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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2021 - Bangladesh

PARTLY FREE

39

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 15 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 24 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

39 / 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 and those perceived to be allied with it, as well as of critical media and voices in civil society. Corruption is a serious problem, and anticorruption efforts have been weakened by politicized enforcement. Due process guarantees are poorly upheld and security forces carry out a range of human right abuses with near impunity.

Key Developments in 2020

- In March, the government temporarily released leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Khaleda Zia from jail to receive medical treatment at home; her release was extended another six months in September. Zia remained sidelined from politics, which severely hampered the competitiveness of the BNP.
- Citing the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in April, the government quarantined over 300 Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char, a silt island off the Bangladesh coastline that critics say lacks adequate facilities and is prone to flooding. Though the quarantine was supposed to be temporary, the original 300 refugees remained on the island through the end of the year. In December, the government sent over 1,000 refugees there, and announced plans to send over 2,500 refugees to the island in total, despite condemnation of the decision from rights groups and the United Nations.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

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

A largely ceremonial president, who serves for five years, is elected by the legislature. President Abdul Hamid was elected to his second term in 2018.

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 was sworn in for her third term as prime minister in early 2019 following the AL's overwhelming victory in the 2018 elections, which were marked by violence, intimidation of opposition candidates and supporters, allegations of fraud benefiting the ruling party, and the exclusion of nonpartisan election monitors. Hamid also swore in 24 cabinet ministers, 19 ministers of state, and 3 deputy ministers.

A2 0-4 pts

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

The AL overwhelmingly won the December 2018 polls, with the party and its alliance partners taking 288 of the 300 directly elected seats. Election day and the campaign that preceded it were marked by political violence in which at least 17 people were killed, as well as legal and extralegal harassment of government opponents. The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) claimed that thousands of its supporters and nearly a dozen of its candidates had been arrested ahead of the elections, and that its candidates were subject to intimidation and violence.

In the election’s wake, the BNP alleged that the AL had benefitted from widespread electoral fraud carried out by AL supporters with the complicity of law enforcement agents and the army. The government also faced criticism for long delays in approving the accreditation of the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), which ultimately canceled its election monitoring mission. A number of domestic and international missions were also unable to observe the elections due to similar delays or authorities’ outright denial of accreditation.

The previous general election in 2014 was boycotted by the BNP, the main opposition party, and was disrupted by significant violence.

A3 0-4 pts

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

The independence of the Election Commission (EC) and its ability to investigate complaints has long been questioned by opposition parties and outside observers, including by foreign governments and international organizations that have withdrawn financial assistance to the commission over such concerns. The EC’s stewardship of the 2018 national election lent further credence to complaints that it favors the ruling party. In the run-up to the 2018 polls, the commission disproportionately disqualified opposition candidates for various violations. Moreover, the EC failed to order additional security measures following outbreaks of political violence that preceded the vote, or to meaningfully address many complaints filed by opposition figures about election-related violence and other electoral irregularities. After the election, the EC affirmed the results without investigating widespread allegations of fraud. In 2020, controversial municipal elections in Dhaka city and by-elections for several vacated parliamentary seats raised further concerns about electoral integrity and the EC’s independence.

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

Bangladesh has a multiparty system in which power has historically alternated between political coalitions led by the AL and the BNP; third parties have traditionally had difficulty achieving traction. Both parties are nondemocratic in terms of internal structure, and are led by families that have competed to lead Bangladesh since independence, along with a small coterie of advisers. A crackdown on the BNP ahead of the 2018 elections significantly disrupted its operations. However, the government eased restrictions on opposition protests and rallies after the polls.

The constitution bans religiously based political parties, and the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) party was prohibited from taking part in the 2014 and 2018 elections because of its overtly Islamist charter, though some JI members ran as independents. Bangladesh’s International Crimes Tribunal—named as such despite lacking international oversight—was created in 2010 by Hasina to try people suspected of committing war crimes during Bangladesh’s 1971 war of independence from Pakistan. Critics of the tribunal claim it was established to persecute Hasina’s political opponents, notably those in JI.

B2 0-4 pts

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

The main opposition party, 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 2018 election campaign was characterized by a crackdown on dissent that saw thousands of people and several political candidates arrested. There were also several acts of violence committed against opposition figures.

In the run-up to the 2018 parliamentary polls, former prime minister and BNP leader Khaleda Zia was convicted on corruption charges in two separate court cases, sentenced to over a decade in prison, and later banned from electoral competition. In March 2020, the government temporarily released Zia from jail to receive medical treatment at home, though she was not permitted to leave the country; her release was extended another six months in September. Zia remained sidelined from politics, which severely hampered the competitiveness of the BNP.

A JI spokesman said more than 1,850 party members were arrested ahead of the 2018 elections, and some party members claimed they had been subject to torture while in custody.

In the first half of 2019, the BNP and other opposition parties boycotted local elections, which saw historically low turnout, but the BNP has since returned to political competition. In 2020, the BNP participated in municipal and other local elections.

B3 0-4 pts

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

The rival AL and BNP parties 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 violence. In 2020, human rights group Odhikar registered 73 deaths and 2,883 people injured because of political violence, and 2,339 injured in intraparty clashes. Violent political protests and election-related violence also persisted in 2020.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other 2 / 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 against women, as well as against as well against LGBT+ people, limits their participation in politics in practice. Religious, ethnic, and other marginalized groups remain underrepresented in politics and state agencies. In 2019, several transgender women competed for women’s reserved seats in parliament. None were selected.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies 1 / 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. Low representation of opposition lawmakers in the National Parliament significantly reduces its ability to provide thorough scrutiny of or debate on government policies, budgets, and proposed legislation.

Problems with the 2018 election including violence, intimidation of opposition candidates and supporters, and allegations of fraud benefiting the ruling party undermined the legitimacy of the AL government that was seated in January 2019.

C2 0-4 pts

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

Under the AL government, anticorruption efforts have been weakened by politicized enforcement and subversion of the judicial process. In particular, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has become ineffective and subject to overt political interference. The government continues to bring or pursue politicized corruption cases against BNP party leaders. In 2020, AL politicians continued to be accused of corruption, despite the party’s increased actions and rhetoric against it. In April, over two dozen AL local leaders and government officials were charged with corruption for allegedly stealing COVID-19 relief supplies that were designated for low-income people who had been particularly affected by the pandemic.

Media outlets and civil society face restrictions and are therefore 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 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. Throughout 2020, journalists were beaten by uniformed security forces, forced to disappear, or sued for defamation. Journalists have been arrested or attacked in connection with reporting on topics including crimes committed during the 1971 war and election irregularities during both the 2018 parliamentary polls and 2019 local polls. 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.

The 2018 Digital Security Act allows the government to conduct searches or arrest individuals without a warrant, criminalizes various forms of speech, and was vehemently opposed by journalists.

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 among the “high ideals” the charter is grounded in. Although religious minorities have the right to worship freely, they occasionally face legal repercussions for proselytizing. Members of minority groups—including Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and Shiite and Ahmadiyya Muslims—face harassment and violence, including mob violence against their houses of worship. In October 2019, a Muslim mob attacked Hindu residences in Barisal after false rumors circulated that a Hindu man posted blasphemous content on Facebook. In May 2020, in the same town, a mob attacked a Hindu man’s shop and subsequently clashed with police, injuring 10 people. These incidents are part of a pattern in recent years in which violence against religious or other minorities appears to have been deliberately provoked through social media.

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 AL’s student wing. Throughout 2020, several academics were fired or censured for criticizing the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues. In September 2019, members of the AL student wing attacked a nonviolent protest and beat a student to death after he posted criticism of the AL on Facebook.

Islamist groups have growing influence on government policy and standards. In 2017, Islamist groups compelled changes to educational content they deemed “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 without fear of 2 /
surveillance or retribution? 4**

Open discussion of sensitive religious and political issues is restrained by fears of harassment and violence. In the lead-up to national and local elections between 2018 and 2020, repression of dissent created a climate of fear and self-censorship. Censorship of digital content and surveillance of telecommunications and social media have become increasingly common. In June 2020, a 15-year-old boy was arrested for criticizing Prime Minister Hasina on Facebook.

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. Many demonstrations took place in 2020, though authorities sometimes tried to prevent rallies by arresting party activists. During the COVID-19 pandemic in April, garment-industry workers disregarded COVID-19 lockdown restrictions to protest for backpay and safer working conditions.

E2 0-4 pts**Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human 2 /
rights— and governance-related work? 4**

Many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operate in Bangladesh and are able to function without onerous restrictions, but the use of foreign funds must be cleared by the NGO Affairs Bureau, which can also approve or reject individual projects. The 2016 Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act made it more difficult for NGOs to obtain foreign funds and gave officials broad authority to deregister NGOs. Democracy, governance, and human rights NGOs are regularly denied permission for proposed projects and are subject to harassment and surveillance. In September 2019, the government banned two NGOs from working in the Rohingya refugee camps after the allegedly supported an antirepatriation campaign to Myanmar.

In 2020, authorities continued to invoke digital security laws to arrest several rights activists for online speech, citing offenses including hurting religious sentiment and undermining law and order. Pressure and intimidation from Islamist groups also limit NGO activities on some issues such as LGBT+ rights and protection for minority religious groups.

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. Organizations that advocate for labor rights have faced increased harassment. Worker grievances fuel unrest at factories, particularly in the garment industry, where protests against low wages and unsafe working conditions are common. Protesting workers often face violence, arrest, and dismissal.

F Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4

Politicization of and pressure against the judiciary persists. In 2017, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court retired; he left the country and said, in an autobiography published in September 2018, that he had been forced to retire after the Bangladeshi military intelligence threatened him because of rulings he had made against the government. In July 2019, Bangladesh’s Anti-Corruption Commission charged the former chief justice with corruption in absentia. Other allegations of political pressure on judges are common, as are allegations that unqualified AL loyalists were being appointed to court positions.

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 ruling party activists are regularly withdrawn on the grounds of “political consideration,” 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. Since 2013, the tribunal has sentenced at least 45 people to death or long prison sentences.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 1 / 4

Terrorist attacks by Islamist militant groups have remained low following the government’s increased counterterrorism efforts since the 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery terrorist attack. However, the Islamic State (IS) militant group claimed credit for several nonlethal bomb attacks on police officers in Dhaka in 2019 and 2020.

A range of human rights abuses by law enforcement agencies—including enforced disappearances, custodial deaths, arbitrary arrests, and torture—have continued unabated. A 2017 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report documented the use of detention and enforced disappearance against members of the political opposition, despite the government’s promise to address the issue. In 2018, the government initiated a “war on drugs,” during which thousands were arrested and over 100 people were killed.

The human rights NGO Odhikar reported 159 extrajudicial killings perpetrated by law enforcement agencies in the first half of 2020. A statement from the International Federation for Human Rights released in August 2020 said at least 572 people had been subject to enforced disappearance between 2009 and July 2020. Prison conditions are extremely poor; severe overcrowding is common, and juveniles are often incarcerated with adults.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

Members of ethnic and religious minority groups face some discrimination under law as well as harassment and violations of their rights in practice. Indigenous people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), religious minorities, and other ethnic groups remain subject to physical attacks, property destruction, land grabs by Bengali settlers, and occasional abuses by security forces.

Over a million ethnic Rohingyas have fled Myanmar and entered Bangladesh since the 1990s. The vast majority do not have official refugee status; suffer from a complete lack of access to health care, employment, and education; and are subject to substantial harassment. Since a sharp escalation in violence directed against Rohingyas in Myanmar’s Rakhine State began in 2017, over 700,000 refugees have poured across the border into Bangladesh, creating a humanitarian crisis. Most refugees live in precarious camps that lack basic services. Authorities reached a repatriation agreement with Myanmar in October 2018, but the United Nations refugee agency said conditions in Myanmar were not fit for the refugees’ return and that safeguards for them were “absent.” Subsequent efforts to repatriate Rohingya have failed, and the government has become increasingly hostile toward the refugees. In 2019, authorities cut off cell phone service in refugee camps (restored in August 2020 after international pressure) and erected barbed wire fencing around them.

Citing the coronavirus pandemic, in April 2020, the government quarantined over 300 Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char, a silt island off the Bangladesh coastline that critics say lacks adequate facilities and is prone to flooding. Though the quarantine was supposed to be temporary, the original 300 refugees remained on the island through the end of the year. In refugee camps on the mainland, gang violence and other lawlessness escalated. In December, the government transferred over a thousand refugees to Bhasan Char and announced plans to move over 2,500 refugees there in total, despite condemnation of the decision from rights groups and the United Nations. Reports alleged that authorities had forced refugees to consent to the relocation.

A criminal ban on same-sex relations is rarely enforced, but societal discrimination remains the norm, and dozens of attacks on LGBT+ individuals are reported every year. A number of LGBT+ individuals remain in exile following the 2016 murder of Xulhaz Mannan, a prominent LGBT+ activist, by Islamist militants. Some legal recognition is available for transgender people, though in practice they face severe 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, 3 / employment, or education? 4

The ability to move within the country is relatively unrestricted, as is foreign travel, though there are some rules on travel into and around the CHT districts by foreigners as well as into Rohingya refugee camps. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government implemented some movement restrictions that were limited in scope and duration.

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 2 / undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 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, 2 / protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 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 violence against women occur regularly despite laws offering some level of protection. A law requiring rape victims to file police reports and obtain medical certificates within 24 hours of the crime in order to press charges prevents most cases from reaching the courts. In October 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 ranks among the top 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage. Despite a stated government commitment in 2014 to abolish the practice by 2041, in 2017 parliament 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. During the COVID-19 pandemic, over a quarter of workers in the garment industry, approximately 1 million people, were laid off. 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, with tens of thousands of people trafficked each year. 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.

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