

Electoral Reform in Bangladesh – Ensuring Fairness and Transparency

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“Bangladesh’s electoral process has been repeatedly undermined by fraud, political violence, and systemic suppression of dissent. The 2018 general elections were described by observers as “silent rigging,” with ballot boxes filled before polling day in 47 out of 50 monitored constituencies.”



Introduction



Introduction

Elections are the cornerstone of any democracy, ensuring that governance reflects the will of the people. Bangladesh, a country with a history of electoral volatility, has witnessed a series of contested elections marred by allegations of fraud, voter suppression, and political violence.

The credibility of its electoral system has been questioned both domestically and internationally, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive electoral reform.

Despite achieving democracy through mass movements in the 1990s, Bangladesh's electoral integrity has suffered in recent years. The 2018 general elections, for instance, were marked by widespread allegations of vote rigging, ballot stuffing, and voter intimidation.

Reports from Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) indicated that irregularities occurred in 47 out of the 50 constituencies they monitored, with evidence of 'silent rigging' where ballot boxes were stuffed overnight before election day.¹

Similarly, the European Union (EU) and the United States expressed concerns over the fairness of the electoral process, with the latter imposing visa restrictions on Bangladeshi officials responsible for undermining democracy.²

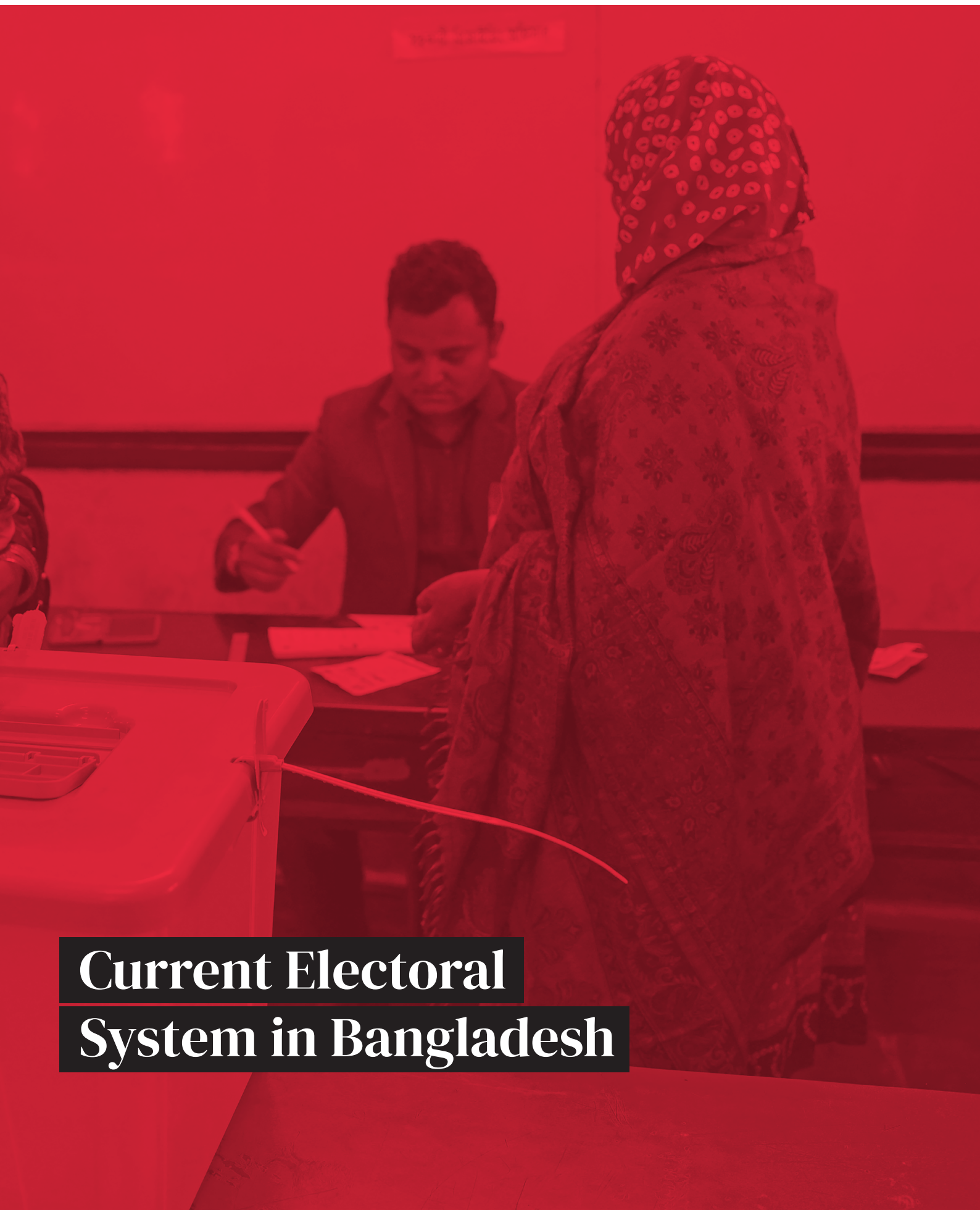
Moreover, the opposition has been increasingly sidelined through arrests and intimidation. In the lead-up to the 2024 elections, over 10,000 opposition activists were reportedly detained,³ raising concerns about the environment in which elections take place.

The previous Awami League regime has been accused of using state machinery to suppress dissent, a claim reinforced by independent watchdogs. The absence of a level playing field has led to voter apathy, with a declining turnout in key elections. For example, the Dhaka city corporation elections in 2020 saw a turnout of just 27.1%, the lowest in decades.⁴

Given these challenges, the objective of this report is to analyse the flaws in Bangladesh's electoral system and propose reforms that can restore public trust, strengthen democracy, and ensure free and fair elections.

“The First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system disproportionately benefits dominant parties, marginalises minorities, and amplifies voter disengagement. In 2018, the ruling party secured over 96% of parliamentary seats with just 76% of the vote.”

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Current Electoral System in Bangladesh

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Current Electoral System in Bangladesh

The electoral system in Bangladesh is based on a first-past-the-post (FPTP) model, where members of the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) are elected through direct voting. This system is straightforward and has been used since the country's independence. However, it presents several challenges:

The Election Commission of Bangladesh (ECB) is responsible for conducting elections, maintaining voter rolls, and ensuring adherence to election laws.

1. Majoritarian Bias: FPTP tends to favor larger parties and can result in a disproportionate number of seats going to the winning party, often at the expense of smaller parties. For instance, in the 2018 general elections, the Awami League won approximately 76% of the votes but secured over 96% of the parliamentary seats.⁵

This skew can lead to a lack of diversity in political representation.

2. Marginalization of Minorities: Smaller parties, particularly those representing ethnic or regional interests, struggle to gain representation under FPTP. This system can marginalize minority groups and limit their influence in the legislative process.

3. Encouragement of Tactical Voting: Voters often feel compelled to vote not for their first choice but for a less preferred candidate who has a realistic chance of winning, thereby reducing the expression of genuine voter preferences.

4. Wasted Votes: A significant number of votes go to losing candidates and do not contribute to the election outcome, leading to voter frustration and apathy.



“Introducing a Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) system could radically improve representation, promote coalition politics, and build long-term trust in the democratic process—drawing on successful models from Germany and New Zealand.”

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Proposal for Proportional Representation

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Proposal for Proportional Representation

To address these issues, a shift towards a Proportional Representation (PR) system is recommended. Under PR, seats are allocated to parties based on the percentage of votes they receive across a larger voting district or nationwide, which better reflects the overall voter preference.

Advantages of Proportional Representation

- 1. Fairer Representation:** PR ensures that all votes contribute towards the outcome, reducing the number of 'wasted' votes and providing fairer representation for smaller parties and minority groups.
- 2. Enhanced Voter Engagement:** With every vote carrying weight, PR can increase voter turnout and engagement, as citizens feel their vote can directly influence parliamentary composition.
- 3. Promotion of Coalition Governments:** PR often leads to coalition governments, which can encourage compromise and consensus-building among diverse political groups, leading to more stable and inclusive governance.
- 4. Reduction of Electoral Volatility:** By smoothing out the extremes of majoritarian rule, PR can lead to more predictable and stable political landscapes.

Implementation Considerations

- **Mixed-Member Proportional (MMP) System:** An MMP system, which combines elements of FPTP and PR, could be considered. This system is

used in countries like Germany and New Zealand and allows voters two votes: one for a preferred party and one for a constituency representative.

- **Electoral Thresholds:** Setting a reasonable threshold (e.g., 3-5%) to gain seats in the legislature can prevent extreme fragmentation by smaller, less viable parties.

International Examples

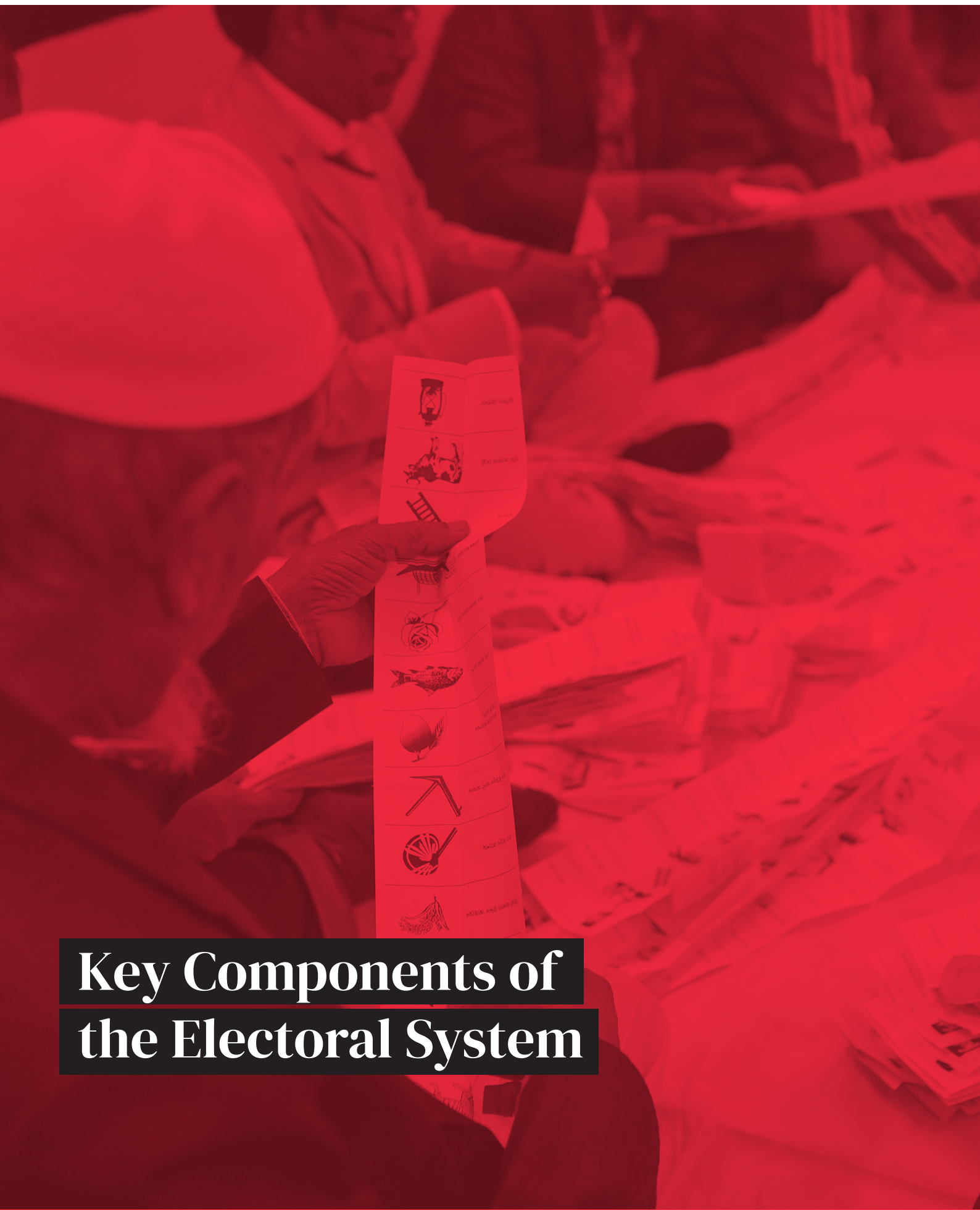
- **New Zealand:** Switched from FPTP to MMP in 1996 after a referendum, leading to greater representation for smaller parties and more collaborative politics.
- **Germany:** Utilizes an MMP system that balances direct candidate elections with party lists, ensuring both local representation and overall proportionality.

Adopting a Proportional Representation system could significantly enhance the democratic fabric of Bangladesh by ensuring a more accurate and equitable reflection of its diverse electorate. Such a change would require broad political consensus and a detailed framework to implement effectively, potentially guided by international expertise and adapted to the specific socio-political context of Bangladesh.

“Despite reforms like biometric voter IDs, the Election Commission’s independence remains deeply compromised. The 2024 voter roll boasts 118 million registered voters, but systematic bias and police interference persist.”

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Key Components of the Electoral System



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Key Components of the Electoral System

1. Election Commission of Bangladesh

(ECB): The constitutional body mandated to oversee elections. However, concerns about its independence have been raised repeatedly.

2. Voter Registration: Bangladesh has a voter base of approximately 118 million people as per the 2024 voter roll.⁶ The introduction of biometric voter ID cards in 2008 was a significant reform aimed at reducing fraud.

3. Election Monitoring: Domestic and international observers monitor elections, but

their access has often been restricted. In the 2018 elections, many foreign observers were either denied visas or faced bureaucratic delays.⁷

4. Law Enforcement and Electoral Security:

Security forces are deployed to maintain order, but reports indicate that law enforcement agencies often act in favor of the ruling party. In the 2018 elections, at least 17 people were killed in electoral violence.⁸



“Bangladesh is witnessing a rise in uncontested elections—39% of chairman seats were won without competition in 2022 Union Parishad elections—pointing to a dangerous erosion of multiparty democracy.”

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A large crowd of people, mostly men, are gathered together, holding up numerous small signs. The signs feature a logo of a boat on water and the Bengali text 'নৌকায় ভোট দিন' (Vote in the boat). The crowd is dense, and the scene appears to be a political rally or protest. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter.

Recent Electoral Trends



Recent Electoral Trends

Bangladesh has seen an increasing trend of uncontested elections, particularly at the local level. In the 2022 Union Parishad elections, over 39% of chairman positions were won uncontested, indicating either a lack of opposition participation or voter intimidation.⁹

This has eroded public confidence in the system, leading to declining voter turnout. The 2014 general elections, boycotted by the opposition BNP, saw only a 51% turnout, with 153 out of 300 seats won unopposed.¹⁰

“The steady disappearance of genuine electoral competition in Bangladesh stands in stark contrast to the democratic aspirations of 1971. When elections become mere formalities, and the space for opposition shrinks before the first vote is cast, it is not just politics that suffers — it is the promise of a people’s republic born from struggle and sacrifice.”

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Challenges Facing the Current System

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Challenges Facing the Current System

• Lack of Trust in the Election Commission:

Opposition parties and civil society organisations have repeatedly accused the Election Commission of bias. Former Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda faced allegations of colluding with the ruling party to manipulate election results.¹¹

• Use of State Institutions for Political Gain:

Reports suggest that state resources, including police and intelligence agencies, are frequently used to intimidate opposition activists.¹²

• **Voter Suppression and Intimidation:** There have been multiple reports of voters being prevented from casting their ballots, particularly

in rural areas dominated by ruling party strongholds.¹³

• **Vote Rigging and Fraud:** In some instances, CCTV footage has emerged showing election officials tampering with ballots.¹⁴

• **Declining Voter Turnout:** A 2022 study found that 68% of Bangladeshis believe elections are not free and fair, contributing to voter apathy.¹⁵

These systemic flaws necessitate urgent reforms to restore electoral integrity and strengthen democratic governance in Bangladesh.



“Vote rigging, disenfranchisement of minorities, and the use of state forces to intimidate voters have become features—not bugs—of the electoral landscape. In 2018, CCTV footage captured officials tampering with ballots.”



Issues and Challenges



Issues and Challenges

The electoral landscape in Bangladesh is fraught with systemic issues that undermine the democratic process. This section discusses these challenges in detail, supporting each point with examples and data.

1. Allegations of Vote Rigging and Electoral Fraud

Vote rigging has been a persistent allegation in Bangladeshi elections, with numerous reports of ballot stuffing and manipulation of electoral rolls. The 2018 general elections were particularly controversial. Observers reported seeing pre-filled ballot boxes at polling stations before the polls opened, a clear indication of vote rigging.¹⁶ An investigative report by Al Jazeera also uncovered potential collusion between election officials and members of the ruling party to tamper with the voting process.¹⁷

2. Political Violence and Safety Concerns

Election-related violence is another significant issue, deterring voter participation and disrupting the electoral process. The 2018 elections witnessed violent clashes that resulted in the death of at least¹⁸ people on election day.¹⁸ Human rights organisations have documented cases where supporters of opposition parties were targeted by ruling party activists, often with impunity.¹⁹

3. Lack of Independence and Perceived Bias of the Election Commission

The credibility of the Election Commission of Bangladesh has been repeatedly called into question. There have been accusations of partisanship towards the ruling Awami League, particularly in its decision-making and enforcement of electoral laws. The resignation of a commissioner in 2021 citing inability to work

independently highlighted these concerns.²⁰ This perceived lack of independence has significant implications for the integrity of elections.

4. Voter Disenfranchisement and Barriers to Voting

Significant segments of the population face barriers to voting, including women, minorities, and residents of remote areas. There are also reports of voters being deliberately misled about polling locations, times, or being outright intimidated to abstain from voting. A survey conducted in 2024 indicated that 30% of minority voters felt unsafe at polling stations.²¹

5. Influence of Money and Muscle Power

The influence of money and muscle power skews the electoral playing field in favor of wealthier candidates and those with political connections. Campaign finance is poorly regulated, allowing for unchecked spending on campaigns. Moreover, there are widespread allegations of criminal elements being used to influence voter behavior and coerce support.²²

“From India’s EVM rollout to Indonesia’s decentralised electoral bodies, global models offer workable blueprints. These reforms tackled similar structural weaknesses and built public trust.”

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Comparative Analysis with Other Democratic Transitions

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Comparative Analysis with Other Democratic Transitions

To understand how Bangladesh might overcome these challenges, it is instructive to look at successful electoral reforms in other nations.

India's Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)

India introduced EVMs to curb vote rigging and ensure faster and more accurate vote counting. Post-implementation, the Election Commission of India reported a significant reduction in electoral disputes and an increase in voter confidence.²³

Indonesia's Decentralised Electoral Administration

Indonesia reformed its electoral management by decentralising it, giving more power to local committees. This increased transparency and community involvement in the electoral process, which helped enhance the system's credibility.²⁴

The roadmap includes:

- **Transparent appointment and funding of the Election Commission**
- **Full rollout of biometric and electronic voting**
- **Legal safeguards for fair media coverage**
- **Campaign finance limits and disclosure rules**
- **Voter education based on civic models from South Korea and South Africa**

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Proposed Reforms

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Proposed Reforms

The following reforms are proposed to address the critical issues undermining the electoral system in Bangladesh and to ensure that future elections are free, fair, and transparent.

1. Strengthening the Independence of the Election Commission

a. Appointment Process

Introduce a more transparent and inclusive process for the appointment of Election Commissioners involving civil society, judiciary, and bipartisan parliamentary committees. This approach is modeled after the system used in South Africa, where the Electoral Commission appointments are made by a panel that includes representatives from the judiciary and civil society, ensuring a broad-based support and credibility.²⁵

b. Funding and Autonomy

Ensure that the Election Commission has adequate funding and autonomy to carry out its duties without governmental interference. The model in Canada can be adopted, where the Elections body operates independently of the government, with its budget and operations protected under the law.²⁶

2. Implementing Biometric and Electronic Voting Systems

To curb vote rigging and ensure the integrity of the vote, implement biometric voter registration and electronic voting machines (EVMs) across all voting stations. This measure has been successfully implemented in India, resulting in reduced allegations of ballot stuffing and electoral fraud. A phased rollout beginning in urban areas could be considered, with eventual expansion to rural locales.²⁷

3. Legislative Changes for Fair Media Coverage and Campaign Spending

a. Media Fairness

Enact laws to ensure equal access to media for all political parties. The UK's model of enforced media neutrality during elections could serve as a template, where specific guidelines are set by an independent body to ensure balanced coverage and equal airtime for all major political parties.²⁸

b. Campaign Finance

Introduce strict campaign finance laws with clear limits on spending and mandatory disclosure of sources of campaign funds. The model in the United States, despite its challenges, includes comprehensive disclosure requirements that could be adapted to suit Bangladesh's context.²⁹

4. Enhancing Security Measures

Deploy neutral and non-partisan security forces to oversee the electoral process, especially in areas with a history of electoral violence. Training and guidelines should be provided to ensure that security personnel act impartially and protect the rights of all voters, similar to the UN's guidelines on the role of security forces during elections.³⁰

5. Education and Outreach Programs

Launch extensive voter education campaigns to inform the electorate about their voting rights and the importance of their participation in the electoral process. South Korea's model, where civic education is integrated into the school curriculum and public outreach programs are common, can provide a basis for these efforts.³¹

“Reforming Bangladesh’s electoral system is not a technical fix—it’s a democratic imperative. Without bold, institutional change, elections risk becoming rituals of control rather than expressions of public will.”



Conclusion

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Conclusion

Implementing these reforms will require a committed effort from all sectors of Bangladeshi society, including the government, political parties, civil society, and the international community. While challenges remain, the adoption of these reforms could significantly enhance the democratic process in Bangladesh, ensuring that elections are not only free and fair but also inclusive and transparent.



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