahead of the 2018 elections significantly disrupted its operations. Since 2018, the government has eased restrictions on opposition protests and rallies, though opposition activities are still met with some repression. In 2023, 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 and early December, reportedly over 20,000 BNP members had been imprisoned; at least eight had died in custody by the end of the year.

Opposition candidates also faced violence in subnational and by-elections in 2023.

The Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which supported a BNP-led government from 2001 to 2006, lost its registration in 2013 for violating constitutional provisions outlawing religiously based parties. JI candidates have since run as independents or as part of the BNP. In June 2023, the government gave JI a permit to hold its first public rally in a decade, but subsequent rallies have faced bureaucratic hurdles and at times violence. JI's efforts to renew its registration failed.

JI leaders have been prosecuted by the International Crimes Tribunal, a domestic government body that investigates war crimes committed during Bangladesh's independence war.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power 1 / through elections? 4

The BNP has been weakened by regular harassment and arrests of key members that have significantly harmed its ability to challenge the AL in elections; the BNP has also boycotted national and local elections in recent years. The 2018 election campaign, in which the BNP did take part, was marred by a crackdown that saw thousands of people and several political candidates arrested and many physically assaulted. BNP leader Khaleda Zia was imprisoned in 2018 and remains under de facto house arrest over corruption convictions. In 2023, judicial harassment of the BNP escalated. As the January 2024 parliamentary elections approached, the BNP estimated that millions of opposition activists faced court cases and thousands more were jailed in the two months prior to election day, including the BNP's secretary general in late October. Still, 27 smaller parties and hundreds of independent candidates participated in the election.

Indicating growing concern about election standards, in February 2023, the United States announced that it would decline to invite Bangladesh to its Summit for Democracy for the second time; in May, the United States announced visa restrictions on Bangladeshis identified as compromising democratic elections.

Amid domestic and international pressure, political conditions did marginally improve prior to the parliamentary elections campaign. In local elections in 2021, 2022, and 2023, independent and BNP candidates defeated AL candidates and opposition parties were permitted to hold major protests.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the 2 / political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 4

The AL and BNP dominate politics and limit political choices for those who question internal party structures or hierarchy, or who would create alternative parties or political groupings.

Animosity between Hasina and Zia, as well as between lower-level cadres, has contributed to continued political and electoral violence in which thousands of people have been killed or injured. The AL's extensive control over state resources at the national and local level gives it significant coercive economic power to influence the political behavior of public sector employees, business

actors, and citizens who fear retaliation. In 2023, the opposition's use of strikes and blockades during the electoral period, often resulting in violence, hindered citizens' ability to participate.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, 2 / and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 4

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 lead both main political parties. Nevertheless, societal discrimination limits female participation in politics in practice. Men are likelier to be selected as candidates, while women are often relegated to serving in 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 representatives 1 / determine the policies of the government? 4

Policy is set by the ruling AL, and weaknesses in the country's institutions have reduced checks on its processes and decision-making. The dearth of opposition representation in the National Parliament significantly reduces its ability to scrutinize government policies, budgets, and proposed legislation. The incumbent government's legitimacy was also undermined by the conduct of the 2018 election, which was marred by violence, intimidation, and allegations of fraud.

C2 0-4 pts

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

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Corruption is widespread. Under the AL, anticorruption efforts have been weakened by politicized enforcement and subversion of the judicial process. The Anti-Corruption Commission is ineffective and subject to overt political interference. The government continues to bring or pursue politicized corruption cases against BNP leaders.

Media outlets and civil society face restrictions and are less able to expose government corruption.

C3 0-4 pts

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

Endemic corruption and criminality, weak rule of law, limited bureaucratic transparency, and political polarization have long 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

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 1 / 4

Journalists and media outlets face many forms of pressure, including frequent lawsuits, harassment, and serious or deadly physical attacks. Arrests and physical assaults of journalists for critical reporting on the government have escalated under the AL, and continued in 2023. A climate of impunity for attacks on media workers remains the norm, and there has been little progress made to ensure justice for a series of blogger murders since 2015. Dozens of bloggers remain in hiding or exile.

In September 2023, the government passed the Cyber Security Act (CSA) to replace and reform the 2018 Digital Security Act (DSA), which had been used to target critical journalists and others for online speech. However, advocates remain concerned that the new law does not make sufficient reforms and would have similarly repressive effects.

Forms of artistic expression contained in books, films, and other materials are occasionally banned or censored.

D2 0-4 pts

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

Islam is designated as the official religion, though the constitution 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. 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, and those attacks continued in 2023.

Those with secular or nonconformist views can face societal opprobrium and attacks from hardline Islamist groups.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 1 / 4

In recent years, Bangladesh's academic institutions have faced frequent threats from a variety of actors, resulting in reduced autonomy and rising self-censorship. Faculty hiring and promotion are often linked to support for the AL, and campus debate is often stifled by the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the party's student wing. In 2023, the BCL continued to suppress dissent and attack government critics on and off campuses.

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.

D4 0-4 pts

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

Open discussion of sensitive religious and political issues is constrained by fears of harassment and violence from the government and religious fundamentalists. Religious fundamentalists have retaliated against those who publicly discuss LGBT+ rights, atheism, or criticism of Islamist movements.

A March–April 2023 poll from the International Republican Institute (IRI) indicated that nearly half of Bangladeshis are afraid to publicly express their political opinions. Over 70 percent of respondents said that they were strongly unlikely or somewhat unlikely to post about politics on social media. The DSA, which was replaced by the CSA in September 2023, enabled the government to increase censorship of digital content and surveillance of telecommunications and social media. From the end of January to the beginning of June 2023, the Law Ministry reported over 7,000 cases filed under the DSA. Free expression advocates were concerned that the CSA would not provide substantial improvements over the DSA.

The government's proposed Data Protection Act has drawn concerns regarding data privacy.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 2 / 4

The constitution provides for the rights of assembly and association, but this is upheld inconsistently. Protesters are frequently injured and occasionally killed during clashes in which police use excessive force.

While tolerance of protests expanded throughout most of 2023, AL supporters and authorities still targeted opposition rallies, and political space contracted precipitously in the months prior to elections. In August, the UN High Commission on Human Rights expressed concern over recurring violence at political rallies.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 2 / 4

Many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operate without onerous restrictions, but the use of foreign funds is closely monitored, and the government has broad authority to deregister NGOs. Democracy, governance, and human rights NGOs are regularly denied permission for proposed projects and face harassment and surveillance, actions which increased in 2023 as the parliamentary elections approached. Pressure and intimidation from Islamist groups also limit NGO activities on some issues such as LGBT+ rights and protection for religious minorities.

In April 2022, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that Bangladeshi authorities were retaliating against human rights advocates, their relatives, and the survivors of victims mistreated or killed by the elite Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) of the Bangladeshi security forces, which the US government had sanctioned in 2021. The registration of human rights watchdog Odhikar was revoked in 2022. In September 2023, a court in Dhaka sentenced the group's two leaders to two years in prison for allegedly spreading false information.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

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 2023 Global Rights Index still ranked Bangladesh as one of the worst countries in the world for worker rights.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

Politicization of and pressure against the judiciary persists. The Ministry of Law controls promotions, postings, and transfers of subordinate court judges. Judges face political pressure over their rulings

and judicial appointments at all levels are highly politicized.

In 2017, Supreme Court chief justice Surendra Kumar Sinha retired and fled Bangladesh, saying he was threatened over rulings against the government. In late 2021, he was sentenced in absentia to 11 years' imprisonment on corruption charges his supporters called politically motivated.

F2 0-4 pts

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

Individuals' ability to access the justice system is compromised by endemic corruption within the courts and severe case backlogs. Pretrial detention is often lengthy, and many defendants lack counsel. Suspects are routinely subject to arbitrary arrest and detention, demands for bribes, and physical abuse by police. Criminal cases against AL activists are regularly withdrawn while cases against BNP activists move forward, undermining the judicial process and entrenching a culture of impunity.

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. Concerns have repeatedly been raised that the International Crimes Tribunal's procedures and verdicts do not meet international standards on issues such as victim and witness protection, the presumption of innocence, defendant access to counsel, and the right to bail. The tribunal has regularly imposed death sentences in recent years.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 2 / 4

Security forces have faced persistent accusations of extrajudicial killings, abductions and other human rights abuses, including during operations to counter the drug trade, organized crime, and terrorism. In late 2021, the US government placed sanctions on several leaders of the RAB, which has appeared to curtail extrajudicial killings. Nevertheless, security agencies continue to commit human rights abuses including enforced disappearances, the use of secret prisons, arbitrary arrests, and torture.

While terrorist activity from Islamic militants has remained low 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 various segments of the 1 / population? 4

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 has an approximate refugee population of 30,000 as of August 2023. The government plans to resettle at least 100,000 people there. Refugee camps on the mainland are affected by gang-related violence and other forms of lawlessness that continued to kill refugees in 2023. Thousands of refugees per year flee Bangladesh on dangerous sea routes where many drown.

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.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 3 / 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 state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

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 violence, and control over appearance? 2 / 4

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. As many as 70 percent of married women are abused by their intimate partners but rarely report those incidents. 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 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 economic exploitation? 2 / 4

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 2023 *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 compared to the previous reporting period.

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