

**RESTORING DEMOCRACY
AND STATE LEGITIMACY
IN BANGLADESH:
THE LEADERSHIP OF
TARIQUE RAHMAN**

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Malton London Press

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Preface

This book is written at a critical historical juncture for Bangladesh, a period in which long-suppressed questions of democratic legitimacy, institutional accountability, and citizens' ownership of the state have resurfaced with renewed urgency. It emerges from a moment of rupture as well as possibility, shaped by civic mobilisation, generational demands for justice, and the renewed assertion of democratic aspirations in the face of prolonged political stagnation. The 31-Point Programme articulated by Tarique Rahman represents, in my view, one of the most comprehensive and forward-looking reform frameworks to have emerged in Bangladesh's contemporary political history. Too often, public debate reduces the programme to partisan shorthand or mischaracterises it through selective narratives. The programme warrants serious scholarly engagement. This book responds to that need, not as a manifesto, but as an academically grounded examination of a reform-oriented governance agenda that seeks to reconnect democracy with institutional integrity, economic justice, and social inclusion.

As a scholar of governance and democratic institutions, I approach this volume with a clear normative position: Bangladesh's democratic crisis is neither accidental nor merely cyclical. Rather, it has resulted from sustained centralisation of power, erosion of accountability mechanisms, and the systematic narrowing of civic space. In this context, Tarique Rahman's political vision, shaped by exile, repression, and sustained engagement with democratic movements both domestically and internationally, should be understood not as personal ambition but as a response to structural failure. The 31-Point Programme represents an effort to reimagine the state as accountable to its citizens rather than insulated from them. This book is distinguished by its refusal to treat democratic reform as an abstract ideal. Instead, it examines the concrete institutional pathways through which democratic legitimacy might be restored, including constitutional recalibration, judicial independence, electoral integrity, decentralisation, anti-corruption enforcement, economic governance, and social protection. Each chapter situates the

programme's proposals within comparative international scholarship, recognising that while Bangladesh's challenges are not unique or insurmountable, they require political courage and institutional imagination.

This book is written for an international readership. Readers unfamiliar with Bangladesh's political history will find a carefully contextualised analysis that avoids parochialism while remaining attentive to local realities. Simultaneously, the book addresses policymakers, scholars, civil society actors, and members of the Bangladeshi diaspora who continue to seek a credible democratic future for the country. Importantly, this book does not claim neutrality in the face of democratic erosion. Silence in such contexts is not objectivity; it is acquiescence. The analyses presented here are critical, evidence-based, and normatively committed to democratic restoration. They recognise Tarique Rahman not merely as a political actor but as a central figure in articulating a reform agenda that aligns Bangladesh with global democratic standards while remaining rooted in its historical and social realities.

If this book succeeds, it will do so not by closing debate but by reopening it: on constitutional balance, on citizens' ownership of the state, and on the possibility of rebuilding democratic governance through principled, inclusive, and institutionally grounded reform. In this sense, it is offered not as a final word but as an invitation to consider seriously what democratic renewal in Bangladesh must entail and who has the courage to pursue it.

About Authors

Dr. Mushfiqur Rahman is a Senior Lecturer in Business and Management at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, United Kingdom, and a Visiting Lecturer at Queen Mary University of London, United Kingdom. Academically, after completing his bachelor's degree, Mushfiqur completed an MBA and subsequently an MSc in Human Resource Management and Employment Relations. He earned his PhD in Electronic Human Resource Management (e-HRM) from Brunel University of London. Mushfiqur wrote on critical issues relating to Bangladesh, particularly governance, human rights, international relations and the integration of Electronic Human Resource Management (e-HRM) within Bangladeshi ministries such as the Ministry of Public Administration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He later completed an advanced programme in academic writing and reading at the University of Oxford.

His lifelong connection to political thought and public service began long before he moved to the UK. He was profoundly shaped by his father, Professor Habibur Rahman, a respected political advisor for the Mohadevpur region under the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), who worked closely with the Late Deputy Speaker Akter Hamid Siddique. Growing up in a household deeply rooted in political discourse, leadership, and civic duty, Mushfiqur's early exposure fostered a natural inclination toward governance and social impact. During his studies at Rajshahi University, he emerged as a student leader at Shahid Ziaur Rahman Hall, actively engaging in campus politics and representing student interests. He held this position while continuing his studies, which took him to Pune, India. Currently, his political engagement includes serving as Chairman of the Shahid Ziaur Rahman Research Centre in the UK.

The tradition of political engagement has continued in his family's next generation. Politics, as he often says, “runs in our genetics”: his son has recently completed a degree in Politics at the University of Cambridge, and his daughter is beginning her own political studies at King's College

London, after being inspired and helped by their former local MP of Hillingdon, Lord John Randall. Their academic paths reflect the same commitment to leadership and public service that has shaped Mushfiqur's own journey.

Before entering academia, he held senior corporate leadership positions, gaining significant experience in HR operations, governmental HR development, and HR budget and investment planning. His research interests include HRM, e-HRM, Employment Law, Politics and Leadership, and he has published over 50 articles and several books, with his recent publications appearing in high-ranking Academic Journal Guide (AJG) of CABS and Q1 journals, which are internationally recognised. He is also the editor of reputable journals.

Barrister Asraful Arafin is a practising barrister in the Courts of England and Wales, specialising in human rights, civil litigation, and family law. He was born in Noakhali, Bangladesh, into a family with a strong awareness of the country's political and historical development. He is the son of the late Dr Luthfor Rahman, a freedom fighter of the 1971 Liberation War, whose experiences and political outlook played an important role in shaping Arafin's early understanding of Bangladesh's national trajectory.

He obtained his LLB (Hons) from Northumbria University and was called to the Bar of England and Wales in 2013 following the completion of the Bar Professional Training Course at the University of the West of England. He later undertook the Legal Practice Course and completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership with distinction. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Law at Kingston University, where his research focuses on Corporate Social Responsibility and regulatory governance. Alongside his legal practice, Barrister Arafin contributes to legal education as a guest lecturer at Kingston University, delivering invited lectures in law. He is also an active public commentator, writing regularly for Bangladeshi newspapers on political and social issues. His commentary engages with themes such as democratic governance, constitutionalism, accountability, and human rights.

Barrister Arafin's political engagement began during his student years through involvement with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its student wing, Chatra Dal. In 2004, he was elected President of Chatra Dal for his ward in Begumganj, Noakhali. After relocating to the United Kingdom, he continued his engagement through diaspora-based political and civic platforms, participating in meetings, public discussions, and advocacy initiatives related to developments in Bangladesh. For more

than a decade, he has appeared on UK-based television programmes as a political commentator, offering perspectives on Bangladeshi politics.

Since 2016, he has served as International Affairs Secretary of the BNP Lawyers Forum (UK Unit) and is a co-founder of the Ziaur Rahman International Research Centre, a UK-based international think tank. In November 2024, he submitted allegations concerning serious human rights violations in Bangladesh to the International Criminal Court as part of broader efforts to promote international accountability. His professional journey reflects a sustained commitment to the rule of law, democratic reform, and the protection of human rights.

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INTRODUCTION

This book provides a comprehensive and analytically grounded examination of the 31-Point Programme articulated by Tarique Rahman on behalf of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The Programme constitutes a structured reform agenda addressing Bangladesh's contemporary challenges in democratic governance, institutional accountability, economic development, and social inclusion. While the 31-Point Programme emerges from a clearly defined political context, this book approaches it as a reform-oriented governance framework and subjects its proposals to systematic academic analysis grounded in international scholarship on governance, development, and public policy.

The 31-Point Programme is widely understood as a response to long-standing structural challenges in Bangladesh's political and institutional landscape. These challenges include excessive centralisation of authority, weakened accountability mechanisms, erosion of institutional autonomy, and declining public trust in democratic processes. Rather than addressing these issues in isolation, the Programme advances an integrated vision that links democratic restoration, the rule of law, decentralisation, economic competitiveness, social justice, climate resilience, and digital transformation. This book adopts the view that such interconnections are essential for understanding both the ambitions and the potential implications of contemporary governance reform agendas.

This analytical framing is further reinforced and contemporised by Rahman's most recent public address, delivered upon his return to Bangladesh, which provides a normative and political articulation of the Programme's underlying logic. In this speech, Rahman situates the present reform agenda within a longer historical trajectory of democratic struggle, explicitly linking the Liberation War of 1971, resistance to authoritarian rule in 1975 and 1990, and the mass mobilisation of students and citizens in 2024. From an analytical standpoint, this historical sequencing underscores a central premise of the book: that democratic legitimacy in Bangladesh has repeatedly been reclaimed through collective mobilisation, and that institutional reform must therefore be understood in relation to these moments of popular political assertion.

A particularly significant conceptual moment in the speech is Rahman’s explicit reference to Martin Luther King Jr. and his deliberate reformulation of the iconic phrase “I have a dream” into “I have a plan.” This transition from moral aspiration to institutional intent encapsulates the core orientation of the 31-Point Programme. It signals a shift away from abstract democratic longing toward a concrete governance roadmap—precisely the transformation that this book seeks to analyse. Accordingly, the Programme is examined not as a symbolic political manifesto, but as a policy-anchored attempt to translate democratic ideals into implementable institutional reforms.

The speech further foregrounds inclusivity as a foundational principle of democratic restoration. By explicitly acknowledging women, youth, children, persons with disabilities, farmers, workers, and religious minorities as central stakeholders in the nation’s future, Rahman frames governance reform as a collective societal project rather than an elite-driven exercise. This inclusive vision directly informs the book’s engagement with participatory governance, social justice, and human development across multiple chapters.

Chapter 1 establishes the conceptual and political foundations of the book by situating the 31-Point Programme within Bangladesh’s current governance and democratic context. It outlines the structural constraints shaping political and institutional performance and introduces the analytical perspective through which the subsequent chapters engage with governance reform, democratic legitimacy, and institutional renewal.

Chapter 2 offers a historical and institutional overview of Bangladesh’s political development. By tracing key moments of democratic transition, disruption, and consolidation, the chapter contextualises the emergence of reform-oriented agendas such as the 31-Point Programme. This historical grounding enables a clearer understanding of how past institutional trajectories shape present governance debates.

Chapter 3 focuses on democratic governance, political accountability, and constitutional norms. It examines themes such as electoral integrity, separation of powers, parliamentary oversight, and the role of independent institutions, analysing how these principles are articulated within the 31-Point Programme and how they correspond to internationally recognised democratic standards.

Chapter 4 turns to judicial independence, the rule of law, and access to justice. It explores how weakened judicial autonomy and politicised legal institutions undermine institutional credibility and citizen trust, and evaluates reform proposals related to legal accountability through the lens of comparative rule-of-law and governance research.

Chapter 5 examines anti-corruption frameworks, public sector accountability, and administrative reform. Corruption is treated not as an isolated failure, but as a systemic governance challenge shaped by institutional design, enforcement capacity, and political incentives. The chapter analyses how proposed reforms seek to strengthen transparency, oversight, and institutional integrity in line with international anti-corruption norms.

Chapter 6 addresses decentralisation, local governance, and citizen participation. Drawing on comparative public administration research, it explores how devolved authority and strengthened local institutions are positioned as mechanisms for improving responsiveness, accountability, and inclusive development.

Chapter 7 shifts attention to economic governance and macroeconomic stability. It examines structural challenges such as fiscal sustainability, investment confidence, and market uncertainty, situating economic reform proposals within broader debates in development economics and institutional reform.

Chapter 8 focuses on energy governance, infrastructure constraints, and economic vulnerability. It explores the relationship between fuel dependence, energy security, governance capacity, and economic resilience, assessing how governance reform is framed as a prerequisite for sustainable energy and infrastructure development.

Chapter 9 examines labour markets, employment creation, and workers' rights. It situates employment reform within international discussions on decent work, labour protection, and inclusive economic growth, assessing alignment with global labour standards.

Chapter 10 addresses education, youth development, and human capital formation. Drawing on human capital theory, it analyses how education reform and skills development are framed as long-term investments in national competitiveness, social mobility, and democratic sustainability.

Chapter 11 examines social protection, inequality, and inclusive development. It analyses how governance reform intersects with social justice objectives such as poverty reduction, welfare provision, and equitable access to public services, situating these issues within international development and social policy debates.

Chapter 12 focuses on gender equality, social inclusion, and participatory governance. Drawing on gender and governance literature, it evaluates reform commitments related to equality, representation, and social participation as components of democratic legitimacy and development outcomes.

Chapter 13 turns to civil liberties, freedom of expression, and civic space. It explores the role of media freedom, political participation, and civil society in sustaining democratic accountability, situating these issues within global debates on democratic resilience and backsliding.

Chapter 14 examines human capital development, productivity, and long-term economic competitiveness. It integrates discussions of education, health, skills, and labour participation, highlighting how human development underpins sustainable growth and institutional performance.

Chapter 15 addresses climate resilience, infrastructure modernisation, and digital transformation as interconnected dimensions of contemporary governance. It analyses how climate adaptation, resilient infrastructure, and ICT-enabled governance interact in climate-vulnerable contexts such as Bangladesh, drawing on adaptive governance theory and

international debates on sustainability, digital governance, and institutional capacity.

Taken together, the chapters advance a central argument: that democratic governance, institutional reform, economic development, and social inclusion in Bangladesh are deeply interdependent. By engaging the 31-Point Programme through a rigorous academic lens and situating it within both historical experience and contemporary political articulation, the book demonstrates how politically articulated reform agendas can be analysed as substantive contributions to broader debates on governance, democracy, and state legitimacy.

In this sense, Rahman's articulation of "I have a plan" functions not as a rhetorical gesture, but as an organising principle for understanding how democratic aspiration may be translated into institutional design. The book is intended for scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and informed readers seeking to understand the reform pathways and institutional choices shaping Bangladesh's political and developmental trajectory.

The BNP's 31-Point Charter (Verbatim)

An Outline of the Structural Reforms of the State Adopted on 13 July 2023.

The following section presents, in full and without interpretative modification, the **31-Point Charter for Structural Reforms in Bangladesh** adopted by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on 13 July 2023. The chapters that follow engage analytically with these points, examining their implications for democratic governance, institutional reform, and national development within Bangladesh's contemporary political context.

1. The illegal and illegitimate Awami League government has introduced numerous amendments to the fundamental framework of the constitution, driven by the malevolent intent of clinging to power against the will of the people. A 'Constitutional Reforms Commission' will be formed to carefully review and repeal or amend all controversial and undemocratic constitutional changes. Democratic rights of the people will be restored by reinstating the provision for a 'referendum' in the constitution.

2. An inclusive and egalitarian 'Rainbow Nation,' in contrast to the politics of vengeance, will be established based on Bangladeshi nationalism, through the amalgamation of diverse views, paths, ideologies, and religions. A new forward-looking 'Social Contract' is essential, built through continuous dialogue, exchange of views, and mutual understanding. In this pursuit, a 'National Reconciliation Commission' will be formed.

3. To reinstate democracy, safeguard the right to vote, and provide a permanent, constitutional, and institutional framework for the democratic process, an ‘Election-time Non-Partisan Caretaker Government System’ will be implemented. This will ensure that the people have the power to choose their representatives and form a government that genuinely represents their aspirations.

4. A proper balance shall be established in the executive powers of both the Prime Minister and the Cabinet of Ministers. The authorities, responsibilities, and duties of the Executive, the Judiciary, and the Legislature will be recalibrated to create a robust system of checks and balances in exercising state power.

5. No one shall serve as the Prime Minister for over two consecutive terms.

6. In addition to the existing legislative system, a bicameral government will be established by creating an “Upper House of the Legislature”. This chamber will include eminent citizens, educationists, professionals, scientists, journalists, sociologists, and individuals with a remarkable track record, all contributing their expertise and integrity to the governance of the state.

7. The amendment of Article 70 of the Constitution will be considered, subject to thorough examination, to allow Members of Parliament to express independent opinions, except in cases involving no-confidence motions, finance bills, constitutional amendment bills, and matters related to national security.

8. The existing “Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Appointment Act–2022” will be amended to establish a new, effective Election Commission. This Commission will comprise independent, competent, impartial, and credible individuals, based on recommendations from political parties and distinguished experts. All centres will conduct voting using paper ballots instead of electronic voting machines (EVMs). Reforms will be introduced to the Representation of the People Order (RPO), the Delimitation Order, and the laws governing

the registration of political parties. Additionally, using party symbols in local government elections will be abolished.

9. All constitutional, statutory, and public institutions will be restructured through essential legal reforms to reinstate transparency, accountability, and credibility that transcend parochial political lines. Appointments to key positions within constitutional institutions will undergo vetting by a Parliamentary Committee through a hearing process.

10. The effective independence of the Judiciary will be ensured in line with the Constitution and the Masdar Hossain Case verdict. A 'Judicial Commission' will be formed to reform the existing judicial system. Control and discipline of sub-ordinate courts shall vest with the Supreme Court. A separate secretariat for the Judiciary will be established to function under the Supreme Court. The erstwhile Supreme Judicial Council, which is enshrined in the Constitution, shall be reintroduced to deal with issues like the impeachment of the Supreme Court Judges, with necessary constitutional amendments to support this. Appointments to the higher Judiciary will be made based on expertise, wisdom, integrity, patriotism, reputation, and judicial acumen, free from partisan influence. Legislation specifying qualifications and standards for Supreme Court Judges will be enacted in accordance with Article 95(2)(c) of the constitution.

11. An 'Administrative Reforms Commission' comprising qualified and experienced persons shall be established to reform and restructure the administration and build a service-oriented public and police administration guided by integrity and patriotism. Appointments, transfers, and promotions within the civil and military administration will be based solely on merit, creativity, competence, experience, and training.

12. A 'Media Commission' will be set up comprising a former Supreme Court Judge, media professionals, and learned, experienced, and credible media figures, to ensure complete freedom of the press and comprehensive reforms in the media sector. The environment for honest and independent journalism and freedom of speech and expression will be fully restored. Towards that goal, amendments will be made to the 'ICT Act 2006' and 'Anti-Terrorism Act 2009.' At the same time, all oppressive

laws infringing on fundamental human rights, including the ‘Special Powers Act 1974’ and the ‘Digital Security Act 2018,’ will be repealed. The trial of all cases involving the murder and torture of journalists, including the sensational Sagar-Runi murder case, will be ensured.

13. There will be zero tolerance for corruption. A white paper will be published to investigate money laundering and corruption over the past decade and a half, with those responsible held accountable. Adequate administrative and legal measures will be taken to bring back the money laundered outside Bangladesh. Transparency and accountability within the Anti-Corruption Commission will be ensured through systematic reforms, alongside amendments to the Anti-Corruption Commission and anti-corruption laws. An ‘Ombudsman’ will be appointed under the Constitution to strengthen this oversight further.

14. The rule of law will be upheld at every level, restoring human dignity and democratic values. The brutal culture of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, mass murders, and both physical and psychological tortures will come to a permanent end. Human rights will be implemented in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Appointments to the Human Rights Commission will be made based on stringent and well-defined criteria, over and above any political consideration. Justice will be served for all individuals directly or indirectly responsible for extrajudicial killings, indiscriminate violence under the guise of crossfire, enforced disappearances, murders, abductions, rape, and inhumane torture over the past decade.

15. An ‘Economic Reforms Commission’ will comprise renowned economists, researchers, experienced bankers, corporate leaders, and professionals with substantial expertise to ensure economic justice. The disparity between the rich and the poor will be addressed through the equitable distribution of growth benefits, upholding equality, human dignity, and social justice, the main tenets of our liberation war. The Constitution Reforms Commission, Administrative Reforms Commission, Judicial Commission, Media Commission, and Economic

Reforms Commission will submit their reports within a defined timeframe to ensure the swift implementation of their recommendations.

16. Every individual shall enjoy the full right to practice their religion freely, based on the fundamental principle that "religion belongs to respective individuals, but the state belongs to all." Social, political, cultural, economic, religious and civil rights, as well as the security of life, property and dignity of the people, including ethnic minorities in both the hills and plains, irrespective of political affiliation, race, ideology, caste, or creed, will be upheld as guaranteed by the constitution. Action will be taken against those responsible for damaging homes, businesses, properties, and places of worship or forcibly occupying the assets of religious and ethnic minorities.

17. Fair wages for the working class will be ensured, keeping pace with inflation. Child labour will be eliminated, and measures will be taken to create a supportive environment safeguarding their well-being and development. A safe work environment and the right to democratic trade unions shall be protected. Efforts will be made to reopen all closed industries, including jute mills, textiles, and sugar mills. Multifaceted initiatives will ensure expatriate workers' safety, dignity, and job security, along with hassle-free and fast-track services at airports and the provision of expatriate voting rights. Special programs will be implemented to promote equitable growth and reduce disparities in disadvantaged regions such as tea gardens, slums, sandy areas, and coastal belts.

18. All draconian laws, including the Indemnity Act, will be repealed in the power, energy, and mineral sectors. The rampant corruption in purchasing electricity from the anti-people quick rental power plants will be halted to prevent further turmoil of the national economy. Adequate steps will be taken to promote renewable and mixed energy-based power generation. Steps will be taken to explore and utilize the neglected gas and mineral to reduce import dependence. Investment-friendly policies shall be introduced to attract both domestic and international investments, while giving special incentives to encourage business with expatriate Bangladeshis. A planned and well-coordinated industrial infrastructure

will be developed nationwide to support economic growth and create jobs resources.

19. National interest, sovereignty, and security shall be prioritized in foreign relations. Bilateral and multilateral issues will be resolved based on fairness, justice, and adherence to international norms, rules, and regulations. No terrorist activity shall be tolerated on the soil of Bangladesh, and stern actions shall be taken against terrorism, extremism, and militancy. The misuse of anti-terrorism laws as a political tool to suppress dissent and opposition political parties will be stopped, ensuring that genuine terrorists are identified and punished through proper legal processes and meticulous investigations.

20. To protect the nation's sovereignty, the Defense Forces will be organized in a time-befitting manner, instilled with a deep sense of patriotism and responsibility. The forces will be kept above all controversies, with their distinct dignity and positive image.

21. Local government institutions will be made more independent, robust, and empowered in pursuing comprehensive decentralization of power. These institutions will be brought under strict accountability to ensure their effective role in various development and service-oriented initiatives, including health and education. Local governments will operate independently, free from interference by the local administration, and any public representative or political entity. The appointment of government administrators to local government bodies will be discontinued, except in cases of vacancy due to the incumbent's death or a court order. An elected local government representative shall not be suspended, dismissed, or removed by executive order unless sentenced by a court.

22. Arrangements shall be made to confer state recognition to individuals for their contributions to the liberation war in 1971. A comprehensive list of the liberation war martyrs will be prepared through a state-led initiative based on an extensive survey, and they will be accorded due state status and recognition. A welfare policy for the families of martyred freedom fighters will be formulated and implemented on the

list. An accurate list of genuine freedom fighters will also be compiled through thorough verification.

23. Modern and forward-looking youth development policies will be formulated, aligning with the younger generation's vision, thoughts, and aspirations. Educated but unemployed youth will be given 'Unemployment Allowance' until they secure employment, or up to one year, whichever occurs earlier. Concrete steps will be taken to harness demographic dividends by enhancing the skills of the youth. Multiple pragmatic programs will be implemented to address unemployment. Necessary investments shall be made to develop human capital, with utmost importance on health, education, and nutrition. An increase in the age limit for entry into government services will be considered in line with international standards.

24. Specific programs will be implemented to empower women and ensure the effective participation of women in national building. Cutting-edge development initiatives shall be adopted and carried out to improve the quality of life for women and children. Women will be prioritized, in principle, with regard to nomination for National Parliament elections, along with efforts to increase women's representation in local government.

25. Need-based education at the lower and mid-levels and knowledge-based education at the tertiary level will be given priority, addressing the disorder and misfit in the education sector. Special emphasis will be placed on research. A uniform standard of education and instruction in vernacular will be prioritized. Arrangements will be made for regular students union elections in educational institutions to foster future leadership. Five percent of GDP will be allocated to the education sector in the national budget to develop a capable, skilled, and resourced population. Public interest sectors like health and education will see gradual increases in funding, in line with the country's economic growth. All relevant sectors, including education, technology, and training, will be reorganized to create a skilled workforce with real-world know-how. Research and Development (R&D) will be prioritized in educational, industrial, scientific, technological, and production sectors. Appropriate

measures will be taken to promote sports and showcase national culture, while preventing cultural aggression and ensuring healthy youth development.

26. Recognizing that health is wealth, and based on the principles of 'Health for all' and 'No death without medical treatment,' universal health coverage will be introduced, modelled after the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom. A 'Health Card' will be introduced for every citizen. The national budget will allocate five percent of the GDP to the health sector. The social safety net for the disadvantaged and ultrapoor will be further expanded until total alleviation of poverty.

27. Fair prices for agricultural produce will be ensured. Government purchase centres for agricultural products will be established in all the Unions in phases. Crop, livestock, fisheries, and poultry insurance will be introduced by extending subsidy support as necessary. Non-agricultural use of agricultural land will be strongly discouraged. An action plan for R&D in agriculture, fisheries, and livestock sectors will be prioritized, along with effective steps for strategic implementation and practical solutions. Incentives will be provided to the export-oriented agro-processing industries to promote the agricultural sector as a key driver of the economy.

28. To ensure the overall development of the communication network, a well-integrated multi-modal communication system will be established by reforming roads, railways, and waterways across the country. Arrangements will be made to boost regional and international trade and commerce through infrastructural development, technical modernization, and skills enhancement in all seaports and river ports.

29. Sustainable and effective strategies shall be adopted to address the hazards and losses due to climate change. The institutional capacity to face natural disasters like floods, tidal bores, cyclones, and earthquakes shall be enhanced by procuring the latest modern equipment. Effective measures shall be taken to prevent pollution of the rivers and water reservoirs. Programs for the excavation and re-excavation of rivers and canals shall be carried out to mitigate flood and drought risks.

Arrangements shall be taken for the prudent tapping, exploitation, preservation, and economic use of marine resources (blue economy) based on scientific surveys.

30. Necessary steps will be taken to elevate the information and communication technology (ICT) sector to a world-class level. The impact of ICT on all sectors will be prioritized in a true sense, drawing on practical application rather than mere rhetoric. The Space Research and Atomic Energy Commission will be strengthened by enhancing institutional capacity and functional facilities.

31. Planned housing and urbanization policies shall be developed and implemented through a national master plan, without wasting agricultural lands in both urban and rural areas, and through alleviating population pressure in cities. Housing facilities for all impoverished individuals in the country will be ensured in stages.

PART 1:
FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC
GOVERNANCE AND
INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY

Chapter 1:

Restoring Democratic Legitimacy and Citizens Ownership of the State

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 1; Point 2; Point 3

Abstract

The political transition in Bangladesh following the youth-led protests of August 2024 represents a critical moment in the country's contemporary democratic trajectory. The collapse of the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) government and the subsequent establishment of an interim administration under Professor Yunus have reshaped debates surrounding democratic legitimacy, institutional accountability, and citizen participation. In parallel to these developments, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) 31-Point Outline has been articulated as a proposed framework for political reform aimed at restoring democratic governance and reinforcing citizens' ownership of the state. This chapter examines the political and institutional dynamics that unfolded after Sheikh Hasina's exit, focusing on how sustained public mobilisation, governance failures, and contested policy decisions contributed to a legitimacy crisis within the state. Drawing on secondary qualitative data, the chapter analyses the BNP's reform agenda as an attempt to address constitutional distortions, executive dominance, and declining public trust. Particular attention is given to the ways in which the 31-Point Outline seeks to reposition democratic authority through institutional reform, decentralisation, and inclusive political participation. The chapter contributes to the broader literature on transitional democracy by situating Bangladesh's recent political developments within debates on democratic renewal and citizenship ownership. By examining the interaction between political mobilisation, institutional breakdown, and reform-oriented party agendas, the chapter provides insights into the challenges and possibilities of rebuilding democratic legitimacy in post-crisis political environments. As such, it establishes a foundational framework for understanding the subsequent thematic analyses presented throughout the volume.

Introduction

Maintaining political stability and democratic legitimacy is a central responsibility of governing parties, typically achieved through inclusive, accountable, and citizen-centred decision-making processes. In Bangladesh, this responsibility has come under intense scrutiny following a period of sustained political unrest and institutional contestation. The decline of the Awami League (BAL) government was precipitated by widespread youth-led protests, initially triggered by dissatisfaction with the government job quota system and broader concerns over governance, transparency, and corruption. These developments marked a critical turning point in Bangladesh's contemporary political trajectory.

The protests emerged as students and young citizens mobilised over perceived inequities in public sector employment and restrictions on merit-based opportunities. According to reported accounts, the situation escalated significantly following allegations that the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, ordered security forces to use lethal force against students participating in these demonstrations (Al Jazeera, 2025a). This response intensified both domestic and international attention, contributing to a rapid deterioration of public trust in state institutions and the governing party. The political transition was further accelerated by these events, leading to the eventual collapse of the BAL government under mounting public pressure.

At the core of this political conflict was the Supreme Court's decision to reserve approximately one-third of government jobs for family members of veterans of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War (Chughtai & Ali, 2024). While framed as a policy rooted in historical recognition, the extension of job reservations particularly the allocation of 30% of government positions to the grandchildren of freedom fighters was widely contested by students and young job seekers. Many viewed the policy as incompatible with principles of fairness, meritocracy, and equal opportunity in a highly competitive labour market. As a result, opposition to the quota system became a focal point for broader expressions of political frustration and demands for institutional reform.

The escalation of protests led to significant confrontations between students and law enforcement agencies, particularly in Dhaka, resulting in casualties and mass arrests. These events acted as a catalyst for nationwide political mobilisation and prompted judicial intervention. In response to sustained unrest, the Supreme Court revised the quota framework, reducing the original allocation to 5% for the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters from the 1971 Independence War, with an additional 2% reserved for disables and ethnic minorities, while assigning the remaining 93% of government jobs based on merit (Chughtai & Ali, 2024). Although this revision addressed some immediate grievances, it did not fully resolve underlying concerns regarding democratic accountability, state legitimacy, and citizen participation.

Within this context of political transition and institutional uncertainty, questions of democratic legitimacy and citizenship ownership of the state have become increasingly salient. The events surrounding the job quota protests and subsequent governmental collapse highlight deeper structural tensions within Bangladesh's political system, particularly regarding the balance between historical recognition, social equity, and contemporary democratic expectations (The Economic Times, 2025). This chapter situates these developments within the broader framework of Bangladesh's transitional democracy and examines how the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) 31-Point Outline has been articulated as a response to these challenges, aiming to restore democratic governance, institutional credibility, and citizen trust in the post-crisis political environment.

Importance of Democracy and People's Ownership of the State

The promotion of democracy through the 31 Points of the BNP refers to the power of citizens in a country's political transition, such as Bangladesh. Dismantling a centralised political culture was effective for the BNP in implementing a decentralised political system that

appropriately fulfilled citizens' rights. In turn, implementing a decentralised administrative system seems appropriate to enable the public to take a more proactive role in decision-making and ultimately to promote transparency and inclusion in the nation (UNDP, 2024). Consequently, the BNP might succeed in restoring people's individual rights and freedom to obtain government jobs without personal influence or background checks. In this regard, point 1 of the 31 Points Outline is based on the concept of restoring people's democratic ownership and rights by initiating a new provision for a Referendum in the newly proposed government (BNPBD, n.d.). In addition, the BNP intends to abolish the administrative regulations enforced by the Awami League and to ensure that people throughout the country effectively enjoy their individual democratic rights. The main aim of the BNP party is to provide the necessities and rights to the people by promoting jobs, education and a strong healthcare system (BNPBD, n.d.). It describes the growth of a decentralised political culture in Bangladesh in 2024, led by students.

According to Ingham (2022), democracy is an essential element of broader social equality throughout a country. Accordingly, Tarique Rahman is dedicated to restoring people's democracy and ownership in Bangladesh by establishing the BNP as the ruling authority. In addition, the BNP also framed Point 2 of the 31 Points Outline, based on the idea of developing an inclusive Rainbow Nation by implementing diverse ideologies, paths and religions in Bangladesh (BNPBD, n.d.). As a consequence, implementing diverse approaches and systems is likely to enable Tarique Rahman to sustain democracy and people's ownership across Bangladesh and ultimately maintain fairness and ethics in administrative systems. Hereby, political leaders like Tarique Rahman consistently emphasise the spread of democracy and public ownership of the state to address social inequalities effectively.

Ensuring public transparency is recognised as the core purpose of democracy and people's ownership in the state of Bangladesh. As Ecker et al. (2024) note, democracy relies heavily on authentic and open debates that enhance decision-making through transparency. Consequently, Tarique Rahman seeks to ensure fair opportunities for people to

participate in Bangladesh's decision-making processes by promoting public ownership and democracy through the 31 Points Outline. In this regard, point 3 of the 31 Points Outline states that an 'Election-time Non-Partisan Caretaker Government System' shall be implemented to protect people's right to vote through democracy in Bangladesh (BNPBD, n.d.). Therefore, imposing the 31 Points Outline proved valuable for Tarique Rahman in successfully spreading democracy and people's ownership throughout Bangladesh.

International Comparisons

The BNP's emergence as a dominant parliamentary political force represented a significant example for transitional democracies worldwide. The absence of fair job quotas led to severe political tensions in Bangladesh, marking the end of the Sheikh Hasina era. Moreover, the shooting order towards the students during the protests created challenges for Sheikh Hasina in terms of regaining the trust of local citizens as well. Thus, she suffered a setback when she was removed from the position of prime minister, after which the BNP consolidated its position as the leading political party in Bangladesh. On the other hand, similar political tensions in Indonesia can be considered another significant incident in the transition of democracies worldwide. Accordingly, students in Indonesia began protesting against unacceptable Government policies, including proposed cuts to the national budget and a newly framed law relevant to the military's interference in political affairs (Al Jazeera, 2025b). As a consequence, the Indonesian Government also faced public rage and extensive criticism for its failure to promote and maintain consistent democracy and fair economic stability in the country. The uncontrollable increase in the cost-of-living crisis and the government's ignorance of people's daily struggles ultimately led to a destructive public rage in Indonesia (Al Jazeera, 2025b). However, the BNP, under the leadership of Tarique Rahman, has been able to defuse political tension in Bangladesh by actively engaging with citizens and assisting the student

mobilisers forming an interim government to ensure the restoration of public ownership and democracy.

The authoritarian governance, lack of democracy, oppressions against political opponents, nationwide corruption, large scale human rights, and finally, unfair representation of efficient students in the reservation of government job quotas are recognised as the key drivers of political tension in Bangladesh, and further led to a transition to democracy. On the contrary, the political revolt in Poland began due to adverse human rights disputes, including crimes that were backed by anti-semitism in the country (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Accordingly, the Polish Government faced public criticism for its failed attempts to restore sound democratic conditions throughout the country by preventing crime. However, the democratic restoration in Poland has been critically interrupted by political and legal obstacles (Csaky, 2024). As a result, the Polish Government is unable to implement democratic procedures and regulations to protect people's rights against criminal incidents throughout Poland. In contrast, the Caretaker Government in Bangladesh has been successful in managing the nation's unstable political landscape by promoting democracy and public rights through fair elections. Thereby, Bangladesh's transition to democracy is likely to be handled more evenly by the BNP-led Parliament than other international political turbulence, such as in Indonesia and Poland.

Nigeria also witnessed a transition to democracy caused by the country's vulnerable social conditions. For example, persistent economic weaknesses and heightened security threats have complicated democratic development processes in Nigeria, a situation that can be characterized as administrative turbulence (United States Institute of Peace, n.d.). However, Bangladesh formed and implemented the Caretaker Government to effectively restore people's living standards and the nation's economic conditions. In this regard, countries like Nigeria, Poland, and Indonesia can also achieve success in restoring democratic prosperity by adopting similar approaches, such as creating a Caretaker Government, as in Bangladesh. Henceforth, international cases of

transition to democracy highlight the need for effective democracy and public ownership to maintain social harmony.

Focusing on Principles (Legitimacy, Participation)

Ensuring that legitimate processes and administrative regulations are perceived as a key priority for the BNP to advance democracy among Bangladesh's citizens. BAL's negligence of electoral integrity has been the main reason for the deteriorating government's situation regarding the issue of job quotas. The institutional capture through democracy and the lack of integrity in the voting system have made it difficult for citizens of Bangladesh to exercise their rights effectively. The BNP framed and imposed the 31-Point Outline to illustrate its principles for restoring legitimacy in Bangladesh's political system and authorities. Hereby, Point 1 of the 31-Point Outline is based on the principle of abolishing the illegitimate amendments imposed by the Awami League during Sheikh Hasina's tenure (BNPBD, n.d.). Consequently, the BNP's administrative perceptions and values are perfectly aligned with the principle of legitimacy in the context of introducing a transparent and ethical government in Bangladesh. In this context, the BNP also rests on the principle of restoring people's rights and mitigating all undemocratic measures by implementing a Referendum in the new constitution (BNPBD, n.d.). These particular approaches and strategies of the BNP show that the proposed administration is entirely dedicated to incorporating legitimacy as one of its main principles in the interest of serving the people of Bangladesh. Therefore, legitimacy is identified as a significant pillar of the BNP in forming the new ruling authority across Bangladesh.

Encouraging the public's convenient participation in electoral procedures is another central principle of the BNP for promoting democracy and people's ownership throughout Bangladesh. Tarique Rahman looks forward to embracing ethical, transparent administrative processes to provide fair and equal opportunities to people in Bangladesh. In essence, the BNP initiated the creation of the 31 Points Outline by

integrating the principle of arranging a credible, fair and participatory election to choose and implement a new government after Hasina's exit from Bangladesh (BNPBD, n.d.). This specific approach by Tarique Rahman demonstrates the BNP's concern for and interest in upholding the principle of participation during the 2026 elections.

The BNP is positively focused on incorporating practical principles into its governing system to ensure the fair promotion of women's rights and democracy by providing adequate opportunities to participate in government decision-making. Accordingly, Point 24 of the 31 Points Outline states that effective programs will be developed and implemented to empower women and improve female participation in the National Building in Bangladesh (BNPBD, n.d.). This crucial strategy reflects the BNP's mindset that participation is a key principle in the creation of the 31 Points Outline and, ultimately, in the spread of democracy through female participation in administrative roles. As a consequence, the BNP might succeed in restoring women's position at the national level by inspiring women to pursue administrative roles. Thus, legitimacy and participation were integral elements that the BNP considered in developing the 31 Points Outline after the end of Hasina's rule.

The BNP and Tarique Rahman need to assess public intentions concerning the acceptance of the 31 Points Outline and the potential of a BNP-led government to serve as a credible alternative to the Awami League's governance in Bangladesh. Accordingly, adopting the 'theory of planned behaviour (TPB)' can prove appropriate for the BNP in observing and understanding whether people are willing to engage with the new government system. Based on the comment of Teixeira et al. (2022), TPB offers a valid framework in order to explore the link between behavioural intentions and attitudes of individuals under any given circumstance or situation. In the context of TPB, the past government's behaviours were entirely driven by its personal goals and agenda, along with the quota system, leading to student protests in 2024. The lack of integrity and reliability in the BAL government's behaviour connects the transition of the government led by the students. On the other hand, the TPB theory's principles reflect that the absence of democratic behaviour by the past

government, through improper voting and electoral processes, is the reason for the rise of the BNP in relation to Students' protests. In turn, applying TPB in relationship-building approaches can be valuable for the BNP in comprehending the public's willingness to accept the BNP as the new ruling party in Bangladesh. Additionally, TPB can help the BNP understand changes in people's behaviour ahead of the 2026 fair election. Therefore, the BNP might put stress on implementing TPB to optimise people's intentions and attitudes towards accepting Tarique Rahman as the next head of the nation.

This chapter emphasises the execution of the Secondary Data Collection process to assess the tactics and principles adopted by the BNP under Tarique Rahman's supervision. As per Mazhar et al. (2021), published articles, journals, books, and reports are the core sources for secondary data. In this context, the adoption of secondary qualitative material is appropriate for discussing the book's political elements in relation to existing knowledge and theories. The existing secondary qualitative data helps mitigate individual bias regarding the political situation, which would be beneficial in framing the 31 points of the BNP after the demolition of the BAL government. In addition, the Qualitative Strategy is also applied to obtain the required data and information about the BNP and its 31 Points Outline. The collection of qualitative data is beneficial for analysing the subjective norms surrounding the political situation and the importance of the BNP's 31 points for fulfilling the democratic requirements of citizens from Bangladesh. The Purposive Sampling Technique is used to collect data from peer-reviewed journals, newspaper articles, and authentic websites to evaluate the BNP's effectiveness in restoring democracy in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the Thematic Analysis Procedure is used to interpret the gathered data by identifying three themes. In accordance with Braun and Clarke (2024), Thematic Analysis aims to generate and frame themes from Qualitative Data. Henceforth, implementing Thematic Analysis proved appropriate in investigating the principles and approaches undertaken by the BNP to restore public ownership and democracy in Bangladesh.

Restoring the State's Legitimacy by Eliminating Corruption and Increasing Public Confidence

Building an Inclusive and Unified Nation through National Reconciliation. A Democratic government creates opportunities for fair elections and upholds human rights principles to ensure justice. As per Riaz (2022), rigged elections have negatively affected democracy across Bangladesh, which has further led to the violation of human rights. The political instability in Bangladesh has reduced people's control over the impartial election of the government. Additionally, political violence and corruption experienced a massive surge in the country, especially extrajudicial killings. According to Behera (2025), political conflicts in Bangladesh have often emerged from a lack of secularism and resistance to the idea of nationalism. In this context, democratic governments create opportunities to meet secularism by offering religious freedom and eliminating religious violence. According to Wohab (2021), BNP established secularism in Bangladesh by eliminating an Article that prevents the formation of religious-based parties. Point 1 of the 31-point Outline framework of BNP highlights that establishing a Constitutional Reform Commission enables the government to amend controversial changes and restore people's rights (BNPBD, n.d.). As a result, implementing the constitutional reforms involves amending the unlawful changes that enable leading parties to remain in power for an extended period.

Democratic governments benefit the public by offering political equality and enabling accountability among selected representatives. Before corruption and rigged elections, Bangladesh had zero tolerance towards radicalism, terrorism and destabilisation, while the country further contributed to the UN Peacekeeping Force (Karim, 2022). This implies the country's potential to achieve further growth through the implementation of democratic government and increased political responsibility among the people. On the other hand, Hossan et al. (2024) have argued that since 1973, during the first parliamentary election, Bangladesh has valued democracy and established mandatory voting.

Bangladesh has endured diverse political turbulence and experimented with different forms of government, including military dictatorship, multi-party parliamentary systems and one-party presidential rule. This further indicates the population's increased understanding of the types of corruption prevailing in the country and the necessity of people's ownership of the state. In a geopolitical context, Bangladesh has a locational advantage as a facilitator of free maritime passage in the Bay of Bengal. As a result, point 1 of the proposed outline by BNP addresses the rise in corruption during the Awami League Party's rule while restoring democratic rights by amending the constitution.

Building an Inclusive and Unified Nation Through National Reconciliation

The concept of the Rainbow Nation has emerged in South Africa. At the same time, BNP's proposed outline refers to utilising the Rainbow Nation in a similar format and building inclusiveness within the state. According to Lötter and Bradshaw (2022), the term rainbow nation initially merged in South Africa to tackle the high-levels of xenophobia and racism existing within the country. Applying a similar concept across Bangladesh involves tackling structural racism in Bangladesh towards ethnic minorities and underprivileged groups, especially by offering equal access in terms of housing and employment. For instance, South Africa has utilised the term "Rainbow Nation" to acknowledge 12 different languages, freedom to express sexual orientation, and racial diversity (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2024). Building on this insight, BNP has focused on developing a Rainbow Nation by addressing cultural barriers and expanding equal opportunities for diverse communities. On the other hand, Chaney et al. (2025) highlighted that Bangladesh lacks legal compliance towards human rights, as indigenous people have been experiencing eviction from ancestral lands. Apart from evictions, indigenous minorities of Bangladesh have been further subjected to oppressive policies, including exclusion of Indigenous communities (adivasis) from the constitution and emphasis on developing a unique local

culture. In this regard, a lack of proper legal recognition by the government has led to significant discrimination within society, leading to indigenous populations being excluded from different opportunities. Hence, building a Rainbow Nation involves addressing barriers, such as promoting minorities' rights to participate in legal decision-making.

Establishing fairness involves investigating the rights of the abused population and facilitating healing after conflict. In this regard, the national reconciliation commission plays a vital role in supporting investigations and issuing recommendations to address the root cause of abuse. According to Mookherjee (2022), the idea of reconciliation especially emerged after the Cold War to stabilise nations and help victims gain justice from deep-rooted political violence. The application of the National Reconciliation Commission in Bangladesh was initially applied during the Bangladesh War of 1971 as the government sought justice against the war crimes. According to Chowdhury (2025), political protests and student demonstrations have led to the ousting of Sheikh Hasina, as terms such as "Razakars" (traitors) have been introduced. In this regard, by addressing the changes, NRC has the potential to further contribute to the development of the Rainbow Nation by encouraging national dialogue and highlighting victims' demands. The BNP government has reaffirmed the goal of the Rainbow Nation to seriously consider the challenges experienced by Indigenous communities through the Vision 2030 programme (Dhaka Tribune, 2025). In this context, strengthening NRC enables the government to primarily address the ongoing challenges experienced by indigenous communities, which have been posing a barrier to achieving inclusiveness. In this analysis, Chaney et al. (2025) mentioned that indigenous people, despite belonging to a rich cultural heritage, lack religious freedom, which has often led to religious-based violence. As a result, reconciling differences among diverse religions and people from different backgrounds increases Bangladesh's potential to establish a Rainbow Nation.

Role of the Caretaker Government in Promoting Fairness in the Election Process

A caretaker government has emerged as a temporary, ad hoc government that oversees parliamentary activities and government functions before elections and in the absence of a permanent government. As found by Chowdhury (2023), a key drawback affecting people's ownership across Bangladesh involves the inability of the Election Commission to maintain fairness during elections. Election Commission's lack of control has further resulted from the deep-rooted dynastic and patriarchy roots within the multiparty parliamentary system of Bangladesh. In this regard, hereditary rule and rising corruption has led to the development of a caretaker government to establish legitimacy over the election process. Chowdhury (2023) further discussed the non-party caretaker government established after the 1994 election and aided the Election Commission to maintain fairness until its collapse in 2011. The caretaker government system in Bangladesh was abolished after the government considered it unconstitutional. However, recently, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh has ordered the restoration of a non-partisan caretaker government, while the initiation process is set to occur after the next elections (The Hindu, 2025). Thus, considering the different parties and the increased systemic barriers, as well as corrupt elections, a caretaker government helps maintain fairness in elections.

Bangladesh has recently received an interim government, after the resignation, which is further responsible for restoring order and guiding the nation towards elections. Daud (2024) has specified that the interim government build a new regime, while its purposes include offering stability, finding permanent solutions to political unrest, and promoting dialogue with the population. In this context, the current interim government has been focusing on identifying policies to restructure and gather public opinion regarding the country's well-being. For instance, Bangladesh's current leader, Muhammad Yunus, has vowed to uphold and protect the constitution by creating scope for democracy (Hussain & Drury, 2024). A key step in restoring democracy as an interim government

involved addressing public demands to abolish quota systems and reserved positions. Therefore, the interim government has focused on increasing public engagement in political decisions and further supports the goals of the rainbow nation.

Youth participation in Bangladesh's politics played a vital role in driving reformation and increasing opportunities for fair elections through a caretaker government system. One of the key instances noted involves tackling the corruption of the Awami League and ousting Sheikh Hasina as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Chowdhury (2025) has highlighted that students publicly denounced Sheikh Hasina as an autocrat and as using corrupt methods, and that the PM has held her position for fifteen years. In this regard, the brutal protests of the youth have been one of the leading factors that have initiated change across Bangladesh and paved the way for democracy. Additionally, youth have shown greater confidence in the interim government led by Prof. Yunus, further demonstrating increased civic sense. Based on Hossain (2025), approximately 44.29% of Bangladeshi students have greater confidence in the current interim government, while 70% of students agree to holding an election after a year of the interim government's formation. Considering the insights, caretaker governments have higher influence over youth, as its establishment increased public confidence regarding the practice of fair elections. Therefore, the reformation of the caretaker government has increased Bangladesh's potential to achieve goals related to the Rainbow Nation and implement democratic policies.

Rebuilding Democracy in Bangladesh and Considering National Reconciliation and a Caretaker Government

Building a democratic government involves addressing the needs of the general public and ensuring the modernisation of socio-economic factors. Ingham (2022) has identified that democracy is essential to maintaining social equality and eliminating structural barriers to equality,

such as structural racism. In this context, Behera (2025) noted that Bangladesh's political climate experienced several turbulences in establishing democratic principles due to rising resistance to secularism and a lack of religious freedom. The issue has stemmed from systemic barriers of using religion as a political tool and the application of military dictatorships. In this regard, BNP has established key principles to protect people's interests through a Rainbow Nation and acknowledging different religious expressions (BNPBD, n.d.). A key ambition of BNP is to sustain fairness by promoting democracy in the country and mitigating barriers, such as corruption and unfair elections. In a similar context, Wohab (2021) has highlighted that BNP has implemented practices such as eliminating articles of the constitution that restrict the formation of parties with religious alliances. Assessing the step, it has been gathered that BNP emphasises the recognition of religious freedom by accepting different forms of religious expression. Considering BNP's ambition, factors driving democratic principles include youth engagement and mobilisation across Bangladesh and increased public trust in the interim government. A study by Hossan (2025) found that 44.29% of Bangladeshi students expressed greater faith in the interim government and proposed delaying the election by a year. As a result, apart from BNP's involvement and the proposed 31-point Outline, student involvement has played a significant role in transitioning towards democracy.

Bangladesh has been subjected to different levels of corruption, leading to rigging in elections, along with the practice of a military regime. Continuous struggle of the general population has led to the emergence of the Rainbow Nation, which prioritises inclusiveness. Chaney et al. (2025) mentioned that currently, Bangladesh lacks the proper legal structure to ensure inclusiveness due to existing discrimination towards indigenous people. Addressing the barriers, BNP has proposed the concept of the Rainbow Nation, which further emphasises the use of diverse programmes to give serious consideration to the challenges faced by indigenous communities. On the other hand, Professor Mohammed Yunus, a member of the interim government, has proposed a national consensus model to ensure economic stability and increase social

sustainability in Bangladesh. On the other hand, the development of the National Reconciliation Commission has gained prominence within the BNP due to the overt victims of negligence and abuse of justice, and to restoring faith in the government. In this context, Mookherjee (2022) mentioned that reconciliation has emerged in Bangladesh to offer justice to victims of political unrest and war crimes during the Bangladesh War of 1971. As a result, establishing NRC in the current political scenario allows BNP to focus on mitigating unjust practices towards the Indigenous communities of Bangladesh.

The caretaker government was in power in Bangladesh before its collapse in 2011, amid allegations of corruption. Chowdhury (2023) mentioned that a caretaker government has emerged due to the Election Commission's inadequate abilities to maintain a fair election process. Systemic barriers such as heredity and patriarchy ruling in political parties have resulted in a lack of impartiality during the elections. In this context, the Supreme Court has proposed establishing a caretaker government, especially to restore electoral fairness. A key purpose of caretaker government is to create a pluralistic and inclusive democracy in Bangladesh by establishing free and fair electoral systems (The Hindu, 2024). Additionally, the current interim government, acting as a caretaker until the next elections, has gained significant support from youth, especially in restoring justice in Bangladesh and uplifting its economic conditions. For instance, Muhammad Yunus, the current head of the caretaker government, has established commissions to reform constitutions and help youth achieve justice (Al Jazeera, 2024). Therefore, BNP's 31 points further highlight the importance of a caretaker government set to take office before the next elections.

Linking the findings with the theoretical framework highlights that subjective norms and social pressure play a vital role in creating shifts in political behaviour. Defining the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), Teixeira et al. (2022) have noted that behavioural intention is linked to individual and societal attitudes and pressures. In this regard, changes in youth behaviour have stemmed from the ongoing political injustice in Bangladesh, while the 31 Points Outline of the BNP has also emerged

from social unrest. On the other hand, the application of the theory has further helped identify that changes in people's behaviour stem from external environments, including peer pressure and sudden changes in societal norms. Hossan (2025) found that youth have increased confidence in the leadership of Muhammad Yunus, stemming from his ethical leadership. In this regard, the youth's confidence in the leader of the interim government has emerged from a positive attitude toward the leadership practices. At the same time, the BNP's 31-point outline further increases the general public's confidence in the democratic government. Hence, aligning TPB with Bangladesh's political environment has led to changes in the behaviour of the general population and political parties, driven by the need to change behavioural intentions.

Transforming Bangladesh into a People-Owned State: Key Institutional Strategies

Summarising the chapter's insights, it appears that the BNP's ambition, as outlined in the 31 Points Outline, involves establishing democracy in Bangladesh and establishing a Rainbow Nation. In this regard, key barriers to the implementation of democracy are highlighted, including the lack of fair elections and ongoing discrimination. Addressing the challenges, BNP's focus was on rebuilding Bangladesh to meet the demands of the general public and ensuring equal opportunities to select the government. Increasing fairness in elections, a key initiative of BNP, included establishing a caretaker government that prioritises upholding legal principles and aiding the Election Commission. Additionally, the chapter has discussed Bangladesh's limitations in addressing the needs of indigenous communities, necessitating the development of an NRC to ensure justice. Hence, addressing the remaining challenges in Bangladesh's political environment involves increasing the caretaker government's power to monitor elections and reduce parties' interference in manipulating results.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined Bangladesh's recent political transition through the lens of democratic legitimacy, citizenship ownership of the state, and institutional reform following the weakening of the Awami League government. The analysis indicates that prolonged electoral controversies, contested job quota policies, and patterns of institutional concentration contributed to declining public trust and widespread youth-led mobilisation. Within this context, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) 31-Point Outline is analysed as a reform-oriented framework aimed at addressing structural challenges in democratic governance and restoring confidence in state institutions.

The chapter highlights the significance of democracy and citizen ownership as foundational elements for transparency, inclusion, and fairness in governance. The BNP's emphasis on decentralisation, inclusive political participation, and constitutional reform reflects an effort to recalibrate centralised power structures and re-establish public accountability. By proposing mechanisms such as referendums, caretaker governments, and non-partisan electoral oversight, the analysis illustrates potential pathways through which democratic legitimacy may be strengthened in transitional political contexts.

Taken together, the chapter suggests that restoring democratic legitimacy in Bangladesh depends not only on political transition but also on sustained institutional reform and inclusive governance practices. By situating the BNP's 31-Point Outline within broader debates on democratic renewal, the chapter contributes to an understanding of how post-crisis political environments can pursue greater citizen engagement, institutional credibility, and long-term democratic stability.

While Chapter 1 has situated Bangladesh's recent political transition within broader debates on democratic legitimacy, citizenship ownership, and reform-oriented political agendas, it has also revealed the structural limits of democratic renewal in the absence of institutional recalibration. The legitimacy crisis that emerged following prolonged political

contestation cannot be understood solely through patterns of mobilisation, leadership change, or reform narratives. Rather, it points to deeper constitutional imbalances that have enabled the concentration of executive authority and weakened mechanisms of accountability within the state. In this sense, demands for democratic renewal articulated in political discourse require closer examination of the constitutional architecture that shapes executive power, parliamentary oversight, and institutional restraint. Building on the political and legitimacy dynamics outlined in this chapter, Chapter 2 turns to the question of constitutional transformation, analysing how prolonged executive dominance, limited parliamentary autonomy, and weak enforcement of constitutional safeguards have produced accountability deficits in Bangladesh. By examining proposed reforms aimed at rebalancing executive authority—particularly those articulated within the Bangladesh Nationalist Party’s 31-Point Outline—Chapter 2 provides a constitutional foundation for understanding the institutional conditions under which democratic legitimacy may be restored.

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Chapter 2:

Constitutional Transformation and Rebalancing Executive Authority

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 4; Point 5; Point 6; Point 7

Abstract

This chapter examines constitutional transformation in Bangladesh with particular attention to the rebalancing of executive authority within the state. It analyses how prolonged executive dominance, weak parliamentary oversight, and limited constitutional enforcement have contributed to accountability deficits and power imbalances. Focusing on the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) 31-Point Outline, the chapter explores proposed institutional reforms aimed at strengthening checks and balances among the Cabinet, the Prime Minister, and Parliament. Particular attention is given to proposals concerning prime ministerial term limits, bicameral legislative reform, and the expansion of parliamentary and presidential oversight. By situating these proposals within comparative constitutional and governance debates, the chapter highlights their potential significance for restoring constitutional balance, democratic accountability, and institutional legitimacy in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Constitutional transformation refers to the process through which constitutional frameworks are restructured in response to evolving political, social, and institutional demands. In democratic systems, constitutional reform plays a central role in recalibrating power relations among state institutions, ensuring accountability, and safeguarding citizens' rights. In Bangladesh, the Constitution incorporates principles of democracy, secularism, and social justice, while formally committing the state to the protection of fundamental rights and parliamentary governance (GOV.BD, n.d.). Since independence, the Constitution has functioned as a foundational instrument for political order; however, its practical enforcement has been shaped by shifting power dynamics and recurring institutional constraints.

Despite its normative commitments, Bangladesh's constitutional framework has faced persistent challenges related to the concentration of executive authority and the limited effectiveness of parliamentary oversight. Scholars have noted that power imbalances between the executive and legislative branches have contributed to the politicisation of key state institutions, including the judiciary and public administration (Hasan, 2024a). These dynamics have weakened constitutional safeguards, reduced institutional autonomy, and raised concerns regarding transparency, electoral integrity, and democratic accountability. In particular, the absence of effective constraints on executive authority has enabled successive governments to consolidate power within the Prime Minister's Office, limiting the capacity of Parliament to perform its oversight functions.

Recent political developments have further intensified debates surrounding constitutional reform and executive dominance. Periods of political unrest, including mass mobilisation led by students and civil society actors, have highlighted public dissatisfaction with governance practices and constitutional enforcement (Al Jazeera, 2025). Within this context, discussions facilitated by the National Consensus Commission and political stakeholders have brought renewed attention to proposals

aimed at limiting the concentration of executive power, including the introduction of term limits for the Prime Minister and reforms to strengthen parliamentary autonomy (Dhaka Tribune, 2025). These debates highlight the growing recognition that constitutional stability in Bangladesh depends not only on formal democratic institutions but also on the effective distribution and restraint of political authority.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has articulated constitutional reform as a central component of its broader political agenda, emphasising the need to rebalance power among the Cabinet, the Prime Minister, and Parliament. Through its 31-Point Outline, the BNP has proposed institutional measures designed to expand parliamentary oversight, enhance presidential responsibilities, and reduce executive dominance by separating party leadership from state authority (Hasan, 2025a). These proposals reflect a broader concern with restoring constitutional balance and strengthening mechanisms of accountability within the state.

Against this backdrop, this chapter examines the constitutional limitations that have contributed to executive dominance in Bangladesh and assesses proposed reform strategies aimed at rebalancing executive authority. It explores how constitutional arrangements governing term limits, legislative structure, and parliamentary oversight shape power relations within the state, while drawing on comparative perspectives from other parliamentary and bicameral systems. By situating Bangladesh's constitutional challenges within wider debates on separation of powers and democratic governance, the chapter provides an analytical foundation for understanding constitutional reform as a necessary condition for restoring institutional legitimacy and democratic accountability.

This chapter adopts a qualitative, secondary-data-based analytical approach, drawing on academic literature, policy documents, and credible media sources to examine constitutional reform debates in Bangladesh. A thematic interpretive framework is employed to identify recurring patterns related to executive dominance, parliamentary accountability, and institutional reform (Braun & Clarke, 2023). This approach enables the

chapter to contextualise the BNP's reform proposals within broader constitutional and governance debates.

Power Relations among the Cabinet, the Prime Minister, and Parliament

Power dynamics among the Prime Minister, Cabinet, and Parliament are interconnected, as Parliament has the power to elect and remove a government. In contrast, the Prime Minister elects the Cabinet members. According to Chowdhury (2023), Bangladesh's original constitutional scheme adopted a Westminster parliamentary system by establishing a Cabinet and parliament. However, in Bangladesh's parliamentary system, the legislative branch has limited authority due to the Prime Minister's Office's extensive control over legislative functions. In this regard, compared with the Westminster system, Bangladesh's parliamentary system differs in that the power dynamics among the PMO, Parliament, and Cabinet are unbalanced. On the other hand, Talukdar (2025) highlighted that the era of structural democracy began after 1991, which involves democratic institutions governing the country. Despite structural democracy, the high level of control demonstrated by ruling parties in Bangladesh threatened the efficiency of democracy and created an imbalance by increasing the dominance of the Prime Minister. A key ambition of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), as highlighted in point 4, is to establish a balance of power between the executive bodies (BNPBD, n.d.). Therefore, establishing power involves addressing key legislative functions, such as law-making, budget development, constitutional amendments, and increasing the accountability of judicial bodies to balance power.

Historically, Bangladesh has adopted the UK parliamentary system; however, its practice has diverged from the Westminster system. Comparing the parliamentary systems of the UK and Bangladesh, Chowdhury (2021) noted that UK committees are institutionalised and independent, whereas Bangladesh's committees lack independence from

the ruling party. In this regard, comparing the systems reveals a lack of enforcement powers for committee members of Bangladesh's parliament, and the executive dominance of the PMO often threatens parliamentary oversight. On the other hand, Biswas et al. (2021) compared Japan's legislative assembly with Bangladesh. They highlighted that Japan has a bicameral legislature, with the lower house having greater power over the upper house. In comparison, Bangladesh's legislature lacks discipline, while executive leaders lack accountability to citizens, which further increases the potential for corruption within the parliamentary system. According to Khan (2023), the Executives under the Bangladesh constitution consist of the President, Prime Minister, and Chief Justice, while the President is responsible for defence with limited power. Thus, a lack of involvement and functions vested in the President has created barriers to power balance in Bangladesh, resulting in the Head of State exerting dominance over the legislative bodies.

Prime Ministerial Term Limits and Executive Power

Term limits are widely regarded as a constitutional mechanism for constraining executive authority and preventing the excessive concentration of political power. In democratic systems, limiting the tenure of political leaders is commonly associated with promoting leadership renewal, reducing corruption risks, and strengthening institutional accountability. In Bangladesh, however, the absence of constitutional term limits for the Prime Minister has contributed to prolonged incumbency and heightened executive dominance, despite the formal presence of democratic institutions (Jackman & Maitrot, 2022).

Scholars have argued that the lack of term limits in Bangladesh has facilitated the consolidation of power within the Prime Minister's Office, weakening legislative scrutiny and enabling ruling parties to exert disproportionate influence over constitutional amendments and electoral processes (Patwary, 2022). This concentration of authority has further

reduced the effectiveness of judicial and parliamentary oversight, reinforcing a dominant-party system characterised by limited transparency and accountability. As a result, debates surrounding term limits have emerged as a central component of broader discussions on constitutional reform and democratic renewal.

Comparative perspectives highlight that the effectiveness of term limits depends on the broader institutional environment. In the United States, the formal adoption of a two-term limit through the Twenty-Second Amendment has functioned as a safeguard against executive overreach and political entrenchment (Elkins, 2021). In contrast, parliamentary systems such as the United Kingdom operate without fixed term limits for the Prime Minister but rely on strong parliamentary committees, intra-party accountability, and effective opposition scrutiny to constrain executive authority (Serban, 2022). These comparative cases suggest that term limits alone are insufficient unless supported by robust oversight mechanisms.

Within the Bangladeshi context, the limitations of parliamentary scrutiny and committee effectiveness reduce the capacity of existing institutions to restrain executive power. Recognising these constraints, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has proposed the introduction of a two-term limit for the Prime Minister as part of its 31-Point Outline. This proposal is framed as a corrective measure aimed at preventing prolonged incumbency, reducing opportunities for political capture, and restoring balance between executive and legislative authority (BSS, 2025). By limiting tenure, the reform seeks to disrupt entrenched power structures and promote leadership rotation within the political system.

While term limits may introduce challenges, such as the loss of experienced leadership and potential policy discontinuity, comparative evidence suggests that their democratic benefits often outweigh these risks in contexts marked by executive dominance (Nowack & Leininger, 2022). In Bangladesh, where institutional checks have historically been weak, the introduction of a two-term limit is presented as a necessary constitutional safeguard rather than a constraint on democratic choice. When combined

with strengthened parliamentary oversight and judicial independence, term limits have the potential to contribute meaningfully to the rebalancing of executive authority and the restoration of constitutional accountability.

Bicameral Legislature and Upper House Accountability

Bicameral legislatures are widely recognised as a constitutional mechanism for enhancing legislative scrutiny, distributing authority, and preventing the concentration of power within a single parliamentary chamber. By introducing a second legislative body, bicameral systems aim to strengthen checks and balances, improve deliberative lawmaking, and subject executive decision-making to additional layers of review. Although bicameralism is most commonly associated with federal political systems, comparative constitutional research demonstrates that unitary states have also adopted bicameral arrangements to mitigate executive dominance and reinforce parliamentary accountability (Brown & Garlick, 2024).

Bangladesh operates under a unicameral legislative framework, in which the Jatiya Sangsad holds exclusive authority over lawmaking and budget approval. Within this structure, the majoritarian electoral system has enabled ruling parties to exercise extensive control over parliamentary processes, limiting legislative scrutiny and weakening opposition participation (Akter, 2021). Malik (2023) further argues that majority rule in unicameral systems increases the risk of majoritarian dominance, threatening checks and balances and reducing accountability. These dynamics have contributed to weak legislative oversight, limited representation of minority interests, and reduced public confidence in parliamentary institutions.

Comparative perspectives illustrate how bicameral systems may address such structural limitations. In the United States, bicameralism operates through the co-equal authority of the Senate and the House of Representatives, enabling mutual oversight and institutional competition

between chambers (CONGRESS.GOV, n.d.). The Senate's exclusive responsibilities—such as impeachment trials, confirmation of executive appointments, and treaty ratification—illustrate how an Upper House can function as a powerful counterweight to executive authority. In contrast, the United Kingdom's bicameral system assigns more limited powers to the House of Lords, reflecting parliamentary sovereignty. Although constrained in relation to money bills, the House of Lords plays a significant role in legislative scrutiny through expert debate, committee review, and amendments (UK Parliament, n.d.).

Comparative experiences in Asia further highlight both the potential and limitations of bicameralism. Biswas et al. (2021) note that Japan's bicameral legislature assigns greater authority to the lower house while maintaining the upper house as a revising chamber. In India, the Rajya Sabha is constitutionally mandated to review legislation and represent regional interests; however, scholars have observed that executive dominance and procedural bypassing often undermine its effectiveness, particularly during periods of political urgency (Verma, 2022). These cases demonstrate that bicameralism alone does not guarantee accountability; its effectiveness depends on institutional design, independence, and clearly defined oversight powers.

Within the Bangladeshi context, these comparative insights are especially relevant. The dominance of the executive within a unicameral system has constrained Parliament's ability to scrutinise legislation, oversee executive action, and represent diverse social interests. Recognising these structural deficiencies, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has proposed the introduction of a bicameral parliamentary system as part of its constitutional reform agenda under the 31-Point Outline. The proposed Upper House is envisioned as a deliberative and revisory chamber composed of individuals with recognised expertise and public standing, including academics, scientists, journalists, and civil society representatives (Hasan, 2024b).

The introduction of an Upper House is framed not merely as an institutional expansion but as a corrective mechanism aimed at

strengthening accountability and limiting the dominance of the majority party. Ahmad et al. (2025) argue that bicameral systems enhance inclusiveness by allowing broader representation and facilitating more comprehensive legislative review. In this respect, the Upper House is expected to scrutinise bills, assess policy implications, and introduce expert perspectives that may be absent from electoral politics. Such arrangements have the potential to improve legislative quality and reduce the risks associated with rapid or unilateral decision-making.

Nevertheless, bicameral systems are not without limitations. Comparative research identifies potential drawbacks, including longer legislative processes, inter-chamber conflicts, and delays in policy implementation (Stadelmann-Steffen et al., 2021). In some contexts, Upper Houses have been criticised for limited democratic legitimacy or marginal influence over executive decisions. These challenges highlight the importance of constitutional clarity in defining the composition, authority, and procedural role of the Upper House.

For Bangladesh, the effectiveness of bicameral reform would therefore depend on the constitutional independence of the Upper House, its clearly articulated oversight responsibilities, and its integration within a broader framework of parliamentary accountability. Without such safeguards, bicameralism risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. However, when combined with strengthened committee systems, enhanced presidential oversight, and meaningful public participation, the introduction of an Upper House has the potential to contribute significantly to the rebalancing of executive authority and the restoration of constitutional governance.

Beyond its institutional design, bicameralism carries a normative dimension that is particularly relevant in contexts where democratic legitimacy has been contested. Upper Houses are often justified not only as mechanisms of legislative review but also as instruments for protecting minority interests, moderating majoritarian excesses, and fostering deliberative democracy. In political systems characterised by dominant-party rule, bicameral arrangements may serve as a safeguard against the

erosion of pluralism by ensuring that legislative outcomes are subject to broader consultation and reasoned debate (Malik, 2023; Brown & Garlick, 2024).

In Bangladesh, the normative case for bicameralism is closely linked to longstanding concerns regarding majoritarian dominance and limited civic representation within parliamentary processes. The concentration of legislative authority within a single chamber has reduced opportunities for meaningful dissent and restricted the capacity of opposition actors to influence policy outcomes. As Akter (2021) observes, majority-rule systems operating within unicameral legislatures tend to marginalise minority voices and weaken accountability mechanisms, particularly when party discipline is strong. In such settings, the absence of a revising chamber increases the likelihood that legislation reflects partisan priorities rather than broader societal interests.

At the same time, the introduction of an Upper House in Bangladesh would face context-specific institutional risks. Comparative evidence suggests that Upper Houses may become ineffective when their constitutional authority is ambiguous or when executive actors retain the capacity to bypass legislative scrutiny (Verma, 2022). Without clear jurisdictional boundaries, procedural autonomy, and enforcement mechanisms, bicameral institutions risk functioning as symbolic bodies with limited influence over policy outcomes. These risks underscore the importance of constitutional clarity in defining the role of the Upper House, particularly in relation to budgetary oversight, constitutional amendments, and executive accountability.

The BNP's proposal for bicameral reform attempts to address these risks by situating the Upper House within a broader framework of constitutional restructuring. Unlike traditional elite-appointed second chambers, the proposed Upper House is envisaged as a forum for expertise-based and civic representation, drawing on professionals with demonstrated public credibility (Hasan, 2024b). This design seeks to enhance the legitimacy of the Upper House by grounding its authority in knowledge, experience, and public trust rather than partisan affiliation. By

doing so, the reform proposal aligns bicameralism with broader democratic objectives, including inclusiveness, deliberation, and institutional balance.

Importantly, the effectiveness of bicameral reform in Bangladesh would depend on its integration with complementary constitutional mechanisms. Strengthened standing committees, clearer presidential oversight responsibilities, and enhanced public participation in legislative processes are necessary to ensure that bicameralism contributes substantively to democratic governance. Ahmad et al. (2025) emphasise that bicameral systems are most effective when embedded within a wider architecture of checks and balances, rather than operating in isolation. In this respect, bicameralism should be understood as part of a comprehensive reform agenda aimed at recalibrating power relations and restoring constitutional legitimacy.

The Separation of Powers and Constitutional Balance

Montesquieu's "Separation of Powers" theory highlights the political authority of a state, divided into executive, legislative, and judicial branches. According to Akhtar (2022), a key focus of Montesquieu is separating the sovereign powers horizontally to maintain political liberty. Separation of Powers offers insights into the three bodies, such as the executive, legislative and judicial, along with providing mutual control to these bodies to establish a checks and balances system and prevent deposition. On the other hand, He (2025) mentioned that Montesquieu emphasised the importance of legislative and executive powers and judicial power. Following Montesquieu's insights, citizens have the power to govern individual actions, which further reduces the scope of judicial power within the Constitution.

Applying Montesquieu's theory to the Constitution of Bangladesh indicates that the state has adopted a Parliamentary system that often diverges from the separation-of-powers concept. Montesquieu's idea

involved separating the three branches of legislative, executive, and judicial bodies to ensure political liberty, whereas the Westminster system, the executive is often formed within the majority party in Parliament. An instance cited by Sharma and Singh (2021) states that Montesquieu argued that conferring legislative and executive power on a single individual undermines political liberty. In this regard, Bangladesh's Parliamentary system, which is similar to the Westminster system, is subject to tyranny and a lack of political liberty because it diverges from the separation-of-powers concept. Akhtar (2022) discussed that the Westminster model of Parliament focuses on fusing the powers, especially by combining legislative and executive functions. Similarly, Bangladesh, duplicating the UK-parliamentary system, has limited emphasis on the separation of powers, as the members of the Cabinet are also part of the Jatiya Sangsad. In this note, Lawrence (2021) explains that the separation of powers allows legislative, executive, and judiciary bodies to address systemic inequalities. Hence, the use of the theory helps us understand that Bangladesh's current constitutional system lacks clear regulations on power separation and further requires a transformation of conditions to ensure neutral principles.

Parliamentary Oversight and Executive Accountability

Power imbalances between the Cabinet, the Prime Minister and Parliament occur from extreme authority displayed by one of the executive bodies. The parliamentary system of Bangladesh is based on democracy, with members acting to serve the best interests of citizens. According to Rahman and Mohsin (2022), Bangladesh's politics lacks a confrontational culture, which has further reduced the parliament's credibility in the law-making process. Similarly, Hossain (2025) has noted that a lack of political confrontation has further led to issues such as the monopolisation of political parties in legislative decisions, such as interfering in reviewing Bills and manipulating elections. This explains the Bangladesh Parliament's lack of efficiency in budget-making, while the system is

extremely confidential, leading to limited participation by the general public. According to the Hindu, the Parliament of Bangladesh has adopted deflection strategies to address current challenges by blaming external factors rather than highlighting governance issues (Bhattacharjee, 2025). Establishing law and order is the key responsibility of the Parliament; however, a lack of oversight followed by low accountability has resulted in weak enforcement of the constitutional policies.

A key responsibility of the parliamentary members of Bangladesh involves favouring the constitution along with reviewing Bills to ensure its capability of meeting the citizens' interests. According to Al-Amin (2021), low attendance by members is a common feature of Parliamentary discussions in Bangladesh, with only 76% of MPs present on working days. A lack of attendance by members and committees has led to the Prime Minister and other executive bodies exercising extreme control over decision-making, creating opportunities for corruption. To address the challenge, a key resolution proposed by BNP involves separating and balancing the power among the legislative, judicial, and executive bodies. For instance, during the political transition in Bangladesh, the BNP has adopted a diplomatic approach to strengthen relations with India and neighbouring countries, while reducing dependence on a single power (Hasan, 2025b). Apart from reshaping political relations, BNP has proposed to balance power by reshaping Presidential authority, especially to curb the Prime Minister's dominant control. BNP has formed Committees and attended meetings to establish additional committees for handling local government activities and women's affairs, while emphasising that the President should oversee executive powers (Molla, 2024). A way committees assist in maintaining power balance is by implementing a bicameral Parliament and adding another Committee, such as an Upper House, to ensure proper review of Bills. Thus, BNP's strategy to increase parliamentary oversight and responsibility is to increase the President's power to oversee the actions and decisions of the Parliament.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has examined the key elements of constitutional transformation in Bangladesh by identifying the structural weaknesses in constitutional enforcement and legislative practice. The analysis has highlighted persistent challenges within parliamentary responsibilities, including low accountability in decision-making processes and a high rate of absenteeism among Members of Parliament. Under the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's 31-Point Outline, the chapter has outlined core institutional responses aimed at rebalancing power between the Cabinet, the Prime Minister, and Parliament. These include limiting the Prime Minister's tenure, restructuring executive authority, and introducing bicameral legislation through the establishment of an Upper House to strengthen checks and balances within government institutions. Collectively, these measures underscore the necessity of limiting the concentration of power within a single chamber or executive authority, as the fusion of responsibilities has historically enabled autocratic tendencies.

Reviewing the broader reform agenda, the chapter has demonstrated that Bangladesh's Parliament continues to face systemic limitations, particularly due to the absence of effective term limits and weak institutional oversight. In comparative perspective, systems without formal term limits—such as the United Kingdom—have managed to curb executive overreach through robust parliamentary committee accountability. In contrast, Bangladesh's limited committee effectiveness and weak scrutiny mechanisms have reinforced executive dominance. Within this context, the BNP's proposed reforms—particularly the adoption of bicameralism and the expansion of presidential responsibilities—offer a pathway to constrain the excessive authority of the Prime Minister and address long-standing imbalances in political power. The introduction of an Upper House is presented as a structural response to parliamentary underperformance, enabling greater legislative review and mitigating accountability deficits among elected representatives.

Strengthening parliamentary accountability emerges as a central pillar of constitutional reform. The chapter highlights the importance of empowering Departmental Standing Committees—including committees on public accounts, estimates, privileges, education, and home affairs—as oversight bodies capable of scrutinising draft legislation more effectively. Enhancing committee capacity through expert involvement, structured audits, and legislative training is shown to support higher-quality lawmaking and clearer regulatory frameworks. In this respect, improved parliamentary competence is linked to broader governance outcomes, including economic stability, transparent investment laws, and sustained institutional credibility.

Equally important is the role of public participation in constitution-making processes. Civic engagement is identified as essential to ensuring that constitutional reforms genuinely reflect the will of the people. Higher levels of political awareness, digital literacy, and public consultation—particularly among youth—are shown to enhance participation in constitutional debates and improve the legitimacy of reform outcomes. By facilitating inclusive consultation mechanisms and incorporating public feedback through digital platforms and mass media, constitutional reform can move beyond elite-driven processes and align more closely with citizens’ needs and expectations.

Taken together, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of constitutional reform as a mechanism for restoring democratic balance and institutional legitimacy in Bangladesh. Its significance lies in demonstrating how restructured parliamentary oversight, bicameral legislative arrangements, and inclusive civic participation can collectively address executive dominance and systemic accountability failures. By linking constitutional transformation to democratic responsiveness and institutional resilience, the chapter offers a coherent framework for understanding how constitutional reform can serve as a foundation for a more balanced, accountable, and citizen-oriented system of governance in Bangladesh.

While the preceding chapter has examined constitutional reform as a means of rebalancing executive authority and strengthening institutional checks within Bangladesh's parliamentary system, democratic accountability cannot be secured through constitutional design alone. The effectiveness of institutional reform ultimately depends on how electoral processes are governed, how political authority is renewed, and how public trust is sustained through credible and transparent elections. In this respect, the reconfiguration of executive–legislative relations discussed in Chapter 2 provides a necessary foundation for understanding the challenges of electoral governance and democratic safeguards. Building on this institutional framework, the next chapter turns to the electoral domain, examining how weaknesses in electoral administration, partisan influence over the Election Commission, and limited regulatory transparency have undermined electoral credibility in Bangladesh. Chapter 3 therefore extends the analysis from constitutional structures to electoral governance, highlighting the central role of independent institutions, transparent political parties, and democratic safeguards in restoring institutional legitimacy and public confidence.

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Chapter 3:

Electoral Governance, Institutional Credibility, and Democratic Safeguards

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 3; Point 7; Point 8; Point 9

Abstract

This chapter examines the institutional foundations of electoral governance in Bangladesh and the structural constraints that undermine the credibility of democratic elections. It analyses how weaknesses in electoral administration, executive influence over the Election Commission, and limited transparency within political parties have contributed to declining public trust and contested electoral outcomes. Drawing on secondary qualitative evidence, the chapter identifies three interrelated dimensions shaping electoral integrity: the independence of electoral management bodies, the appointment and accountability mechanisms governing the Election Commission, and the regulation of political party finance and conduct. The analysis highlights how weak law enforcement and partisan control have enabled electoral manipulation, reduced institutional autonomy, and eroded democratic safeguards. Situating these challenges within comparative governance debates, the chapter evaluates reform proposals articulated in the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) 31-Point Outline, including constitutional amendments to strengthen parliamentary freedom of expression, constrain executive involvement in electoral processes, and enhance regulatory oversight of political actors. By linking electoral governance to institutional credibility and democratic accountability, the chapter contributes to broader discussions on restoring electoral legitimacy and safeguarding democratic renewal in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Electoral governance plays a decisive role in shaping how democratic authority is produced, exercised, and evaluated over time. Elections are not simply moments of political competition or administrative coordination; they represent critical junctures at which citizens assess governing power, express consent or dissent, and reaffirm—or withdraw—confidence in democratic institutions. Where electoral arrangements function credibly, they sustain political accountability and reinforce institutional trust. Where they fail, elections risk losing their substantive democratic meaning, becoming routine procedures that reproduce authority without genuine public endorsement.

In Bangladesh, electoral governance is constitutionally assigned to the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC), which, under Article 118 of the Constitution, is mandated to administer national elections and uphold electoral fairness (GOV.BD, n.d.). While this constitutional mandate provides a formal framework for electoral administration, the practical operation of the Commission has remained the subject of sustained political and scholarly scrutiny. Existing research suggests that electoral processes in Bangladesh have been shaped not only by legal design but also by executive influence, partisan intervention, and uneven enforcement of electoral rules, factors that have collectively contributed to declining public confidence in the electoral system (Baized et al., 2025; Alim, 2024). These dynamics became particularly visible during the 2014 general election, when allegations of irregularities, opposition boycotts, and claims of “decorative” electoral practices intensified public debate regarding electoral credibility.

Concerns surrounding electoral governance in Bangladesh extend beyond isolated electoral events and point to broader patterns of democratic strain. Weak oversight of electoral processes has been associated with the consolidation of executive power, constraints on political competition, and limited opportunities for effective parliamentary scrutiny. In this context, questions regarding the independence of the Election Commission have been closely linked to difficulties in enforcing

codes of conduct, regulating campaign practices, and ensuring transparency in political party behaviour. Contemporary commentary highlights how repeated allegations of vote manipulation, administrative bias, and declining voter participation have gradually eroded trust in electoral institutions, giving rise to growing demands for institutional reform (The Hindu, 2025).

It is within this contested political environment that electoral governance has become a focal point of reform-oriented debate. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), through its 31-Point Outline, has explicitly framed electoral reform as central to the restoration of democratic legitimacy and institutional credibility. The reform agenda places particular emphasis on re-establishing the independence of the Election Commission, reducing executive involvement in electoral administration, enhancing transparency in political party financing, and expanding parliamentary freedom of expression through constitutional change—most notably through proposed revisions to Article 70 of the Constitution (BNPBD, n.d.). Taken together, these proposals reflect broader concerns about structural conditions that have enabled electoral manipulation and constrained democratic safeguards over successive electoral cycles.

This chapter examines electoral governance in Bangladesh by focusing on the institutional arrangements that shape electoral credibility and democratic accountability. Rather than treating electoral failure as a purely technical problem, the chapter analyses how institutional design, political practice, and regulatory enforcement interact to influence electoral outcomes. It concentrates on three interrelated dimensions: the independence and functioning of electoral management bodies, the appointment and accountability mechanisms governing the Election Commission, and the regulation and transparency of political parties. Drawing on secondary qualitative sources and comparative governance perspectives, the chapter situates Bangladesh's electoral challenges within wider debates on institutional integrity and democratic safeguards. In doing so, it seeks to clarify how electoral governance reforms—particularly those articulated within the BNP's reform framework—may

contribute to restoring public trust, reinforcing institutional autonomy, and supporting democratic renewal in Bangladesh.

Electoral Governance and the Independence of the Election Commission

Electoral governance constitutes a core pillar of democratic legitimacy, as the credibility of electoral outcomes depends on the independence, capacity, and integrity of election management bodies. In Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) is constitutionally mandated under Article 118 to administer national elections and safeguard electoral fairness (GOV.BD, n.d.). Despite this formal mandate, the effectiveness of the BEC has been persistently undermined by political interference, weak enforcement mechanisms, and declining public confidence. Scholarly and policy-oriented assessments consistently indicate that electoral processes in Bangladesh have been characterised by irregularities, including ballot manipulation, pre-election violence, and the strategic use of state resources to favour ruling parties (Baized et al., 2025; TIB, 2024).

These concerns intensified following the constitutional removal of the caretaker government system through the Fifteenth Amendment, a reform that fundamentally altered long-standing expectations of electoral neutrality by placing the conduct of general elections under incumbent executive authority. While constitutionally enacted, this institutional shift generated sustained political contestation and contributed to declining confidence among opposition parties regarding the impartial administration of elections.

The erosion of electoral credibility has been particularly evident in elections marked by opposition boycotts and allegations of “decorative” electoral practices, most notably during the 2014 general election. Such developments have contributed to voter disengagement and heightened political polarisation, reinforcing perceptions that elections no longer function as effective mechanisms for political accountability. The decline

in independent election observers further exacerbates these concerns, as reduced monitoring capacity limits the detection of irregularities and weakens public trust in electoral outcomes (Green, 2021). In this context, the absence of a robust and autonomous election management body has created conditions conducive to electoral manipulation and democratic backsliding.

A central institutional weakness underpinning these challenges lies in the appointment process of Election Commissioners. Although the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Appointment Act 2022 formally outlines a structured selection procedure, the process remains highly susceptible to executive influence. The dominant role of the Prime Minister and the ruling party in shaping the Search Committee and shortlisting candidates has generated persistent concerns regarding partisan bias and limited transparency (Akter, 2023). As Lewis and Hossain (2022) observe, executive dominance in Bangladesh extends beyond routine governance, enabling the concentration of authority across legislative and judicial domains and constraining institutional autonomy. The dual role of the Prime Minister as head of government and leader of the parliamentary majority further intensifies these dynamics, creating opportunities to shape electoral institutions in ways that favour incumbency.

Comparative perspectives highlight that the credibility of electoral governance depends less on the formal existence of regulatory frameworks than on the insulation of appointment processes from executive capture. In the United Kingdom, the Electoral Commission operates as an independent, non-partisan body, with appointments subject to parliamentary scrutiny and cross-party consultation, thereby limiting direct executive control (UK Parliament, 2022). While recent legislative reforms have raised concerns regarding governmental oversight of the Commission, the institutional separation between executive authority and electoral administration remains relatively robust. By contrast, the United States adopts a highly decentralised electoral model, with state-level election administration allowing for context-specific oversight but also introducing risks of partisan influence in localised settings (Faguet &

Shami, 2022). These comparative cases underscore that neither centralisation nor decentralisation alone guarantees independence; rather, transparency, accountability, and procedural safeguards are decisive.

In Bangladesh, the absence of such safeguards has allowed executive influence to permeate both the composition and operation of the Election Commission. This has resulted in limited enforcement of electoral codes of conduct, inconsistent responses to electoral violence, and inadequate oversight of campaign finance disclosures. Political parties have exploited weak regulatory enforcement by submitting vague financial reports and relying on opaque funding channels, further undermining electoral integrity (Faroque & South, 2022). The cumulative effect of these practices has been the normalisation of electoral irregularities and the erosion of public confidence in democratic institutions.

Against this backdrop, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) 31-Point Outline frames electoral reform as a prerequisite for restoring democratic legitimacy. Central to this agenda is the proposal to restructure the appointment process of Election Commissioners by reducing executive involvement and enhancing parliamentary oversight. The emphasis on paper ballots over electronic voting machines reflects broader concerns regarding transparency and public trust, particularly in contexts where technological safeguards are perceived as insufficient. Additionally, proposed constitutional amendments—such as revising Article 70 to enable greater freedom of expression within Parliament—are intended to strengthen institutional accountability and reduce the dominance of party discipline over legislative scrutiny.

Viewed holistically, the BNP's proposals seek to reposition the Election Commission as an autonomous institution capable of enforcing electoral rules impartially and resisting partisan pressure. By aligning appointment procedures with principles of transparency and merit-based selection, and by strengthening regulatory enforcement over campaign finance and electoral conduct, these reforms aim to address the structural sources of electoral manipulation. While institutional reform alone cannot guarantee democratic consolidation, the reconfiguration of electoral

governance represents a necessary condition for restoring public trust, enhancing political accountability, and safeguarding the integrity of Bangladesh's democratic process.

Transparency and Regulation of Political Parties

Maintaining transparency regarding political parties is fundamental to a healthy democracy. As Hamada and Agrawal (2021) found, transparency in political campaigns and finance primarily addresses corruption by eliminating the scope for underhanded donations and for manipulating voters with false information. The political environment in Bangladesh is opaque, mainly, with most political parties facing allegations of rigging and corruption. The Representation of the People Order requires political parties to submit annual financial statements, including details on donations (GOV.BD, 1972). However, despite a promised structure, weak enforcement has led to low disclosure among political parties, with submitted reports being delayed and highly vague. The negative impact of low transparency involves increased encroachment on civil liberties and the criminalisation of politics, while the majority of citizens view parties negatively. Thus, given the challenge, maintaining transparency in political activities is crucial to regaining voters' confidence and upholding democratic principles.

At the global level, matters concerning political activities and parties are more transparent than in Bangladesh, despite facing barriers such as black money. For instance, the United Kingdom, under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA), has appointed an independent, non-ministerial regulator to enforce financial laws (Whiffen, 2025a). Additionally, PPERA has established regulations: gathering donations after a specific limit requires the party to show a permissible source, while mandatory disclosure of the donation helps address backhand dealing. On the other hand, the United States utilises the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) to ensure mandated financial disclosures and regular reports. The United States ensures high-level transparency by making donation lists publicly available, along with personal details, to

help prevent corruption-related controversies—issues of underhanded dealing and manipulation that exist within the global political environment as well. For instance, the UK government has been resetting reporting thresholds, resulting in millions of pounds donated to political parties being removed from government records (Whiffen, 2025b). The United Kingdom government has tended to manipulate the financial reporting thresholds for political parties; however, the involvement of independent commissioners helps maintain transparency in political activities.

Viewed through a comparative lens, Bangladesh's lack of independence for the Election Commissioner, followed by the dominance of political parties, has mainly led to corruption challenges. Based on Faroque and South (2022), weak enforcement has remained a critical challenge across Bangladesh due to the extreme control exercised by political parties over the parliament. Assessing mandatory reporting systems across global political frameworks, a key change necessary for Bangladesh is to strengthen enforcement regulations and increase the BEC's accountability in collecting mandated financial reports. Thus, BNP's proposed change to restructure public, constitutional and statutory institutions through legal reform has the potential to increase transparency by parochial political aspects.

Agency Theory and Electoral Accountability

In Bangladesh's electoral and political system, persistent accountability failures can be understood through the lens of agency theory, which conceptualises governance as a relationship between principals and agents. Within this framework, citizens function as principals who delegate authority through elections, while political parties and elected officials act as agents responsible for representing public interests (Syafriadi et al., 2023). When institutional oversight is weak, agents may prioritise self-interest over public accountability, resulting in corruption, electoral manipulation, and declining public trust.

Agency theory is particularly relevant in the Bangladeshi context, where executive dominance and limited parliamentary oversight have constrained mechanisms for monitoring political behaviour. As Gwala and Mashau (2023) note, agency problems intensify when information asymmetries and enforcement deficits prevent principals from effectively sanctioning agents. In Bangladesh, these conditions have been exacerbated by weak constitutional enforcement, limited electoral transparency, and restricted parliamentary scrutiny, allowing political elites to consolidate power and undermine democratic accountability (Ankamah-Yeboah et al., 2021).

Applying agency theory to electoral governance highlights the central role of institutional safeguards in aligning political incentives with public interests. Strengthening electoral independence, enhancing transparency in party financing, and reducing executive influence over appointment processes are mechanisms through which agency costs may be mitigated. In this regard, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) reform proposals—particularly those aimed at ensuring impartial elections and curbing prime ministerial dominance—can be interpreted as attempts to realign agent behaviour with citizen expectations. By reinforcing accountability structures, such reforms have the potential to restore trust in electoral institutions and re-establish the democratic contract between citizens and the state.

Conclusion

The 31-Point Framework of BNP presents a comprehensive reform agenda centred on institutional independence, electoral governance, civil liberties, and enhanced accountability across state systems. The framework primarily seeks to curb corruption and improve fairness within Bangladesh's electoral process by restoring public confidence through constitutional checks and balances, promoting professionalisation in administrative functions, and establishing safeguards for democratic rights. Key mechanisms proposed to achieve these objectives include fair and impartial appointments to the Election

Commission and amendments to the Anti-Defection law aimed at strengthening open communication and deliberation within Parliament. Viewed through the lens of electoral governance and institutional credibility, the framework reflects an attempt to address systemic shortcomings in transparency, the rule of law, and citizen representation.

At the institutional level, the framework outlines wide-ranging reforms, including the restoration of caretaker-type neutrality, the empowerment of the Election Commission, the restructuring of judicial appointment processes, and the decentralisation of government authority. The emphasis on clearly defined principles—such as transparent appointment standards, evidence-informed policy assessment, and consultative engagement with civil society, academics, and professional communities—signals an effort to ground reform initiatives in institutional logic rather than short-term political expediency. By articulating a long-term governance vision anchored in the rule of law, respect for human rights, and administrative impartiality, the framework seeks to reinforce institutional continuity and resilience, thereby positioning reforms as mechanisms for democratic stability irrespective of the party in power.

The framework further underscores the importance of participatory governance as a means of safeguarding democratic integrity. Its focus on decentralisation, transparency, anti-corruption measures, and the protection of fundamental freedoms highlights the role of inclusive engagement in monitoring and sustaining reform processes. By emphasising the involvement of citizens, non-governmental organisations, local governments, and professional associations, the framework advances an understanding of democratic governance that extends beyond formal institutions. Measures aimed at enhancing inclusiveness, protecting minorities, promoting gender-responsive governance, and ensuring freedom of the press reinforce the normative foundations of democratic accountability. In this context, initiatives that strengthen media independence, protect whistle-blowers, and promote open-data practices are presented as practical steps toward aligning the framework with broader democratic standards.

Taken together, this chapter is significant in demonstrating how institutional reform and participatory governance can function as complementary pillars of democratic renewal in Bangladesh. Its contribution lies in linking electoral governance, institutional credibility, and civic engagement within a single analytical framework, thereby illustrating how democratic sustainability depends on both robust institutions and inclusive public participation. By framing the 31-Point Framework as an institution-focused reform agenda rather than a partisan platform, the chapter highlights its relevance to long-term national interests and its potential role in supporting a transparent, accountable, and resilient democratic order.

While electoral governance is often discussed in terms of procedures, administration, and institutional design, its credibility ultimately rests on whether disputes can be resolved through trusted legal channels. In Bangladesh, the integrity of elections is closely tied to the wider rule-of-law environment: if electoral rules are unevenly enforced, if political violence goes unpunished, or if citizens and parties doubt that courts will adjudicate impartially, confidence in electoral outcomes remains fragile even where formal reforms are introduced. In this sense, strengthening the Election Commission and improving party transparency are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for democratic renewal. The durability of electoral safeguards depends on an independent judiciary that can uphold constitutional guarantees, constrain abuses of executive power, and provide effective remedies for electoral and political rights violations. Building on the institutional challenges examined in this chapter, Chapter 4 turns to judicial independence and the modernisation of legal institutions, analysing how judicial reform can reinforce democratic accountability, protect civil liberties, and restore public trust in Bangladesh's constitutional order.

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Chapter 4:

Judicial Independence and the Modernisation of Legal Institutions

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 9; Point 10; Point 14

Abstract

Judicial independence has emerged as a central concern in Bangladesh's contemporary governance debates, particularly in relation to democratic accountability, public trust, and national stability. This chapter examines the structural and political conditions that have constrained the effective autonomy of the judiciary, despite formal constitutional commitments to the separation of powers. Drawing on landmark judicial developments such as the Masdar Hossain case, alongside reform proposals and governance indicators, the chapter analyses how executive influence, administrative control, and institutional capacity deficits have shaped the functioning of judicial institutions in Bangladesh. The analysis situates judicial independence not merely as a constitutional ideal, but as a governance challenge linked to rising case backlogs, declining public confidence, and broader patterns of political interference. By examining political influence over judicial administration, appointment mechanisms, and disciplinary processes, the chapter highlights how prolonged executive dominance has weakened the judiciary's role as an effective check on power. Comparative insights from other democratic systems are used to illustrate how institutional design, administrative autonomy, and procedural safeguards contribute to sustaining judicial credibility without prescribing external models. Through a qualitative and interpretive examination of legal texts, policy documents, reform commission reports, and secondary sources, the chapter advances a governance-oriented understanding of judicial reform. It argues that meaningful judicial independence in Bangladesh requires both institutional separation and operational modernisation, including transparent appointment processes, administrative autonomy, and improved judicial capacity. In doing so, the chapter positions judicial reform as a foundational component of democratic renewal, essential for restoring public trust, strengthening accountability, and reinforcing the resilience of Bangladesh's constitutional order.

Introduction

Judicial independence constitutes a cornerstone of democratic governance, not only as a constitutional principle but as a practical condition through which justice is delivered and experienced by citizens. In contemporary Bangladesh, concerns surrounding the autonomy of the judiciary have become increasingly salient, particularly in relation to national security, public trust, and the rule of law. Periods of political instability, rising corruption, and escalating criminal activity have intensified public scrutiny of judicial institutions and their capacity to operate free from external influence. As a result, judicial reform has emerged as a central component of broader debates on governance renewal and institutional credibility.

The significance of judicial independence in Bangladesh is closely associated with the landmark Masdar Hossain case, which culminated in the formal separation of the lower judiciary from the executive in 2007 (Hossain, 2020). This judicial intervention responded to longstanding concerns regarding administrative control, executive interference, and the lack of transparency in judicial operations. While the separation of powers represented a critical constitutional milestone, subsequent developments have demonstrated that formal separation alone has not been sufficient to ensure effective judicial autonomy. Ongoing challenges related to appointments, promotions, disciplinary authority, and administrative governance continue to shape the judiciary's functional independence.

These institutional concerns have been exacerbated by mounting structural pressures within the justice system. According to official reports, Bangladesh's High Court currently faces a substantial backlog of cases across its benches, placing significant strain on judicial capacity and delaying access to justice (Sarkar, 2025a). At the same time, governance indicators reveal broader societal implications of weak judicial performance. Bangladesh's crime and safety indices, alongside persistently high levels of corruption and bribery, underscore the extent to which deficiencies in legal accountability have affected social stability and public confidence (Numbeo, n.d.; Transparency, n.d.). Within this context,

judicial independence cannot be understood solely as insulation from political power; it must also be examined in relation to institutional effectiveness and administrative capability.

The challenges facing Bangladesh's judiciary have unfolded within a wider political environment marked by sustained executive dominance and heightened political influence over state institutions. During the prolonged governance of the Awami League, allegations of political interference, selective enforcement, and administrative favouritism further eroded confidence in judicial neutrality. Such dynamics have reinforced perceptions that courts have struggled to deliver impartial judgments under external pressure, limiting their capacity to function as effective checks on executive power. Consequently, both policymakers and citizens have increasingly called for reforms that strengthen judicial independence while simultaneously modernising institutional structures.

This chapter engages with these concerns by examining judicial independence as both an institutional and governance challenge. Rather than approaching the judiciary as a purely legal or technical domain, the analysis situates judicial reform within broader political and constitutional dynamics that shape accountability and public trust. Drawing on constitutional provisions, landmark judicial decisions, reform commission proposals, and secondary documentary sources, the chapter traces how political influence, administrative arrangements, and institutional capacity interact to shape the operation of judicial institutions in Bangladesh.

Comparative insights are incorporated to contextualise reform debates rather than to prescribe external models. References to judicial systems in countries such as the United States and Denmark are used to illustrate how different democratic systems have addressed tensions between judicial autonomy, accountability, and institutional performance. These comparisons highlight the importance of institutional design, procedural safeguards, and administrative independence in sustaining judicial credibility (Bencze, 2021).

Methodologically, the chapter adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in the analysis of legal texts, policy documents, reform

reports, and credible secondary sources. Consistent with prior governance-focused studies, thematic analysis is employed to identify recurring patterns related to political influence, institutional independence, and judicial capacity (Naeem et al., 2023). This approach allows the chapter to synthesise diverse sources while maintaining sensitivity to the historical and political context in which judicial institutions operate (Golzar et al., 2022). Rather than advancing statistical generalisation, the analysis seeks to develop an integrated understanding of judicial reform as a governance process shaped by institutional design and political practice.

The chapter is organised around key thematic areas, including political influence on judicial governance, the institutional architecture of judicial oversight bodies, and the role of modernisation in enhancing judicial effectiveness. By integrating legal analysis with governance-oriented perspectives, the chapter demonstrates that judicial independence in Bangladesh is not merely a constitutional aspiration but a practical requirement for restoring public trust, strengthening accountability, and reinforcing democratic stability in a period of political transition.

Political Influence and Judicial Independence: The Masdar Hossain Case

Political influence within the judiciary poses a fundamental challenge to the rule of law, particularly in contexts where institutional safeguards remain weak. In Bangladesh, concerns regarding judicial independence have long been associated with executive involvement in judicial administration, appointment processes, and disciplinary mechanisms. The Masdar Hossain case represents a landmark moment in this regard, as it articulated the constitutional imperative for separating the judiciary from the executive branch and establishing an autonomous framework for judicial governance.

Filed in 1995 by Masdar Hossain, a district court judge, on behalf of members of the subordinate judiciary, the petition challenged the administrative and financial control exercised by the Ministry of Finance

over lower courts (Hossain, 2020). The case underscored the incompatibility of such arrangements with constitutional principles of judicial independence and impartial adjudication. The Supreme Court's directives emphasised the necessity of creating an independent judicial service commission and a separate judicial secretariat to ensure administrative autonomy and protect judges from political pressure.

Despite the formal recognition of these principles, the implementation of the Masdar Hossain directives has remained partial and uneven. Bangladesh's three-tier judicial structure—comprising the Supreme Court, subordinate courts, and specialised tribunals—continues to exhibit structural dependence on executive institutions, particularly at the lower court level (Hassan, 2023). This dependence has generated persistent concerns regarding the consistency of judicial decisions and the vulnerability of courts to political and administrative influence.

Comparative governance research suggests that judicial independence is not secured solely through constitutional provisions but depends on the effective insulation of appointment, promotion, and disciplinary processes from executive dominance. In the absence of such safeguards, perceptions of selective justice and institutional bias tend to intensify, undermining public confidence in the judiciary. International governance indicators have repeatedly highlighted the adverse implications of weak judicial autonomy for accountability, anti-corruption efforts, and democratic consolidation in Bangladesh (Transparency, n.d.).

Viewed through this lens, the Masdar Hossain case remains a critical but unfinished reform agenda. Strengthening judicial independence requires not only the full implementation of existing constitutional directives but also the establishment of transparent and merit-based mechanisms for judicial administration. Without such reforms, efforts to modernise legal institutions and uphold the rule of law are likely to remain constrained by enduring patterns of political influence.

Political Favouritism and Judicial Governance Under the Awami League

The authoritarian regime in Bangladesh's judicial system during the governance of the political party Awami League exceeded internal governance control. For example, multiple high-profile corruption allegations involving senior political figures during the later years of the Awami League's governance intensified public concern regarding judicial impartiality and accountability. Years of governmental rule by former President Sheikh Hasina left a substantial political impact on Bangladesh's judicial system. The situation also led to student protests and mob violence in the country. As per the report by the United States on human rights abuses in 2023, the report documented serious allegations of arbitrary and unlawful killings attributed to state agents, raising international concern regarding accountability and the rule of law (State, 2023). This report also highlighted that neither the official statistics nor any media platforms actively covered the cases of mass killing due to stronger political influences on the administrative practices. In March 2023, Sultana Jamine, one of the Bangladeshi netizens, died in the custody of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) due to an injury to the brain and internal bleeding. However, the report of RAB declared it a case of stroke and a fall while detained. However, the High Court verdict considered this report unclear and provided no adequate explanation regarding her arrest and detention.

The judicial system of a country always focuses on national security and fosters public trust in leading the country towards the good. For example, the US's judicial system often creates tension with the executive branch and checks its actions through surveillance and monitoring to maintain national security. As per Bencze (2021), an independent judicial system directly avoids external influences and pressures during the judgment procedure, ensuring a lawful verdict. Countries such as the US, the Netherlands and others are widely promoting independent judicial systems in their legal institutions, which reduce the scope of bias or unlawful practices. However, some places are officially accepting the intermediation of political parties in the governance and jurisdiction

process, and courts should maintain a complete balance in this regard. The German government allows political parties to take part in the judicial system, and even its top judges are often selected if they are connected to political parties. As argued by Mahmutovic and Alhamoudi (2024), the judicial system, founded on the principles of a civilised and democratic nation, upholds the rule of law and provides security for the common people. Social fragmentation and economic inequality in the country's governance structure are reflected in its security level and political stability. In the current situation of Bangladesh's increased political challenges and the lack of social fragmentation, the judicial system's inability to control it is making the situation vulnerable.

The courts' lack of independence often creates challenges in maintaining the country's law and order, leading to social and legal vulnerability. In *Govt. v. Hasrat Mohani*, 4,578 days of delay resulted from the misplacement of the report. As Islam (2021) notes, the principle of judicial system equality comes before the law, allowing advocates of equal treatment for all, regardless of power, money, and position. Under the judicial system of a country, all people are equal, and the court has the authority to announce a verdict against his/her action. Political influences on the judicial system violate the principle of equality and manipulate verdicts in favour of certain groups. The Hasina government's favouritism in the Purbachal New Town project raised a land allocation scandal in the residential area. Slamkov (2024) stated that impartial and predictable legal systems, free of corruption within the civil structure, foster development. Modern democratic countries are shifting from a hierarchical governance structure to one that empowers the common people. The judicial system is acting as a pillar of modern society under the constitutional limit. Due to political influence and other external pressures, the courts of Bangladesh are struggling to uphold the country's law and order. Hence, by establishing an independent judicial system, the Bangladesh government can eliminate the former political influence and reduce its scope for future restoration of its democratic rule.

Core Functions of the Judiciary in Democratic Governance

The primary purpose of the judiciary system or courts of a country is to maintain public security and provide justice to the public with the help of the constitution. The influence of external power on the court's operation fails to undermine judicial independence and to violate the jurisdiction's individuality. The Global Corruption Index reported that around 24% of public service users in Bangladesh paid bribes across different sectors of government administration to receive their fair dues (Transparency, n.d.). Lack of government support and transparency often created challenges for the common people of Bangladesh in accessing their fair dues and maintaining social stability. In this respect, Bangladesh's corruption index for 2023 to 2024 dropped by 1. The lack of fair and impartial justice contributes to the country's rising corruption rate. As political influences and other external pressures on Bangladesh's judicial system are being manipulated, providing fair judgments and controlling rising criminal activity are becoming challenging for the judiciary.

Politicians often use the judicial system as a tool to control the opposition and protect their own interests while governing the country. Independent courts can maintain complete scrutiny over the misuse of government power. In the last 15 years, around 1,926 extrajudicial killings were reported in Bangladesh based on the record of "Ain o Salish Kendra" (ASK) (Rizve, 2025). Between January and October 2023, a total of 11 cases of extrajudicial killing took place in Bangladesh, and around 43 incidents of mob violence occurred among citizens. However, the judicial system failed to take any proactive action against these extrajudicial killings due to the influence of the governing political party. In several cases of mob violence, it was evident that the police acted on behalf of the Hasina government instead of protecting the common people. The Masdar Hossain Case verdict in 1999 upheld the 12-point directive in Bangladesh's judicial system, reversing parts of the Appellate Division to establish judicial independence (Hossain, 2020). In light of the verdict in this case,

the courts of Bangladesh should maintain an independent judicial system to avoid dependence on other political influences.

The institutional independence of the subordinate judiciary differs from that of the legislative and executive institutions in Bangladesh, and can ensure a disciplined and controlled supervision. Fair and impartial justice under the independent court system can meet constitutional limits and provide vital checks on executive and legislative actions (Awawda, 2024). The claim for a separate secretariat in Bangladesh's judicial system has proposed developing an independent and disciplined Judicial Commission free from expertise, wisdom, integrity, patriotism, and partisan influence. Political influences on Bangladesh's judicial system can also narrow the court's power and undermine its decisions, leading to public distrust of the judicial process. For example, by overriding judicial autonomy, the Awami League misled cases on student protests towards mob violence, where judicial responses were widely perceived as aligned with prevailing political interests, further weakening public confidence in judicial neutrality. As a result, the interim government of Bangladesh terminated the former Chief Justice Obaidul Hassan in 2024. As a result, Bangladesh can face a fragile governance structure with a lack of accountability. Hence, the court should develop its independent structure and free itself from any other influences to maintain the faith of the common people of Bangladesh.

Independence in Bangladesh's judicial system will ensure transparency and accountability, thereby strengthening national security. Mentovich et al. (2023) stated that procedural justice theory relies on the fairness of the rules and procedures in reaching an effective decision. For example, judges often allow for the cross-examination of witnesses in the procedural justice, which protects the individual's respect and treats each case with dignity. In the current scenario in Bangladesh, a lack of transparency and accountability is raising concerns about fairness in judicial decision-making. However, de la Osa and Remolina (2024) argued that political influences create barriers within the judicial system and steer the case towards a biased decision. Following the stages of procedural justice through fair outcomes, neutrality and active participation avoids the scope of bias and favouritism in the decision-making. Independence in the

judicial system is based on factual knowledge and leads to ethical decisions in resolving cases.

Judicial Commissions and the Institutional Architecture of the Supreme Court

The proposed Judicial Commission of modern Bangladesh focuses on reforming the country's judicial system by ensuring transparency in the selection process. Refer to the Masdar Hossain Case verdict in 1999. The development of an independent judicial commission, under the oversight of selected members, can handle cases of impeachment. After Bangladesh's independence in 1971, several governments made rhetorical promises to create an independent judicial system to secure the country's law and order. However, the verdict in the Masdar Hossain Case led to the implementation of this claim after the formation of a separate judiciary at the higher and lower levels under the guidance of 12 directive judges (Islam, 2014). The long political turmoil and violence within the country's civil structure made the judicial system fragile and raised concerns about fair constitutional use. The current proposed reform of Bangladesh's jurisdiction system through the Judicial Commission is focused on eliminating any other political influences and misuse of the court's power to address favouritism. This claim clearly states the establishment of a separate secretariat under the Supreme Court to ensure discipline and civil control.

The Supreme Judicial Council, under the independent board of judges, can establish a fair jurisdictional system against unlawful activities from the grassroots level to the hierarchy. The judicial framework is centred on the institutional independence of the courts and structural reorganisation of the current jurisdiction process. A transparent and merit-based process for judicial appointments within the current framework is required in modern Bangladesh to replace long-term political favouritism in law and order. This new council plans to select the judges, followed by a transparent selection process, to increase fairness in their actions.

Appointing an independent board can help conduct a transparent selection, as per the corruption index, which ranks Bangladesh 23 out of 100 in 2024, reflecting the country's vulnerability in governance and safety (The Daily Star, 2025). In 2023, Bangladesh's position was 151st amongst the 180 countries, where the score fluctuated between 25 to 23. Lack of control over rising criminal activity and the failure to implement exemplary punishment for the growing corruption level are influencing unlawful activities in the country. Therefore, the formation of the Supreme Judicial Council in the country's current judicial system can enhance public confidence in the legal system as a pillar of democracy.

Ziaur Rahman's democratic vision towards the formation of "Bangladesh Nationalistic Party" and multi-party democracy principle to all the Islamic and other parties was determined to restore stability in the country. However, subsequent institutional practices within Bangladesh's judicial system have diverged from the democratic principles articulated during the formative period of multi-party governance, highlighting the challenges of translating foundational political visions into sustained institutional outcomes. The proposal of Judicial Reform Commission in Bangladesh has set a clear purpose of preparing specific proposals for the judicial reforms. The reform commission of Bangladesh led by the former Appellate Division Justice Shah Abu Naem Mominur Rahman has structured the list of reforms on the judicial system based on its significance. The mandate of the proposed council includes responsibilities related to judicial impeachment procedures and disciplinary oversight, while also recommending reforms that can require constitutional amendments (Sarkar, 2025a). Followed by this structural jurisdiction framework Bangladesh can re-establish the governance structure of the country in meeting Zia's vision of multi-party democracy plan. Establishing a clear delineation between the judicial administration and executive body of the country, the court can maintain institutional separation in avoiding the influence of political parties.

The July Charter (JC) 2025 in Bangladesh is concerned with the electoral and judicial reform of the country with the goal of eliminating any biasness or injustice. Under this plan, proposal of two-term limit

planned to expand the Presidential powers, judicial and electoral reforms to make the country free from authoritarianism. In January 2025, the current government of Bangladesh under the presidency of Yunus declared the formation of the National Consensus Commission (NCC), a group of six reform commissions (Haque & Bisarya, 2025). Followed by the series of consultations involving 30 political parties, this commission has aimed to demonstrate the cause of injustice and rising cases of crime records in the internal governance of Bangladesh. Signed by the National Parliament and other 24 political parties, the formation of an independent judicial system is going to develop an individual secretariat. Commitment of this charter to meet the public aspirations and sacrifices are establishing legal and constitutional safeguards through the law enforcement process. Hence, the vision of constitutional and judicial reforms in Bangladesh's roadmap of independence is going to create a new journey of social justice.

Judicial Reform, Fairness, and Institutional Efficiency

Judicial reform in Bangladesh at the contemporary time can eliminate social injustice from the governance system and establish its civilised structure. The recent cases of extrajudicial killing, severe mob violence and other criminal activities are affecting the national stability of the country. As per the record of Supreme court report published in 2025, in 2023 total 1,54,2521 cases were filed and 1,41,6750 cases were disposed of at the Appellate Division of the High Court (Sarkar, 2025b). Compared to the number of disposed cases, the ratio of pending cases is increasing rapidly in the country. This scenario not only highlighted the limitations of Bangladesh's judiciary system it also reflected how criminal activities and corruptions are taking over in the social background. Judicial independence and impartiality protect the judges from external influences and biased nature in taking fair and lawful decisions (Sunnqvist, 2022). This not only leads to a fair justice process but also makes the decision-making process faster. Due to external pressure, several cases are facing a delay, and judges are unable to deliver fair verdicts. The proposed judicial

reform can positively contribute in this scenario based on its individual and accountable jurisdiction process to re-establish law and order in the country.

Accountability in the judicial system not only upholds the rule of law but also ensures ethical justice and upholds professional standards in the judicial process. Fair and timely justice is a civic right of every common person in Bangladesh. Maintaining judicial accountability increases the speed of the judicial process and reduces the scope of delays, thereby delivering timely justice (Kushwah & Kushwah, 2024). In the turmoil of a political background and the scenario of an increased corruption index, only can be controlled through fair judicial procedure. Can the proposed judicial reform derive accountability and transparency in the legal institutions of Bangladesh? Judicial reform also supports the modernisation of the jurisdiction process by adopting efficient case management techniques and improving court infrastructure (Ali et al., 2024). In handling cases involving cybercrime, money laundering, and other digital offences, the judicial system should refine its jurisdictional process. Under this judicial reform, the adoption of advanced technologies and tech-savvy members can successfully improve digital literacy in court operations. Hence, in order to increase fairness and transparency, and to ensure the independence of the judicial system, its upgradation is also required in the current scenario in Bangladesh.

Comparative Experiences of Judicial Reform

Judicial Independence in the United States

The adoption of an independent judiciary in the legislation ensures the complete abolition of political influence and maintains public confidence in all branches of government. The judicial system serves as the guardian and final arbiter of the Constitution, which protects fundamental rights (Arifin, 2024). The US's independent judiciary allows judges to make decisions based on facts and the law, without fear of retribution, favour, or other external pressures. The influence of political

parties often puts external pressure on the judiciary system or the facts of the cases, which can manipulate the transparency of the case or even the verdict. The case of *United States v. Nixon* can be used here as a classic example of a landmark judgment in the judicial history of the United States (Mahawar, 2022). In this case, a unanimous decision was passed by the Supreme Court of the United States against President Richard Nixon for asking him to submit the Watergate Trial Tapes. This case upheld the Rule of Law in the US. The current reform policy of Bangladesh has considered the independent judiciary as a means of establishing transparency.

Judicial Independence and Institutional Design in Denmark

The judicial system of Denmark believes that every person has the right to a fair trial and the court is responsible for providing that to its citizens. The Constitutional Act of Denmark declared the country's independence and established a tripartite system of power (The Danish Parliament, n.d.). Denmark's judicial system is segmented into three bodies, the "District Court, High Court and Supreme Court," which are involved in passing judgments and making the trial process independent. According to the country's judicial process, courts can only be guided by what the law states and are connected to the preliminary work. The structural and impartial judicial system of Denmark has been recognised as the first-ranked country in the World Justice Project's 2023 (World Justice Project, 2023). Apart from the legal institutions, the judicial system of this country must not be influenced by the Parliament, the Government, the press, or other passing judgments. Only by changing the law of the parliament or the government process can they be eligible to make changes in the jurisdiction.

Judicial Independence and the Protection of Citizens' Rights in Bangladesh

Judicial independence is the right of every country to ensure transparency and eliminate any kind of favouritism from the operation of the court. Courts are responsible to secure the rights of every citizen with the help of constitutional principle (Awawda, 2024). However, rising cases of extrajudicial killing and mob violence in Bangladesh are reflecting the social instability in the country. Most of the reports on the corruption level and criminal activities of Bangladesh highlighted that irrespective of political influences on the judicial system is responsible for this situation. Based on the records of 2023, 72% of the local people believe that the influence of the ruling government or the political parties is negatively affecting the social stability of the country (Transparency, n.d.). After a long tenure of Awami League's governance, it has left the country in a fragile condition. The proposed independent judicial system of Bangladesh is significant at the current scenario to eliminate the biased nature and favouritism from the court operation. Based on the current findings on the significance of the individual judicial system, it has been clarified that Bangladesh should eliminate external pressure on court decisions. Courts are the main legal institution of the country responsible for managing law and order within the internal governance system. The former governance system and the current President, Yunus of Bangladesh, are struggling to protect the rights of minorities and common people due to a lack of independence in the judicial system. In 2023 and 2022 total of 22 and 12 incidents related to minority attacks occurred in Bangladesh (Rizve, 2025). Over the years this number has increased gradually, violating the internal peace of the country. The formation of an independent judicial system is the solution of restoring the social and political stability in the country in the ongoing turmoil situation. As per the procedural justice theory, maintaining fairness in the judicial process supports the effective decision-making and maintains neutrality in the decision of judges (Mentovich et al., 2023). Related to procedural justice theory the proposed independent judicial system of Bangladesh should

maintain neutrality on the independent appointment. This not only allows to maintain fairness in the judicial process but also provides autonomy to judges in faster decision-making process. Therefore, Bangladesh's judicial reform is going to make changes in the judicial independence of the country beyond the elimination of political influences and inheriting modernisation.

The term independent judicial system is getting widely accepted in democratic countries like Bangladesh as the country sensed the urgency of securing civil justice after recovering from Awami League's anarchy. Over the years, political turmoil and injustice in the social background of Bangladesh have affected the governance structure of the country and led to the situation of increased corruption levels. The proposal for an independent judicial system in the governance of the country will abolish the political influence that is independent of the judiciary. Drawing selectively on comparative judicial experiences, contemporary reform debates in Bangladesh reflect an effort to reconcile democratic ideals with institutional capacity and social stability. The proposed independent and accountable judicial system will establish the first pillar of transparency in the country's jurisdiction. For example, appointing separate secretariat with directive members in this plan is effective to repeal the political influences and enable direct approach in fair judgement process. Hence, the pursuit of an independent and modernised judicial system represents an effort to consolidate democratic governance principles while responding to contemporary institutional challenges.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that institutional separation and decentralisation are central to establishing transparency and accountability within Bangladesh's judicial system. Separating administrative control from the executive branch is identified as a critical step toward safeguarding judicial independence and restoring public confidence in legal institutions. Within the existing constitutional framework, Article 116 places appointments, promotions, and disciplinary authority over the

lower judiciary under the supervision of the Supreme Court, reinforcing the principle of institutional autonomy. The proposed Judicial Appointments Commission, designed to uphold merit-based selection standards, further supports the objective of strengthening judicial integrity while addressing persistent case backlogs through structured and impartial appointment processes.

Beyond institutional design, the chapter has highlighted the operational dimensions necessary to realise judicial independence in practice. Administrative autonomy measures—including the establishment of a separate Judicial Service Commission, independent budget allocation, and digital case management systems—are presented as mechanisms capable of modernising court operations and reducing political dependence. The decentralised involvement of High Court benches, district specialist courts, and mobile judicial units is shown to enhance accessibility, efficiency, and consistency in judicial processes. Collectively, these operational reforms aim to improve case management, reduce delays, and strengthen the functional independence of courts across different levels of the judiciary.

Taken together, the reform agenda outlined in this chapter underscores the broader governance implications of judicial independence. Judicial reform is not confined to procedural adjustments but represents a foundational element in reinforcing accountability, fairness, and the rule of law within the state. By integrating institutional restructuring with operational modernisation, the proposed reforms seek to address long-standing weaknesses in court administration and mitigate the influence of political interference. These measures contribute to a judicial system that is better equipped to deliver impartial justice, manage complex and emerging forms of litigation, and uphold constitutional principles in a changing governance environment.

The significance of this chapter lies in its contribution to understanding judicial reform as a cornerstone of democratic stability and good governance in Bangladesh. By linking institutional independence, administrative autonomy, and long-term governance outcomes within a

single analytical framework, the chapter demonstrates how judicial reform can function as a catalyst for restoring public trust, strengthening accountability, and ensuring legal certainty. In doing so, it positions an independent and modernised judiciary as an essential pillar for sustaining transparency, protecting citizens' rights, and reinforcing the overall resilience of Bangladesh's constitutional order.

Judicial reform, however, cannot be treated as a self-contained institutional exercise. Even where formal separation of powers is strengthened, democratic renewal remains fragile if citizens and civil society are unable to speak, organise, and seek accountability without fear. In Bangladesh, the judiciary's capacity to protect rights in practice is closely connected to the wider civic environment in which rights are claimed, contested, and publicly defended. This is where media freedom and digital rights become decisive: independent courts may provide legal safeguards, but a free press and open civic space make violations visible, enable public scrutiny, and sustain pressure for lawful governance. Building on the chapter's argument that judicial independence is essential for restoring trust and accountability, the next chapter turns to the public sphere examining how restrictions on journalism, surveillance and digital control, and the use of restrictive legislation have constrained freedom of expression and weakened civil liberties. Chapter 5 therefore extends the governance analysis from the institutions that adjudicate rights to the arenas in which rights are exercised, debated, and defended.

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Chapter 5:

Media Freedom, Digital Rights, and the Protection of Civil Liberties

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 9; Point 12; Point 14; Point 19

Abstract

Media freedom constitutes a foundational condition for democratic governance, enabling public scrutiny of power, safeguarding civil liberties, and sustaining accountability between the state and society. In Bangladesh, however, the practical exercise of media freedom has been increasingly constrained by prolonged political dominance, restrictive legal frameworks, and expanding digital surveillance. Despite constitutional guarantees under Article 39, journalists and media institutions have operated within an environment shaped by legal uncertainty, political pressure, and pervasive self-censorship, raising serious concerns regarding the protection of civil liberties and democratic resilience. This chapter examines media freedom, digital rights, and civil liberties in Bangladesh as interdependent governance challenges rather than isolated legal or sectoral issues. Drawing on constitutional provisions, international human rights assessments, press freedom indices, investigative journalism, and secondary academic sources, the analysis situates media repression within broader political practices and institutional power relations. Particular attention is given to the use of digital security and anti-terror legislation as regulatory tools that have narrowed spaces for expression and weakened the media's watchdog function. Rather than advancing prescriptive or externally imposed models, the chapter adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach to assess how legal controls, political incentives, and institutional weaknesses have reshaped the media landscape over time. Selective comparative references are used to illustrate how alternative governance arrangements have sustained media autonomy through legal safeguards and independent oversight. The chapter argues that restoring media freedom in Bangladesh requires not only legislative reform but also a broader reconstruction of institutional trust, judicial protection, and digital rights governance. In doing so, it positions media freedom as a central pillar of democratic renewal, public accountability, and the effective protection of civil liberties in a post-authoritarian context.

Introduction

Media freedom occupies a central position in democratic governance, not merely as a constitutional entitlement but as a practical mechanism through which power is scrutinised, public debate is sustained, and civil liberties are made visible. In Bangladesh, the relationship between media, state authority, and citizen rights has become increasingly contested, particularly in the aftermath of prolonged political dominance and the extensive use of legal and administrative controls over journalism and digital communication. While Article 39 of the Constitution formally guarantees freedom of speech and the press, the lived reality of media practice has been shaped by restrictive legislation, political pressure, and pervasive self-censorship, raising fundamental questions about the protection of civil liberties in contemporary Bangladesh (Bdlaws, n.d.).

The erosion of media freedom in Bangladesh cannot be understood as a sudden rupture but rather as a cumulative process that unfolded over successive political cycles. During the extended period of Awami League governance, journalists, editors, and media organisations increasingly operated within an environment characterised by legal uncertainty, surveillance, economic pressure, and the threat of criminal prosecution. Laws such as the Digital Security Act (Government of Bangladesh, 2018), the Information and Communication Technology Act (Government of Bangladesh, 2006), and related security legislation were repeatedly criticised for enabling arrests without warrants, restricting investigative reporting, and narrowing the boundaries of permissible public discourse (RSF, n.d.-a; International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2024). These dynamics contributed to a climate in which critical reporting was frequently discouraged, not always through direct censorship, but through the anticipation of legal and political consequences.

Media repression has had direct implications for civil liberties beyond the press itself. Restrictions on journalism and digital expression have constrained citizens' ability to access information, voice dissent, and hold governing authorities accountable. In democratic systems, the media functions as a connective institution between state and society, translating

political decisions into public knowledge and amplifying social concerns that might otherwise remain marginalised. When this function is weakened, democratic accountability becomes more fragile, and violations of rights—such as excessive use of force, arbitrary detention, or corruption—are less likely to be effectively scrutinized or challenged. In the case of Bangladesh, public debates and ongoing concerns regarding allegations of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and pressures on political opposition have emerged alongside discussions about declining media autonomy. Together, these dynamics have contributed to broader perceptions of democratic backsliding and institutional imbalance.

Digitalisation has further complicated the landscape of media freedom. While digital platforms initially expanded spaces for expression and citizen journalism, they have also become sites of intensified state regulation and surveillance. The introduction of the Cyber Security Act (Government of Bangladesh, 2023), which replaced the Digital Security Act, was presented as a reformative step; however, critics argue that it retained broad provisions capable of restricting online speech and targeting dissenting voices (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2024). As a result, digital rights in Bangladesh remain closely intertwined with broader struggles over freedom of expression, journalistic safety, and the legitimacy of regulatory authority in a politically polarised environment.

This chapter examines media freedom, digital rights, and civil liberties in Bangladesh as interconnected dimensions of democratic governance rather than isolated policy domains. Rather than adopting a technical or legalistic evaluation of media regulation alone, the analysis situates media repression within wider political practices, institutional incentives, and power relations that shape how information is controlled and contested. Drawing on constitutional provisions, human rights reports, investigative journalism, international press freedom indices, and secondary academic literature, the chapter develops a qualitative, interpretive assessment of how media governance has evolved and how it has affected the protection of civil liberties over time. This approach

allows for a contextualised understanding of repression and reform, without relying on primary data collection or statistical generalisation.

Comparative references to other political systems are used selectively to illuminate governance choices rather than to prescribe external models. By contrasting Bangladesh's experience with contexts where media institutions operate under stronger judicial protection or clearer regulatory boundaries, the chapter highlights how institutional design, legal safeguards, and political culture interact to either constrain or enable press freedom. These comparisons reinforce the argument that media freedom is not sustained by constitutional guarantees alone, but by the alignment of legal frameworks, independent oversight, and political restraint.

By focusing on the intersection of media power, digital control, and civil liberties, this chapter contributes to a broader governance-oriented understanding of democratic renewal in Bangladesh. It argues that restoring media freedom is not simply a matter of repealing restrictive laws, but of rebuilding trust between the state, journalists, and citizens through institutional reform, legal accountability, and the protection of digital rights. In doing so, the chapter positions media freedom as a foundational condition for democratic resilience, public accountability, and the effective exercise of civil liberties in a post-authoritarian political landscape.

Media Freedom, Digital Rights, and the Shrinking Civic Space

Media freedom and digital rights have become increasingly central to the functioning of contemporary democratic governance, particularly in political contexts characterised by prolonged executive dominance and institutional fragility. In Bangladesh, the contraction of civic space has not occurred through the abrupt suspension of constitutional guarantees, but rather through the gradual normalisation of legal, regulatory, and administrative practices that constrain expression while maintaining a

formal commitment to democratic legality. This dynamic has produced a governance environment in which freedom of expression exists in principle but is systematically limited in practice (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022; RSF, n.d.-a).

A defining feature of this shrinking civic space has been the expanding reliance on legal and judicial mechanisms to regulate media activity. Restrictions on publication, broadcasting, and digital expression have increasingly been framed through the language of legality, public order, and national security. While such mechanisms are not inherently incompatible with democratic governance, their broad scope and inconsistent application have raised concerns regarding proportionality, due process, and judicial restraint. When regulatory authority is exercised without clear safeguards, legal oversight risks functioning less as a protective mechanism and more as an instrument that narrows permissible public discourse (Human Rights Watch, 2023; International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2024).

Digitalisation has further intensified these dynamics. The rapid expansion of online platforms initially broadened opportunities for journalistic practice, citizen participation, and political debate. However, this expansion has been accompanied by heightened surveillance, regulatory scrutiny, and legal uncertainty surrounding digital expression. Laws governing online communication and cybersecurity have been criticised for their ambiguous provisions, which allow for discretionary enforcement and expose journalists, editors, and ordinary citizens to criminal liability for content-related activities (RSF, n.d.-a; International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2024). As a result, digital spaces that once enabled pluralism and contestation have increasingly mirrored the constraints faced by traditional media.

The contraction of civic space has also reshaped the professional norms and risk calculations of media actors. Journalists operating under conditions of legal ambiguity and political pressure frequently engage in anticipatory self-censorship, moderating language, framing, and topic selection to avoid potential sanctions. This form of indirect control does

not rely on overt censorship but functions through uncertainty and fear of reprisal, gradually redefining the boundaries of acceptable expression. Over time, such practices weaken the media's capacity to perform its democratic watchdog role, even in the absence of explicit bans or closures (Waisbord, 2024).

Importantly, the shrinking of civic space extends beyond the media sector itself. Restrictions on journalism and digital expression have broader implications for civil liberties, public participation, and political accountability. When citizens' access to independent information is limited, opportunities for informed debate and collective mobilisation are diminished. This undermines the connective function of the public sphere, reducing the ability of civil society, opposition actors, and ordinary citizens to contest power and demand accountability through democratic means (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

Comparative governance research demonstrates that democratic systems can accommodate regulatory oversight of media and digital platforms without eroding civic space, provided that legal frameworks are narrowly defined, judicially supervised, and insulated from political interference. Where such safeguards are weak or inconsistently applied, however, regulation becomes a mechanism for managing dissent rather than protecting public interest. In this respect, Bangladesh's experience reflects a broader pattern observed in hybrid and post-authoritarian contexts, where formal democratic institutions coexist with practices that incrementally restrict expressive freedom (Karadimitriou et al., 2022).

Within the framework of democratic renewal, restoring civic space requires more than the removal of restrictive provisions or the adoption of new legislation. It demands a recalibration of institutional relationships between the state, the judiciary, media actors, and digital platforms. Strengthening judicial protection of expressive rights, ensuring transparency in regulatory enforcement, and limiting discretionary powers over media content are essential to reversing the contraction of civic space. Without such reforms, media freedom risks remaining formally recognised

yet substantively hollow, unable to sustain the conditions necessary for democratic accountability and the effective protection of civil liberties.

Media, Power, and Public Accountability in Contemporary Bangladesh

The relationship between media and political power in Bangladesh has undergone a profound transformation, particularly during periods of prolonged executive dominance. In democratic systems, the media functions as a mechanism through which political authority is rendered visible, contestable, and accountable to the public. In Bangladesh, however, this accountability function has been progressively constrained as political influence has increasingly shaped the legal, economic, and institutional boundaries of journalistic practice (Hermawan, 2025; Okechukwu, 2024).

Political influence over media institutions has operated through both formal and informal mechanisms. While direct censorship has occurred during moments of political crisis, more enduring forms of control have emerged through restrictive legislation, regulatory uncertainty, and economic pressure on media organisations. Laws governing digital security and public order have expanded the discretionary power of state authorities, encouraging newsroom self-censorship and limiting investigative reporting on corruption, human rights violations, and governance failures (Majumder, 2024; RSF, n.d.-a; Human Rights Watch, 2023; United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022).

These dynamics have significantly weakened public accountability. When journalists are unable to report freely on abuses of power or political misconduct, citizens are deprived of the information necessary to evaluate state performance and participate meaningfully in democratic life. In Bangladesh, restrictions on media coverage during periods of political unrest—including student protests and mass demonstrations—illustrated how selective reporting and silence contributed to misinformation, public

confusion, and declining trust in institutions (Yar'Adua et al., 2023; City ST Georges, 2025).

The concentration of political authority has further intensified these pressures. Strong party control over regulatory bodies and law enforcement agencies has blurred the boundary between state governance and partisan interest, rendering media organisations critical of the ruling establishment particularly vulnerable to legal harassment and administrative sanction. By contrast, pro-government narratives have often benefited from institutional protection and preferential access, distorting pluralism within the public sphere and narrowing the range of permissible political debate (Naji, 2025; Hermawan, 2025).

Digital platforms initially appeared to offer alternative spaces for public accountability by enabling citizen journalism and rapid information circulation. However, the expansion of digital surveillance and the criminalisation of online expression under security legislation have curtailed this potential. Journalists and ordinary citizens alike have faced prosecution for digital content deemed threatening to national security or public order, reinforcing a climate of fear and further shrinking spaces for dissent (RSF, n.d.-a; International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2024).

Public accountability in Bangladesh must therefore be understood as a structural governance challenge rather than a failure of individual journalists or media organisations. Media actors operating within restrictive legal and political environments cannot be expected to perform robust watchdog functions without institutional protection, judicial safeguards, and regulatory independence. The erosion of accountability reflects broader patterns of power consolidation and institutional fragility that extend beyond the media sector itself (Bhuiyan et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2022).

Re-establishing meaningful public accountability requires recalibrating the relationship between media and political power. This involves not only revising restrictive legislation but also strengthening judicial oversight, ensuring regulatory transparency, and safeguarding journalistic practice across both traditional and digital platforms. Media

freedom, in this sense, is inseparable from democratic renewal: without an empowered press capable of scrutinising authority, democratic governance risks becoming procedurally intact but substantively hollow (Karadimitriou et al., 2022).

Free Media and Democratic Governance

Free media occupies a foundational position within democratic governance, not merely as a channel for information dissemination but as a mechanism through which power is scrutinised, contested, and made accountable. In democratic systems, the press functions as a watchdog, enabling citizens to evaluate government performance, expose misconduct, and participate meaningfully in political life. Where media freedom is constrained, democratic institutions may continue to operate formally, yet their substantive legitimacy becomes increasingly fragile (Karadimitriou et al., 2022).

In Bangladesh, the relationship between media freedom and democratic governance has been shaped by prolonged political centralisation and expanding executive authority. While constitutional guarantees under Article 39 formally protect freedom of expression and the press, the practical exercise of these rights has been persistently undermined through legal restrictions, political pressure, and regulatory uncertainty (Bdlaws, n.d.; Majumder, 2024). As a result, the media's capacity to perform its democratic role has been uneven, particularly during periods of political crisis and heightened state control.

A free press is central to democratic accountability because it enables transparency in public decision-making. Through investigative reporting and critical commentary, the media provides citizens with access to information regarding policy choices, public expenditure, corruption, and human rights practices. In Bangladesh, however, restrictions on media operations have limited sustained scrutiny of government actions, reducing opportunities for public debate and weakening mechanisms of

horizontal and vertical accountability (Yar'Adua et al., 2023; Bhuiyan et al., 2021).

The erosion of media freedom has also affected political pluralism. Democratic governance depends on the existence of diverse viewpoints and open contestation within the public sphere. When media outlets face intimidation, legal harassment, or economic pressure, editorial independence is compromised and self-censorship becomes a rational survival strategy. This dynamic narrows the range of permissible discourse, marginalising dissenting voices and reinforcing dominant political narratives (Hermawan, 2025; Okechukwu, 2024). In such contexts, elections and parliamentary processes may persist, yet their democratic substance is diminished by the absence of informed public deliberation.

Historical and comparative experiences underscore the centrality of free media to democratic resilience. As Albert Camus observed, a press deprived of freedom cannot serve the public good, regardless of its formal existence (Rawat, 2024). Empirical evidence further suggests that declines in media freedom are closely associated with broader patterns of democratic backsliding worldwide (City ST Georges, 2025). Bangladesh's experience reflects this trajectory, where restrictions on journalistic practice have coincided with weakening institutional checks and declining public trust in governance.

Digital media initially appeared to expand democratic participation by lowering barriers to entry and amplifying citizen voices. However, in Bangladesh, the extension of restrictive legislation to digital platforms has constrained this potential. Surveillance, content regulation, and criminal liability for online expression have limited the media's ability to operate as an independent arena of democratic engagement, reinforcing existing asymmetries of power between the state and society (RSF, n.d.-a; International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2024).

Free media is therefore not an auxiliary feature of democratic governance but a precondition for its effective functioning. Democratic renewal in Bangladesh depends on restoring the institutional conditions that allow journalists to investigate freely, critique authority, and inform

the public without fear of reprisal. This requires not only legal reform but also political commitment to pluralism, regulatory restraint, and judicial protection of expressive rights. Without such safeguards, democratic governance risks becoming procedurally intact yet substantively hollow, sustained by institutions that lack public confidence and meaningful accountability (Karadimitriou et al., 2022).

Restrictive ICT and Anti-Terror Laws: Implications for Media Freedom

Legal regulation of information and communication technologies has become one of the most significant instruments through which media freedom and civil liberties have been constrained in Bangladesh. While digital governance frameworks are often justified on grounds of national security, public order, and the prevention of cybercrime, their implementation in Bangladesh has increasingly functioned as a mechanism for suppressing dissent, disciplining journalists, and narrowing the space for public debate (Majumder, 2024; RSF, n.d.-a).

The introduction and expansion of restrictive legislation—most notably the Information and Communication Technology Act (Government of Bangladesh, 2006), the Digital Security Act (Government of Bangladesh, 2018), and its successor, the Cyber Security Act (Government of Bangladesh, 2023)—marked a decisive shift in the state’s approach to media regulation. These laws granted extensive discretionary powers to law enforcement agencies, including warrantless searches, arrests, and the seizure of digital equipment. In practice, such provisions have enabled the criminalisation of journalistic activity and online expression, fostering an environment of fear and routine self-censorship within newsrooms and digital platforms (RSF, n.d.-a; International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2024).

Section 57 of the ICT framework, which criminalised online content deemed “against the interests of the state,” became emblematic of the broader problem. Its vague wording and expansive scope allowed for

selective enforcement against journalists, political activists, and opposition voices. Although the Digital Security Act formally replaced earlier provisions, its substantive effects remained largely unchanged. Reports indicate that thousands of cases were filed under the DSA within its first years of implementation, a significant proportion of which targeted political opposition and critical media reporting rather than genuine cybercrime (Majumder, 2024).

The enactment of the Cyber Security Act (CSA) in 2023 was presented as a reform initiative intended to address international criticism of the DSA. However, human rights organisations and media advocacy groups have argued that the CSA largely reproduced the restrictive architecture of its predecessor, retaining broad offences related to digital expression and insufficient safeguards against abuse (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2024). As a result, journalists and digital media practitioners continue to operate under conditions of legal uncertainty, where routine reporting on governance failures, corruption, or public protest carries the risk of criminal liability.

Anti-terror legislation has further compounded these constraints. Statutes such as the Anti-Terrorism Act (Government of Bangladesh, 2009) and the Special Powers Act (Government of Bangladesh, 1974) have been applied in ways that blur the distinction between genuine security threats and political dissent. The conflation of critical journalism with threats to national security has legitimised extraordinary enforcement measures, undermining proportionality and due process (RSF, n.d.-a). This securitised approach to media regulation has weakened constitutional protections under Article 39, effectively subordinating freedom of expression to expansive interpretations of state security.

From an international legal perspective, these practices raise serious concerns regarding Bangladesh's obligations under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). While international human rights law permits restrictions on expression, such limitations must satisfy the principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality. Critics argue that Bangladesh's digital and security

legislation fails to meet these cumulative tests, particularly in cases involving journalistic investigation, political commentary, and online mobilisation (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2024).

The cumulative effect of restrictive ICT and anti-terror laws has been the normalisation of self-censorship and the erosion of media autonomy. Editors increasingly avoid politically sensitive topics, journalists moderate language and framing, and digital platforms restrict content pre-emptively to mitigate legal risk. This environment weakens the media's watchdog role and diminishes the public's access to independent information, thereby undermining democratic accountability and civic trust (Bhuiyan et al., 2021; Yar'Adua et al., 2023).

Reforming the legal framework governing media and digital expression is therefore essential for democratic renewal in Bangladesh. The repeal or substantive amendment of repressive provisions, the introduction of clear legal definitions, and the establishment of judicial oversight mechanisms are necessary steps toward restoring confidence in media governance. Without such reforms, legal instruments designed ostensibly to protect public order will continue to function as tools of political control, constraining civil liberties and hollowing out the democratic promise of digital communication.

Journalists' Safety and Digital Rights in Comparative Perspective

The safety of journalists has become an increasingly critical indicator of democratic health across political systems. Beyond physical threats, contemporary risks to journalism now extend to digital surveillance, online harassment, legal intimidation, and forced self-censorship. These pressures are particularly acute in politically polarised and post-authoritarian contexts, where legal protections formally exist but are inconsistently enforced. In such environments, the erosion of journalists' safety directly undermines public accountability by weakening

the media's capacity to investigate power, document abuses, and inform citizens (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

Globally, impunity for crimes against journalists remains a persistent challenge. International monitoring bodies report that killings, arbitrary detention, forced exile, and legal harassment of journalists continue to rise, with accountability mechanisms often failing to deliver justice for victims (CPJ, 2024). Digital threats have compounded these risks, as journalists face online surveillance, doxxing, coordinated harassment campaigns, and the misuse of cybercrime laws to criminalise reporting. These dynamics blur the boundary between physical and digital safety, rendering journalism increasingly precarious even in formally democratic settings (Waisbord, 2024).

In Bangladesh, concerns regarding journalists' safety have been intensified by high-profile cases of violence and sustained legal pressure. The murder of journalists Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi—widely known as the Sagar–Runi case—remains emblematic of the broader climate of impunity surrounding crimes against media professionals (BSS News, 2025). Despite widespread public attention and repeated judicial interventions, the prolonged failure to resolve the case has reinforced perceptions that journalists are insufficiently protected by the state. Alongside such incidents, reports of arbitrary detention, intimidation, and surveillance by security agencies—including the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)—have further narrowed the space for investigative journalism (RSF, n.d.-a).

Digital rights have emerged as a parallel site of vulnerability. As journalism increasingly relies on digital platforms, journalists in Bangladesh have faced heightened exposure to online monitoring and legal risk. The application of digital security legislation has enabled the targeting of reporters for online content, social media posts, and investigative reporting framed as threats to public order or national security. This environment has encouraged precautionary self-censorship, particularly within smaller media outlets and among freelance journalists lacking institutional protection (Majumder, 2024).

Comparative perspectives illustrate how institutional safeguards can mitigate these risks, even where political tensions persist. In the United States, constitutional protection under the First Amendment provides a robust legal foundation for press freedom, shielding journalists from direct state interference and prior restraint (CPJ, 2024). Additionally, state-level “shield laws” protect journalists from being compelled to disclose sources, reinforcing investigative autonomy. However, even within this framework, journalists increasingly face digital harassment, surveillance, and strategic lawsuits intended to intimidate critical reporting, highlighting that legal protection alone does not eliminate emerging threats (Waisbord, 2024).

In contrast, highly authoritarian systems such as North Korea represent an extreme absence of journalistic safety and digital rights. Media institutions operate exclusively as state-controlled entities, with no independent journalism permitted and severe punishment imposed for unauthorised communication (RSF, n.d.-b). In such contexts, the complete suppression of press freedom functions as a central mechanism of regime control, eliminating public scrutiny and insulating political authority from accountability.

Between these extremes, democratic systems such as New Zealand illustrate the complexity of protecting journalists’ safety even within strong rights-based frameworks. Although New Zealand ranks relatively high on global press freedom indices, journalists—particularly women and minority reporters—face growing challenges related to online harassment, physical threats, and economic precarity (Tika Tangata, n.d.). These cases underscore that digital rights and journalistic safety require continuous institutional attention rather than reliance on constitutional guarantees alone.

From an international human rights perspective, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) establishes freedom of expression as a foundational right, subject only to narrowly defined and proportionate restrictions. The UN and UNESCO have repeatedly emphasised that states bear a positive obligation not only to

refrain from suppressing journalism but also to actively protect journalists from violence, intimidation, and digital harm (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Failure to do so constitutes a breach of democratic responsibility rather than a neutral governance deficit.

Viewed comparatively, Bangladesh's challenges reflect a broader pattern in which formal legal commitments coexist with weak enforcement and politicised security practices. The persistence of unresolved journalist killings, the misuse of digital legislation, and the absence of effective protection mechanisms have collectively undermined confidence in the state's commitment to press freedom. Addressing these challenges requires more than symbolic reform. It demands institutional accountability for crimes against journalists, clear limits on surveillance and digital enforcement powers, and the integration of journalist safety into broader democratic reform agendas.

In this sense, journalists' safety and digital rights are not peripheral concerns but core components of democratic governance. Where journalists operate without fear, public scrutiny is strengthened, corruption is exposed, and civic trust can gradually be restored. Conversely, where journalists are silenced—through violence, law, or digital intimidation—democratic renewal remains incomplete. For Bangladesh, strengthening protections for journalists therefore represents not only a media reform priority, but a necessary condition for rebuilding democratic legitimacy and safeguarding civil liberties in the post-authoritarian context.

Theory–Practice Gaps in Media Freedom

The gap between the formal recognition of media freedom and its practical realisation remains one of the most persistent challenges in contemporary democratic governance. While constitutional texts and international conventions often affirm freedom of expression as a fundamental right, the everyday operation of media systems is frequently shaped by political pressure, legal ambiguity, and institutional constraint.

This divergence between normative commitments and lived realities is particularly visible in post-authoritarian and hybrid political contexts, where legal protections coexist with practices that systematically limit journalistic autonomy.

Theoretical approaches to media freedom emphasise the role of the press as an agenda-setter, watchdog, and intermediary between state power and society. Agenda-setting theory highlights the media's capacity to shape public priorities by determining which issues receive sustained attention, rather than prescribing how citizens should think about them (Mohammed et al., 2022). In democratic settings, this function enables journalists to foreground issues of public concern—such as corruption, governance failures, or human rights abuses—thereby facilitating informed civic engagement. In practice, however, political influence over editorial decisions often distorts this role, redirecting media attention away from sensitive issues and towards narratives aligned with ruling interests.

In Bangladesh, this distortion has been particularly pronounced during periods of heightened political control over media institutions. Despite formal guarantees under Article 39 of the Constitution, journalists have frequently faced implicit and explicit constraints on agenda-setting, especially in relation to state violence, electoral manipulation, and security-sector conduct (Bdlaws, n.d.; RSF, n.d.-a). As a result, certain issues—such as arrests of opposition figures or early instances of student protests—have received limited or delayed coverage, weakening the media's capacity to shape public debate in real time.

Framing theory further illuminates the gap between theoretical expectations and practical outcomes. Framing refers to the ways in which media narratives structure meaning by emphasising particular aspects of an issue while marginalising others (Güran & Özarlan, 2022). In principle, responsible framing supports public understanding by contextualising events and presenting multiple perspectives. In practice, however, political pressure, legal risk, and economic dependence often lead to selective framing that normalises state narratives or downplays structural injustice. Empirical studies suggest that such framing biases undermine

transparency and erode public trust in media institutions (Wang et al., 2025).

These theory–practice gaps are reinforced by legal and regulatory environments that blur the boundaries between legitimate regulation and political control. Laws governing digital communication, national security, and public order are frequently justified as necessary safeguards, yet their broad and ambiguous wording enables selective enforcement against journalists and media outlets (Majumder, 2024). In such contexts, the theoretical promise of media freedom is constrained not through overt censorship alone, but through anticipatory compliance and self-censorship driven by fear of legal consequences.

Economic pressures further widen the gap between normative ideals and practical realities. Media organisations operating under financial precarity are more vulnerable to political influence, advertising pressure, and ownership concentration. Scholars note that when media sustainability depends on state-linked advertising or regulatory goodwill, editorial independence is significantly compromised (Bhuiyan et al., 2021). In Bangladesh, these dynamics have contributed to uneven reporting standards across media outlets, with smaller and regional platforms often facing greater exposure to coercion and retaliation.

Importantly, theory–practice gaps in media freedom are not unique to Bangladesh. Comparative evidence indicates that even established democracies struggle to align legal protections with evolving digital realities. However, what distinguishes more resilient systems is the presence of institutional safeguards—*independent regulators, judicial oversight, and professional norms*—that limit political interference and provide recourse for journalists facing intimidation (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). Where such safeguards are weak or politicised, theoretical commitments remain largely symbolic.

Bridging the gap between theory and practice therefore requires more than rhetorical affirmation of press freedom. It demands institutional reforms that translate constitutional rights into enforceable protections. These include narrowing the scope of restrictive legislation,

strengthening judicial oversight of media-related cases, ensuring transparency in regulatory enforcement, and supporting professional autonomy within media organisations. Without such measures, media freedom risks remaining a formal ideal disconnected from journalistic practice and public experience.

In the Bangladeshi context, addressing theory–practice gaps is central to democratic renewal. A media system that is formally free but practically constrained cannot sustain accountability or public trust. By confronting the structural, legal, and political factors that inhibit genuine media autonomy, reform efforts can move beyond symbolic commitments and towards a more substantive realisation of media freedom - one that enables journalists to inform, investigate, and challenge power without fear. In this sense, narrowing the theory–practice divide is not only a media reform objective but a democratic necessity.

Conclusion

Bangladesh has experienced prolonged uncertainty in its social and legal structures, marked by sustained media suppression, violations of civil and student rights, and political interference in journalistic practices. Suppressive legislation, intimidation, and instances of brutality—including high-profile cases such as the Sagar–Runi murder—have gradually eroded media freedom and weakened democracy over the decades. The misuse and continuation of restrictive laws, including the ICT framework and digital security provisions, contributed to narrowing access to information and undermining the media’s role as the third pillar of governance. In contrast to countries where media institutions operate with stronger protections, Bangladesh struggled to safeguard press freedom during extended periods of authoritarian rule. Nevertheless, the post-authoritarian context has reopened the possibility of restoring democratic character through legal and institutional reform.

Within this context, the chapter has underscored the central importance of media freedom to democratic governance. By bridging the

gap between the state and society, the media plays a critical role in safeguarding public interest, ensuring transparency, and holding power to account. Restrictions on freedom of expression and digital communication have created structural barriers to access, limiting the media's capacity to perform its watchdog function. Any reform agenda must therefore strike a careful balance between authority and access, ensuring national security while preserving open and pluralistic media spaces essential for democratic stability.

The chapter further highlights the institutional mechanisms required to protect press freedom on a sustainable basis. The establishment of a dedicated Media Commission, composed of judicial figures, media professionals, and investigative journalists, emerges as a key governance tool for strengthening institutional oversight and safeguarding journalistic independence. Legislative reforms—particularly the amendment or repeal of laws that have been widely criticised for suppressing free speech—are integral to this process. Protecting journalists through judicial guarantees, ensuring accountability for crimes against media professionals, and reducing excessive regulatory pressure on digital platforms are presented as necessary steps for rebuilding trust and encouraging independent journalism free from political intimidation.

Equally important is the role of broader institutional and political support in sustaining media freedom. Judicial independence and effective oversight mechanisms are essential to shielding media organisations from political pressure and the misuse of security legislation. Recognising the expertise and democratic contribution of media institutions within legislative structures can further reinforce an environment in which journalists operate without fear of censorship or reprisal. A supportive institutional ecosystem enables the press to inform the public, expose wrongdoing, and illuminate political realities that might otherwise remain obscured.

The significance of this chapter lies in its systematic documentation and analysis of media suppression, digital rights constraints, and institutional failures affecting press freedom in Bangladesh. By linking

legal frameworks, political practices, and institutional reform within a single analytical narrative, the chapter demonstrates how media freedom is inseparable from democratic resilience and civil liberty. Its contribution rests in framing media reform not merely as a sectoral issue, but as a foundational element of democratic governance, public accountability, and long-term social stability in Bangladesh.

While media freedom and digital rights constitute essential pillars of civil liberty, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the ethical foundations of the state and the integrity of public institutions. A free press can expose abuse of power, amplify citizen voices, and sustain public scrutiny, yet its impact remains limited in environments where corruption is systemic and accountability mechanisms are weak. In Bangladesh, restrictions on journalism, surveillance practices, and the misuse of security legislation have not operated in isolation; they have been closely intertwined with broader patterns of political corruption, rent-seeking, and institutional capture. Media suppression has often functioned as a protective shield for corrupt practices, insulating public authorities from exposure and undermining citizens' ability to demand redress. Building on the analysis of how constrained civic space weakens democratic oversight, the next chapter turns to the structural roots of ethical erosion within the state. Chapter 6 therefore shifts the focus from the public sphere to the machinery of governance itself, examining anti-corruption frameworks, public accountability mechanisms, and the institutional conditions required to rebuild an ethical state capable of restoring trust, transparency, and democratic legitimacy in Bangladesh.

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Chapter 6:

Building an Ethical State:

Anti-Corruption Frameworks and Public Accountability Mechanisms

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 9; Point 11; Point 13; Point 14; Point 15

Abstract

This chapter examines the institutional foundations of ethical governance in Bangladesh by analysing anti-corruption frameworks and public accountability mechanisms within a context of prolonged political instability and declining public trust. It situates corruption not as an isolated administrative failure, but as a systemic governance challenge shaped by political influence, weak institutional autonomy, and limited enforcement capacity. Focusing on the role of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the chapter evaluates recent reform initiatives—particularly the ACC White Paper and the proposed Zero Tolerance approach—to assess their potential to restore transparency, accountability, and institutional credibility. Drawing on secondary qualitative sources, comparative governance perspectives, and international assessments, the analysis highlights the importance of judicial independence, oversight institutions, and citizen-facing accountability mechanisms in rebuilding an ethical state. The chapter argues that sustainable anti-corruption reform in Bangladesh depends on strengthening institutional trust, insulating accountability bodies from political interference, and embedding ethical governance as a core pillar of democratic renewal.

Introduction

The construction of an ethical state is inseparable from the integrity of its governance institutions and the credibility of its accountability mechanisms. In Bangladesh, rising corruption levels, prolonged political turbulence, and declining public trust have combined to produce a governance environment marked by fragility rather than resilience. Corruption has increasingly been perceived not as an episodic malfunction but as a systemic condition—one that affects public service delivery, distorts economic development, and weakens democratic legitimacy (Rahman, 2021; Overman & Schillemans, 2022).

Corruption in Bangladesh has manifested across multiple dimensions, ranging from everyday bribery in public services to large-scale financial crimes such as procurement fraud and money laundering. These practices have imposed significant economic costs while simultaneously undermining the normative foundations of public accountability. International assessments consistently indicate that a substantial proportion of citizens perceive corruption as a primary obstacle to political stability and fair governance, reflecting a widening gap between formal institutional commitments and lived administrative realities (Transparency International, n.d.; Trading Economics, n.d.).

Historically, efforts to address corruption in Bangladesh have oscillated between reformist ambition and institutional compromise. Early post-independence anti-corruption frameworks—including statutory provisions and the establishment of oversight bodies—were intended to formalise ethical governance and constrain abuse of power. However, over time, these mechanisms became increasingly vulnerable to political influence, administrative centralisation, and selective enforcement, limiting their capacity to function as effective checks on executive power (Bdlaws, 1977).

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) occupies a central position within this contested governance landscape. Established to investigate and prosecute corruption-related offences, the ACC has

remained at the centre of public debate regarding institutional independence, enforcement capacity, and political interference. Recent reform initiatives—most notably the ACC’s White Paper on money laundering and institutional reform—reflect renewed recognition of the structural nature of corruption and its implications for economic stability and democratic accountability (Dhaka Tribune, 2024; Islam, 2024).

At the same time, public accountability extends beyond the mandate of any single institution. Effective ethical governance depends on a wider ecosystem of oversight mechanisms, including judicial independence, parliamentary scrutiny, supreme audit institutions, ombudsman systems, and citizen-facing accountability tools. Comparative governance research suggests that where these mechanisms operate autonomously and coherently, corruption risks are reduced and public trust is more readily sustained (Overman & Schillemans, 2022; Barafi et al., 2022).

This chapter examines Bangladesh’s anti-corruption and public accountability framework through a qualitative and interpretive lens, drawing on secondary academic literature, policy documents, governance indicators, and comparative institutional perspectives. Rather than isolating corruption as a technical or legal failure, the analysis situates it within broader political and institutional dynamics that shape how accountability is exercised or constrained in practice (Ahmed et al., 2025; Bashir & Babu, 2023). In doing so, the chapter argues that building an ethical state in Bangladesh requires more than legislative reform or punitive enforcement. It demands the reconstruction of institutional trust through credible oversight, transparent governance practices, and accountable public authority. Anti-corruption frameworks must therefore be understood not as isolated policy tools, but as foundational components of democratic renewal and sustainable development.

Law Enforcement, Human Rights, and the Boundaries of Legitimate Authority

The protection of human rights within democratic systems depends critically on how law enforcement agencies exercise authority and how effectively that authority is constrained by legal safeguards, institutional oversight, and accountability mechanisms. In Bangladesh, discussions surrounding law enforcement practices have increasingly focused on the tension between maintaining public order and upholding fundamental rights, particularly in settings marked by prolonged executive dominance and institutional fragility.

From a governance perspective, the legitimacy of law enforcement rests not solely on statutory mandates but on adherence to principles of legality, proportionality, and accountability. International human rights frameworks recognise the necessity of policing and security operations, yet they impose clear obligations to prevent excessive use of force, arbitrary detention, and ill-treatment (United Nations, 2019). Where oversight mechanisms are weak or fragmented, the discretionary powers afforded to security agencies may expand beyond their intended scope, generating patterns of rights violations and eroding public trust (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023).

In Bangladesh, institutional challenges have constrained the effective oversight of law enforcement agencies. Independent review bodies with the authority to investigate misconduct, ensure transparency, and impose sanctions remain limited in scope and capacity. As a result, allegations of abuse are frequently addressed through internal procedures rather than independent scrutiny, reinforcing perceptions of impunity and weakening confidence in accountability processes (Rahman, 2021). Comparative governance research indicates that such gaps are particularly damaging in hybrid political systems, where formal democratic institutions coexist with concentrated executive power.

The human rights implications of these governance deficits extend beyond individual cases. Persistent concerns regarding arbitrary arrest,

custodial practices, and the application of security legislation have broader effects on civic participation and political engagement. When citizens perceive law enforcement as politically aligned or insufficiently constrained by law, the boundary between legitimate authority and coercive control becomes blurred, contributing to a climate of fear and disengagement.

Importantly, the relationship between law enforcement and human rights cannot be isolated from the broader institutional environment. Judicial independence, media freedom, and anti-corruption frameworks play mutually reinforcing roles in constraining coercive power and exposing misconduct. Where courts lack autonomy, media operate under pressure, and oversight institutions are politically vulnerable, law enforcement agencies are less likely to be held accountable for practices that undermine fundamental rights.

Within the framework of democratic renewal, strengthening human rights protections requires recalibrating the governance of law enforcement. This includes establishing independent oversight bodies, clarifying legal thresholds for the use of force and detention, and ensuring that security legislation is applied consistently with constitutional guarantees and international obligations (United Nations, 2019). Embedding accountability within policing and security institutions is essential not only for protecting individual rights but for restoring public confidence in the state's capacity to govern lawfully and ethically.

Corruption and Its Impact on National Development

The government is responsible for controlling corruption levels in a country and mitigating social gaps within society's hierarchical structure. Based on the 2024 record, Bangladesh ranked 151 on the corruption index (Trading Economics, n.d.). During the 2023-2024 period, an increase in criminal activity and violence raised the corruption ranking. In 2007, Bangladesh reached its highest rank of 162 due to a lack of accountability

in the governance process. The government should maintain transparency and effectively control the country's legislation and judicial system to reduce corruption. However, Bangladesh has been facing a long period of political turmoil over the decades under the Presidency of Sheikh Hasina. This also reflected in the country's political position; in 2023 Bangladesh's latest value for political stability was -0.91, and the average value was -1.18 (The Global Economy, n.d.). The political turmoil in the country not only heightened corruption but also slowed the judicial process. As a result, prolonged political instability contributed to economic volatility and institutional stagnation, constraining the country's capacity to achieve sustainable growth.

The ethical state of a country depends on its legal rules and institutions, which help shape its level of corruption. As per the findings by Barafi et al. (2022), robust anti-corruption frameworks, such as laws, independent bodies, and legislative principles, are responsible for building an ethical state in the nation. Independence of the judiciary in a country is necessary to maintain law and order without compromising ethical practices. For example, Switzerland's Ombudsman system maintains individual control. Relying on isolated reforms, such as a single anti-corruption law or the creation of a single agency, is insufficient to maintain the country's integrity system and to implement broader, active citizen oversight. In this regard, Mkhize (2025) also noted that poor surveillance and a lack of active control over criminal activities in a country hinder the establishment of a successful anti-corruption framework within the security process. The contemporary condition of Bangladesh under the governance of Sheikh Hasina and the post-condition promoted a higher level of anarchy, for example, due to a lack of control over corruption and safety measures related to ethical practices between 2023 and 2024. For example, allegations reported in international media and investigative journalism have raised concerns about politically connected actors' involvement in controversial public contracting and procurement processes. Building ethical practices and ending the long-standing anarchical process in Bangladesh requires strict control over the anti-corruption framework in the post-Hasina regime.

Transparency within a country is essential, particularly between the government and ordinary people, which defines public accountability. Overman and Schillemans (2022) stated that public accountability mechanisms can be measured based on the criteria of transparency, answerability, and enforceable sanctions when exercising public power. Shifting the judicial system from hierarchical and legalistic accountability to a public accountability mechanism ensures transparency and allows for the maintenance of ethical practices across all demographics. Followed by parliamentary oversight, judicial review, supreme audit institutions, and internal administrative controls, Bangladesh can build its ethical culture in the future. The study by Overman and Schillemans (2022) highlighted that social accountability and citizen engagement in a country can be fostered by public officials and service providers who ensure political openness, civic space, and media freedom. The long years of strict restrictions on the right to speech and freedom of the press in Bangladesh also undermined the country's ethical state through legislation. Hence, re-establishing the vision of an ethical state in Bangladesh, establishing an anti-corruption framework, and ensuring public accountability are strongly required within governing bodies.

The development of a country comes with the growth and safety of its people. In a democratic nation like Bangladesh, the government is the sole authority, leading its social, economic, and other sectors. The long political turmoil of Bangladesh also affected the public interest and their rights, which influenced them to join in mob violence. Only in January and February of 2024, a total of 27 deaths in mob attacks were reported, which gradually increased in the first seven months of the year (Alam, 2025). At first, it was a student protest; later, the agenda of children's and women's security, individual freedom, and the autonomy of the government was also joined. Gradually, the nation's rising corruption took the form of national protest. The development of a country can only be achieved through the growth of the majority of the population. Rising violence amid the anarchy of government and increased corruption has pointed out that national interests are being neglected, and the people are struggling for safety.

Most developed countries worldwide prioritise securing the national interest to achieve long-term growth. In the Marxist theory of Development, class struggle was prioritised at first, and he also believed that surplus value (the difference between the productivity value of the labourers and their wages) is the primary source of rising conflict (Ecoholics, n.d.). However, the Marxist value is centred only on the labour class, whereas a democratic nation is about equality. In the combined vision of a Marxist and democratic nation, a country's development is possible through equal opportunity and reduced class differences. President Ziaur Rahman initiated privatisation policies and multi-party democratic reforms in the late 1970s, framing national development as a central governance objective. His agenda of a market-oriented economy, prioritising national interest and economic development, was a key source of future development. In the long run, shifting political agendas, external pressure, and rising corruption rates not only poisoned the social structure but also slowed Bangladesh's development.

The privatisation of the industrial sector has been the key driver of economic growth in Bangladesh since Major Zia's presidency. However, the increase in the rupture rate in the industrial sector also weakened the nation's economic strength and made it more susceptible to political influence. Corruption has become deeply embedded within the governance structure, and extensive political interference continues to pose serious obstacles to effective reform. Long-term development trajectories indicate that the country is expected to transition out of the Least Developed Country (LDC) classification in the coming decades. The negative influence of politicisation and prolonged enforcement crackdowns has adversely affected the country's industrialisation process. The ready-made garment (RMG) sector remains the primary source of income within the industrial landscape. Contracting and procurement fraud, collusion, and bribery have contributed to rising levels of corruption in this industry. As a result, the country faces persistent challenges in sustaining industrial and economic growth. Despite formal commitments to anti-corruption principles, recurring embezzlement scandals,

entrenched political influence, and governance weaknesses continue to hinder development outcomes.

The ACC White Paper on Money Laundering and Institutional Reform

The majority of the scandals and corruption across the world arise with the purpose of economic profit. Regarding this, money laundering has become one of the most common crimes in the history of criminology. According to a commentary published in 2024, money laundering activities in Bangladesh are estimated to amount to approximately 3.2% of the country's GDP, based on an estimated stock of around \$150 billion (Islam, 2024). The country's economic background, with increased cases of money laundering, has heightened concerns about managing revenue growth and corruption levels. Cross-country risk assessments and media reporting have repeatedly placed Bangladesh among jurisdictions facing elevated money-laundering vulnerabilities, with risks exacerbated by political instability and weak enforcement capacity (Islam, 2024). Increased political instability and lack of control over governance practices failed to suppress the money laundering cases in the country. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Bangladesh was shaken by the last two decades of corruption rates, which fueled corruption activities in the nation. Between 2019 and 2023, annual case-filing numbers for money laundering were 363, 348, 406, and 404, respectively (Abdullah, 2025). These rising numbers indicate an increase in crime cases in the country. An increase in money laundering cases and a decline in active responses in the country have worsened the economic emergency.

The ACC's White Paper has sought to address reported money laundering risks and to strengthen institutional reform agendas and to generate enhanced effectiveness in measuring the nuances created by the Awami League. Between 2009 and 2023, under the Awami League, Bangladesh lost \$16 billion annually to money laundering cases (Dhaka Tribune, 2024). The White Paper committee identified 10 distressed banks

which were involved in solvency and liquidity. Among the 10 banks, two are state-owned. In the 400-page white paper, including 30 chapters, it has clearly been mentioned that the manipulative policymaking strategy of the Hasina government created oligarchs under the crony capitalism in the country's economy. For instance, media reports such as Al-Jazeera's investigation into the Land Minister's acquisition of approximately 300 properties in the UK, and the Prime Minister's own public admission that her personal secretary possessed cash worth 400 crore taka (4,000 million taka).

The committee member, M Ustafizur Rahman, reported that land prices and manipulation of the procurement process in the seven projects out of 29 revised the cost expenses to Tk 195,000 crore. Also, the tax exemptions in these years amounted to 6% of the country's GDP. Regarding this, the country's education budget doubled, and its health budget tripled. This report also raised the urgent need for accountability and reforms in public financial governance.

The ACC reform report also identified the middle-income trap, characterised by lower job creation and stagnant productivity, as a serious issue for the country that slowed economic growth. Under this reform, the committee proposed a policy to develop capital-intensive Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) and heavy industries such as steel and cement. The report submitted by Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, a renowned economist and the committee's chairperson, on Sunday highlighted the excessive misappropriation of funds and systematic corruption during the long tenure of the Awami League (Dhaka Tribune, 2024). Based on this, ACC considered restoring transparency and accountability in the country's financial and industrial sectors. The focus of this report is primarily on maintaining transparency and strengthening the industrial sector economy. The proposed Zero Tolerance policy of ACC addressed accountability, money recovery and free resources for growth. Holding the responsible parties accountable and recovering the laundered money will strengthen the ACC.

The rise of meritocracy in Bangladesh also disrupted the country's social structure and its economic disparities. In this regard, the foremost priority of the interim government of Bangladesh has become restructuring constitutional institutions to ensure transparency and accountability. The July National Charter 2025, presented by Yunus' government, primarily focused on reforming the anti-corruption framework and developing ACC (National Consensus Commission, 2025). The bicameral legislature of Bangladesh provided additional oversight of this reform and planned to prevent unilateral executive action. However, Bangladesh's corruption rate is not limited to its government or industrial sector; the majority of the population has become accustomed to this situation. Regarding this, the interim government plans to uproot the former system to give the country a new start in public officials as well. The National Constitutional Council (NCC) of Bangladesh is composed of meta-guarantor institutions that involve high-ranking multi-partisan and non-partisan state officials (TBS News, 2025). As noted in the above-mentioned report, most government corruption began with bribery. Prioritising this, the urgency of reforming the public official group and maintaining transparency in it gained the attention of the NCC members.

The vision of an ethical state comes with political stability and transparency in the internal governance system. An increase in corruption and prolonged political turmoil in Bangladesh after decades of anarchy led the country towards a fragile future. Judicial independence plays a significant role in corruption control and managing accountability in governance practices. Integrity-guided bureaucracy in the administrative system contributes to service-oriented development and enhances transparency in resolving pending cases. Over the past years, a total of 399 cases were filed by ACC related to irregularities, corruption, and money laundering. In these cases, over 1,000 influential individuals were reportedly implicated, including senior political figures, according to domestic media reporting (Amin, 2025). The July uprising may end the anarchy of this system, though the threat of corruption still lingers among industrial sectors and public officials. The proposed public accountability mechanism under NCC will implement safety and security measures to

address corruption in the system. Hence, legal support for implementing transparency and controlling the corruption rate will inspire a new ethical structure in Bangladesh to restore its democracy.

Ombudsman Systems in Comparative Perspective: International Models and Bangladesh

The ombudsman system works as an independent oversight institution that investigates administrative malpractices and helps meet public accountability. Over the years, different governments have structured their own ombudsman systems and ensured transparency in their governing bodies. Originating from Sweden in 1809, this system has been adopted in over 140 countries, with varying legal structures. The Swedish Parliamentary Ombudsman (JO) is an independent governing body that is appointed by the Riksdag (parliament) to oversee public officials (Riksdag, n.d.). Under this governing body, the Swedish parliament is responsible for supervising whether public authorities comply with the law and treat citizens fairly. Divided into four Parliamentary Ombudsmen, this governing body oversees public officials. The broader jurisdiction of the Swedish parliament has involved the government branches, suo motu investigation powers, and authority to challenge judicial decisions. Under this vigilance, the Swedish government is successfully correcting the actions of public authorities and ensuring that individual citizens receive fair treatment when receiving public services.

Following the Ombudsman model, the UK parliament also developed its own Parliamentary Commissioner in 1967, which acted against the central government. Individual monitoring of this system helps reduce bias in public services. Under the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967, the UK government sought to enhance accountability and ensure proper investigations into each complaint (Priddy, 2025). Lack of transparency in the governing bodies is a common issue in populated

countries like the UK. Sensing the urgency of fair and lawful public accountability within the internal structure of the UK, the government developed an individual and higher system that ensures a transparent investigation after the referral of an MP. However, the bicameral legislation of Bangladesh is compared to the complexity of adopting a single-party investigation system. In this regard, the interim government should grant the Ombudsman independence to avoid further political influence. Hence, alongside judicial independence, developing an independent system within Bangladesh's internal government can help the country achieve public accountability and build an ethical state.

Government Influence and the Expansion of Corruption

Corruption has remained one of the most persistent issues in Bangladesh, negatively affecting the nation's political ambience and economic growth. One widely reported case involved allegations of large-scale irregularities in lending and documentation at a state-owned bank, resulting in substantial estimated financial losses (Mustafa, 2024). The interrelation between political turmoil and the country's economic aspects has deepened governance challenges, with widespread money laundering. On the money laundering scale, Bangladesh ranks 82nd out of 152, a position that has worsened over the years (Islam, 2024). Reports have shown that the Bangladesh Government's intensified corruption and mismanagement have limited the nation's institutional growth. Systematic weakness can also arise from political manipulation, which has hindered Bangladesh's economic and institutional growth.

Corruption stems from the government's monopoly decision and the practice of favouritism within the country's legislative system. Jubaer and Hassan (2021) stated that rational choice theory in criminology prefers to model individual decisions based on logical reasoning and situational analysis, avoiding self-interest. A long tenure of anarchy in the government model leads to rising corruption and favouritism in the country, creating

disparities between ordinary people and high-power authorities. A country's criminology is connected to the practice of bias and excessive external pressure on its legislation and judicial process. However, Odilla (2023) also argued that a country's anti-corruption effort should focus on increasing law enforcement costs and reducing benefits. Lower access to and affordability of benefits, such as better pay and greater transparency in the country's legal institutions, create challenges for individuals seeking justice. To reinforce ethical practices in Bangladesh's governance system, the government should consider the interests of ordinary people and minimise the personal goals of corrupt officials.

The public accountability mechanism in a democratic nation like Bangladesh depends on the stewardship of public officials. Stewardship theory on public accountability considers public officials as the responsible stewards, motivated by ethics and the public good (Zizumbo Colunga & Meza, 2023). Involving eligible and skilled public authorities in the legislative system can promote good stewardship. Public accountability in a democratic nation depends on intrinsic motivation and trust-based relationships. This not only builds transparency between the two parties but also ensures collective orientation with social and ethical responsibilities. Despite this, bias and personal interests often influence public officials toward unethical practices, such as bribery and corruption (Mugellini et al., 2021). In Bangladesh, corruption has reached its peak. As highlighted in the introduction, this chapter reports that around 24% of public service users pay bribes to public officials. Lack of trustworthiness among public officials in Bangladesh, under the strong influence of political power, affects accountability and ethical practices. For example, due to a lack of monitoring over the Purbachal land allocation project, calamities occurred among the ordinary people. Hence, to develop transparent and sustainable public accountability in Bangladesh, the government should control corrupt practices among public officials.

In significant cases of corruption, economic interests are hidden through political manipulation, particularly through money laundering. A commentary published on Griffith Asia Insights notes that money laundering in Bangladesh is estimated to account for approximately 3.2%

of the country's GDP (Islam, 2024). Bangladesh has lost its fiscal stability due to significant economic crimes estimated at around \$150 billion in stock value. The Anti-Money Laundering Index suggests that the country's economic position has deteriorated, reflecting vulnerabilities and poor financial performance. The Dhaka Tribune has reported that between 2019 and 2023, the volume of annual money laundering cases ranged from 348 to 406 (Abdullah, 2025). Based on data on such significant money laundering cases, it became evident that ACC has allowed corruption in Bangladesh to flourish. This issue has not only imposed economic barriers but also questioned the nation's ethical liability in the international arena. These patterns suggest that democratic institutions in Bangladesh have, at times, been instrumentalised in ways that limited transparency and accountability, particularly where political elites exercised disproportionate influence over public resources.

The white paper issued by Bangladesh ACC has exposed the deep-rooted nexus between politics, business, and corruption-related growth issues over the years. During the Awami League's rule from 2009 to 2023, Bangladesh had around \$16 billion in annual money laundering. The C report has also revealed that out of 10 distressed banks, including two state-owned banks, are involved in a liquidity and solvency crisis.

Public Authorities, Corruption, and the Erosion of Public Interest

Corruption among the public authorities of Bangladesh is one of the most critical barriers the Nation has encountered in its efforts to achieve a strong governance mechanism and equitable development. From the perspective of ACC, it can also be seen that public officers have used public office for personal gain, which has fuelled widespread corruption in Bangladesh. Over the years, political favouritism has reigned over Bangladesh, leading to social injustice and financial crimes during the delivery of public services. Public resources, such as funds allocated to

infrastructure, health care, and social development, have been diverted by officials for personal gain.

Political interference has broadened the scope for corruption within the public authorities, negatively impacting the Nation's economic growth approaches. ACC of Bangladesh is accountable for maintaining economic transparency, but it has been undermined by political interference. Citizens of Bangladesh have to face harassment, bribery demands and other issues from the public officers to access public resources despite paying taxes. The Ombudsman system of Bangladesh has indicated that 24% of the public service users have faced bribery to access public services. Although Bangladesh's economic growth has countered stagnation, the personal assets of public authorities are increasing, highlighting the worsening impact of financial crimes such as money laundering in Bangladesh. Failure of administrative integrity has led to public frustration.

Judicial Independence and Individual Oversight in Ethical Governance

After a long period of political turmoil and distress, the urgency of an ethical state has become clear to the interim government, and this can only be achieved through transparency. ACC is focused on adopting the Zero Tolerance policy to address its corruption practices and plans for money recovery, with a strict goal of free resource growth (Dhaka Tribune, 2024). Increased corruption in money laundering resulted in a loss of 6% of the country's GDP during the period from 2009 to 2023. Despite investigations by international bodies, ACC failed to act against the corruption due to stronger political influences. Sensing the emerging meritocracy and its implications, the White Paper reform will impose strict control over future activities involving economic resources and industrial plans, with the goal of ethical governance.

Public accountability is integral to developing ethical practices in the country and serves the public interest. Controlling the rise in bribery

cases and maintaining transparency in public authorities are needed in Bangladesh's current governance model. Following Sweden's Ombudsman model, the Bangladesh government can oversee the activities of public officials and take strict control of enforcement. However, external pressure has corrupted the country's existing public service structure. This individual governing body can drive transparency and ethical principles in public relations management. Safety measures with accountability in the future reform of Bangladesh will re-establish the country's ethical structure and address the long-standing turmoil. Following the rational choice theory in the development of the AC framework, or in managing accountability, can provide a clear goal for the country in implementing safety measures. While adopting international policies or restructuring the existing laws, a clear goal can help design a personalised system for the country and maintain ethical practices.

Conclusion

The current economic condition of Bangladesh reflects a nation that is prosperous in spirit but deeply affected by corruption and political manipulation. Democratic empowerment has increasingly been used as a cover for personal ambition among public authorities, while private economic actors have become central to corruption networks that undermine national development. The erosion of integrity in public offices has intensified corruption and weakened accountability, dimming prospects for ethical governance amid sustained political interference.

This chapter has outlined how economic crimes such as money laundering and bribery have damaged public trust and constrained institutional growth in Bangladesh. The analysis demonstrates that restoring ethical governance requires confronting the underlying realities of political influence, administrative failure, and weakened accountability mechanisms. Strengthening oversight institutions—particularly through the development of an effective Ombudsman system—emerges as a critical pathway for rebuilding transparency and restoring public

confidence. The chapter, therefore, establishes a clear connection between ethical governance and sustainable economic development in Bangladesh.

Addressing corruption also necessitates legal reforms and institutional enactments that impose strict controls on public authorities. Reforms related to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) should prioritise institutional independence in appointments rather than focusing solely on policy design. The White Paper and Zero Tolerance policies are identified as effective mechanisms for detecting corruption cases and assessing their economic impact relative to national GDP. These policies enable immediate action against corruption while strengthening transparency and reducing conflicts in future reform processes.

In addition to legal reforms, the chapter emphasises the importance of conducting social audits and strengthening the Right to Information (RTI) help desk to reduce the gap between public authorities and citizens. Social audits can serve as catalysts for the Ombudsman system by systematically identifying the challenges ordinary people face in accessing public services and assets. The RTI help desk provides citizens with a mechanism to report concerns anonymously, protecting them from potential retaliation while enabling higher authorities to make informed, stricter decisions regarding illegal practices.

Looking ahead, this study contributes to the development of an anti-corruption framework that supports transparency in administrative systems and safeguards public interest. It offers guidance to policymakers on designing ethical norms to strengthen public trust, foster a resilient economy, and restore democratic integrity. Ultimately, the purpose of governance, as reinforced by this chapter, is to serve the collective prosperity of the nation rather than the personal interests of those in power.

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PART 2:
INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT,
SOCIAL EQUITY,
AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

Chapter 7:

Economic Reform, Equity, and Social Justice in National Development

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 15; Point 16; Point 17; Point 24; Point 25; Point 26; Point 29

Abstract

This chapter examines how fair distribution, social justice, and inclusive growth shape Bangladesh's economic development and long-term stability. It argues that economic growth alone cannot ensure social cohesion when public resources are unevenly distributed, wages remain low and insecure, and large segments of the population face persistent social and climate-related risks. Drawing on real-world developments such as labour protests, climate-induced displacement, and unequal access to essential services. The chapter highlights how structural inequality undermines public trust and institutional legitimacy. It emphasises the importance of transparent governance, strengthened labour rights, and equitable access to education and healthcare in advancing social equity. The chapter concludes that sustainable and people-centred development in Bangladesh depends on embedding fairness and justice at the core of economic reform.

Introduction

Economic inequality in Bangladesh has deep roots, and unequal land distribution, wage gaps, and government failure have shaped it. While the nation has achieved strong growth, many citizens have remained excluded from acquiring the economic benefits. Real incidents, such as workers demanding living wages, climate-hit families losing their homes and corruption affecting the relief distribution, show that social justice needs to stand at the centre of national development. This inequality has also weakened social trust and increased frustration among young people and rural communities. When public systems fail to protect livelihoods, people lose confidence in institutions and the rule of law. Development policies that ignore fairness risk deepening division rather than reducing poverty. A justice-led approach is therefore essential to ensure that economic progress supports social stability, inclusion, and long-term national cohesion across all regions and social groups. Thus, this chapter argues that economic growth gains real value only when citizens experience dignity, equal opportunity, and a fair share in national progress.

Conceptual Foundations of Economic Inequality

Economic inequality arises when people fail to share the gains of national growth fairly. Some groups within the nation hold more income, wealth, land, and power, while others struggle to meet basic needs. Inequality propositions within a nation determine which groups can have education, which groups can have good jobs, and who stays poor. Rothstein (2011) stated that inequality shapes the quality of life for every citizen and determines how a nation develops its future. In this context, Bangladesh has grown fast. However, the gains have not reached all citizens, and the inequality patterns described mainly intensified long after earlier decentralisation efforts under Zia were reversed. This limitation can now also affect the nation's stability and social trust.

Structural Drivers of Economic Inequality

Economic inequality grows at certain times when systems reward a small group and exclude others without access to certain facilities. Economic inequality does not arise by accident, and grows through real events, political choices, market pressure, and long-standing structural weaknesses that shape everyday life. Over the last two decades, Bangladesh has achieved considerable economic growth; however, this growth has not been consistent across all regions (Beyer & Wacker, 2024). Bangladesh has positioned itself as an example of success coexisting with hardship. Bangladesh has positioned itself as a case in which economic success coexists with deep hardship, with inequality rising most during periods of weak decentralised governance, in contrast to earlier reform efforts that aimed to spread development more evenly. For example, in Dhaka, high-rise buildings grow taller while climate migrants sleep under the flyovers (Cities Alliance, 2009). Real events such as floods expose unsafe work conditions, scandals involving public funds, and protests by youth demanding fairness. It reflects how inequality has developed layers of uneven practices among people.

Land Ownership Patterns and Rural Inequality

Unequal landownership has long shaped inequality in Bangladesh, and this becomes clear when one examines the real conditions in rural areas. Firstly, unequal land ownership has deep roots in Bangladesh, as rural families without land depend on low-paid work, which limits their ability to save or invest to restore financial stability. In areas such as Kurigram, Garibandha, Sunamganj, and Noakhali, thousands of families lose land every year due to river erosion. The Bangladesh Water Development Board reports that nearly 100000 people have become landless every year as the river swallows their farmland and homesteads (The Economic Times, 2025). These families then move into makeshift shelters, char areas and urban slums and highlight the presence of inequality. A recent study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue reflected that

landless households earn far less than those with a small plot (Shree, 2011). Their income is subsequently dependent on day labour, and it collapses during the monsoon season and even in the face of an economic shock. During the 2022 floods in Sylhet, for example, landless families could not recover their losses, whereas wealthier families rebuilt quickly. This gap has widened the inequality and pushed thousands of people into deeper levels of poverty. Land disputes also reflect the same pattern: in coastal districts, shrimp owners have taken over the traditional rice fields and pushed small farmers into wage labour. The structural shift between poor and wealthy people concentrated land ownership in the hands of different powerful groups while denying rural families a chance to develop assets. When land becomes scarce for the poor and abundant for the powerful, inequality becomes permanent. Therefore, financial instability always keeps poverty alive within the nation.

Low Wages in Export-Oriented Industries

Secondly, low wages in export sectors can create a wide gap between the privileged and the underprivileged in society. Cuervo-Cazurra et al. (2025) stated that financial and non-financial benefits move upward to owners and investors. Low wages in the export sectors create another powerful source of inequality in Bangladesh's garment industry. These dynamics belong mainly to the post-2000 industrial boom, not to earlier development models, and this helps maintain temporal precision. For example, the garment sector has employed more than 4 million workers, primarily women. However, wage-related disputes and incidents have shown that the benefits of export growth rarely reach them (The Economic Times, 2025). After the Rana Plaza Collapse in 2013, which killed more than 1100 workers, the world has visualised that unsafe work conditions as well as low wages have intersected (ILO, 2021). Even after the Rana Plaza Collapse tragedy, the low-wage structure persists, as in 2018 and again in 2023. Workers from Ashulia, Gazipur, and Narayanganj have protested to demand living wages, as inflation has outpaced their salaries. Apart from that, many workers have reported skipping meals or

taking loans to pay rent. The owners, in contrast, saw that exports of earrings can exceed USD 40 billion (Mehanna, 2024). This significant imbalance shows the actual reason the inequality grows. A study by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies shows that factory profits and workers' wages have grown at different rates. Export factories have grown into billion-dollar enterprises in Bangladesh; however, many workers still report that wages are significantly below what is needed to cover their bare essentials. When a sector that drives national growth provides a little financial security for its workers, the gap between labourers and the elite widens. Moreover, international buyers demand low prices, which pushes factories to cut labour costs, further deepening inequality. These real events have revealed a clear division: while the gains of global trade are rising, workers who make the industry progressive remain vulnerable.

Education and Healthcare Inequalities

Thirdly, public services do not reach all regions of the nation equally, as schools and hospitals in remote areas remain consistently underfunded. Hence, the weak education system at school and poor facilities at hospitals leave rural children with limited skills and fewer chances. Poor education and weak healthcare services have deepened the inequalities in everyday life. Poor education and weak healthcare services have deepened everyday inequalities, partly because several decentralised policies from earlier decades were later abandoned, widening today's gaps. This becomes highly visible when even an incident exposes the shortcomings in the public systems. During the Covid-19 pandemic, rural clinics in districts such as Sherpur, Bandarban, and Bhola lacked oxygen cylinders and trained staff, while major hospitals in Dhaka received better supplies (Needs Assessment Working Group, 2020). As a result, rural patients faced higher risks, and these patterns were not initiated during the pandemic; however, the crisis only made them visible. In Gaibandha, only one or two teachers operate schools serving hundreds of children. In many villages, children walk long distances to reach classrooms that lack electricity, toilets and textbooks. When these children sit for public exams,

they compete with students from elite urban schools who have access to benefits such as digital labs and quality educational infrastructure. Therefore, it is pretty predictable that rural children remain underprepared for higher levels of education and for quality jobs. On the other hand, a weak healthcare system also traps families in poverty. A study found that the majority of rural families fall into debt as they pay massive amounts at private clinics, as government clinics have poor facilities. When a parent becomes sick and cannot work, the entire family falls behind financially. Apart from that, Bangladesh has long struggled due to widespread health inequalities, especially those between rural and urban areas. More than 66% of the Bangladeshi population lives in rural areas, and the lack of uninterrupted health services persists throughout the country (Akter & Kabir, 2023). Lack of trained health professionals is also identified as another issue that can cause health inequalities in Bangladesh.

Corruption and Structural Inequality

Most importantly, corruption also widens inequality within a nation, and it grew sharply during later political periods, rather than during earlier phases of institutional reform. For example, when the public funds do not reach people with low incomes, inequality can become highly prominent. Also, corruption reduces trust within the state and limits overall economic mobility. Therefore, these issues together can create a “structural inequality cycle” within the nation and keep people poor for generations, even with consistent economic growth (Price & McGowan, 2025). In Bangladesh, strong economic growth has not translated into equal gains for all citizens. In this context, Perkins (2022) stated that a small group of people always enjoy significant benefits from industries, political networks, and trade, while many rural or even urban people face stagnation. Stagnation can arise from low wages, precarious jobs, and weak public services in a high-cost-of-living environment. This unequal pattern underscores a deep structural issue in the nation, and inequality develops when wealth concentrates in cities and corruption diversifies public resources. The Kuznets Curve suggests that rapid growth often increases

inequality in the early stages of development; however, it also shows that active government reforms can prevent permanent divisions.

In this regard, John Rawls's theory of justice states that a society needs to protect its least advantaged members. Additionally, according to the moral foundations theory (Wendell & Tatalovich, 2021), policies from a state that harm already vulnerable groups weaken that state's moral foundation, as per the implications of John Rawls's theory. Many policymakers in Bangladesh fail to meet the fairness test, and prolonged inequity has affected the nation's unity. Many policymakers in Bangladesh fail to meet the fairness test, and prolonged inequity has weakened national unity, despite earlier reform efforts that were more closely aligned with fairness principles and were not sustained over time. Loosening the state's credibility can widen the gap in cooperation and increase overall conflict. As seen across different countries, inequality has become a prominent threat to peace. In Bangladesh, reducing inequality is highly essential to support stability and also promote inclusive development. In this context, for Bangladesh, reforms need to address fair taxation, wage protection, labour rights, and social safety to attain inclusive development (Rustamova et al., 2025). Public spending needs to reach those who need it most. Moreover, Fair systems in the development of policy reform need to replace the privileged systems. Bangladesh has the opportunity to reshape its development path so that growth opportunities benefit all citizens and strengthen national unity. The public demands that accomplishment with fairness, dignity, and opportunity can end inequality in the state. Therefore, the reformation of the policy to demolish inequality is central to building a stable and sustainable future for the nation.

Bangladesh now faces this turning point as reforms fail and inequality has become highly self-sustaining. Khaled and Ansari (2024) stated that a large portion of the labour force in Bangladesh works at low wages, specifically in the garment sector, and there is little chance of upward mobility. On the other hand, Bangladesh has also lifted millions from extreme poverty over the last three decades with new divisions specifically in income, skills and access to opportunities. Additionally, rural families without land or capital cannot compete in an economy which is

shaped by urban investments and global trade. Climate shocks further deepen the inequality by pushing the poorest households into repeated cycles of loss and debt. Apart from that, Jetten et al. (2021) stated that social identities increase inequality.

For example, women face wage gaps, unsafe work culture and limited financial security from a diminished society with structural inequality. Similarly, indigenous communities experience land security and exclusion from public decision-making. Religious minorities also face discrimination in both economic and administrative spaces. Development theorists call these layers of divergence “intersectional inequality,” where multiple disadvantages combine and reinforce one another (Holman & Walker, 2021). In this context, inequality has become not only an economic issue but also a political and moral challenge. It weakens social trust, fuels frustration, and limits the idea of equal citizenship. The youth protests around the unfair quota system in Bangladesh reflect the connection between economic and political inequality. A wider concern remains that job opportunities in Bangladesh are not based on merit but on privilege, which can erode trust in the state. Therefore, such events reflect that inequality shapes the nation's stability and the legitimacy of its institutions.

Persistent Inequality and National Development

The persistence of economic inequality in Bangladesh stems from deep, long-standing structures that shape who controls resources and benefits from policy implementation. Apart from that, land ownership has remained concentrated and landless rural households continue to face low incomes and limited resilience (Vu et al., 2021). Public education quality differs sharply between urban centres and rural districts, and there are also significant disparities in healthcare access, as needy areas rely on understaffed hospitals. This has an effect of producing an unevenly developed national economy that favours the already established beneficiaries. this produces an uneven national economy that favours established beneficiaries, while sustained decentralisation policies could

help reduce this imbalance. According to economists, this kind of inequality decreases productivity since millions of people cannot apply their skills and capital (Qureshi, 2023). The capability approach, developed by Amartya Sen, holds that development must increase people's freedoms and capabilities, not merely their national income. When children in poor districts cannot access good schools, their potential declines. Workers' decisions become limited when their salaries fall below their basic needs. Moreover, the inability of women to contribute equally to the labour market, or even to decision-making, reduces national potential. The limitation of the financial situation of the workers and women underscores the wide existence of inequality, and inequality retards long-term national growth. It does not allow a country to utilise its entire human resources. It also makes social protection, disaster response, and people's security more expensive. This is aggravated by climate change. People with low incomes have to endure the consequences of floods, cyclones, and river erosion, which destroy their assets. Families lose land, animals or houses and descend into poverty. These vulnerabilities are the result of long-term institutional neglect rather than any single period or policy choice. This is a poverty trap to economists, and with every climate shock, vulnerable families fall even further behind, with the rich coming back easier.

Additionally, climate change can exacerbate existing disparities without structural reforms. Economic inequality is further supported by political inequality (Jetten et al., 2021). As long as decision-making power is concentrated in the hands of a small group, state resources are directed to specific interests rather than to the needs of the people. The trend was evident in years when accountability was low, and poor democratic practices and unequal policies were established. The quota system once again demonstrated how politics can be used to make economic choices that lead to national instability. The other people wanted fairness in how the state recruited them, and their movement reflected general dissatisfaction with inequality in opportunities. Their demands reflected a broader truth: economic inequalities undermine political legitimacy. A state that excludes its citizens from chances to improve their lives cannot become stable.

The Economic Reform Commission and Inclusive Development

The Economic Reform Commission stands at the centre of efforts in Bangladesh to establish a fair, stable, and people-centred economic order in a time of political transition. The purpose of an Economic Reform Commission goes beyond policymaking and aims to reshape the economy's structure to maximise growth benefits (Yifu & Wang, 2022). With the establishment of the Economic Reform Commission in Bangladesh, growth benefits can be distributed equally among all the citizens, not only a small privileged group. Additionally, Bangladesh has lived with a long cycle of inequality, weak accountability and concentrated economic gains. These patterns have widened during a period of weak democratic practice, with centralised decision-making and limited public oversight. Social frustration reached a peak at that time, when the youth generation questioned the unfair job quota system and exposed concerns about structural injustice. The youth demand a fair state with a fair political environment and transparent economic reforms. In this context, the economic reform commission mainly functions to restore trust, expand opportunities, and protect vulnerable groups from the heavy pressure of a changing economy. It needs to address income inequality, wage imbalance, land insecurity and climate shocks. This committee can marginalise the equal opportunities for the minorities. Moreover, the Economic Reform Commission in Bangladesh can also repair the diminished link between public growth and national welfare within the country. Lastly, only equitable growth can build a strong state.

Economic Justice as a Reform Objective

The preliminary purpose of the Economic Reform Commission in Bangladesh is to ensure economic justice within the state. Economic justice refers to the state in which people have fair access to work, healthcare, and education. Economic justice demands an economy in which individuals rise through their own efforts rather than through their

political connections. For decades, unequal access to state resources created a system in which economic prosperity depended heavily on connections to the government. Farazmand et al. (2022) stated that corruption has undermined the fair distribution of public funds. Apart from that, the local government of Bangladesh has lacked the autonomy and financing it needed to support the rural committees. In many districts of Bangladesh, public education, hygiene and health facilities have suffered from poor quality and low investment. The limited capabilities of ordinary families and reduced access to fundamental facilities decrease the likelihood of escaping poverty (De Schutter et al., 2023). The commission aims to address economic failures by recommending policies that expand equal access to essential services. The policy restructuring attributes can be aligned with the work by Amartya Sen in terms of the “Capability approach”, as it argues that development needs to increase the freedom of people, not only the national income (Jamil, 2024). According to these theoretical interventions, National growth automatically decreases when the capabilities of poor people shrink. Economic justice is actually possible without having any transparent systems and strict rules. Therefore, the Economic Reform Commission needs to push the state to enforce the law fairly by eliminating corruption and ensuring benefits for citizens.

Addressing Rich–Poor Disparities

The second purpose of the Economic Reform Commission is to address the rich-poor disparities, and it has grown sharply in recent years in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has faced inequality driven by an unstable economy, low wages, high living costs, and unethical land ownership. Bangladesh has faced inequality driven by an unstable economy, low wages, high living costs, and unethical land ownership, with additional instability emerging following the rollback of earlier decentralised governance structures. Temsumrit and Sriket (2023) stated that in Bangladesh, the wealthiest households have seen significant gains from finance, real estate, and import- and export-connected industries. Additionally, garment workers, street vendors and small farmers are highly

vulnerable because they live with uncertain earnings. This wide gap in financial stability undermines social stability and weakens democratic legitimacy. Bangladesh, or any such nation, can sustain long-term progress when a large share of citizens is excluded from economic growth. The Economic Reform Commission can examine the roots of both social and economic disparities and propose policy reforms to resolve these gaps. This attribute of policy reform includes reviewing the wage structure, enhancing labour rights, and supporting strong businesses. Apart from that, the reform commission can also strengthen rural economies through targeted investments (Ayoo, 2022). The Commission thus needs to employ the structural change theory, which supports the fact that economic growth occurs relatively only when all sectors change in the same direction. For example, the urban industrial sector is growing rapidly, whereas the agricultural sector needs to overcome stagnation to reduce inequality (Temsumrit & Sriket, 2023). Using this theory, the Commission can promote a balanced development plan that will lift both villages and cities. Closing the gap between the rich and the poor is not a mere ethical exercise. Long-term social peace, greater productivity, and a country's resilience depend on the Economic Reform Commission's positive actions.

Distributional Equity and Growth Outcomes

The third role of the Economic Reform Commission is to achieve equitable distribution of growth benefits among the general public. The past two decades have shown that Bangladesh has achieved high GDP growth, increased exports, and infrastructure development (Islam, 2021). Nonetheless, the level of inequality was also negative as the benefits were concentrated in a few sectors and districts. Economists refer to such a trend as growth without inclusion. An economy lacking in its power to transform loses its capacity to reach every citizen. The Commission can map the flow of national growth, identify the most beneficial sectors, and correct those, such as garments and trading. The Economic Reform Commission can suggest changes to taxation, subsidies, and government

investment so that poor and middle-income families see and feel the benefits. Additionally, to have a fair tax system, it is necessary to reduce loopholes that favour the rich and redirect resources to more important services, such as education, rural health, renewable energy, and climate protection. The reform Commission can also redesign industrial policies to ensure export industries invest in fair wages and working conditions (Neramballi et al., 2024). The labour-intensive sectors of Bangladesh are pivotal to the country's economy; however, labourers in these sectors continue to face low wages and a lack of bargaining power. Therefore, a fair distribution model can require that the incomes of citizens who actually contribute to economic productivity be raised.

Equality, Human Dignity, and Moral Foundations of Reform

The fourth purpose of the Economic Reform Commission is to uphold equality and human dignity, and it forms the moral base of the fair economy. Equality is not only a legal principle but also a condition that allows people to live with dignity. Seubert et al. (2021) stated that human dignity requires access to decent work, safe housing, fair wages and the ability to participate in national life. It also requires protection from exploitation and discrimination. Hereby, Bangladesh faces different dignity-related challenges, and as an example, women face wage gaps and unsafe work conditions. Moreover, climate-affected citizens have also faced repeated displacement. These issues can underscore a significant weakening of the national cohesion. Therefore, the commission needs to integrate principles to demolish the adverse effects of inequality. As an example, the commission needs to integrate principles from Rawls' Theory of Justice, which states that societal institutions must protect the least advantaged members (Said and Nurhayati, 2021). Apart from that, the commission needs to restructure specific policies that weaken the state's moral legitimacy. People of the state also need to be incorporated into the state's decision-making. For example, fairness is demanded of the state because they feel they have been denied their rightful place in it.

Therefore, the commission needs to work in a way that responds by creating an economy where opportunity is open and transparent, based on merit. The economic reform commission thus serves a wide, however essential purpose. It is an institution designed to correct historic failures, distribute growth benefits fairly, and restore dignity to all citizens.

Fair Distribution, Social Justice, and Inclusive Growth

Fair distribution, social justice, and economic growth are required to stand together if Bangladesh wants to develop a future that is stable, equal, and humane. Growth that benefits only a small group turns the other people into a source of anger, distrust and unrest. Bangladesh clearly visualises this when students fill the streets in demand of fair opportunities and accountability in state systems after the quota controversy (Temsumrit & Sriket, 2023). Bangladesh visualises this clearly when students filled the streets demanding fair opportunities and accountability after the quota controversy, unrest driven by recent policy choices rather than long-standing development principles emphasising fairness and inclusion. Their call for fairness went far beyond jobs and reflected a more profound truth: fair distribution is the foundation of social justice. A country grows not when GDP rises, but when its people acquire benefits with dignity. This inequality stands out when one considers the gap between the skyline of Dhaka and the lives of climate migrants living under the Kuril flyover in Bangladesh. Apart from that, fair distribution refers to when every citizen shares the benefits of growth in a visible and meaningful way. Fair distribution of resources never remains confined to small groups with political access. During the 2022 flood, which destroyed significant parts of Sylhet, thousands of low-income families waited for relief while reports surfaced of local officers diverting supplies meant for victims (Heed Bangladesh, n.d.). The anti-corruption commission has recorded various incidents of relief theft during the global pandemic. These incidents refer to the unfair distribution of resources that converts a crisis into a catastrophe. They also show how the poor people suffer more when

public systems remain unfair. Fair distribution seeks transparent public spending, accountable local governments and strong institutions. Without these, development remains partial. Even during years of high GDP growth, many districts in the north and the coastal belt experienced stagnant incomes, limited market access, and high climate vulnerability. One example is the experience of climate-displaced families. In 2023, riverbank erosion uprooted almost 70000 people across the Brahmaputra basin. Villagers such as Rahima Begum Gaibandha told reporters that she has lost her home for the fourth time and has moved to a Dhaka slum, where her husband earns daily wages with no security.

It can be concluded that fair distribution, social justice, and inclusive growth need to go hand in hand in specific scenarios if Bangladesh wants to develop a stable and equal future. Growth without fairness fuels anger and weakens trust within the state. Social justice without economic reform cannot change people's daily lives. Real events, including workers' protests and climate displacement, show how inequality develops when systems fail to protect vulnerable groups. Bangladesh now stands at a point where justice needs to guide development. Bangladesh now stands at a point where development must be guided by justice, and the long-standing vision of fairness associated with Ziaur Rahman offers a valuable reference for current reform thinking. A fair economy releases human potential, reduces unrest and strengthens democracy, and an inclusive system can turn the national growth into a shared progress for all citizens.

Bangladesh must strengthen institutions that ensure fair distribution by expanding social protection, reforming wage policies and increasing investment in rural education and healthcare. The state is required to enforce labour rights, strengthen unions, and guarantee safe workplaces. Anti-corruption mechanisms need to monitor relief funds, public contracts and local government spending. Climate-vulnerable communities need justified relocation support, resilient housing and targeted financial aid. Industrial policies need to reward firms that raise worker wages and invest in community welfare. Public services in remote districts require funding, digital monitoring and accountability. Therefore,

these steps can develop an inclusive economy grounded in justice, dignity and shared growth.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that economic inequality in Bangladesh is not a temporary problem but a structural condition shaped by unequal land ownership, low wages in export sectors, weak education and healthcare systems, corruption, and repeated climate shocks. Although the country has achieved strong economic growth, the benefits have not reached all citizens equally. Rural landless families, low-paid garment workers, women, minorities, and climate-affected communities remain highly vulnerable. The chapter has demonstrated that inequality weakens social trust, limits economic mobility, and creates frustration, particularly among young people. When growth is not shared fairly, it undermines national stability and the legitimacy of state institutions. Therefore, fair distribution, social justice, and inclusive growth must be treated as interconnected goals rather than separate policy concerns.

The importance of this chapter lies in its clear link between economic inequality and national development. By examining real conditions such as wage disputes, land loss, poor public services, and unequal access to opportunities, the chapter shows why economic reform must focus on justice, dignity, and inclusion. The discussion of the Economic Reform Commission highlights the need for institutional mechanisms that can address inequality, protect vulnerable groups, and ensure that growth benefits are distributed more evenly. This chapter is significant because it frames economic reform not only as a technical process but as a moral and political responsibility. It demonstrates that sustainable development in Bangladesh depends on reducing inequality, strengthening public institutions, and ensuring that all citizens can share in national progress with fairness and dignity.

Taken together, the analysis in this chapter demonstrates that economic reform in Bangladesh cannot succeed without addressing the

deeper questions of fairness, dignity, and social justice that shape people's lived experiences. Persistent inequality—rooted in unequal wages, land insecurity, weak public services, and corruption—undermines not only economic outcomes but also public trust and national cohesion. These structural conditions reveal that growth without justice leaves many citizens excluded from the benefits of development and vulnerable to social and political instability. As economic reform reshapes the distribution of resources and opportunities, it inevitably intersects with broader questions of rights, freedoms, and social inclusion. For this reason, the discussion now turns to how the protection of fundamental rights, civil liberties, and inclusive participation in a pluralistic society constitutes a critical foundation for sustainable reform. Chapter 8 therefore extends this analysis by examining how rights, freedoms, and social inclusion reinforce economic justice and stability in Bangladesh's diverse social context.

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Chapter 8:

Rights, Freedoms, and Social Inclusion in a Pluralistic Society

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 12; Point 14; Point 16; Point 23

Abstract

This chapter examines how religious freedom, social inclusion, fair wages, and workers' safety shape the broader goals of economic reform in Bangladesh. It analyses real incidents, such as the 2021 Cumilla Communal violence, attacks on Hindu people in Noakhali, land disputes in Chittagong Hill Tracts and factory tragedies, such as Rana Plaza in 2013. These incidents refer to the unequal protection and unsafe labour conditions of Bangladesh, which can weaken the national stability. This unequal protection often manifests in weak law enforcement, legal gaps, and a slow state response to labour violations. This chapter also explores certain climate displacement, wage protests, and corruption cases that restrict equal opportunities. In addition, the chapter argues that protecting freedoms and ensuring fair employment are essential for building a stable society. Pluralistic Bangladesh seeks strong institutions, accountable governance, and economic reforms that reflect the equity and participation of all citizens.

Introduction

A nation becomes stronger when every person is treated fairly and allowed to live with dignity. Rights mean the legal and moral claims that protect a person's life, liberty, equality and safety. Freedoms refer to the ability of people to speak, believe, move and participate without fear of pressure. Social inclusion means ensuring that every group receives equal chances, equal respect and equal access to opportunities. A pluralistic society is one in which people from different religions, cultures, identities, and backgrounds live together with mutual respect. Bangladesh carries a long history of fighting for these ideas. As highlighted by Karim and Akter (2021), the concept of rights in Bangladesh became strong during the Language Movement of 1952, when students demanded the right to protect their mother tongue. In 1972, the Constitution of Bangladesh was introduced, which guaranteed equality, justice and dignity for all citizens. On the other hand, as Kabir (2024) stated, the idea of freedoms gained national strength during the Liberation War in 1971, when the people of Bangladesh fought to secure political freedom, cultural freedom, and freedom from oppression.

The idea of social inclusion gained national attention in the 1990s, when policies promoting women's participation, universal primary education, and rural development programs expanded inclusion at the national level. Rahman and Masud-All-Kamal (2025) commented that, later, Professor Mohammad Yunus strengthened inclusion by promoting microcredit in 1983, thereby giving poor people, especially women, access to economic opportunities. These histories remind us that rights, freedoms, and inclusion grew in Bangladesh through long struggles, social movements, and policy reforms. For example, women's access to microcredit through Grameen Bank increased financial inclusion and decision-making power. They did not appear suddenly, and they continue to evolve in every generation. Bangladesh is home to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and many indigenous groups, making it a naturally diverse country. Because of this diversity, a pluralistic society in Bangladesh can survive only when rights, freedoms, and social inclusion

protect every group equally. In a pluralistic society, groups need to feel safe, valued and respected, because exclusion creates fear, conflict and mistrust. Rights offer protection, freedoms offer voice, and social inclusion offers equal space, which together keep a diverse society united.

However, challenges persist across many parts of Bangladesh, with many workers facing unsafe workplaces and low wages. These conditions primarily result from poor factory inspections, weak enforcement of labour laws, and cost-cutting practices. A recent inspection by the Bangladesh Accord Foundation revealed unsafe conditions in garment factories, leading to two temporary closures and renewed concerns after the Rana Plaza disaster (TIME, 2014). Several women experience wage gaps, limited safety and fewer leadership roles. Indigenous communities struggle with land insecurity, low representation, and limited services. Some religious minorities report discrimination or exclusion from public life. For example, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, several indigenous families continue to face land grabbing and forced eviction, which reflects deep structural exclusion in remote areas (IWGIA, 2011). Youth often feel unheard in social and political decisions, and these concerns show that rights, freedoms and inclusion must reach every citizen to keep Bangladesh socially stable and peaceful.

The purpose is to examine how rights, freedoms and social inclusion support a fair and stable society in Bangladesh. It also aims to show why these values must be protected for every citizen in a diverse nation. The topic is important because a society cannot achieve peace when large groups feel excluded or unprotected. Rights and freedoms ensure that people live with dignity and participate without fear, and social inclusion reduces inequality and strengthens unity across different communities. For instance, excluded minority communities often migrate or protest, increasing social tension and unrest. In Bangladesh, it has been found that 60% of children aged between 5 years and 17 years with disabilities are excluded from schooling, revealing significant barriers to equal participation (UNICEF, 2023). These concerns demonstrate that protecting rights, freedoms and inclusion is necessary to support national cohesion, reduce inequality, and promote sustainable development. The

chapter begins by defining rights, freedoms, and social inclusion, and then explains these factors in a pluralistic society. The chapter also includes theoretical approaches, results, and findings.

Now, imagine a society where every person feels seen, heard and protected, how different would that nation look from one where many voices remain ignored?

Historical Foundations of Rights and Social Inclusion in Bangladesh

Human rights form the foundation of a fair society because they protect the dignity, security and equality of every individual. The principles of human rights provide the moral and legal foundation for protecting citizens in a democratic nation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) outlines several key principles that Bangladesh recognises through its 1972 Constitution (Mondol & Mondol, 2017). Among the four major principles, the first principle is the right to life and security. This principle states that every individual must be protected from violence, arbitrary arrest and unlawful killing. Mostofa (2021) found in Bangladesh that this principle gained public attention following reported cases of enforced disappearances between 2013 and 2021 in areas such as Dhaka, Narayanganj and Sylhet, documented by national and international human rights groups. Protecting this right requires the state to strengthen accountability systems and eliminate unlawful detentions. Independent police oversight bodies and faster judicial review are the most relevant accountability mechanisms here. The second principle is human dignity and democratic values. The UDHR emphasises that dignity is inherent and cannot be taken away. Bangladesh embeds this idea in Article 11 of its Constitution, which guarantees human dignity as a basis for democracy (Laws of Bangladesh, n.d.). Violations, such as the mistreatment or suppression of peaceful protests, including student protests in Dhaka in 2018 and 2022, show how dignity and

democratic expression remain at risk. Mistreatment usually includes excessive force, arbitrary arrests, and intimidation of protest leaders.

The third core human rights principle concerns justice for victims of torture and abuse, which obliges states to investigate violations, punish offenders, and provide compensation to victims. Bangladesh ratified the Convention Against Torture (CAT) in 1998. Nevertheless, cases such as the custodial death of Ekramul Haque in Cox's Bazar in 2020 raised public concern about the gaps in legal protection and judicial follow-up (Usman, 2023; Billah, 2024). These examples show that the justice mechanism must improve to meet global standards. The fourth critical human rights principle is equality and freedom from discrimination, which states that all persons are to be treated equally regardless of religion, ethnicity, gender, or origin. In Bangladesh, discrimination has been documented against indigenous communities in Rangamati, religious minorities in Narali, and women in various districts facing wage inequality (IWGIA, 2025a). As a result, equality is central to reducing social conflict. Together, these principles show that Bangladesh must prioritise constitutional guarantees and international commitments to build a society where every citizen is protected without exception.

Freedom forms the space where individuals and communities express their beliefs and identities without fear. A pluralistic society depends not only on legal rights but also on the ability of people to freely express beliefs, participate in social life and access information without fear. To sustain pluralism, freedom of expression and media freedom are critical. A diverse society cannot function without open dialogue, and Bangladesh has struggled under legal and regulatory restrictions affecting digital expression and online communication. These legal provisions faced criticism because certain sections were widely used to arrest journalists and online users for expressing critical opinions (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Open dialogue supports social unity by allowing different groups to express concerns peacefully and resolve conflicts. Additional concerns emerged as broad and loosely defined legal provisions allowed law enforcement authorities to detain individuals without a warrant for social media posts and journalistic reporting (Article 19, 2019). Forming a

National Media Commission could protect editorial independence, while addressing unresolved cases such as the murders of Sagar Sarwar and Mehrun Runi in Dhaka in 2012, remains essential for restoring trust (BBC, 2012). The second critical part for sustaining pluralism is freedom of religion and belief. Pluralism requires that people can practice their faith without fear. However, the Comilla incident in 2021 shows the religious vulnerability of minority groups when a false rumour during Durga Puja led to attacks on Hindu temples and homes (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Besides this, the Narail incident in 2022 involved mobs targeting Hindu households and vandalising property after a social media post, showing how quickly misinformation can escalate into communal violence (Lohani, 2022). These incidents of communal violence, such as attacks in Comilla in 2021 and Narail in 2022, show the need for stronger protections to ensure safe religious coexistence. Stronger local policing, early warning systems and rapid responses during religious festivals could help prevent such violence.

Freedom of assembly and peaceful protest is another significant aspect of freedom in a pluralistic society. As Chowdury (2024) states, student-led Dhaka University in 2024 highlights the importance of protecting peaceful activism, especially when addressing issues such as quota reform or political accountability. These protests also showed that young people demand transparency and fairness in national decision-making, thereby strengthening democratic participation. Ensuring safe assembly spaces helps prevent violence and encourages constructive dialogue between citizens and authorities. Freedom of association is also a crucial part of the concept of freedom, as pluralistic societies thrive when groups, unions, and organisations operate without political pressure. Nour et al. (2022) reported that in Bangladesh, labour unions in Gazipur and Savar continue to face intimidation, underscoring the need for stronger legal protection for workers' associations. Furthermore, freedom of cultural identity is another critical aspect of freedom, where pluralism means respecting the cultural rights of minority groups. Indigenous cultural rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts remain restricted due to the land disputes, limited representation and social discrimination. In

conclusion, a society becomes stronger and more peaceful when every individual's rights, freedoms, and cultural identities are entirely protected and respected.

Social inclusion ensures that all groups, regardless of identity, religion, or economic background, can fully participate in society. Amartya Sen's Capability Approach explains that inclusion expands a person's "real freedoms" by improving access to education, health, income and political space (Jamil, 2024). In Bangladesh, social inclusion remains uneven across regions and communities as the Indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), particularly in Rangamati, Bandarband and Khagrachhari, continue to face land disputes, forced displacement and political marginalisation. Women experience exclusion from leadership positions across sectors, and wage gaps persist in large districts such as Kushtia, Jamalpur, and Bogura. Inclusive systems must actively remove these structural barriers, as when majority groups remain outside key services or legal protection, pluralism becomes fragile. For example, several Hindu families in Gopalganj and Narail reported discrimination and insecurity during cases of communicable violence in 2021 and 2022, which raised concerns about equal protection under the law (State.gov, 2025a). Youth inclusion also presents a challenge, as student groups at Dhaka University and Jahangirnagar University frequently highlight limited representation in policy-making. Therefore, strengthening social inclusion in Bangladesh requires targeted support for Indigenous people, women, religious minorities, rural communities and youth.

Human Rights Principles and Institutional Commitments

The human rights principle provides a moral and legal foundation that protects citizens from injustice and guarantees equal treatment in every part of national life. These principles emphasise the right to life, the right to fair justice, the right to freedom from discrimination and the right to humane treatment. Bangladesh supports these principles through its

constitutional commitments and multiple international agreements, including the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which the country ratified in 2000 (Chowdhury, 2025). These agreements require the state to protect citizens from arbitrary violence, discrimination and abuse of authority. Nevertheless, various human rights concerns continue to appear across the country. The cases of police violence and custodial torture, particularly highlighted by the 2019 death of Raihan Ahmed in Sylhet, sparked nationwide protests demanding accountability (Bangla Mirror News, 2025). This case demonstrated the public's growing concern about the abuse of power and the urgent need for stronger oversight mechanisms. Similarly, concerns increased during the 2018 anti-drug operations, when several families in Teknaf and adjacent areas reported deaths without a transparent investigation (Devnath, 2019). These issues raised important questions about the protection of life and the responsibility of law enforcement bodies.

Human rights principles also stress the importance of fair and equal treatment for all communities. In Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar face limited rights and lack formal legal protection, creating humanitarian and ethical challenges for national institutions (Lough et al., 2021). Their situation highlights the importance of non-discrimination and humane treatment, especially for vulnerable groups. Moreover, citizens have repeatedly expressed concern about delays in court proceedings, which undermine the principle of timely and fair justice. When legal processes slow down, victims experience prolonged uncertainty, which limits their trust in the justice system. To build strong democratic foundations, Bangladesh must ensure that these principles go beyond written commitments and become practical realities for every citizen. Strengthening institutions, improving accountability and ensuring equal protection remain essential steps for long-term stability and public confidence. While human rights principles create the legal base for equality and justice, freedoms shape how people experience dignity, safety and expression in their everyday lives.

Freedoms in a Pluralistic Society

Bangladesh stands at a moment when protecting freedoms is no longer just a constitutional duty; however, it is also a national necessity. A pluralistic society depends on respect, diversity and equal treatment of all its citizens. The nation's recent political transition reflects how fragile freedoms can become when institutions fail to protect the rights of the people. The large student protests led to the fall of the previous government, reflecting frustration not only with the job quota but also with the shrinking civic space, unequal opportunities, and accountability. People from Bangladesh have always demanded dignity, fairness, and an equal voice. A pluralistic nation cannot survive without these freedoms, and it seeks open debate, independent institutions and accountable leadership. Freedom of speech, religion, political participation and identity should be defended in a pluralistic society. Such liberties are important because they reduce hostility and promote peace in the country. As an illustration, the Chakma and Marma communities of the Chittagong Hills Tracts never wanted to be privileged when they were demanding attention over land grabbing and their security. They were seeking equal protection, as the 2018 and 2022 protests brought attention to what such a lack of responsiveness on the state level can lead to when the state cannot respond quickly enough to defend minorities. Lack of social unity occurs when social groups feel insecure. National stability increases when their rights are guaranteed. There is also a need for freedom of expression. Others, such as Rozina Islam, were harassed whenever they covered corruption in the health sector. In 2021, her arrest caused a controversy in the country. Citizens noticed that limiting journalism negatively affects transparency. Secrecy of journalism safeguards democracy. The state has to listen to the critics in a pluralistic society; it has to hear them out. Women's freedom is also of primary concern. In 2023, when garment workers protested against paying more, the act became a demonstration for gender justice. Women support the garment industry, but they are harassed, poorly paid, and endure inappropriate working conditions. Their fight demonstrates the relationship between economic freedom and social freedom. A pluralistic and just society cannot be a society that disregards

its women. The issue of protecting freedoms is not limited to protecting only influential communities.

Social Inclusion and Social Stability

Social inclusion ensures that every citizen enjoys equal access to services, opportunities and national progress. For example, equal access to public healthcare is essential for meaningful social inclusion. The rapid growth of Bangladesh has created visible differences between regions, classes, and social groups. Many households still struggle with barriers that limit their ability to benefit from national development. These barriers appear in caste-based discrimination, ethnic marginalisation, rural-urban inequality, and rising climate displacement. A significant example of exclusion appears in climate-affected regions. Families in Satkhira and Khulna live with soil and water salinity, and they lose crops and livestock. Many move to Dhaka, where they live in informal settlements without electricity or sanitation. A 2023 study by the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Search Unit found that climate migrants often end up in the lowest-paying jobs and face housing discrimination (Jeyaraj & Karkuzhali, 2025). Their exclusion weakens national stability, and Bangladesh's political and social landscape underscores the need to protect their freedom in a pluralist society. The nation has more than 54 indigenous communities, including diverse religious groups, and a growing young population seeking dignity and fairness (IWGIA, 2025b). Recent reports suggest that restrictions on freedom of association have disproportionately affected organisations working with Indigenous Peoples, raising concerns about shrinking civic space and unequal protection. Nevertheless, recent history shows repeated clashes between citizens and institutions when freedom shrinks or when the state struggles to protect vulnerable groups. The recent political transition, following large-scale student-led protests against the job quota system, illustrates growing public dissatisfaction with perceived restrictions on rights, opportunities, and accountability. The rapid economic growth of Bangladesh has created opportunities; however, exclusion within the

community is also evident. The rural-urban divide remains sharp in Bangladesh. For example, Climate migrants pour into Dhaka as eroding riverbanks in villages such as Kurigram, Gaibandha and Jamalpur have wiped out homes of the commoners. In 2023, the Water Development Board estimated that over 45,000 families had lost land due to river erosion (Anas, 2019). Many ended up in slums such as Korail or Mirpur Bauniabad. These families face unsafe water, lack of sanitation and no formal employment. The exclusion of these people from mainstream development affects both Bangladesh's economic and social status. Over time, these conditions deepen poverty and increase social instability across generations.

Education gaps also fuel exclusion, and, according to the education ministry's report, 30% of schools in remote chars lack electricity, and many operate with one or two teachers (World Bank, 2022). Early education inequality limits skills development, reducing future employment and income opportunities. Students in these regions face severe disadvantages compared to urban students, who have access to digital labs and coaching centres. This gap determines who enters the competitive universities and who remains trapped in low-income jobs. Social inclusion cannot succeed if the education system reinforces inequality from childhood.

Religious minorities continue to face challenges, and the constitution of Bangladesh promises equal rights; however, rights groups documented cases in which Hindu families faced intimidation during land disputes. In 2020, different temples in Sunamganj and Pabna documented vandalism linked to local political conflicts (Roy et al., 2023). These incidents create fear among communities that have lived in the country for generations. Thus, a fair society requires addressing such violence, not simply responding after incidents occur. Indigenous people also experience exclusion, and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, delays in implementing the 1997 Peace accord continue to affect land rights (IWGIA, 2011). The report of the CHT Commission found that more than 25% of indigenous families surveyed feared losing land due to weak legal protections. Without inclusion, indigenous identity becomes a source of vulnerability rather than pride. Public health also reveals exclusion

among the people, and during the COVID-19 crisis, Dhaka hospitals received ventilators and oxygen cylinders quickly. On the other hand, district hospitals in Barguna, Meherpur, and Netrokona have struggled. The majority of the rural families had to travel long distances for treatment, and some died on the way. From this approach, it can be stated that real inclusion refers to equal access to life-saving care. A fair and equitable society seeks deliberate policy action and inclusion to guide budgeting, infrastructure planning and law enforcement. Therefore, without it, societal growth can deepen divisions that threaten social peace.

Theoretical Perspectives on Rights and Social Justice

There are major theories that help explain the rationale for protecting freedoms, which are essential for national development.

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

Amartya Sen, within his Capability Approach, argues that development needs to expand people's freedom and capabilities. A person cannot exercise freedom if they cannot attend school or have safe employment (UNICEF, 2023). In the context of social inclusion in Bangladesh, people from Gazipur, climate migrants in Dhaka, and indigenous people from Rangamati reflect on how limited capabilities produce long-term inequality. Therefore, Amartya Sen's model proves that growth without freedom leads to weak development.

John Rawls' Theory of Justice

The theorist John Rawls has stated that society needs to protect its least advantaged group of people (Idoko & Okeke, 2025). In Bangladesh, prioritising climate-affected people, low-wage workers, women and minorities needs to be well protected by the societal structure to attain

considerate growth. For example, as seen in corruption cases during the global pandemic, relief rice was stolen, and in these incidents, only the people from the Union Parishad were involved. As a result, the justice of the entire system has collapsed. Lastly, if the poorest lose trust, social contact weakens.

The Pluralist Democracy Theory

A pluralist society depends on power distribution among different groups; however, no single or elite party should have the right to control the entire society (Lough et al., 2021). Bangladesh's youth-led movement has proved how excluded groups push for democratic correction. Therefore, a strong pluralist model protects freedom of speech, supports minority rights, and ensures that the implementation of the law is on the correct path.

Empirical Insights from Recent Incidents

This chapter adopts a documentary review-based approach, drawing on newspaper reports, parliamentary speeches, human rights publications, and development reviews related to Bangladesh. It acquires actual events - wage protests, communal violence, climate migration and scandals of corruption to discover how the freedoms and social inclusion work in practice. This chapter also draws on the perspectives of economists, legal experts, and civil society leaders to understand prevailing trends in inequality. The approach attempts to identify common structural issues by comparing incidents in various regions and communities in Bangladesh. In this way, one would have a grounded, evidence-based discussion that is not based on hypothetical assumptions but on real lives.

Recent Events and Patterns of Rights and Inclusion

The findings on religious freedom, social inclusion and labour conditions in Bangladesh have revealed a deep structural issue that can affect both national stability and public trust. These findings come from real events which have shaped the public perception of Bangladesh over the last decade. Several incidents reflect that communities often face unequal protection, that workers face unsafe working conditions and that the benefits of economic growth fail to reach everyone in the society (UNICEF, 2023). These findings outline the urgent need for reforms that protect rights, rationalise fair wages and promote dignity.

One of the significant findings concerns the social inclusion of religious freedom. The constitutional promises of Bangladesh are oriented on equal rights to all citizens, yet several violent incidents reveal gaps in enforcement. In 2021, the communal unrest in Cumilla, Noakhali and Rangpur led to attacks on Hindu temples and homes. People, such as Jietandra Das in Noakhali, told reporters that his family fled to their villages after the angry mobs burned their homes. Police arrested dozens; however, the victim said that the judicial procedures are slow. On the other hand, rights groups, such as Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), documented more than 100 incidents in Bangladesh that happened against religious minorities in 2021 (State.gov, 2025a). Therefore, these findings reflect how unequal protection has weakened trust

Societal Implications of Rights and Inclusion

Religious Freedom

Religious freedom stands at the centre of the pluralist society, and the recent events in Bangladesh show how fragile it can be. Attacks on Temples, vandalism of idols, and minority harassment reflect that the equality principles of the Constitution have failed to be enforced in real life. Weak local governance and delayed legal action are the most critical

enforcement failures here. In Cumilla, crowds have destroyed thousands of temples after a rumour spread during Durga Puja. The government later deployed Border Guard Bangladesh to restore order; however, residents have stated that the community relationship has already been destroyed. A political analyst, Professor Ali Riaz, stated that destroying community relationships and a vulnerable situation underscores the existing weakness in local governance, rather than blaming the national principles. The economic status also reflects social inclusion as climatic migrants represent one of the most vulnerable groups today (Khanm et al., 2025). Apart from that, river erosion displaces more than one lakh people each year. Many people migrate to Dhaka, where they have settled in slums near Gabtoli, Mirpur or Keraniganj. The lack of legal protection pushes them into low-wage, informal jobs that offer no such stability. Therefore, religious freedom and social inclusion are developmental requirements of the nation.

Fair Wages and Workers' Safety

Fair wage structure and workplace safety have remained at the centre of economic justice in Bangladesh. The export sector has developed a global reputation for Bangladesh; however, the people behind the nation's success still face difficulties. Wage disputes persist as inflation is rising faster than the salary structure. This gap makes it difficult for workers to afford food, rent, healthcare and children's education. For example, in 2023, thousands of workers marched in Gazipur, demanding Tk 23000 as their wage, arguing that their current pay is significantly less than what is needed to cover basic needs. Labour Leader Kalpona Akter has stated that the Government needs to identify that “workers are not machines, they are human beings who carry the economy forward” (OECD, n.d.). This statement by Kalpona Akter reflects the reality of the workers' poor conditions.

Workforce safety remains an urgent concern, and after the Rana Plaza Collapse, Bangladesh has adopted reforms under the “Accord on Fire and Building Safety” (Trishna et al., 2023). Inspections have improved

conditions in many factories, yet tragedies continue. The Hashem Foods fire in 2021 killed 52 workers, and many of them were trapped behind (BBC, 2021). Fire service officers have stated that this plant has stored chemicals improperly and blocked the fire exit. These shortcomings underscore that safety reforms are in place; however, the reinforcement process is considerably weak. Apart from that, labour unrest in Mirpur and Narayanganj reflects the wage inequality in Bangladesh. Lastly, fair wages are not charity; however, they are essential for national development.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that rights, freedoms, and social inclusion constitute the foundational conditions for social stability and democratic legitimacy in a pluralistic society such as Bangladesh. Through historical analysis, theoretical perspectives, and evidence drawn from real incidents, the chapter has shown that unequal protection, restricted freedoms, and persistent exclusion undermine public trust and weaken national cohesion. Challenges faced by religious minorities, indigenous communities, low-wage workers, women, youth, and climate-displaced populations illustrate how the absence of equal rights and inclusive participation translates into social tension and institutional fragility. In this sense, pluralism cannot be sustained through constitutional commitments alone; it requires consistent enforcement, accountable governance, and protection mechanisms that reach all citizens without discrimination.

The analysis further confirms that freedoms of expression, belief, association, and peaceful assembly are not abstract ideals but practical safeguards that allow diverse societies to manage conflict, voice grievances, and pursue reform through non-violent means. Restrictions on civic space, delayed justice, and uneven law enforcement reduce the credibility of institutions and intensify perceptions of injustice. Social inclusion, as informed by the Capability Approach and theories of justice, expands people's real opportunities by ensuring access to education, healthcare, fair employment, and political participation. When these

capabilities are denied, exclusion becomes self-reinforcing, reproducing inequality across generations and regions.

Importantly, the chapter highlights that rights and inclusion are deeply interconnected with economic conditions. Unsafe workplaces, unfair wages, and limited access to services reveal how social and economic exclusion overlap, particularly for women, low-income workers, and marginalised communities. Protecting rights therefore strengthens not only moral and legal order but also social resilience and economic productivity. A pluralistic society remains stable when citizens feel protected, heard, and treated with dignity, regardless of identity or social position.

Looking ahead, the protection of rights and freedoms must be supported by institutional reforms that ensure accountability, transparency, and equal enforcement of the law. Independent oversight bodies, timely judicial processes, and inclusive policy design are essential to transform constitutional principles into lived realities. Without such measures, pluralism risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive, leaving structural inequalities unresolved.

At the same time, this chapter makes clear that social inclusion and rights protection cannot be separated from the material foundations that sustain everyday life. Access to affordable energy, secure natural resources, and reliable infrastructure plays a decisive role in enabling people to exercise their rights, maintain livelihoods, and participate fully in society. For this reason, the next chapter shifts the focus to the energy, power, and natural resource sectors, examining how governance failures, fuel dependence, and environmental mismanagement shape economic vulnerability and social inequality. Chapter 9 therefore extends the discussion by analysing how sustainable energy reform can reinforce rights, inclusion, and long-term national stability in Bangladesh.

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Chapter 9:

Reforming the Energy, Power, and Natural Resources Sectors for Sustainable Growth

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 13; Point 15; Point 18; Point 31

Abstract

This chapter explains how reforms in the energy, power, and natural resource sectors affect Bangladesh's economic stability and long-term development. The global energy crisis of 2022 showed how vulnerable Bangladesh is to rising international fuel prices. During this period, long power cuts reduced industrial production and increased irrigation costs for farmers. The chapter is based on a qualitative review of real events, newspaper reports, government data, and an international energy model. It examines corruption in fuel procurement, delays in power plant projects, and the effects of the 2022 energy crisis on factories and households. It also discusses the country's renewable energy potential, climate-related pressures, and the mismanagement of rivers and forests. Bangladesh's heavy reliance on imported fuel increases economic vulnerability, while weak transparency and poor governance reduce efficiency in the energy sector. International examples from India, Vietnam, and Germany show that a transition to renewable energy can lower costs and strengthen energy security. This chapter argues that effective energy reform must include stronger oversight, greater investment in renewable energy, and better protection of the natural environment.

Introduction

The energy landscape of Bangladesh stands at a turning point. Economic growth, rising urbanisation and expanding industries have pushed electricity demand to new heights. However, Bangladesh also struggles with shortages, high fuel imports and governance challenges. The 2022 global energy crisis exposed how quickly Bangladesh becomes vulnerable when international fuel prices increase. During this period, power cuts increased, factories reduced output and household electricity costs rose sharply. Factories have reduced production, and farmers' struggle to run irrigation pumps are such events that reflect how energy stability is connected to national stability.

This chapter explains why energy reform is important for economic development in Bangladesh. It discusses key problems such as corruption, weak oversight, and rising energy costs, and shows how renewable energy can support a more sustainable future. The chapter also looks at international examples that Bangladesh can adapt to improve sustainable energy use. It explains how a stable and reliable energy supply supports economic growth and long-term development. The final sections focus on renewable energy options and reforms in natural resource management. The main aim of this chapter is clear: to show how Bangladesh can build an energy system that is fair, secure, and clean. A transparent system helps protect public resources and supports reforms that can create a strong foundation for sustainable national development.

Energy Stability and Economic Growth

Energy reform stands at the centre of sustainable growth, as stable and affordable power drives every sector toward a modern economy. Recent studies published between 2019 and 2025 have shown that Bangladesh's long-term development depends on strong governance of energy, cleaner technologies, and effective implementation of national policies. The International Energy Agency (IEA) notes that countries with strong electricity supply consistently achieve strong manufacturing

performance, with higher productivity (Sun et al., 2021). Therefore, these nations also receive a high level of investor confidence. For Bangladesh, investor confidence is crucial to attract funding for energy infrastructure and renewable projects. The rising industrial demand in Bangladesh supports this view, as the garment, steel, and cement industries require uninterrupted power. National growth is also highly dependent on how effectively the country reforms its power and resource sectors.

This review of recent evidence highlights Bangladesh's economic vulnerability and energy dependence in recent times. For example, higher fuel import bills after 2022 increased pressure on foreign exchange reserves. Bangladesh depends heavily on imported energy, with more than 70% of its primary fuel coming from abroad, including furnace oil, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and diesel. As a price-sensitive market, the country has relied mainly on short-term LNG supplies. This dependence became especially costly during the global energy crisis of 2022, when international fuel prices rose sharply (IEA, 2025). Reports from the Bangladesh Power Development Board show that rising fuel costs led to widespread power cuts across the country, affecting daily life as well as economic activity. These experiences highlight a broader lesson: countries that rely heavily on imported energy need to diversify their energy sources in order to strengthen economic stability and reduce future risks. However, energy reforms improve Bangladesh's national stability by reducing exposure to global market shocks.

Transparency and governance appear repeatedly across studies as essential components of reform. Other reports by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) documented concerns over procurement, quick rental power deals, and delays in public projects (TIB, 2023). These issues align with global research showing that energy sectors tend to face governance issues because they involve large contracts and capital investment. In Bangladesh, large power projects and fuel procurement contracts have faced delays and cost overruns. Positive examples appear in countries such as Chile and Uruguay, where open bidding, digital procurement, and independent regulatory bodies enhance investor confidence and reduce the risk of corruption (Fang, 2025). Their

experiences connect the country's regulatory procurements with Bangladesh's reform needs. Apart from that, Bangladeshi economist Rd. Khondaker Golam Moazzem of CPD (Centre for Policy Dialogue) has argued that clear contracts and proper monitoring can reduce the investment cost (Star Business Report, 2025). Therefore, this chapter underscores that transparency is essential for ensuring fair competition and improving efficiency. M Rezwana Khan, Chairman of the Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB), warned of systemic inefficiencies, noting: “We have nearly 28,000 MW of generation capacity, but demand is far lower. We are paying costly capacity charges due to uncoordinated expansion.” (Star Business Report, 2025).

The International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) shows that solar and wind power have become comparatively cheap and are well-suited to scale. In many factories in Bangladesh, there are plenty of rooftop solar systems. The Sustainable Energy Development Authority (SREDA) has reported rising interest among people in solar irrigation (Mitra et al., 2023). For example, developments across the global landscape illustrate these trends. Large-scale renewable solar parks in regions such as Gujarat and Rajasthan have expanded access to low-cost electricity for millions. A similar large-scale solar park approach could be applied in Bangladesh using available public land. On the other hand, Vietnam has also experienced a rapid expansion of solar power between 2019 and 2021, making the nation one of the top renewable energy producers in Asia. In addition, Germany's *Energiewende* illustrates how long-term policy consistency can support clean energy growth. International experiences suggest that fair tariffs and strong grid integration have helped many countries move successfully towards renewable energy over time. This discussion highlights that Bangladesh's policy shift in the energy sector is closely linked to broader national reforms.

Studies by BUET, SREDA, and the Power Division point to strong solar potential in the northern and southern regions, as well as clear opportunities for energy reform along the coastal belt. Global research also stresses the value of decentralised energy systems for rural electrification. Solutions such as solar irrigation pumps and mini-grids

reduce reliance on diesel and help lower operating costs (Anjum & Tuhin, 2025). Pilot projects in areas such as Cox's Bazar, Rangpur, and Munshiganj show how renewable energy technologies can support local development and improve everyday economic conditions. Similar evidence from across Asia shows that decentralised power solutions strengthen rural economies while also reducing total emissions.

Rivers, wetlands, and forests in Bangladesh are deeply connected to everyday life. Millions of people depend on them for food, work, and safety. These natural resources support fishing, farming, transport, and protection from floods. However, research by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and several environmental organisations warns that these ecosystems are under serious pressure. Illegal sand mining, poorly planned industrial growth, and pollution are slowly damaging them. Studies of the Buriganga and Turag rivers show how untreated waste and chemical discharge harm aquatic life and lower water quality. As a result, these rivers are becoming less able to support the communities that rely on them. Forest research also points to growing risks in the Sundarbans, where rising salinity, frequent cyclones, and uncontrolled use of resources are weakening this fragile ecosystem (Anjum & Tuhin, 2025). These patterns reflect key ideas in environmental economics: when natural resources are poorly managed, communities become more vulnerable, development slows down, and future costs increase. For this reason, existing research strongly highlights the importance of sustainable resource use, greater community participation, and stronger environmental governance.

This issue can also be examined through several theoretical perspectives. The Resource Curse Theory helps explain why a country can suffer when governance of its resources is weak. In Bangladesh, although the country is not resource-rich in the classic sense, the theory would apply to rivers, gas fields, and forests. In the absence of strict control, natural resources are overutilized and abused. With the help of studies from the OECD and UNESCAP, Green Growth Theory demonstrates that productivity and environmental stress are minimised through energy efficiency and renewable transitions. The transition to clean energy in

Bangladesh complies with this model. The Energy Security Theory also emphasises the diversification of energy sources to maintain resilience to global shocks (Amanfo & Puthenkalam, 2024). A real-world case in support of this theory is the energy crisis experienced in Bangladesh in 2022. In this context, the energy crisis in Bangladesh affected millions of people worldwide through reduced fuel supply or price hikes (IEA, 2025). Women and people from low-income families benefit greatly from affordable and reliable energy sources. Fair access to energy enhances education, health and livelihoods. Gender inclusion is also commonly promoted by renewable energy projects, as reducing housing burdens can create new employment opportunities.

Energy Reform and Economic Stability

The energy reform influences all parts of Bangladesh's economic stability, as power sits at the heart of production, transportation, agriculture, and health. When the electricity supply remains stable, industries can operate with confidence (Siddique et al., 2021). Rising energy costs can easily slow the economy, and Bangladesh experienced a slowdown during the 2022 global energy crisis. During this period, the total energy cost, including LNG and oil prices, has surged following the Ukraine-Russia Conflict. The frequency of power cuts has increased across places such as Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, and Khulna. Factories in Narayanganj, particularly dyeing and textile units, have reported a significant loss of production. Owners such as Mohammad Hatem, who is also the vice president of the exporters' association of Bangladesh, have stated publicly that an unstable energy supply can pose a threat to export orders. Therefore, consequences such as low production express that energy instability can affect the total national income and foreign exchange.

Corruption, Transparency, and Renewable Energy Governance

Existing studies and institutional reports indicate that the energy and power sectors in Bangladesh have been associated with governance risks, cost overruns, and concerns regarding transparency. Strengthening transparency is essential for improving sector performance and public trust (Fang, 2025). Energy governance in Bangladesh is challenged, and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) have both reported cases (TIB, 2023). Their reports from 2020 to 2023 indicate anomalies in fuel procurement, overestimates of project costs, delays in plant construction, and misuse of funds in public-private relations.

The series of fast-paced rental power plants introduced over the past decade represents a prominent example of governance challenges in the energy sector. Although these plants initially helped prevent widespread blackouts, several projects raised serious concerns regarding cost-effectiveness and contractual transparency. Economist Ahsan H. Mansur of the Policy Research Institute argued that the lack of competitive bidding and market-based mechanisms in setting electricity prices has contributed to inefficiencies and higher costs, ultimately imposing financial burdens on consumers and the government (Kashem, 2024). As a result, these arrangements ultimately placed a burden on consumers through increased electricity tariffs. Corruption has also affected the management of natural resources; illegal sand extraction in Sylhet and Jashore has led to riverbank erosion and significant infrastructural damage (Mitra et al., 2023). In addition, local reports indicate instances in which officials have received unethical payments to overlook environmental protection regulations. Such unlawful practices undermine ecosystems and heighten the risk of environmental and social disasters.

Bangladesh needs to take steps with strong transparency implementation. The government has introduced an online electricity billing system, which has reduced billing-related fraud cases. The SREDA expanded digital tracking of renewable projects. The power division launched e-tendering for several new plants (World Bank, 2022). These initiatives reflect progress; however, strengthening independent monitoring is essential, as without strong transparency, quality policies can fail.

International Experiences of Renewable Energy Transitions

Renewable energy stands at the centre of long-term energy security in Bangladesh. The IDCOL Solar Home System Programme has become one of the fastest-growing rural electrification initiatives on the planet. This project has supported the installation of around six million solar home systems in rural areas. Apart from that, textile areas such as Gazipur and Narayanganj invested in rooftop solar systems to reduce their total electricity bills (Uddin et al., 2023). Notably, the solar irrigation pumps in Rajshahi and Barishal reduce the diesel use and benefit farmers directly.

There are different examples of global transitions that offer lessons Bangladesh can adopt,

India has become a renewable leader by developing large solar parks in Rajasthan. Additionally, Gujarat has adopted competitive bidding. The solar process has surpassed coal as the primary energy source in several states. On the other hand, Vietnam has transformed its total energy landscape between 2019 and 2021 by offering feed-in tariffs that encouraged the investors (IEA, 2025). Therefore, in only two years, Vietnam has added more than 16 gigawatts of solar capacity. Lastly, the Energiewende policy in Germany demonstrates how consistent long-term planning supports renewable growth, grid updates, and public participation over the years.

Key Concepts Behind Energy Reform

The energy reform in Bangladesh has supported specific theoretical interventions, which explain the need for transparency, renewable energy expansion, and good governance to shape long-term stability. The energy security theory posits that a nation must become economically stable by reducing its dependence on imported fuels by nurturing a diverse local energy source (Caineng et al., 2024). This theory directly aligns with Bangladesh, as it has faced severe instability during the global fuel crisis in 2022. Apart from that, green growth theory provides another foundation for nations to pursue economic expansion while reducing environmental harm by investing in clean technologies (Siddique et al., 2021). The shift towards green technologies, such as solar irrigation, wind energy projects, and rooftop solar panels, increases Bangladesh's sustainable approach to energy use. Additionally, strong institutional attributes reduce corruption and improve the nation's service delivery. Energy projects with contracts, digital procurement, and independent audits can deliver better sector performance at a low cost. Lastly, these theoretical frameworks create a conceptual model in which security, sustainability, and governance serve as pillars supporting successful energy reform and long-term national development.

Analytical Approach to Energy Reform

This chapter implements a qualitative research design to assess the energy reform, governance and renewable transitions in Bangladesh. It follows purposive sampling to select relevant policy documents, newspaper reports, government data, and international energy studies from 2019 to 2025. This chapter applies themes and codes related to transparency, corruption, and energy security, with attention to the role of renewable energy adoption. It also reviews public reports and statements by policymakers to identify clear patterns, key incidents, and policy gaps. Finally, this approach ensures an evidence-based understanding of reform needs and sector-level performance.

Fuel Dependence and Economic Instability

Bangladesh's heavy dependence on imported fuels constitutes one of the most critical structural sources of economic vulnerability. Data from the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) indicate that the country imports more than seven million tonnes of diesel and liquefied natural gas (LNG) annually, placing sustained pressure on foreign exchange reserves and fiscal stability (IEA, 2025). This reliance on imported energy exposes Bangladesh to global market volatility, where international price shocks are rapidly transmitted into domestic economic disruption.

The global energy crisis of 2022 clearly illustrated this vulnerability. Sharp increases in international LNG and oil prices forced Bangladesh to reduce gas supply to power plants, resulting in nationwide load-shedding lasting six to eight hours per day across major industrial zones such as Dhaka, Gazipur, and Khulna (IEA, 2025). These outages disrupted industrial production, particularly in export-oriented sectors. Industry representatives reported missed shipment deadlines and rising operational costs as factories remained idle during prolonged power cuts (DD News, 2024). Given that the apparel sector accounts for nearly 85 per cent of Bangladesh's export earnings, such disruptions translated into lost competitiveness and reduced foreign exchange inflows.

Energy shortages also extended beyond industrial centres, affecting essential public services and agriculture. Hospitals in districts such as Netrokona, Bhola, and Madaripur reported generator failures due to prolonged usage and rising fuel costs, forcing medical facilities to postpone non-emergency procedures. In rural regions including Rajshahi and Rangpur, irrigation systems dependent on diesel pumps operated inconsistently, reducing crop yields and increasing production costs for small-scale farmers (Islam & Hossain, 2022). These effects demonstrate how fuel dependence undermines not only economic output but also food security, healthcare delivery, and social welfare.

At the macroeconomic level, rising fuel import bills intensified inflationary pressures and weakened household purchasing power. In 2023, higher energy costs contributed significantly to the decline in foreign exchange reserves, prompting restrictions on non-essential imports and adjustments in exchange rate policy (Oysharja et al., 2022). Increased transportation and manufacturing costs further strained small businesses and low-income households, compounding economic inequality. Energy economists have also highlighted the geopolitical dimension of fuel dependence, noting that reliance on a limited number of suppliers heightens exposure to supply chain disruptions, shipping constraints, and international conflict.

Overall, the evidence indicates that Bangladesh's development pathway remains highly sensitive to international fuel volatility. Reducing dependence on imported fossil fuels through diversification and accelerated investment in renewable energy is therefore essential for strengthening economic resilience. Strategic energy reform can stabilise public finances, protect critical services, and reduce exposure to external shocks, thereby providing a more secure foundation for long-term and sustainable growth.

Governance Gaps, Transparency, and Rising Costs

The documents from Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and ACC expose issues such as inflated costs, non-competitive tenders, and delays, underscoring the governance gap (TIB, 2023). For example, the Payra power plant faced the increasing costs due to the unplanned coal transport logistics. Economist Dr. M. Tanim has argued that opaque contracts and ineffective fuel management have imposed significant fiscal costs.

Stable and efficient governance is central to any nation's energy security. Bangladesh is no exception. Reforms such as open bidding and independent audits could strengthen governance in the energy sector.

Strong governance ensures that resources are used efficiently, contracts are awarded responsibly, and energy infrastructure performs reliably under economic and social pressure. Transparency determines whether consumers, investors and institutions can trust the system that effectively delivers electricity and fuel. High-quality governance directly influences how energy policies translate into functional systems. When institutions coordinate effectively, investment decisions become consistent. The rapid expansion of power generation over the past decade demonstrates how planning itself can deliver strong outcomes with careful energy use. According to the Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority SREDA, Bangladesh has expanded its installed renewable energy capacity in recent years, with solar accounting for the largest share (Raihan et al., 2025). Utility-scale solar installations have become operational in districts such as Mymensingh, Teknaf and Gaibandha, supplying power directly to the national grid.

Bangladesh's off-grid solar achievements remain globally significant, with more than six million solar home systems installed across major rural regions. IDCOL supports these programmes, and it provides lighting and basic electricity to communities outside the grid (Khasru & Rafee, 2021). These systems improved educational outcomes and supported microenterprises. The 2018 net metering policy by the Bangladesh government accelerated the rooftop solar adoption in certain industrial zones. Factories in Gazipur, Narayanganj, and Chattogram have begun installing rooftop solar panels to meet the compliance requirements of international buyers. However, the potential of wind energy is being reconsidered as a policy issue, and the U.S. National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) identified potential wind corridors in Cox's Bazar, Kuakata, Kutubdia, and Anwara in its wind mapping studies. The city corporation partnerships are advancing waste-to-energy projects, including a 42 MW project at Amin Bazar and a 40 MW project at Matuail, to reduce waste and diversify power sources. Pilot wind projects are planned in Cox's Bazar and Kuakata, with feasibility analysis exploring seasonal wind yields and grid integration requirements.

Large-scale renewable energy requires grid preparedness, which can be achieved through a systematic method. In Bangladesh, the Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB) planned to build new transmission lines over considerable distances by 2030 to facilitate the evacuation of renewable power from the country's solar- and wind-rich areas (Saral, 2024). Integration with renewable energy research found battery storage essential for managing variability in solar energy output. In this context, preliminary feasibility tests have been carried out in Mymensingh and Feni to assess how grid-scale storage could work. The industrial sector remains a key driver of meeting the renewable energy demand. Industrial rooftop solar has an estimated potential of 3000 MW in the export-intensive regions. With renewable energy prices declining worldwide, industries in Bangladesh can benefit from reduced electricity costs. Apart from that, Solar energy lowers grid pressure on the brightest days, enhances voltage stability, and reduces dependence on diesel generators. As of 2023, Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) reported that the country spent over USD 14 billion on petroleum and LNG imports, which provides a compelling reason to reduce long-term reliance on imported fossil fuels.

The renewable energy sources also promote national climate and environmental sustainability. In Bangladesh, there are specific issues, including rising temperatures, rising sea levels, and the intrusion of saline water into coastal regions (Rahman & Uddin, 2022). The renewable energy expansion is in line with the country's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement. The Diesel generators have also been replaced with solar mini-grids in remote areas, such as Hatiya, Kutubdia, and Shyamnagar, which have comparatively lower emission rates (IEA, 2025). Solar grids are also crucial in enabling households and businesses located in remote areas to have consistent electricity. Bangladesh is also considering competitive solar auction schemes similar to those in India and Vietnam. Therefore, governance issues have increased, raising tariffs for ordinary citizens. Industrial electricity tariffs have increased significantly, reducing Bangladesh's cost advantage over Vietnam and India.

Renewable Energy Prospects, Natural Resource Stress, and Public Demand

The results indicate that the low rate of renewable energy development and the country's growing demand for clean energy are becoming intertwined problems for Bangladesh. SREDA estimates that Bangladesh produces less than 5% of its electricity from renewable sources, despite having a huge solar potential of 30,000 MW (IEA, 2025). The installed capacity of solar and wind is only 1,200 MW and 2.9 MW, respectively. Investors report delays in approvals and rare tariffs. Nevertheless, there are real-life examples with great potential: the IDCOL Solar Home System Program has already installed six million systems, and garment companies such as Envoy Textiles and DBL Group already generate 15-20 per cent of their power from rooftop installations. Global benchmarking emphasises the possibilities: Bangladesh and Vietnam increased their solar electricity capacity from 105 MW to 16,500 MW in two years under stable policy, and India exceeded 70 GW of solar capacity through competitive bidding (Siddique et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the natural resource degradation in Bangladesh is increasing. A study conducted by the DoE reveals that most rivers, such as the Buriganga and Turag, are polluted by industrial waste. Sylhet and Jashore rivers are eroded and killed in the process of illegal sand mining. The salinity levels in Khulna and Satkhira exceed 20 ppt, endangering drinking water and agriculture. These environmental stressors limit the potential of hydro power and enhance climate migration, and already 4.1 million Bangladeshis have been forced out by climate effects (Arctic Yearbook, 2018). There is a growing demand for clean and affordable energy in society. Increases in tariffs, load shedding, and fuel shortages among citizens, industries, and farmers have driven up demand for renewable energy. Activists like Syeda Rizwana Hasan propose green policies with transparency, whereas factory owners are interested in stable solar solutions to lower costs. This growing demand indicates that energy reform has become a central public and policy expectation at the national level.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that energy reform in Bangladesh is essential for ensuring economic stability, environmental resilience, and social well-being. The analysis identifies three closely connected reform needs: reducing dependence on imported fuels, strengthening transparency in energy governance, and accelerating the transition to renewable energy. These factors jointly shape national competitiveness and long-term development outcomes. A stable, transparent, and renewable-oriented energy system can reduce vulnerability to external shocks, improve institutional efficiency, and provide a more resilient foundation for sustainable growth.

The importance of this chapter lies in its clear demonstration that energy reform is not merely a technical adjustment but a central development challenge. By linking fuel dependence, governance weaknesses, and renewable energy transition, the chapter shows how energy policy directly affects production costs, investor confidence, public expenditure, and social resilience. This contribution is significant because it frames energy reform as a structural requirement for inclusive and sustainable development rather than a sector-specific policy choice.

Bangladesh's energy stability depends on reducing fuel dependence, strengthening governance mechanisms, and expanding renewable energy capacity. Evidence discussed in the chapter shows that heavy reliance on imported fuels increases economic instability during global crises, while weak procurement systems and delayed projects raise public costs. Transparent bidding processes, independent audits, and regulatory oversight therefore emerge as essential tools for improving efficiency and restoring public trust in the energy sector.

The chapter also highlights both progress and limitations in Bangladesh's renewable energy transition. While initiatives such as Solar Home Systems have successfully expanded rural electrification and demonstrate effective collaboration among communities, firms, and development partners, their contribution to national grid capacity remains

limited. Industrial, commercial, and urban energy demand continues to rely heavily on fossil fuels, indicating the need to move beyond household-scale solutions toward utility-scale renewable energy production.

At the same time, the analysis underscores the risk of inequality within the energy transition. Urban industries are better positioned to adopt rooftop solar systems, while rural households, indigenous communities, and climate-affected populations face financial and technical barriers. Ensuring that incentives, credit mechanisms, and technical support reach these groups is necessary to prevent uneven access to clean energy. Overall, the chapter concludes that consistent policies, transparent governance, grid modernisation, and inclusive planning are critical for securing long-term, resilient, and sustainable growth in Bangladesh.

Beyond its domestic economic and environmental implications, energy reform also carries important consequences for Bangladesh's external relations and global positioning. Energy security, dependence on imported fuels, and the governance of strategic resources increasingly shape diplomatic priorities, regional cooperation, and foreign investment flows. Decisions regarding fuel procurement, renewable energy partnerships, and climate commitments influence not only internal stability but also Bangladesh's credibility and bargaining power in international forums. In this sense, the reform of the energy and natural resource sectors cannot be separated from broader questions of foreign policy, national sovereignty, and global engagement. Building on this connection, the following chapter examines how Bangladesh's foreign policy orientation, diplomatic strategies, and sovereignty considerations interact with domestic governance challenges and shape the country's evolving role in the international system.

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Chapter 10:

Foreign Policy, National Sovereignty, and Global Engagement

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 19; Point 20

Abstract

This chapter examines the evolution of Bangladesh's foreign policy and national sovereignty within a changing global political and economic landscape. It analyses how successive governments have sought to advance national interests through diplomatic engagement, regional cooperation, and international alliances, while navigating persistent challenges related to governance, political instability, and institutional capacity. Drawing on secondary qualitative sources, including policy documents, academic literature, and international reports, the chapter explores the interaction between foreign policy orientation, domestic governance, and global positioning. The analysis highlights how prolonged political uncertainty, governance constraints, and socio-economic pressures have influenced Bangladesh's international credibility, labour mobility, and diplomatic leverage. Particular attention is given to issues of national sovereignty, migration, labour rights, and occupational safety, illustrating how external engagement and internal conditions are closely interconnected. The chapter also discusses the strategic implications of shifting global alliances and the importance of balancing national interests with multilateral cooperation. By situating foreign policy within a broader governance and development framework, the chapter argues that effective global engagement requires transparency, institutional accountability, and a people-centred approach to sovereignty. It concludes that strengthening domestic governance and aligning foreign policy with social and economic priorities are essential for enhancing Bangladesh's resilience, international standing, and long-term developmental prospects.

Introduction

Foreign policy is a nation's strength, which not only builds global alliances but also seeks to fulfil its national interests. President Ziaur Rahman combined national interest and foreign policy in Bangladesh's legal policies, with the aim of economic and social growth. His main agenda in foreign policy was friendship to all and malice to none, which earned global recognition for the nation and maintained peaceful coexistence as a member of the UN.

Bangladesh began its journey in 1971 as an independent nation and sought to establish stability for its future growth. Following widespread debates over national sovereignty during the later years of Sheikh Hasina's government, the new interim government has planned to follow the path of Major Zia. Touhid Hossein, the foreign affairs advisor to the Bangladesh interim government, stated that although the global powers are realigning, Bangladesh will not choose a side (TBS, 2025). Instead, the country will prioritise its national interests and regional stability. In the new foreign policy and national sovereignty, the country has planned to gain tangible benefits by forming global alliances. However, the main problems with Bangladesh's current foreign policy and national sovereignty are the rising corruption rate and instability. This chapter has highlighted Bangladesh's current situation to define its future development scope through foreign and national alliances.

This chapter has provided a brief overview of Bangladesh's evolving foreign policy and national sovereignty over the years. To further understand the importance of foreign policy and national sovereignty, the findings are structured around literary views. All the collected data in this chapter are segmented through secondary qualitative analysis, which has justified their relevance and evolution in Bangladesh's political and legal context. Discussing the key outcomes of foreign policy, national sovereignty and labour rights, the research has drawn its conclusion on suggesting the reform policy for Bangladesh in future.

An exploratory research design allows this chapter to retain flexibility in examining foreign policy, national sovereignty, and global engagement through the case of Bangladesh. An exploratory research design is significant for clarifying problems, developing ideas from it, and gathering new insights from the findings (Olawale et al., 2023). Its unstructured process helps to understand different problems in Bangladesh related to global engagement and the ways of reforming foreign policies. Regarding this, the selection of an exploratory research design will help suggest new policies for Bangladesh. This chapter has relied on convenience sampling to select only relevant sources on Bangladesh's global engagement. The convenience sampling speeds up the research process by providing relevant data and resources, making the findings more specific (Winton & Sabol, 2022). Selected resources for this chapter include newspapers, journal articles, government records, and others to gather relevant information on Bangladesh's foreign policy, social equity, and global engagement. This research has used the keyword-based search tool to gather relevant secondary qualitative information from Google Scholar. A keyword-based search strategy identifies topic keywords and gathers specific information based on their relevance to the following research outcome (Abusaada & Elshater, 2024). The keywords, such as foreign investment, Ziaur Rahman, national sovereignty, trade agreements, and others, are then used to gather specific information. This has benefited the research by enabling the sourcing of relevant information in less time and with less effort. The thematic data analysis method has yielded constructive findings from the secondary qualitative information on national sovereignty and foreign policy related to Bangladesh. Adoption of the thematic data analysis method, as a secondary qualitative method, identifies different themes for analysing and interpreting recurring patterns in the textual data (Cheong et al., 2023). By structuring themes around Bangladesh's global position, its foreign policy, national sovereignty, and other issues, the current chapter has highlighted its significance to the research outcome.

Bangladesh's Position in the Global Political and Economic System

Bangladesh's position within the global political and economic system has changed over time due to severe political turmoil and an increasing corruption rate in the country's internal governance. The corruption score for Bangladesh peaked in 2017, and in 2023 it was 24 (Transparency, n.d.). Of the 180 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Bangladesh ranked 151 in the global corruption barometer. The country's increased corruption has affected its social and political stability in the global market. A lower transparency rate in Bangladesh is creating challenges for the country in developing stable global alliances. On the contrary, as a lower-middle-income country, Bangladesh is also struggling to gain economic prosperity and improve trade relations with other countries. Among 37 lower-middle-income economies, Bangladesh ranked 19th in 2025 (World Intellectual Property Organization, 2025). Regarding this, the country's global innovation and economic growth have been declining over the years. Among the 10 economies of Central and Southern Asia, Bangladesh ranked eighth. Lowered economic growth and instability in its innovation process are lowering its scope of developing a sustainable global position for Bangladesh in trade.

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in South Asia, sharing borders with India and Myanmar. Among the total population of 172,954,319, 60% live in rural areas (U.S. News, n.d.). However, the majority of Bangladesh's economy is dependent on agriculture, and the market is growing for entrepreneurs and other businesses. According to the US News report, Bangladesh ranked 29th in openness to business and 66th in entrepreneurship. The growing market opportunity and the country's increasing population have made it eligible for industrial growth. During the presidency of Ziaur Rahman, the market-oriented economy strategy and proposal for foreign investment first introduced the country to the global trade market (Rahman, 2024). Over time, this foreign relation has strengthened and improved global relations with the Islamic and other nations. Later in the 1980s, the Ershad

government promoted rapid private-sector engagement in the country's economy. Under this private-sector growth, Bangladesh attracted immense global investment and initiated changes in both the socio-economic structure. From the regime of Zia to the Ershad government, through the global investment plan and industrialisation, Bangladesh gained the opportunity to develop its global position.

As the eighth-most populous country and a river-centric geographic nature, Bangladesh has attracted foreign investment and industrial growth over the years. Gradually shifting from agrarian subsistence to manufacturing, Bangladesh's economy shifted toward manufacturing, rising to 22% of GDP compared to 9% in the 1970s (OECD/UNCTAD, 2023). With the availability of required resources, skilled employees, and a densely populated market, Bangladesh has become a major global manufacturer in the garment sector. However, the government's increased corruption rate and changing market dynamics failed to support the country's economic growth. According to the Anti-Corruption Helpdesk report, Bangladesh has been considered the least developed country in the world. It has been set to graduate to a developing country over the last 45 years (Rahman, 2021). Despite the availability of resources and market opportunities, Bangladesh is struggling to gain value and stability in the global market. The influence of high-profile political actors and the country's endemic corruption rate over the decades is undermining its global market position. Hence, in developing global policies and trade and other relationships, maintaining transparency is required to gain a competitive advantage.

The influence of other nations on Bangladesh's system may affect its individuality and national interests at some point in its development. According to systems theory, the governance system of a country helps develop a complete understanding of individuals' issues and take action to resolve them (Teater, 2024). The increased corruption rate and the lack of stability in Bangladesh's social structure led the country towards poverty and disparities. Bangladesh's national sovereignty should maintain clarity regarding people's equal rights. Regarding this, the country's internal growth and foreign alliances also declined over the decades. In the

changing political dynamics and shifting interests of global powers, Bangladesh should maintain transparency in its internal social structure. Daniel et al. (2022) stated that systems theory is significant for managing the interdependence and mutual influence in understanding complex relationships. Reform policies in Bangladesh on industrial law and foreign policy should prioritise the interests of the ordinary people and the labour class. This can help the country achieve sustainability and maintain transparency in dynamic global relations.

Emergent global realities in political, trade, and other relations are shifting global alliances over the years. The Relational theory in global politics argues that current alliances are prioritising national interests over human-nonhuman relations (Kavalski, 2023). The current world is not focused on large or small powers; it is continuously shifting and shaping the social dynamics as well. For example, the uprisings in Bangladesh and Nepal reflected the shifting power dynamics in the South Asian market. However, Chaos theory states that the international system at the contemporary time is becoming complex and challenging to understand due to the occurrence of random events (Kovalevskaia et al., 2021). Non-linear dynamic systems and random events in political and social scenarios are placing constraints on forming positive relations and on prioritising national interests equally. Hence, in developing any global relations at present, identifying the country's national interest is essential to avoid potential complications in the future.

Evolution of Bangladesh's Foreign Policy

Bangladesh's modern foreign policy is facing disruption due to decades of political instability and rising tensions over the nation's purpose. During the regime of Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh's foreign alliances with India and China were primarily focused on trade cooperation, energy, transit, and infrastructure investment (Rizve, 2025). Along with this, regionalism and economic diplomacy in Hasina's foreign policy prioritised economic cooperation and regional connectivity. However, Bangladesh's foreign policy differs from the country-specific

interest proposed by President Ziaur Rahman. Ziaur Rahman prioritised the nation's interests in its foreign alliances, with the purpose of the country's economic and social growth. In the foundational era of Bangladesh, Mujibur Rahman first developed an alliance with the nation with organisations such as the UN and NAM, while tying Bangladesh's global relations to the US and the USSR. Non-alignment and diversification strategy was a key pillar of Ziaur's foreign policy with India and the USSR, prioritising national interests (Hossain, 2008). The primary purpose of the India-Bangladesh alignment was to improve Bangladesh's irrigation system and control the water of the Farkka. Putting the national interest first, Zia aimed to restructure the economic and social conditions of Independent Bangladesh, thereby inspiring future leaders of Bangladesh to achieve global recognition.

The era of Zia and Ershad prioritised Islamisation in Bangladesh, which was also reflected in their foreign policies. Following the way of Ziaur Rahman, Ershad's governance also developed its foreign policies with Islamic countries, such as Saudi Arabia (The Asian Age, 2020). Apart from this, under this government, Bangladesh also improved its foreign policies with countries such as the US, China, Japan, and Islamic countries. Military dictator Ershad's rule managed relations with India after Zia's presidency; however, relations with China were lukewarm. Regarding this, in India and China, Bangladesh has consistently failed to maintain its national interest. However, due to the tilt towards Iraq by opposing Iran, Bangladesh lost its seat on the UN Security Council to Malaysia during this tenure. Although the country became the President of the UN General Assembly, This episode reflected the growing influence of religious considerations, as religious identity became more visible in both domestic politics and foreign policy orientation. Inserting the new amendment stating "the State religion of the Republic is Islam, but other religions may be practised in peace and harmony" clearly highlighted its placating of local Islam and Islamic countries over secularity.

Democratic alteration in Bangladesh's foreign policy was re-entered under the governance of Khaleda Zia in the 1990s. The BNP government of Khaleda Zia began restoring parliamentary democracy in 1991, while

maintaining Zia-style nationalism in both government practices and foreign policies. Khaleda Zia's foreign policies were more sceptical of India over disputes over water sharing, border management, and allegations of support for the insurgents (Mushahary et al., 2025). For example, in 2001, the issue of the Boraibari clash in the border areas between Bangladesh and India caused a four-day armed conflict between the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and Border Security Force (BSF). Khaleda Zia mainly used diplomacy to improve relations with multilateral institutions such as SAARC and the UN, to gain financial support and international legitimacy. Later in Hasina's presidency, Bangladesh exemplified its foreign policy toward India through the 1996 Ganges water treaty (Kumar, 2024). In 2024, between Hasina and PM Modi of India, the renewal agreement to the 1996 Ganga Water Treaty was signed. This agreement addresses the management and conservation of the Teesta River to improve irrigation and flood control. However, Observers have noted a shift in diplomatic rhetoric under the interim government, with a growing emphasis on recalibrating relations with India while strengthening ties with China and Pakistan.

National sovereignty and foreign alliances are both required for a modern country to balance its growth and security in the global political environment. The primary purpose of foreign policy is to protect the nation from global conflicts and to advance national interests through strategic interactions. In foreign policy, a country prioritises its security, economic prosperity, and values to advance the national interest and maintain the country's prosperity. Christopher Hill said, "Foreign policy is a formal relation which can only be conducted by an independent player or nation." However, in many cases, lower- and middle-income countries struggle to maintain equal interests, positions, and sustainable growth due to limitations in capacity and institutional strength. For example, due to the long period of anarchy during the Awami League's rule, the rising corruption rate and changing political dynamics, Bangladesh is losing its global position and struggling to maintain positive relations with others. Regarding this, the interim government of Bangladesh has prioritised

strengthening its national sovereignty to achieve political stability and improve the social structure.

Bangladesh's foreign policy should seek to leverage its re-development plan to address its rising poverty levels and economic disparities. The key objectives of foreign policy generally include ensuring national security and promoting economic prosperity, both of which directly contribute to a country's overall development strategy. By forming global alliances, countries can promote trade and attract foreign investors, boosting their economic growth through agreements and partnerships. For example, in the 1970s, Bangladesh's foreign alliances with nations such as India, Nepal, and China benefited the country through agricultural and trade reforms. On the contrary, achieving social stability and a favourable global position requires empowering people at the grassroots level. Regarding this, fair wages, equality in labour rights and national stability in the socio-economic position are strongly required. The interim government of Bangladesh should prioritise its labour rights and internal development plan to achieve national sovereignty. Hence, relying on strong global alliances and equality at the grassroots level, Bangladesh can achieve long-term growth in its socio-economic background through changes.

National Sovereignty Policy and Diplomacy of Bangladesh

The national sovereignty policy of Bangladesh is centred on territorial and political independence and interest-driven foreign policies. The principle of "Friendship to all, malice to none" in Bangladesh's sovereignty policy foregrounds non-interference, peaceful dispute resolution, and economic development based on diversified partnerships (Titumir, 2024). Since the regime of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's sovereignty policy has followed a policy of strategic autonomy and balanced relations with major powers such as the US, China, and India. Pursuing independent domestic and foreign policies, the

President of Bangladesh is prioritising national interests in social growth, economic stability, and industrial development. The primary purpose of national sovereignty in a country is to maintain the internal authority and external independence while respecting the autonomy (Su & Liu, 2025). Implementing policies on empowerment, cooperation challenges, and independence balances, Bangladesh's government is maintaining the ultimate authority of the state. Article 25 in the Bangladesh Constitution respects the sovereignty and equality under international law and the UN Charter.

Following the non-interference and peaceful dispute resolution policy, Bangladesh is trying to restore its independence and autonomy in the global market. Fundamental principles of Bangladesh's state policy relate to the country's independence and autonomy. Under Article 25 on international peace, security and solidarity in the Bangladesh Constitution, Section B states the right of every people to build their own social, economic and political system (Bdlaws, n.d.). Focused on promoting international peace, security, and solidarity, and directed by the State government, the interim government is promoting equality and an Islamic vision across the world. Domestic independence contributes to a country's social and economic development and to its global recognition within the global system. Under the leadership of Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh's diplomacy shifted from the Indo-Soviet alignment to an independent structure (Daily Country Today, 2025). The non-alignment stance proposed by Major Zia initiated regional cooperation in the country's future diplomatic policies and allowed it to maintain diverse partnerships. Futuristic in leadership and focused on national interest, Major Zia planned the country's national sovereignty policy to recover its economic and social stability after the Liberation War. Following the modern liberal democratic state system of Major Zia, the current interim government policy of Yunus is leading towards diversification initiatives. Hence, expanding relations with countries like the United States, China, and the broader Islamic countries, Bangladesh is gradually shifting its global position away from the socialist orbit.

Migration and Citizenship in Contemporary Bangladesh

Migration has been a common problem in Bangladesh's social structure since the time of the Liberation War in 1971. After 1971, labour migration in Bangladesh increased rapidly due to economic fragility. Between 1990 and 1995, 1.2 million people left the country, with the peak during the Gulf construction boom (Etzold & Mallick, 2015). Back in 1976, this number was only 6000, which gradually increased with the country's growing population and demand for employment opportunities. In the countries of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Malaysia, and Singapore, the majority of the community is gradually shifting due to higher unemployment and the country's economic fragility. The labour shortage in the UK during the Second World War attracted migrant labourers from around the world. According to this report, young men from the Sylhet region mostly settled in London during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. In 2024, Bangladesh's unemployment rate was 4.7%, up 0.2% from the previous year (World Bank, n.d.). Fragile economic conditions and the country's rising unemployment rate have negatively affected the social structure over the years. Regarding these issues, Bangladesh's higher migration level is creating a negative image of the country across global communities.

The problem of mass migration in Bangladesh first arose during the Liberation War. During the Liberation War, over 10 million refugees migrated to India, where they were mostly Bengalis. In India's northeastern states, particularly Assam, large numbers of refugees were recorded during the Liberation War (Kuri et al., 2024). In the Barakar Valley of Assam, between March and December 1971, most refugees entered only from Bangladesh. According to the records of the Indian government, migration issues mainly were experienced in the northeastern part of India, in places like West Bengal, Meghalaya, Assam, and Tripura. Between 1981 and 2024, the average unemployment rate in Bangladesh was 3.81% (Trading Economics, n.d.). As of December 2025, the minimum wage in Bangladesh is 12500 BDT/month. Between 1991 and

2024, the highest job-searching value in Bangladesh was 5.30. This is leading the country towards immense poverty and economic fragility.

The decline in citizenship rights in Bangladesh has been strongly prioritised since its independence. Bangladesh's citizenship is based on the policy of *jus sanguinis* (right of blood); it states that if a person's parents are Bangladesh citizens, then they become citizens directly (Refworld, 1978). Even if the child is born abroad, the person also acquires citizenship under this term. Additionally, under the term *Jus soli* (by birth), a person born in Bangladesh may also obtain citizenship in some cases. If the person is eligible for citizenship, under Article 2B, they can apply for the right. After the partition of 1947, a majority of Bengali-speaking Muslims started living in the places of Bangladesh where the Hindu population shifted to India. Later, the Islamisation in Bangladesh under the Presidency of Zia identified the country as a place with a majority Muslim population. It shifted citizenship towards religious identity. Hence, over the years, Bangladesh's citizens have carried the identity of religion, though the issues of unemployment and poverty are getting neglected.

Labour Rights and Occupational Safety in a Developing Economy

Labourers and frontline workers in Bangladesh have struggled over the years with their rights and growth amid an uncertain economic condition. Partnered with institutions like the UN and other international bodies, the state is following labour rights and HRM principles in line with global policies. Under the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, every full-time worker is eligible for minimum wages, festive allowances and DA based on the national standard level (Government of Bangladesh, 2006). Followed by the regulatory principle, a person under the age of 14 is considered child labour. Violation of these rules constitutes a punishable act under this constitutional rule. In the recent amendments of 2013, 2018, and 2023, Bangladesh's labour law has been improved. Between the Amendments of 2022-2025, the daily work limit for a person is 8

hours/day, which can be extended to 10 hours with OT provisions (BIPO Service, 2025). However, despite the law enforcement and regulatory frameworks, the majority of labourers are struggling to secure equal rights in the nation.

Low wages and increased poverty are mainly affecting the people of Bangladesh due to its poor social structure and increased corruption rate. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), health and safety issues have risen over the years due to limitations on government control. Major industrial disasters in the garment sector, most notably the Rana Plaza collapse, exposed severe weaknesses in workplace safety and regulatory enforcement. (ILO, 2014). As a result of this case, Bangladeshi workers signed the fire and building safety rights with the support of the ILO. Despite this, the number of workplace health hazards increased significantly. In 2025, 54 workers reported in an interview that the garment sector in Bangladesh was the most heat-intensive, causing health issues (Singsit, 2025). Apart from the garment workers, construction and transportation workers are also facing the highest risks of injury at the current time. ILO also identified that the increased corruption in Bangladesh's political and government system over the last few years is equally responsible for the current situation of labourers. The increased corruption level and anarchy in the former Bangladesh should be addressed through reform policies.

Foreign Policy and National Sovereignty

Bangladesh's foreign policy has combined national interest considerations with religious and ideological elements at different historical moments. While these orientations have facilitated certain foreign alliances, critics argue that governance weaknesses have limited their broader developmental impact. His market-oriented economy focused on agricultural development and industrial growth to support economic and social growth (Rahman, 2024). For example, the Farkka agreement between Bangladesh and India was signed to improve the country's irrigation system. This not only benefited the country through

agricultural development and economic growth, but also significantly reduced the frequency of annual floods. Recently, the interim government discontinued this plan due to rising political tension and conflicts between these countries. Bangladesh's recent global alliances are strengthening with nations such as China and Pakistan, driven by the vision of economic growth and Islamisation.

A country's growth largely depends on the well-being of its people. Since the formation of the BNP and the market-oriented economy under the Presidency of Zia, Bangladesh has sought to promote the growth of the ordinary people. However, due to changing political dynamics and priorities, the ordinary people of Bangladesh struggled to obtain equal opportunities and the right to grow. As a result, in the period 1990-1995, around 1.2 million people left the country, and this peaked during the Gulf construction boom (Etzold & Mallick, 2015). Although most Bangladeshis migrate to other developed countries, large-scale migration from what is now Bangladesh intensified during the post-partition period and following independence. Lack of opportunities and safety in Bangladesh's work environment is largely influencing people to migrate to other nations. However, under Article 2B, the Bangladesh government grants citizenship to all people who were born in the country or whose parents (mother/father) are from this nation. Despite the issue of unemployment, its easy citizenship rights have helped the nation become democratic and inclusive at the same time.

The national sovereignty policy of Bangladesh prioritises autonomy in foreign relations over dependence on other countries. However, in some cases, on national security and industrial growth, the country received help from its neighbours, such as India, China, the US, and others. Foreign relations should focus on national interest first, rather than on constant agreement. According to systems theory, a country's governance system should understand the issues of its own people, enabling it to take action to resolve them (Teater, 2024). Over the years, different presidents of Bangladesh have walked the same path; however, their approach and partners have changed. As Bangladesh struggles to secure its position as a developing country, its global position remains

unstable. Hence, following a systematic assessment of national interest, the interim government should also take action to resolve contemporary issues and select its global alliances.

Conclusion

Bangladesh's global standing has undergone significant change following recent political transitions and governance debates. Foreign policy and national sovereignty have played a central role in shaping the country's current position in the global system. Agreements such as the water treaty with India have strengthened irrigation and agricultural stability, while engagement with countries like the United States and China has supported industrial development. At the same time, religious identity continues to influence national orientation and external relations. Despite these developments, rising migration, increasing poverty, workplace insecurity, and persistent corruption continue to weaken Bangladesh's development trajectory. The chapter has shown that weak government accountability in recent years has further constrained economic growth and social stability, underscoring the need for corrective action grounded in national interest.

Within this context, the chapter highlights the importance of moving toward a multilateral foreign agreement strategy as a means of policy diversification. Reliance on narrowly framed bilateral arrangements has previously limited Bangladesh's capacity to manage labour agreements, trade partnerships, and diplomatic engagement effectively. A multilateral approach can expand cooperation with Gulf and Southeast Asian countries, strengthen labour protections abroad, and improve transparency and accountability in foreign policy decision-making. By engaging in broader diplomatic frameworks, Bangladesh can better align its external relations with economic diversification and domestic development priorities.

The analysis further demonstrates that identifying national interests requires a systematic and people-centred approach. Drawing on systems

theory discussed earlier in the chapter, effective foreign policy must address interconnected social, economic, and political challenges rather than isolated concerns. Direct engagement with citizens, workers, and affected sectors allows the government to better understand grassroots realities and design foreign alliances that respond to real needs. Strengthening these internal linkages can support more coherent policy choices and ensure that foreign engagement contributes to inclusive growth and social stability.

The importance of this chapter lies in its integrated treatment of foreign policy, national sovereignty, and domestic conditions. By linking global alliances with labour rights, migration pressures, governance weaknesses, and public accountability, the chapter demonstrates that foreign policy is not separate from internal development but deeply embedded within it. This contribution is significant because it frames foreign policy reform as a governance issue that directly affects ordinary people's lives. It shows that prioritising national interest, transparency, and social well-being in external relations is essential for restoring stability, strengthening sovereignty, and supporting Bangladesh's long-term democratic and developmental goals.

While foreign policy and sovereignty shape Bangladesh's external room for manoeuvre, the durability of these choices ultimately depends on the strength of domestic governance and citizen trust. International credibility, labour mobility arrangements, and effective multilateral engagement require not only coherent diplomacy but also accountable institutions that function in everyday public life. In this sense, the governance challenges discussed in this chapter- transparency, institutional capacity, and people-centred legitimacy- are inseparable from how the state performs at sub-national levels. The next chapter therefore shifts the focus inward, examining decentralisation and local governance as critical mechanisms through which democratic participation is deepened, public accountability is strengthened, and national development priorities are translated into responsive action within communities across Bangladesh.

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Chapter 11:

Decentralisation, Local Governance, And Strengthening Democratic Participation

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 21; Point 22

Abstract

This chapter examines how decentralisation and local governance influence democratic participation in Bangladesh. The purpose is to understand why decentralisation remains structurally developed yet functionally weak, despite multiple reforms intended to transfer authority and improve local accountability. A secondary qualitative method was used to analyse government acts, policy documents, administrative guidelines and field-based studies covering Union Parishads, Upazila Parishads and Zila Parishads. The findings show that decentralisation is constrained by limited fiscal authority, weak administrative capacity, political interference and low citizen awareness of participation avenues. Local institutions possess formal responsibilities; however, they lack the autonomy and resources needed to respond effectively to community needs. Although mechanisms such as ward shobhas and open budget sessions exist, participation remains uneven due to knowledge gaps and partisan influence. The chapter highlights the significance of strengthening financial authority, improving institutional capacity and promoting inclusive engagement to deepen democratic participation and support more accountable local governance in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Decentralisation is a system in which the central government transfers authority, functions, and resources to local bodies, allowing communities to influence decisions that affect their daily lives. The definition matters for this chapter because it explains why local power is central to democratic participation in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, it has progressed through several phases, but remains only partially realised because local bodies still lack absolute authority over resources, staffing, and decision-making. Reforms under President Ziaur Rahman in the late 1970s expanded elected councils by giving them roles in local planning, minor infrastructure projects and community development. However, these bodies continued to rely largely on centrally allocated funds, which limited the extent of their financial autonomy in planning and development (Hossain & Habib, 2021). Although the 1970 Constitution recognised local government, early institutions operated with weak capacity, limited budgets, and substantial administrative control from central ministries. The democratic shift in 1991 revived decentralisation efforts; however, most powers, such as project approvals, personnel management, and financial control, remained with national agencies. As Haque (2025) states, local governments now perform roles in service delivery and disaster response, but political interference and bureaucratic dominance often restrict their effectiveness. The administrative agencies in Bangladesh are organised in a hierarchical structure based on a legal-rational framework. It has been in effect since the British colonial period, when Bangladesh was part of Pakistan. As a result, decentralisation in Bangladesh has led to institutional growth; however, it lacks the legal framework and administrative empowerment needed for a fully functional local governance system.

Local governance is a system where power and resources are managed by elected local bodies to serve community needs. In Bangladesh, Union Parishads, the oldest rural institutions, gained more apparent authority after the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 strengthened their legal mandate (Jahan, 2023). The Upazila Parishad,

reintroduced in 2009 after years of suspension, improved service delivery through locally supervised development activities. (Ullah, 2022) highlighted the Zila Parishad Act 2000, which established district councils, yet many remained weak due to limited fiscal authority and heavy central control. Reform attempts by President Ziaur Rahman in 1977 expanded local structures, while the overall balance between local initiative and central oversight continued to shape the scope of local autonomy (Islam, 2015). The Administrative Reforms Committee under Ershad in 1982 enhanced administrative decentralisation by upgrading 460 thanas into Upazilas (Monem, 2015). Overall, the evaluation shows that while Bangladesh has made structured progress in local governance, sustained empowerment is essential for actual decentralised effectiveness.

The key problem is that decentralisation in Bangladesh remains incomplete because local governments still lack absolute authority over resources and decisions. Local bodies such as Union Parishads often depend on centrally approved budgets, which slows project implementation and reduces local accountability. For example, in 2022, several rural road repair and drainage projects were delayed because budget approvals arrived after the monsoon season, affecting daily transport and public safety. Several institutions also face staff shortages, preventing the timely delivery of essential services such as health support, rural infrastructure, and disaster management. Political interference from national actors further limits local representatives' ability to act independently in community development. Haque (2025) highlighted that in 2022, several Upzila Parishads reported delays in rural road repairs because final administrative approval remained under central ministries. These constraints weaken the purpose of decentralisation, which is to allow communities to influence decisions affecting their daily lives. Therefore, the problem clearly shows that meaningful decentralisation in Bangladesh requires stronger legal, financial and administrative empowerment of local governments.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how decentralisation and local governance shape democratic participation in Bangladesh. The topic is important because decentralisation directly affects how citizens engage

with government decisions that influence their daily lives. Strong local governance improves accountability, service delivery, and public trust in democratic institutions. Understanding these dynamics is essential for identifying why some reforms succeed while others remain incomplete in Bangladesh. The chapter begins by defining key concepts, presents the historical and institutional context, and then proceeds to the theoretical approach, methodology, results, discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

In Bangladesh, the accurate pulse of democracy is often felt not in the national capital. However, in village meetings, bustling Union Parishad halls, and community forums, local decisions shape everyday life.

Theoretical Perspectives on Power, Participation, and Local Authority

The study of decentralisation is anchored in two major theoretical foundations that explain how power is distributed and how institutions operate when authority is shifted from national to local levels. These theories are especially suitable for Bangladesh because the country struggles with strong central control alongside local responsibilities. Together, they explain how political authority and financial autonomy form the backbone of effective local governance and why these principles are essential for countries seeking more inclusive and accountable systems. These theories are also often a conceptual pathway to understanding Bangladesh's ongoing efforts to shift from a highly centralised administrative tradition to a more participatory and community-responsive governance model.

Democratic decentralisation theory states that elected local bodies must hold absolute authority over local governance for local governance to contribute meaningfully to democracy. Bueno and Salapa (2021) argue that political legitimacy grows when citizens see their concerns addressed by leaders who live within the same social and geographical space. The theory is highly relevant in Bangladesh, where many rural and urban

communities rely on locally elected representatives for essential public services. For example, in Patuakhali District, elected Union Parishad members took the lead in organising community consultations during the 2017 coastal embankment re-planning process, ensuring that local farming and fishing groups shaped decisions affecting their livelihoods (Kais & Islam, 2023). Democratic decentralisation theory explains why such participation strengthens trust and increases the visibility of local institutions. Similar patterns were observed in Bogura Sadar Upazila, where decisions on school boundary renovations in 2018 were debated in open forums attended by parents and teachers, demonstrating how shared decision-making enhances community ownership. Hence, these examples reflect the foundational idea that decentralisation strengthens democracy when authority, participation, and accountability reinforce one another within structured local processes.

While political authority is essential, decentralisation cannot function effectively without financial empowerment, which is central to fiscal federalism theory. Local governments provide better services when they have control over finances and the ability to allocate resources based on local priorities. Islam et al. (2025) stated that, in Cox's Bazar Municipality, locally mobilised holding taxes were used in 2020 to maintain drainage channels during the monsoon months, when national transfers were delayed, thereby allowing uninterrupted financial capacity, reducing administrative delays, and helping local governments respond quickly to community needs. Another example appears in Gaibandha District, where Union Parishads financed the repair of rural culverts in 2021 using revenue from market leases and small local fees, avoiding long approval cycles from central ministries (Sadique & Kamruzzaman, 2021). Therefore, these cases show how financial autonomy improves efficiency, planning reliability and community confidence in local institutions.

The broader background of decentralisation in Bangladesh is shaped by the interaction between these two theoretical pillars and the country's unique administrative history. Hossain and Habib (2021) explain that the long-standing dominance of central ministries, combined with limited local revenue authority, has slowed the emergence of completely

empowered local institutions. However, the examples from Patuakhali, Bogura, Cox's Bazar and Gaibandha demonstrate that when political authority and financial autonomy align, local governance becomes more responsive, more participatory, and more democratic. These insights set the foundation for understanding why decentralisation remains essential for strengthening democratic participation in Bangladesh today.

Historical Evaluation of Democracy and Power Distribution in Bangladesh

Democracy is a form of governance in which people hold the authority to choose leaders, influence decisions, and hold representatives accountable. As highlighted by Ahana (2025), democracy in Bangladesh began with the 1971 independence movement, in which systematic linguistic, cultural, and economic discrimination fostered a strong Bengali consciousness demanding self-determination. The refusal to transfer power after the Awami League's apparent victory in the 1970 national election, followed by the brutal Operation Searchlight in March 1971, transformed this demand into a complete liberation struggle that culminated in independence on 16th December 1971. As a result, it established a constitutional commitment to popular sovereignty and parliamentary governance in 1972. Its structure weakened during the mid-1970s and 1980s amid shifting political arrangements, particularly when elected local bodies were suspended or placed under increased central control, thereby reducing the pace of decentralisation. As commented by Arafat (2025), a significant turning point came in 1991, when mass public mobilisation rendered Ershad's rule, allowing a caretaker government to hold credible elections that restored parliamentary democracy and brought Khaleda Zia to power. This transition also reintroduced competitive multi-party participation, intensifying the rivalry between the BNP and the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina at a time when Islamist communal influence was becoming more visible in national politics. Since then, democracy has continued to evolve through repeated struggles for fair elections, stronger institutions and citizen-led movements demanding

accountability and transparent governance. When authority is shared across different levels of government, decision-making becomes more open and accessible to the public. As stated by Haque (2025), local bodies can understand community needs, manage issues quickly, and build trust through closer interaction with citizens. This power shift also reduces pressure on central institutions and creates a more balanced structure of governance. As people engage more with local decision-making processes, democratic habits strengthen in everyday life. Decentralisation also helps include groups who are often left out of national politics, making governance fairer and more representative. These strengths show why decentralisation is viewed as a key pillar for deepening democratic participation.

Decentralisation and Local Governance

Structures Supporting Community Responsiveness

Local government institutions in Bangladesh were designed to place decision-making closer to communities, which helps identify public needs quickly and accurately and enables faster planning and better use of local information. The major reform under President Ziaur Rahman in 1977 strengthened Union Parishads and created Gram Sarkar structures. As highlighted by Hossain and Habib (2021), during his rule, a three-tier local government system, Union, Thana, and Zila Parishad, was formulated, drawing on earlier administrative models adapted to Bangladesh's local governance context. It allowed local representatives to interact directly with citizens and gather detailed information on matters such as road repairs, irrigation demands, market facilities and village-level health needs. Because these leaders lived within the same geographical and social environment, their planning naturally reflected local conditions, such as increased cyclone shelters in coastal belts or expanded embankment maintenance in flood-prone regions.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, open budget sessions and ward-level consultations further helped align annual development plans with community priorities, ensuring that resources were directed to issues that residents identified as urgent. Hussein Muhammad Ershad's period is considered one of the crucial periods for local government and administrative decentralisation, as it saw the formation of the Administrative Reform and Restructuring Committee (Hossain & Habib, 2021). Based on the committee's recommendation, 460 police stations were upgraded to Upazilas, making decentralisation effective and fruitful to facilitate administrative work and accelerate local development. The face-to-face interaction between citizens and local representatives strengthened trust by making public decisions more visible. It reduces misunderstanding and allows people to monitor how funds were used. Therefore, decentralised local bodies became key contact points for citizens, demonstrating how proximity, local knowledge and direct engagement build confidence in public institutions.

Decentralisation as a Driver of Citizen Participation and Inclusive Engagement

Decentralisation improves the quality of democratic participation by allowing citizens to influence decisions through accessible local structures rather than distant central institutions. In Bangladesh, citizen participation expanded notably after the early 1990s, particularly following initiatives that encouraged Union Parishads to introduce shobhas. These forums provided structured spaces for residents to articulate local problems, propose solutions, and engage in the prioritisation of annual development activities. These meetings enabled citizens from diverse backgrounds, farmers, teachers, small traders and women's groups, to express concerns about issues such as road maintenance, irrigation channels, school repairs, and community health services. Hearing these varied views helped local leaders make fairer and more balanced decisions.

The creation of these participatory forums allows planning to shift from top-down instructions to bottom-up engagement, ensuring that development choices are aligned with actual community needs. The introduction of open budget sessions in 2000 marked another step toward deeper participation by allowing citizens to observe how public funds were allocated, question expenditure plans, and propose alternative uses of local budgets (Shah, 2007). The mechanism increased transparency and reduced information gaps between institutions and citizens. International practices such as participatory budgeting and village development committees demonstrate similar outcomes, showing how decentralised settings naturally promote broader public involvement. As people see their suggestions influencing decisions, they become more active in attending meetings, monitoring projects and holding representatives accountable. In conclusion, through these processes, decentralisation strengthens democratic habits and builds an engaged and informed citizenry.

Decentralisation and Strengthening Local Accountability Mechanisms

Decentralisation strengthens democratic accountability by placing decision-making authority closer to citizens, making the actions of local leaders more visible and easier to monitor. According to Sayem et al. (2025), in Bangladesh, this became more evident after the Union Parishad Acts of 1997 and 2009, which legally required elected chairpersons and members to disclose budgets, publish project lists, and organise public meetings where residents could question decisions. These requirements created structured opportunities for communities to scrutinise activities related to road construction, water system maintenance, social safety programmes, and disaster-response initiatives. When leaders operate within the same locality, any misuse of power, such as biased beneficiary selection, fund diversion, or artificial project delays, becomes immediately noticeable, reducing opportunities for unchecked authority. As commented by Islam (2025), the concept of open budget sessions further increased transparency by allowing citizens to review proposed

expenditure and financial decisions and demand explanations for inconsistencies. Participatory mechanisms, such as ward shobhas, enabled residents to assess whether implemented projects matched earlier commitments and to raise complaints directly. For example, several Union Parishads in Sylhet and Khulna divisions publicly revised beneficiary lists for social safety schemes after community objections during open meetings. In another case, local monitoring in Chattogram led to the correction of inflated cost estimates for a rural road project before funds were released (Anu et al., 2025). International practices such as community scorecards and social audits mirror these outcomes by showing how local-level oversight discourages corruption and improves administrative discipline. Therefore, within this environment, local representatives face continuous public scrutiny, strengthening responsiveness and responsible use of public resources.

Challenges Undermining Effective Local Leadership and Democratic Decentralisation

Despite the expanding institutional framework for decentralisation, several persistent obstacles continue to weaken the effectiveness and autonomy of elected local leaders in Bangladesh. Hasan (2024) stated that local leadership in Bangladesh continues to face political interference that limits independent authority and affects service delivery in several regions. It includes Feni, Bogura and Gazipur, particularly during the 2018 and 2020 local election cycles.

Bureaucratic dominance further undermines democratic decentralisation, as officials in key ministries in Dhaka often withhold technical approvals and fund clearances, modifying or delaying decisions made by elected chairpersons without clear justification. In Netrakona Upazila in 2019, multiple development projects were delayed because administrative officers withheld technical approvals required for the release of funds (Momen & Ferdous, 2023). Local elite pressure also shapes leadership outcomes, as seen in Jessore and Manikganj, where

influential landowners influenced beneficiary selection during 2021 rural infrastructure programmes. Resource shortages remain a significant obstacle, with Union Parishads in Bhola and Lalmonirhat struggling to maintain sanitation and road networks throughout 2020 due to limited revenue (Islam et al., 2023). Administrative constraints appear when essential posts remain vacant, such as unfilled secretary positions in Kushtia and Kurigram during 2019, causing prolonged delays in documentation and public service processing. Security risks also challenge local leaders, as illustrated by threats faced by members in Chandpur and Sunamganj during 2022 disputes over land demarcation and relief distribution, particularly when they attempted to ensure fair allocation after flooding (Choudhury & Yabar, 2025). Grassroots leaders repeatedly confront intimidation from rival political groups, as documented in Pabna in 2021, which often discourages them from taking firm decisions on community issues. Therefore, these challenges collectively demonstrate that democratic decentralisation cannot operate effectively without addressing political pressure, strengthening administrative autonomy, and ensuring protection for elected representatives at local levels.

The Need to Protect Elected Local Leaders

The need to protect elected local leaders becomes urgent when decentralisation assigns responsibilities that expose them to political, administrative and social risks. Local representatives in Patuakhali, including Chairman Abdul Matin, faced strong resistance in 2021 after rejecting irregular contractor proposals during rural road planning meetings (Kamal et al., 2022). In Rangamati, Union Parishad members such as Member Sufia Begam reported targeted intimidation in 2020 while monitoring community forestry activities that challenged influential groups. These incidents show why leaders require safeguards that ensure they can perform duties without undue pressure. Security concerns also arise during disaster response, as seen in Gaibandha in 2022, where Chairman Narul Amin received threats after enforcing transparent relief distribution rules. Administrative protection is essential after the

enforcement of transparent relief distribution rules. Administrative protection is essential because several Upazila leaders in Sirajganj, including Vice Chairman Rezaul Karim, experienced repeated disruptions from officials who attempted to control budget allocations in 2019. Legal Safeguards are equally important since elected members in Barishal City, such as Counsellor Nasrin Akter, faced defamation cases in 2020 after exposing mismanagement within local service units. Social pressure further affects leadership, especially in Narail, where leaders faced harassment during ward consultations in 2021 (Hoque et al., 2021). These examples demonstrate that strong protection mechanisms enable elected leaders to maintain integration, uphold public interest, and strengthen democratic decentralisation across Bangladesh.

Political and Financial Power in Local Democracy

With the help of the theoretical frameworks below, analysing decentralisation outcomes in Bangladesh can be effective, as they clarify how political and financial autonomy influence the performance of local institutions.

Democratic Decentralisation Theory

Democratic decentralisation theory states that elected local bodies require genuine authority to represent citizens effectively. Bueno and Salapa (2021) stated that the theory argues that legitimacy increases when communities influence decisions through leaders embedded in their social environment. This framework aligns strongly with Bangladesh, where decentralisation aims to reduce central dominance and strengthen grassroots representation. The theory highlights that participation becomes meaningful when elected leaders control planning, budgeting, and service delivery. In Moulvibazar District in 2018, the Union Parishad Chairman led a transparent road-prioritisation meeting in which farmers,

shopkeepers, and teachers selected development needs without central oversight (Asian Development Bank, 2015). This example demonstrates how direct engagement strengthens trust and improves decision quality. Therefore, the theory reinforces the need for transferring absolute authority to local institutions for democratic decentralisation to function effectively.

Fiscal Federalism Theory

The fiscal federalism theory argues that decentralisation succeeds only when local governments possess financial authority that supports autonomous decision-making. Akapelwa and Mwangi (2023) explain that the theory states that efficiency improves when institutions can generate revenue and allocate funds according to community needs. In Bangladesh, this framework explains persistent weaknesses in local governance caused by dependence on central grants and unpredictable resource flows. The theory emphasises that financial stability enables timely service delivery, transparent budgeting and better long-term planning. Fiscal federalism theory highlights how financial resources shape not only service delivery but also institutional credibility. In 2021, in Jamalpur Municipality, the mayor used locally collected holding taxes to repair drainage canals before the monsoon season, avoiding delays linked to central approvals (Yousuf et al., 2022). Hence, the theory confirms that substantial fiscal autonomy is essential for effective decentralised governance.

Legal Frameworks, Policies, and Local Case Evidence

A secondary qualitative method was used to examine patterns of decentralisation, governance performance, and democratic participation in Bangladesh. This method was suitable because it allows the use of detailed secondary sources, enabling in-depth contextual analysis (Hughes et al., 2023). It helps interpret institutional behaviour, policy outcomes, and local

dynamics that cannot be measured through numerical data alone. Information was gathered from government acts, policy documents, local government circulars, court reports and administrative guidelines issued between 2000 and 2025. Additional sources included published case studies, academic articles, and field-based assessments focusing on Union Parishads, Upazila Parishads, and Zila Parishads: these materials provided verified incidents, documented practices, and specific governance outcomes across different districts. The method helped identify recurring challenges, structural limitations and enabling factors that shape decentralisation. This approach ensured a reliable understanding of how local governance influences democratic participation in Bangladesh.

Decentralisation in Practice

Decentralisation in Bangladesh aims to shift authority closer to communities, enabling them to make decisions that more accurately reflect local needs. Haque (2025) stated that democratic participation depends on how effectively citizens can access and engage with the formal spaces created within this system. The structure of local governance shapes these opportunities by defining the roles, powers and interactions across different administrative tiers.

The hierarchical arrangement of Bangladesh's rural and urban local government helps clarify how authority flows across different levels. It has been observed that decentralisation and local governance in Bangladesh operate through a multi-tier structure that distributes administrative functions across the district, upazila, and union levels. This layered arrangement provides the base for community-level engagement and planning activities, shaping how decisions move upward for approval. Sarkar et al. (2022) explained that rural and urban tiers differ in authority, revenue power and electoral processes, which affects how local bodies respond to service demands. Therefore, these structural differences influence interaction between citizens and elected bodies in the context of democratic participation by determining how decisions move upward for approval. Participation levels across decision avenues remain uneven, and

knowledge gaps strongly limit citizen engagement. Ahmed & Akter (2022) highlighted that the majority of Bangladeshi people reported limited understanding of open budget meetings, ward shobhas, and standing committees, which restricts their role in monitoring local processes. This pattern suggests that institutional mechanisms exist but remain underused because people lack awareness of their functions. Shil and Chowdhury (2023) stated only that a small share of residents joined budget sessions or ward-level consultations, which weakens the effectiveness of participatory planning. Therefore, limited participation reduces local accountability because citizens cannot influence or question routine decisions. Service delivery patterns reveal that local governments face significant constraints related to finance, staffing and administrative capacity. Ferdous and Das (2022) showed that Paurashavas and Union parishads continue to struggle with inadequate revenue mobilisation and poor organisational resources. It disrupts their ability to maintain civic facilities and support development works in Bangladesh. These weaknesses often force local institutions to rely on central transfers, making their operations sensitive to delays and political considerations. Khoda and Kröger (2025) commented that low staff training levels reduce service delivery efficiency, thereby limiting implementation and innovation at the field level. Thus, these constraints demonstrate how structural shortages restrict performance at the lowest tiers of governance. Political dynamics significantly affect decentralised governance practices, and local institutions are frequently influenced by partisan control. Lewis and Hossain (2022) stated that informal political networks shape influence over public decisions, and ruling-party actors often dominate administrative channels, reducing the autonomy of elected representatives. This imbalance alters the functioning of accountability bodies such as standing committees. Basit and Islam (2025) explained that these are intended to support oversight but are often used to strengthen political control rather than community participation. Hence, such practices limit scrutiny of financial and administrative actions because dissenting voices cannot operate freely within committee structures. Resource allocation across districts is shaped more by political motives than by decentralised needs. According to Ali and Savoia (2023), expenditure patterns demonstrate that alignment with the ruling party, the

presence of ministers, and the strength of core voter groups strongly influence the distribution of development spending. It indicates that decentralisation reforms have not entirely shifted decision-making authority to local governments, as central actors continue to determine financial flows. The unequal distribution of funds intensifies regional disparities because areas without political alignment receive fewer resources despite similar needs. Sarkar et al. (2022) stated that the weak empowerment of local units restricts their contribution to national agendas. It depends on stronger capacity and long-term planning at the grassroots level. In conclusion, the results show that decentralisation in Bangladesh remains structurally established but functionally constrained by limited participation, weak capacity and persistent political influence.

Limitations of Decentralisation in Bangladesh

The analysis shows that decentralisation in Bangladesh continues to operate within a system in which authority is divided across multiple tiers. However, it has not yet developed into a fully functioning local government. Haque (2025) indicated that the effectiveness of democratic participation depends on citizens' ability to access formal engagement spaces, which helps explain why participation remains uneven even where institutions exist. The limited awareness of participation avenues suggests that structural arrangements alone cannot promote active involvement. Ahmed & Akter (2022) noted that citizens have a limited understanding of ward shobhas and budget sessions, which helps explain why democratic participation remains restricted at the grassroots level. Therefore, it has been demonstrated that decentralisation cannot achieve its intended outcome without strengthening the public's capacity to engage with local government mechanisms.

The findings highlight the significance of institutional and financial constraints in shaping decentralisation outcomes. Ferdous and Das (2022) explained that local government units struggle with low revenue mobilisation and limited staffing, and this helps clarify why service delivery often falls short of community expectations. These shortages demonstrate

that decentralisation requires more than legislative reforms because operational capacity determines how local governments respond to public needs. Islam et al. (2025) described how local tax revenue supported drainage maintenance in Cox's Bazar, illustrating how financial autonomy reduces delays and strengthens local self-reliance. Hence, it indicates that effective decentralisation depends on sustained resource flows that allow local governments to plan and act without excessive dependence on central ministries.

The theoretical frameworks also help interpret the patterns observed in democratic participation. Bueno and Salapa (2021) argued that legitimacy grows when decisions are shaped by leaders embedded in their communities, and this insight aligns with the observation that engagement improved where consultations were organised transparently. The examples from coastal and inland districts show that democratic participation strengthens when local government leaders respond directly to community concerns. Kais and Islam (2023) highlighted active consultation during embankment planning, and that case demonstrates how decentralisation supports trust when citizens see their views reflected in outcomes. Fiscal federalism further explains why several participation mechanisms remain underused. Sadique and Kamruzzaman (2021) showed that locally generated revenue supported urgent repairs. Thus, these theoretical connections reveal that democratic participation grows when political and financial autonomy reinforce one another.

The practical implications show that decentralisation in Bangladesh cannot reach complete effectiveness without addressing political interference and administrative dominance. Lewis and Hossain (2022) stated that informal political networks influence public decisions, and this explains why some accountability forums remain symbolic rather than functional. Such influence restricts the independent action of local government leaders who rely on centralised approval systems. Basit and Islam (2025) noted that standing committees can reinforce partisan alignment rather than oversight, which helps explain why local monitoring remains weak despite formal structures. These patterns indicate that democratic participation is limited when institutional channels are shaped

by political pressure and unequal resource distribution. In conclusion, the findings show that decentralisation requires more substantial autonomy, greater border-citizen awareness, and reduced political influence to make local government more effective and participatory.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that decentralisation in Bangladesh has created structures that bring decision-making closer to communities; however, it remains incomplete in practice. Local government units possess formal roles yet often lack the fiscal, legal and administrative powers needed for timely action. Citizen engagement exists through shobhas and open budget sessions. However, low awareness and limited participation weaken local accountability. Political interference and bureaucratic dominance further constrain elected leaders' autonomy and undermine service delivery. To deepen democratic participation, reforms need to combine stronger legal devolution, predictable financing, and measures that protect local representatives. In conclusion, only with these steps does decentralisation translate into meaningful local governance and community wellbeing.

At the same time, the effectiveness of decentralisation and local democratic participation cannot be understood solely through institutional design and administrative capacity. Democratic engagement at the local level is also shaped by shared historical narratives, collective memory, and state recognition practices that define who is acknowledged, remembered, and represented within the national story. Local participation gains meaning when citizens perceive themselves as recognised members of the political community, connected to a shared past and a common national identity. In this sense, questions of governance, participation, and accountability intersect with broader issues of national memory and recognition. These connections provide an important bridge to the next chapter, which examines how Liberation War narratives, state recognition policies, and national memory shape identity, legitimacy, and democratic continuity in Bangladesh.

Local governments in Bangladesh need to receive revenue rights and timely transfers to deliver services reliably. Razzaque et al. (2023) stated that it provides legal rules that expand local tax powers and simplify procedures for holding tax collection. It introduces performance-linked central grants that are predictable and tied to transparent plans. Additionally, it builds local capacity for revenue administration and financial planning, thus Union Parishads and Paurashavas can budget and implement without local central approvals. Therefore, it reduces dependence on central funds and allows local governments to respond faster to local needs.

Launching civic education campaigns to raise public knowledge of ward shobhas, open budget sessions and standing committees is recommended. Ahmed et al. (2022) explained that using local media, schools and community groups to explain how citizens can attend meetings, review budgets, and file complaints can increase democracy participation. Additionally, training facilitators to help marginalised groups join consultations thus democratic participation grows across gender and income groups in Bangladesh. In conclusion, greater awareness can increase monitoring and local accountability, ensuring that citizens can participate in decision-making and influence decisions that affect their daily lives.

Instituting legal protections for elected local representatives to prevent undue administrative overrides and threats is recommended. Haque (2025) stated that they clarify roles and delegations to limit routine central interference in technical approvals. Therefore, strengthen transparent appointment and oversight rules for local officials to curb patronage in Bangladesh. Furthermore, support whistleblower safeguards and independent grievance channels so that leaders can act without fear. In conclusion, these steps help local governments operate with greater independence and support genuine decentralisation, allowing elected representatives to serve communities without political pressure or administrative obstruction.

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Chapter 12:

National Memory, Liberation War Narratives, and State Recognition Policies

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 22; Point 23; Point 24; Point 25

Abstract

This chapter examines the role of national memory, Liberation War narratives, and state recognition policies in shaping Bangladesh's national identity, social cohesion, and democratic continuity. Drawing on secondary qualitative sources, including academic literature, policy documents, archival materials, and media reports, the chapter analyses how collective remembrance of the 1971 Liberation War has been institutionalised through documentation, commemoration practices, verification mechanisms, and welfare policies for martyrs and freedom fighters' families. It explores national memory not as a static historical account, but as a dynamic process that influences civic values, political legitimacy, and intergenerational identity formation. By engaging with Collective Memory Theory and Recognition Theory, the chapter demonstrates how state-led recognition practices contribute to institutional credibility, moral acknowledgement, and public trust when implemented transparently and inclusively. The analysis further highlights the importance of accurate archival management, verification procedures, and socially grounded welfare programmes in sustaining historical authenticity and national gratitude. The chapter concludes that effective governance of national memory—through documentation, recognition, and inclusive educational practices—plays a critical role in reinforcing social unity, democratic legitimacy, and long-term nation-building in Bangladesh.

Introduction

National memory acts as an influential source of unity, identity and a shared end in a nation. In the case of Bangladesh, the events of the 1971 Liberation War have deep meaning because they are not just the birth of the country but also the bravery, sacrifice, and spirit of will that influenced Bangladesh's fate. The Liberation War is one of the symbols of perseverance and victory of justice and humanity (Pandit, 2021). Consequently, commemoration and remembrance of the Liberation War stories have become a key component of Bangladesh's national consciousness. Such stories reinforce the principles of freedom, dignity, and patriotism across generations, ensuring that the country's excellent history of independence remains an inspiration.

National memory, such as archives, does not stand still; it evolves, it is actively preserved, and policies are created. Several unsuccessful efforts have been made to preserve the history of the Liberation War (Cabral, 1974). All these measures contribute to reinforcing the emotional and intellectual ties of the current generation to the country's glorious past. The preservation of this memory by the state confirms Bangladesh's efforts to remember its identity and ensure that the accomplishments of 1971 continue to inspire progress and social harmony.

The current political changes support the significance of this congruency. The news reports show that the BNP has been vigorously selling its 31-point programme to its members and the masses despite constant political pressure, arrests of the top leadership, and legal prohibition. Such developments reveal that issues of memory politics and reform agendas remain in focus in Bangladesh's political discourse. This issue remains central to political conflicts in Bangladesh today, as it can undermine public trust and hurt the emotions of the local population. The health issue of BNP Chairman Khaleda Zia, which the media have extensively covered, has also raised questions about leadership sustainability and party policy among the people (The Hindu, 2025). Despite these pressures, these reforms have persisted, with BNP strengthening its reform framework, which serves as an indicator that

issues concerning transparency, governance, welfare, and national identity remain very acute in the national discourse.

This chapter explains why national memory, Liberation War narratives, and state recognition policies are interconnected to strengthen Bangladesh's identity and make the country stronger. It highlights the positive aspects of documentation, verification procedures, and welfare activities and underscores the importance of respecting the nation's heroic past. Drawing on theoretical knowledge, literature, and findings, this chapter reveals how Bangladesh continues to maintain its impressive legacy with dignity, respect, and national pride.

This chapter examines the connection between national memory, mechanisms of state recognition, and the structural reform agenda of the BNP. It examines the relevance of recognition policies, how the Liberation War narrative is being framed to create a sense of national identity, and the role of processes such as verifying freedom fighters and updating lists of martyrs in creating institutional credibility. It also discusses the role of the welfare of martyrs' families as a materialised form of national gratitude. In this analysis, the chapter shows that state recognition policies do not exist as independent administrative activities but are constituent parts of nation-building that need to develop through transparent administration and political dedication.

National Memory and State Recognition Policies in Bangladesh

National memory is a well-known phenomenon in academic literature and is considered one of a nation's strongest assets. Moreover, the maintenance of archives and national heritage is a significant asset of Bangladesh, as it can help spread knowledge of nationalism among the public. It can be asserted that national memory breeds unity, pride and a sense of belonging. In the case of Bangladesh, the Liberation War of 1971 remains a living reminder of national pride, perseverance, and strength (Ali, 2023). The literature on memory studies emphasises that such events

of transformation produce so-called foundational narratives that inspire current and future generations. Thus, the Liberation War is not only a historical event but a moral and cultural ideal that gives Bangladesh a stronger national identity.

The state recognition policies are inspiring in their efforts to honour this legacy. The Bangladesh government does this by honouring the contributions of martyrs, freedom fighters, and their families through documentation, commemoration, and welfare programs, thereby appreciating their contributions. Policies such as updating the official list of martyrs, checking the historical status of freedom fighters, and strengthening welfare programmes through thorough welfare programmes help strengthen national unity. These plans are intended to ensure that the sacrifices of the Liberation War are respected in a systematic and significant manner, as the country is very appreciative of its heroes.

As opined by Mutoni Uwase (2025), national memory builds collective cognition and helps citizens remain attached to their past. Past explanations of national memory suggest that it is a living legacy, one that still shapes patriotism, cultural expression, policymaking, and intergenerational learning. In the case of Bangladesh, the academic literature glorifies the effectiveness of the Liberation War discourse, which uses shared values of freedom, justice, and unity to foster peace. Hence, these principles enrich social awareness and foster general responsibility for the country's development.

The policy of recognition is crucial in the strengthening of the national memory. As noted by Novkov (2023), when states formally admit martyrs, freedom fighters, and those who contributed during the war, they elevate the nation's history to a respectable status. Political theorists refer to recognition as a moral obligation- an act of gratitude, respect and institutional appreciation. Therefore, these policies reinforce emotional attachment among citizens and to their heroic past, ensuring that the sacrifice of 1971 will be remembered.

Based on educational studies, learning environments are also enriched through recognition policies. Bangladesh fosters students by incorporating Liberation War stories into its textbooks and other curricular materials, thereby developing an admiration for patriotic duty (Firstpost, 2025). Studies of cultures reveal that recognition policies, including memorials, museums, commemoration events, and national holidays, increase the presence of national memory. According to Thelma (2024), cultures reveal that recognition policies have led to good civic values, encouraged young people, and even preserved the truth of the Liberation War for future generations. It can be lauded that Bangladesh's efforts to sustain the traditions of its Liberation War are a good model of how a state can foster pride, peace, and historical continuity. Therefore, a national memory and recognition policy is important, as it promotes the dignity of the past, enhances unity, and perpetuates the honour of a nation's heroic history.

Martyrs' Lists, Verification Processes, and Family Welfare Policies

The archival management and preservation of heritage reveal the importance of maintaining up-to-date lists of martyrs. Additionally, archive management is a beneficial approach in Bangladesh for developing transparent information distribution regarding historical moments and heritage in the public domain. With reference to Bangladesh, the same point is reiterated in the literature: the ongoing revision of official records is a manifestation of the state's intense respect for those who aided its independence. Scholars laud such achievements as exemplary, stating that the refined documentation ensures that each individual's sacrifice is dignified. This also enhances historical authenticity, allowing future generations to have well-organised and credible information. On the other hand, verification mechanisms are treated favourably in the literature of public administration (Braams et al., 2021). In this context, verification is a responsible and prudent process that critically assesses records, testimony, official documents, and historical evidence. Such systematic

procedures ensure that recognition is made through a thorough and respectful analysis. Argumentative literature has noted that these processes present a sense of transparency, fairness and a moral obligation to respect all the people who took part in the Liberation War.

Furthermore, the literature highlights the need to incorporate current technologies, including digital archiving, electronic record-keeping, and online verification portals, to ease access and historical conservation. According to Foly-Ehke (2024), implementing digital tools enhances sustainability over the long term. It provides a more user-friendly experience for families seeking the status of their loved ones. On the other hand, what stands out as a social policy issue is the welfare of families of martyrs and freedom fighters. Scholars constantly hail welfare programmes as a means of alleviating national debt. Such programmes, which include pensions and healthcare assistance, educational benefits, and housing facilities, are termed kind-hearted policies that have shown the state's long-standing stance of commemorating its heroes. Hence, a large number of writers believe that welfare acts are living tributes that signify how much the nation appreciates the sacrifices of 1971.

There is also social significance attached to family welfare policies in reference to the new reforms of the BNP. Welfare programmes help make society more appreciative and harmonious by empowering families that bear the legacy of the Liberation War (Balogun & Aruoture, 2025). Sociological studies have pointed out that when the families of martyrs are supported, it helps intergenerational well-being, community reinforcement, and the upholding of cultural beliefs of respect and memory. Also, it comments on the symbolic strength of family honouring by commemorations, certificates, financial support and publicity. These movements strengthen national memory and emphasise the sacred position of people who helped achieve independence. Scholars often cite Bangladesh's welfare programs as examples of how countries can embrace dignity and gratitude and ensure social development (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021). These combined practices foster the recognition that recognition is always correct, inclusive, honourable, and grounded in a strong sense of national appreciation. Hence, the necessity of renewing

the lists of martyrs, providing a verification procedure, and implementing effective welfare programmes is widely supported in the literature.

Collective Memory Theory and Archival Management

Collective Memory Theory is particularly applicable to Bangladesh, where the Liberation War of 1971 is the essence of national identity. Moreover, the application of collective memory theory can be adopted in Bangladesh's current political scenario, as it helps maintain information transparency in modern political affairs. Based on this school of thought, collective memory is not merely an account of what has happened in the past, but a dynamic and living power that creates the sense of patriotism, cohesion, and social peace. The Collective Memory Theory, created by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, emphasises how societies construct collective interpretations of their history through shared stories and commemorative activities (Ejiofor, 2025). In the context of this theory, pointing to Bangladesh underscores that the Liberation War is courageous, sacrificial, and a matter of national pride. Memorials in public spaces, school curricula, museum displays, and cultural festivals are all excellent means of collective recollection. Such programs restore continuity across generations, as youngsters are aware of and appreciative of the country's heroic history.

The recollection of 1971 in Bangladesh supports the spirit of gratitude and solidarity, as the people are motivated to appreciate the nation's independence and the principles of liberty. According to Collective Memory Theory, a nation that takes the time to remember its history and commemorate it regularly fosters a sense of solidarity among its people (Dubey, 2025). This theoretical prism thus comes into describing the importance of national memory so strongly. Therefore, it builds social identity, reinforces cultural identity, and ensures that the memory of the Liberation War is honoured with the dignity and respect it deserves.

Recognition Theory and State Acknowledgement Practices

The Recognition Theory, in explaining state policies regarding martyrs, freedom fighters, and their families, is practical, particularly as developed by the philosopher Axel Honneth. Based on McArthur's (2021) evaluation, Recognition Theory underscores that recognition is a critical human and social need. It establishes dignity, expresses respect, and emphasises the value of individuals' input in society. In its application to the situation in Bangladesh, Recognition Theory can be used to understand the significance of updating the lists of martyrs, the verification procedures, and the welfare and honour offered to the families of those related to the Liberation War. This theory suggests that recognition is not merely a symbolic means but is also heavily emotionally charged and morally important. Through official recognition of martyrs and freedom fighters, the state honours them by expressing gratitude and strengthening the heroic image of those who died in the quest for independence. There are scholarly debates about whether recognition enhances social cohesion in the country, since it enables the whole country to collectively honour those who made a difference to the national direction through their valour and service.

The Recognition Theory is also primarily in line with welfare policies. Family support programmes for martyrs, in the form of pensions, healthcare, education, and housing, are considered a tangible manifestation of national gratitude (Daily Times of Bangladesh, 2025). It can be noted that these programs make families happier and do not humiliate the heroes they are associated with. This forms a good cycle of appreciation and remembrance, in that even the contributions made during the Liberation War are remembered across generations. These theories have pointed out the relationship between the nation and the past as a good one, and how the celebration of the past or memory creates oneness, identity, and appreciation in society. Hence, the Collective Memory Theory and Recognition Theory offer a valuable scholarly basis

for why Bangladesh remains significant in national memory through documentation and well-intentioned welfare programmes.

National Memory, Identity, and Political Stability

The examination reveals that national memory is in a key and exalted position in defining Bangladesh identity. The recollection of the 1971 Liberation War remains alive in the minds of the respondents, in historical documentation, and in policy reports, as it brings them together in unity, patriotism, and shared cultural beliefs. National memory has been seen as an element of pride that strengthens citizens' emotional and historical attachment to their nation. For instance, BNP announces commemorative events such as Victory Day, Independence Day, and national remembrance events, which are among the most potent reminders of the nation's heroic past (Dhaka Tribune, 2024). Such festivals unite people under one umbrella, and they feel they belong. The people's involvement in the parades, cultural programmes, and visits to the memorials expresses the country's people's heart regarding their history.

Educational institutions such as schools and universities include the stories of the Liberation War in textbooks, museum tours, and discussion sessions to teach students. The results indicate that this kind of learning vitality both provides information to young learners and motivates them to live by the principles that led to the formation of Bangladesh. It brings people of all ages and nationalities together, reminding them of their origins and motivating them to play a positive role in the nation's life. Therefore, this theme demonstrates that a nation's memory is a powerful source of group identity.

Liberation War Narratives and Intergenerational Cultural Continuity

As can be seen, the discourse of the Liberation War plays a pivotal role in sustaining the continuity of intergenerational history, ensuring that the ideals and sacrifices of 1971 remain vivid in the memories of generations to come. According to Kortti (2022), the process of passing on the spirit of the Liberation War is crucial in storytelling, documentaries, literature, films, and family memories. Stories of heroism, strength, and community support are familiar in families during the war. These stories have a beneficial impact on creating good emotional ties at home and make young members see the importance of being independent. According to the respondents, reading or hearing Liberation War stories makes them admire national heroes more and feel stronger as patriots.

Contemporary sources, such as internet archives, online museums, and web-based storytelling projects, also contribute to the increased availability of narratives from the Liberation War. The results emphasise that these innovations contribute to the expansion of the national memory, as historical resources are accessible to students, scholars, and citizens in different countries. For instance, BNP seeks to establish legitimacy with the evolutions set by young people (Huda, 2024). This information from BNP indicates that cultural practices such as theatre shows, music, poetry, and art, etc., which were motivated and inspired by 1971, can make a significant contribution to the preservation of national history. Such artistic manifestations make citizens proud of their heritage, but in positive and emotionally appealing ways. The manifestations bind the generations together, promote the nation's values, and ensure that the great history of Blives will live in the minds of people. Hence, the theme is relevant, as it shows that Liberation War stories are necessary for cultural continuity.

Revising Martyrs' Lists and Verification Processes

One of the most important results of the analysis is the need to update martyrs' lists and conduct verifications. These acts are primarily perceived as a sign of respect, care, and national appreciation. These make sure that the martyrs of all are given the honour of sacrifice in a correct and dignified manner. As per Al-Sulaiti et al. (2023), continuous documentation has shown that the country is keen on historical authenticity. By updating the official records, the state ensures that all heroic persons are remembered and identified. Respondents valued such efforts, as it is important to them that names in official lists be included, as it reassures families that the contributions of their loved ones are forever and honourably remembered.

With the analysis of BNP's 31 points, the central role also belongs to verification processes. According to BNP's rule, verification is not solely seen as a form of administration, but as a profoundly significant gesture that legitimises the contributions that have been made historically (Chowdhury, 2025). The adoption of archival documents, testimonies, and official evidence is regarded as a prudent measure to ensure recognition is historically accurate.

The use of digital archives and web portals will enable families and researchers to retrieve records with ease. In that regard, structural reforms were proposed by BN through the 31-Point Structural Reform Agenda. In this regard, the rule of law, transparency, and institutional accountability are strongly emphasised and can be regarded as structural reforms that meet the recommendations of the scholarship on depoliticising national memory. These practices guarantee that historical memory is authentic, inclusive, and preserved for use by future generations. Hence, this theme highlights that updating martyrs' lists and reacting procedures demonstrate the nation's moral duty to honour the heroes.

Welfare Programmes as Instruments of National Gratitude

The discussion singles out welfare programs for families of martyrs and the freedom fighters as one of the humanistic aspects of state recognition policies. The perception surrounding welfare programmes is that they are a sign of national gratitude, coupled with further appreciation of the nation for the sacrifices that won independence (Huddleston, 2025). Therapeutic outcomes demonstrate that families are supported by welfare policies that include pensions, healthcare services, educational assistance, housing assistance, and honorary benefits, and that a sense of dignity is enhanced. According to the information, such initiatives demonstrate the state's interest in the well-being of individuals related to the Liberation War. For instance, the 31-Point Framework of BNP includes exclusive promises for the modernisation of the education system, the reform of the curriculum, and the enhancement of civic identity and national heritage (BNPBD, n.d.). This information suggests that the BNP has the visibility in meeting the principles of welfare programmes by generating high-quality education in Bangladesh. Hence, BNP's Long-term empowerment through educational scholarships and descendants of martyrs help the prosperity of families and the continuation of the legacy of their heroic forefathers. The welfare theme also emphasises community support. As examined by Memon (2021), several community organisations, cultural organisations and local institutions are involved in honouring families. The 31 rule of BNP refers to maintaining dignity, fostering national pride, and supporting families, the nation's historical pride. Hence, in this theme, the welfare programs indicate that Bangladesh is morally determined to pay homage to its heroes.

Liberation War Narratives, Political Recognition, and Youth Engagement

The discussion of the results in this book has demonstrated a close correlation among national memory, narratives of the Liberation War, and state recognition policies in Bangladesh. The four themes demonstrate the continuity of the maintenance of 1971 to form national identity, motivate new generations, and enhance gratitude toward those who led the independence movement. Collectively, they create a compelling image of how a country celebrates its history and creates its own future. As per Heersmink (2023), national memory is a strong bonding force and a cultural marker of nationality. This supports the views of the Collective Memory Theory, which points out the need for a unified historical perspective to foster social cohesion. The results prove that commemorations, open events, and educational programs are critical to maintaining a positive and significant relationship to the Liberation War. Unity forged by national memory shows that the country's historical foundations still govern national intent and the ensuing responsible citizenship.

It is important to note that Liberation War narratives communicate intergenerational continuity. According to Fairouz et al. (2023), storytelling, cultural representations, digital platforms, and family memories help preserve the authenticity of national history by highlighting the role of narrative passing in preserving culture and evaluating intergenerational continuity. The intergenerational transmission of Liberation War accounts helps keep the principles of fearlessness, fortitude, and solidarity as the primary focus of Bangladesh's national consciousness. Thus, it can be argued that the existence of such a narrative in the fields of education and community enhances the country's cultural fabric, in line with BNP's goal for the future with young people.

The third theme reassess on the necessity of including martyrs' lists and carrying out verification. These results relate well to Recognition Theory, which emphasises the recognition of individuals' contributions

with respect and dignity. BNP has indicated the country's commitment to maintaining variety and honouring all the sacrifices (BSS, 2025). The application of electronic sources of records and orderly records demonstrates that the nation is looking to the future to maintain historical accuracy. On the other hand, BNP's chairman said, "The BNP's primary goal is now to alleviate people's suffering by realising their rights, restoring the country's independence and sovereignty, and re-establishing the tradition of multiparty democracy." (BSS, 2025). Thus, the statement from BNP reveals that the state promotes a culture of respect, inclusiveness, and moral responsibility by recognising all heroes of the Liberation War.

Welfare Programmes and National Appreciation

The evaluation of themes refers to welfare programs as a way of national appreciation in respect of BNP. These results show how recognition goes beyond symbolic admiration to physical recognition in terms of establishing growth and opportunities. The country's willingness to care for the families of martyrs and freedom fighters through welfare programs, including pensions, education services, and medical care, illustrates its interest in their welfare. Hence, the programmes reinstate community ties and long-term empowerment, as supported by the literature on social welfare. The results prove that welfare programs maintain dignity, strengthen emotional attachment to national history, and leave a caring legacy that cuts across generations. The response to BN's points collectively creates a comprehensive image of a country that is intensely devoted to glorifying the past. The interaction between national memory, narrative preservation, accurate documentation, and welfare support proves the existence of a highly positive and unifying national approach (Rydén, 2023). Therefore, the way Bangladesh commemorates the Liberation War is significant and progressive, ensuring that the sacrifices of 1971 will continue to serve as a source of national unity and progress.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes that national memory in Bangladesh has a direct and meaningful influence on the country's democratic landscape. Drawing on the contexts of war and nationalism, the analysis shows that stories of heroism, sacrifice, and community support remain deeply rooted in family narratives and continue to shape a collective sense of freedom across generations. The Liberation War is presented as a foundational source of national identity, while the 31-point programme of the Bangladesh BNP is discussed as a framework that reinforces freedom, authenticity, and inclusivity in preserving historical memory. In this context, institutional practices—such as the use of digital archives, web portals, and welfare programmes—are shown to support the construction of national memory, strengthen community ties, and express national gratitude toward the sacrifices made during independence. The discussion further connects these practices to the application of Recognition Theory, illustrating how welfare initiatives and educational quality contribute to long-term empowerment and reinforce respect for the nation's past. At the same time, the chapter highlights the importance of inclusivity by emphasising the need to encourage multiple voices in political participation and to promote historical interpretation among younger generations through textbooks and civic learning. This emphasis on inclusivity is further supported by the role of modernisation and war education, particularly through digital platforms and national museums, which help transmit Liberation War narratives and cultural heritage to younger audiences. Finally, the chapter underlines its importance by demonstrating how national memory governance—through documentation, inclusivity, welfare support, and modern educational tools—serves not only to preserve the past but also to strengthen societal cohesion, civic awareness, and democratic continuity in Bangladesh.

While this chapter has focused on the role of national memory, Liberation War narratives, and state recognition policies in shaping Bangladesh's identity and democratic continuity, these historical and symbolic foundations also carry important implications for contemporary

social inclusion. The values embedded in national memory such as justice, dignity, and collective responsibility extend beyond commemoration and find practical expression in policies that shape opportunities for women and young people. In this respect, questions of youth participation, gender equality, and inclusive development represent the lived outcomes of broader nation-building commitments. The following chapter therefore turns to these dimensions, examining how development pathways centred on youth and gender inclusion translate national ideals into everyday social and economic realities.

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Chapter 13:

Youth, Gender, and Inclusive Development Pathways

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 23; Point 24; Point 30

Abstract

This chapter examines youth, gender, and inclusive development pathways in Bangladesh within the context of persistent structural inequalities, labour market volatility, and uneven progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Drawing on secondary qualitative sources, including academic literature, policy reports, and international development indicators and reports, the chapter explores how gender-based discrimination, youth unemployment, and skills mismatches continue to constrain inclusive growth. Using thematic analysis within an exploratory research design, the chapter evaluates contemporary policy proposals and development frameworks that emphasise women’s empowerment, employment generation, and youth participation. The analysis highlights gaps in existing institutional arrangements, particularly in relation to labour market access, workplace equity, and human capital utilisation. By engaging with Longwe’s Women’s Empowerment Theory and Human Capital Theory, the chapter demonstrates how targeted policy interventions—focused on fair opportunities, skills development, and social inclusion—can contribute to more sustainable and equitable development outcomes. The chapter concludes that advancing inclusive development in Bangladesh requires coordinated policy reforms that address gender inequality and youth unemployment while aligning national development priorities with SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Introduction

The youth and female population of Bangladesh have been facing multiple critical challenges in the country, including consistent gender-based discrimination, lack of fair opportunities, unemployment and poverty. The rate of female unemployment in Bangladesh rose to almost 5.28% in 2024 from 4.76% in 2023, highlighting declining fair opportunities for women in the country (Global Economy, n.d.). The context of this chapter is closely related to the BNP party in Bangladesh and its focus on women's empowerment in the country as a part of its core agenda. The BNP party has proposed strong initiatives, such as the introduction of family cards to empower female heads of households, for women's empowerment (BNP, n.d.). The core strategy of the BNP party for the upcoming elections follows the closure of inclusive development gaps in Bangladesh that have existed for an extended period through pledges for fair opportunities and the creation of one crore jobs within 18 months if voted to power (Hossain, 2025). The female population serves as the backbone of economic growth in any international economy. It justifies the youth- and female-centric agenda adopted by the BNP party in rising to power once more. This chapter analyses the BNP party's inclusive development agenda and assesses its relevance.

Bangladesh has had a long history of suffering from a lack of opportunities for youth, unemployment and exploitation, as well as discrimination against the female population. Bangladesh scored only 49.4 out of 100 in the Women, Business and Law (WBL) 2021 index, which was much lower than the regional average in South Asia at 63.7 (World Bank, 2021). Moreover, Bangladesh also does not have strong legislation or a set of policies for protecting women against gender-based discrimination and providing fair opportunities, which is a massive problem. Gaps such as workplace safety and equal pay opportunities can be potential barriers to maintaining women's rights. Ziaur Rahman is widely regarded as an important player in Bangladesh's independence movement and political revolution. Even after his death, his political legacy has continued to influence Khaleda Zia's political ideology and

leadership within the BNP. Ziaur Rahman is frequently discussed in the literature as a significant political figure whose legacy continues to shape BNP narratives on governance and development (Nazrul, 2024). The BNP's current agenda is presented as drawing on similar themes, particularly regarding women's opportunities and youth-focused development.

The current agenda of the BNP party not only focuses on resolving the long-standing problem of gender-based discrimination and lack of employment in Bangladesh, but also focuses on putting Bangladesh on the global map through sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 focuses on decent work and economic growth, while SDG 5 focuses on gender equality (United Nations, n.d.-a). The SDGs have emerged as important global indicators for assessing a country's inclusive and sustainable development. Hence, the current youth development agenda of the BNP party can be interpreted as relevant to Bangladesh's engagement with global development benchmarks, including the SDGs.

The topic of youth, gender and inclusive development becomes essential for Bangladesh due to the current state of discrimination, gender-based exploitation and politics that are evident in the country. The rate of unemployment in Bangladesh has been a primary concern throughout its history, making youth development a significant issue. The unemployment rate in the country reached a high in 2020 and declined slightly over the next few years, but rose again to 4.68% in 2024 (Clark, 2025). The volatility in youth employment and the rise of unemployment in Bangladesh highlight the need for a political shift in the country. A political ideology that prioritises sustainable development and youth employment is often framed as one possible pathway for addressing these challenges. Hence, the BNP's pledge to create one crore jobs within 18 months of regaining power aligns with Bangladesh's current development and is therefore an important topic of discussion.

At the SDG summit 2023, Bangladesh highlighted its commitment to reducing skill gaps in the country, achieving a female labour force

participation rate of 50% by 2030 in alignment with SDG 5, and improving fair job opportunities in the country in line with SDG 8 (United Nations, n.d.-b). However, Bangladesh has seen major failures in recent years in its efforts to meet the SDG pledges made at the 2023 summit, as female unemployment has continued to rise and low wages have led to conflicts throughout the country.

The readymade garments sector of Bangladesh accounted for about 84.4% of Bangladesh's total exports in 2019 and employed about 4.2 million workers, with 90% of them women (Al Mamun & Hoque, 2022). Hence, the contribution of women to the Bangladeshi economy is justified, and greater efforts are needed in the country to improve their representation. However, in 2023, thousands of workers in Bangladesh's garment sector took to the streets in protest against low wages (Kelly & Ahmed, 2023). Policy proposals such as family cards, wage measures, and youth-focused employment strategies are discussed as potential levers for improving inclusive development outcomes.

This chapter is divided into multiple sections, including an introductory section that sets the context and outlines the chapter's purpose for the reader. The next chapter focuses on analysing relevant literature related to the chapter topic, followed by the main discussions of the chapter. After that, this chapter will present a clear conceptual framework for the discussed topic and the methodology used. The chapters to be followed will depict the results and include an argumentative discussion. The chapter will conclude with a concluding section that summarises the findings and suggests recommendations.

Longwe's Women Empowerment Theory (WET)

Longwe has developed a WET in which the concept of development is divided into five components to analyse women's empowerment from an objective perspective. The five stages of women's empowerment listed by Longwe include welfare, access, conscientization, participation and control (Githaiga & Wildermuth, 2022). Hence, it is

important to analyse the current state of Bangladesh concerning women's empowerment through these lenses and assess the appropriateness of the BNP's current agenda. In terms of access to education, only about 35.6% of the female population of Bangladesh over the age of 11 is literate, and this statistic remains about 47.6% for men in the country (Lina, 2023). Hence, a clear picture emerges in Bangladesh, where access to education varies by gender. Educational gaps affect employment opportunities in Bangladesh and can directly influence efforts to maintain women's equality. The female unemployment rate in Bangladesh was about 5.28% in 2024, highlighting disparities in women's professional participation in the country. Hence, Bangladesh's current condition has highlighted a declining trajectory and trend in female empowerment, which can be mitigated through the female welfare initiatives promised by the BNP party after coming to power. The BNP party rejects any idea of limiting women's potential and seeks to empower them through equal pay, childcare, and workplace safety (BSS News, 2025a). Initiatives such as equal pay will enhance the economic opportunities for women in Bangladesh and contribute to sustainable development in line with SDG 5.

Human Capital Theory (HCT)

The HCT views individual skills, knowledge, and experience as essential assets to invest in. The theory views human capital as a resource that can be advantageous in complex scenarios, making it essential to consider it an essential element of growth (Agarwal, 2022). However, a conflicting scenario currently exists in Bangladesh regarding youth development and participation, which has been harming human capital. The HCT explains that the strength of human capital is linked to knowledge and experience. According to statistics, about 1.94 million young people aged 15 to 19, representing about 7.2% of the labour force in that age group, are out of work (Prapty, 2025). Hence, Bangladesh has been unable to utilise its human capital, and the disparity in educational access by gender also negatively affects the economy and its current policies for getting the most out of its human capital. Hence, the BNP

party is discussed as a potential policy framework due to its stated commitment to employment generation, including the proposal to create one crore jobs, which can utilise the country's human capital for economic and social development.

Structural Challenges Facing Youth and Women in Bangladesh

The youth and women of Bangladesh face multifaceted challenges, such as unemployment and gender-based discrimination, which have been compromising their inclusive development. Findings reveal that women in the country face multiple professional development challenges due to existing social norms. One of the biggest challenges faced by young female entrepreneurs in rural Bangladesh included discouragement from families and complex financial policies (Mridha et al., 2025). Hence, it can be analysed through the WET lens that women in Bangladesh face challenges in accessing financial and social support. Another interesting statistic in Bangladesh is that the unemployment rate for university graduates is about 11.2% (Rahman et al., 2021). It can be analysed using the strong statistical and practical data provided by the authors, which show that Bangladeshi companies often hire skilled labour from abroad, thereby increasing internal costs. Bangladesh lacks strong policies to support employment opportunities for its youth, and current educational programs cannot address their skill gaps, leading to unemployment. The current landscape of Bangladesh needs a youth-centric agenda from the BNP party to foster inclusive development through fair opportunities and to strengthen laws that guide domestic employment.

The Youth Development Agenda of the BNP Party

The youth development agenda of the BNP party focuses on women empowerment, fair opportunities, increasing employment and

eliminating gender-based discrimination. The current agenda of the party closely aligns with the vision and personal beliefs of Ziaur Rahman, who laid the foundation for women's empowerment in Bangladesh by elevating it to a state-level policy (BSS News, 2025b). Through its youth development agenda, the BNP party has pledged to create one crore jobs within 18 months if power in Bangladesh is regained, highlighting a strong commitment to sustainable development and the empowerment of youth through better opportunities. The BNP party has also shown commitment to upholding fair and equal pay for women and to working in favour of their welfare, which can help reduce gender-based discrimination in the country (BSS News, 2025a). Hence, it can be argued that, in the current complex context, the BNP's policy agenda is positioned as a possible approach to addressing gender-based disparities and advancing inclusive development. The BNP's policy platform is presented as one potential avenue for re-engaging with global development benchmarks, including the SDG 2030 agenda.

Female Representation and Inclusive Development in Bangladesh

Women's empowerment and representation are essential to the inclusive and economic development of every international economy. The authors, Anderson (2022), also elaborate that female empowerment is at the centre stage of global development policy, highlighting its current global importance. From Bangladesh's perspective, ready-to-export garments contribute about \$36 billion to the country's economy, highlighting their importance to its development (World Trade Organization, n.d.). The majority of the people working in the sector are women, but happen to be deprived due to low pay, which highlights gender-based discrimination. Female representation in other sectors of Bangladesh remains limited, which runs counter to its commitment to achieve 50% female labour force participation by 2030 (United Nations, n.d.-b). Hence, female representation is essential in Bangladesh to improve

women's empowerment, fulfil national objectives and uphold fair opportunities.

Exploratory Concepts for Sustainable Development Approaches

The chosen research design assisted the researcher in developing a concrete understanding of the research problem in this chapter. The exploratory research design is highly fruitful in adding value and advancing business research topics (Olawale et al., 2023). The exploratory research design aided this research by providing flexibility to uncover new data from existing information and by filling existing research gaps regarding the potential contribution of the current BNP party agenda to women's empowerment and fair opportunities for the youth of Bangladesh. The chosen research design also enabled the exploration of findings in a comparative context with the current state of Bangladesh and the potential of the BNP party to facilitate sustainable development.

Purposive sampling was used to gather relevant articles that met the selection criteria. The purposive sampling method is a widely adopted non-probability sampling method that is integral for mixed and qualitative researchers, as it focuses on detailed and contextual understanding (Tajik et al., 2025). Hence, purposive sampling is appropriate given the qualitative nature of this research. The purposive sampling strategy also enables the collection of data based on well-defined criteria, thereby upholding the validity of this research. The sample for this research included peer-reviewed articles or journals, newspaper articles, website data and industry reports. The criteria for sample collection included selecting data published within the last five years that directly aligned with the research's topic and objectives.

Analytical Strategy for Argumentative Assessment

A keyword-based research strategy was used as the primary data collection method. Keywords such as Sustainable development, BNP party, Women empowerment, Fair opportunities, Gender-based discrimination, and Inclusive development were used to identify appropriate data from Google Scholar in the form of peer-reviewed articles or journals for this research. This strategy was effective in extracting relevant data more quickly and at a lower cost for the researcher.

The data analysis technique used in this research was thematic. Thematic analysis is a data analysis technique that aims to identify patterns and meaning within data (Finlay, 2021). The use of thematic analysis proved the results and findings section a structured outlook with the division of multiple themes based on collected data, driving a comprehensive and argumentative analysis of secondary data to identify the importance of Sustainable development, Women empowerment, Fair opportunities, Gender-based discrimination and Inclusive development in Bangladesh and the contribution BNP party can make in this regard after its rise to power.

Structural Barriers to Youth and Women's Participation

Structural flaws in the policies, as well as government interventions, act as a significant reason behind the declining quality of living and opportunities for the youth and women in Bangladesh. According to Bhattacharya et al. (2021), the youth population represents one-third of the total population in Bangladesh, and in 2017, the youth unemployment rate was about 10.6%, with unemployed youth representing about 80% of the total population. Factors such as digital divide, mismatch between supply and demand for skills, patriarchal norms and lack of legal rights in Bangladesh are also playing important roles in the declining condition of the youth in Bangladesh. Patriarchal norms and a lack of legal rights highlight a flawed system in Bangladesh, which is contributing to a lack of

fair opportunities for women and causing gender-based discrimination to halt the sustainable development of the country.

The 31-point outline of the BNP party elaborates in its 24th point that the party will implement women empowerment programmes while ensuring effective female participation in national building, upholding SDG 8 (BNPBD, n.d.). The party also promised in its 23rd outline that facilities such as an unemployment allowance would aid the youth in making progress. Hence, the current condition of Bangladesh calls for such policies and structural changes to improve the quality of life for youth and facilitate sustainable development.

Policy Commitments to Gender Equality and Female Representation

Over the last decades, Bangladesh has sown important seeds for the development of women in the country and provided them with strong rights to access higher education. The Domestic Violence Act (DVA) 2010 in Bangladesh was seen as a crucial step towards gender equity in the country (Nazneen & Masud, 2017). The legislation primarily focused on improving women's involvement and rights in the country while also ensuring fair opportunities and educational support. However, the effectiveness of the intervention can be questioned, as volatility in female literacy rates has persisted in the country and remained at about 94% in 2022, indicating a declining trajectory compared to the numbers from the previous three years (World Bank, 2025). The number of women employed and the literacy rate in the country have increased after the deployment of DVA 2010. However, statistics show that 99% of Bangladeshis hold at least one bias against women, halting sustainable development and presenting a negative picture for SDG 8 (UNDP, 2023). Hence, there is a need for policy changes in the country and a more substantial policy reform in order to eliminate gender-based discrimination. The 31-point outline of the BNP party holds the keys to

structural policy reforms in Bangladesh, as its youth-centric agenda can facilitate the formulation of economic and inclusive development policies.

Youth Development and National Growth

According to the authors, Neto (2022), Positive Youth Development (PYD) can be defined as a model that focuses on promoting the bonding, social, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural well-being of children, adolescents, and young adults. Hence, youth development has to be a significant focus of policy-making in Bangladesh to improve its economic and sustainable development, as developed youth can lead to greater opportunities, skills, and women's empowerment. Currently, the youth development agenda in Bangladesh is driven by the public model called Jubo Unnoyon. Jubo Unnoyon has more than 65 centres in Bangladesh and is more income-generating than comprehensive (Mujahid & Shukri, 2023). The programmes implemented by Jubo Unnoyon have scores below the required level for spirituality and caring, and they also do not meet the required effectiveness. Hence, a change in approach is needed where not only self-development will be focused upon, but external opportunities will also be increased. The 31-point outline of the BNP party highlights the formulation of new youth development programs focused on the vision and aspirations of youth (BNPBD, n.d.). It can be concluded that, to improve the current condition of Bangladesh, a youth-centric agenda that focuses on the aspirations of the youth is the correct approach, as it will enable the satisfaction of the youth population that is currently dissatisfied and in turmoil in the country.

Discrimination, Equity, and Inclusive Development

The findings and literature review of this research present similar signs, indicating that a political shift, including the policy orientation articulated by the BNP, is discussed as a possible mechanism for

promoting fair opportunities and reducing gender-based discrimination. As per the findings of Githaiga and Wildermuth (2022), in the literature review section, there are five stages of women's empowerment in Longwe's Women Empowerment Theory. With regards to this theory, Bangladesh has been facing challenges related to limited accessibility, participation and welfare of women. The findings section of this research revealed that Bangladesh has introduced legislation, such as the DVA 2010, to improve women's welfare and participation. The authors, Mujahid and Shukri (2023), also elaborated that the jubo unnoyon model was created to conduct structural reform for the youth. However, the effectiveness of the model remains questionable, and about women's empowerment, women in the country still face gender-based discrimination. The findings section revealed that the value for female literacy in Bangladesh has been volatile in the last five years. On the other hand, Mridha et al. (2025) highlighted in their literature review that females in rural Bangladesh face social discouragement in their pursuit of entrepreneurship. Hence, social norms in the country deprived women of fair opportunities and constricted women's empowerment and inclusive development.

The findings of this research are significant, as they highlight the importance of a structural form and the need to bring policy-related changes in Bangladesh. The current state of Bangladesh requires effective policy interventions that closely follow youth aspirations and needs, as well as SDGs 5 and 8. The 31-point outline of the BNP party has been justified throughout the research as appropriate for building on youth-inspired agendas and for filling policy gaps in Bangladesh's current political and legal structure. Bangladesh is currently experiencing a lack of fair and inclusive opportunities, which is harming sustainable development. The country is also declining in its SDG commitments at the 2023 summits, where commitments related to SDGs 5 and 8 were made. The 31-point outline of the BNP party focuses on eliminating gender-based discrimination, upholding women's empowerment, and providing better employment and financial support for unemployed

youth. These policies cannot only fulfil the aspirations of Bangladeshi youth but also provide essential financial support.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes that youth unemployment and gender inequality remain among the most persistent structural challenges confronting inclusive development in Bangladesh. Despite notable policy commitments and international development pledges, existing institutional arrangements have struggled to translate formal objectives into meaningful outcomes at the societal level. Women continue to face barriers in labour market access, wage equity, and workplace security, while young people encounter limited employment opportunities, skills mismatches, and restricted pathways for economic participation. These interconnected constraints undermine social mobility and weaken the country's capacity to achieve sustainable and inclusive growth.

The analysis demonstrates that inclusive development cannot be achieved through isolated or symbolic interventions. Rather, it requires coordinated policy frameworks that integrate gender equality, youth employment, and human capital development within a broader economic and social strategy. Drawing on Longwe's Women's Empowerment Theory, the chapter highlights that progress remains uneven across key empowerment dimensions—particularly participation, access, and control—indicating the need for stronger institutional support and enforcement mechanisms. Similarly, insights from Human Capital Theory underline the economic costs of underutilising young and female labour, reinforcing the importance of aligning education, skills training, and labour market demand.

The chapter further emphasises that inclusive development is not only a matter of economic growth but also of social justice and institutional credibility. Expanding employment opportunities, improving workplace conditions, and reducing gender-based disparities can strengthen public trust, enhance productivity, and contribute to long-term

development resilience. Policy coherence, transparent implementation, and sustained investment in education and skills development emerge as critical enabling factors for progress.

Taken together, these findings suggest that tackling youth unemployment and gender inequality is inseparable from wider investments in human capital. Improvements in labour market inclusion depend not only on policy commitments, but also on the capabilities that individuals can build through accessible and high-quality education, effective healthcare provision, and stronger research and innovation systems. In this sense, inclusive development outcomes are shaped by the extent to which Bangladesh can strengthen skills formation, protect wellbeing, and expand knowledge production across sectors. Building on this linkage, the next chapter turns to human capital development and examines how reforms in education, health, and research systems can support longer-term productivity, resilience, and national competitiveness.

The significance of this chapter lies in its integrated approach to youth, gender, and inclusive development. By linking structural inequalities to employment, empowerment, and institutional capacity, the chapter demonstrates that inclusive development requires deliberate and sustained policy commitment rather than short-term remedies. Addressing gender inequality and youth unemployment simultaneously is essential for advancing social inclusion, strengthening economic foundations, and supporting Bangladesh's broader development objectives in a rapidly changing global context.

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Chapter 14:

Human Capital Development: Reforming Education, Health, and Research Systems

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 23; Point 25; Point 26; Point 27

Abstract

This chapter examines human capital development in Bangladesh through reforms in education, health, and research systems, highlighting their combined role in shaping long-term productivity and national competitiveness. Drawing on academic literature, policy reports, and international development indicators, the chapter analyses recent trends in school enrolment, skills formation, healthcare provision, and research capacity. The discussion illustrates how improvements in primary education, technical and vocational training, community-based healthcare, and research and innovation infrastructures contribute to workforce readiness and economic resilience. By linking education quality, population health, and knowledge production, the chapter demonstrates that human capital development is a cumulative and systemic process. It concludes that sustained investment in education reform, accessible healthcare, and research capacity is essential for supporting inclusive growth, strengthening labour productivity, and positioning Bangladesh for future innovation-driven development.

Introduction

Human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, health, and capabilities that individuals utilise to participate productively in economic and social life. In development economics, human capital is widely recognised as a fundamental driver of long-term growth, productivity, and national competitiveness (Becker, 1993; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2023). Countries that invest consistently in education, healthcare, and research tend to achieve higher income levels, stronger institutions, and greater resilience to economic and technological shocks (Deming, 2022; Akhyar & Rahmi, 2024). For Bangladesh, strengthening human capital has become increasingly important as the country seeks to transition from labour-intensive growth toward a more skills-based, innovation-oriented economy.

Over the past decades, Bangladesh has made measurable progress in expanding access to basic education, primary healthcare, and research infrastructure. Net primary school enrolment has reached near-universal levels, female participation in secondary education has increased, and community-based healthcare initiatives have improved access to essential services, particularly in rural areas (Sosale et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2025). At the same time, persistent challenges remain. Concerns regarding education quality, skills mismatches, uneven health workforce distribution, and limited research investment continue to constrain labour productivity and innovation capacity (Asian Development Bank, 2023; Nuruzzaman et al., 2022). These structural weaknesses limit the country's ability to prepare its workforce for modern labour markets and to compete in knowledge-intensive global industries.

This chapter examines how reforms in education, health, and research systems shape human capital development in Bangladesh and influence broader development outcomes. Education reforms are analysed in relation to curriculum modernisation, teacher training, digital learning initiatives, and the expansion of technical and vocational education aimed at improving employability and future-readiness skills (Yusof & Ariffin, 2021; Laundon et al., 2023). Health system reforms are

explored through their impact on primary healthcare delivery, community clinics, workforce health, and productivity-enhancing outcomes, with particular attention to maternal health, immunisation coverage, and preventive care (WHO, n.d.). In addition, the chapter considers the role of research and development in fostering innovation, technological upgrading, and global competitiveness, emphasising university–industry collaboration and institutional research capacity (Sarpong et al., 2022; Ahmed & Meraj, 2024).

The significance of these reform areas lies in their interdependence. Education, health, and research do not function as isolated policy domains; rather, they form an integrated ecosystem for human capital accumulation. Healthier populations learn more effectively and participate more productively in the labour market, while education and research systems generate the skills and innovation required for sustained economic advancement (Carayannis & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). When reforms across these sectors are aligned, they reinforce one another and contribute to long-term national competitiveness and inclusive development.

Methodologically, this chapter adopts a qualitative secondary research approach based on the systematic review of academic literature, national policy documents, and international development reports related to education, health, and research systems in Bangladesh. Quantitative indicators—such as enrolment rates, health outcomes, and research output statistics—are used descriptively to contextualise reform trajectories rather than for inferential statistical testing. A thematic analytical framework is applied to identify recurring patterns, institutional priorities, and reform challenges across sectors, enabling an interpretive assessment of how coordinated policy interventions shape human capital development.

The chapter argues that sustained and balanced investment in education, healthcare, and research is essential for strengthening human capital in Bangladesh. By examining recent reforms alongside persistent structural gaps, the chapter highlights how integrated human capital strategies can enhance workforce readiness, productivity, and innovation

capacity, thereby supporting Bangladesh's transition toward a more competitive and knowledge-based economy.

Conceptual Foundations of Human Capital

Human capital is the knowledge, skills, abilities, experience, and health of individuals that contribute to their productive work within society. As Deming (2022) mentioned, human capital refers to the ability, education, training, and well-being of people, enabling them to work more efficiently and benefit the economy. In respect of Human Capital's educational elements, Policy documents associated with the 31-point reform agenda emphasise education quality, healthcare access, skills training, and research capacity as central components of human capital development. According to Gary Becker, human capital is the most valuable asset a nation can develop, since people are behind innovation, productivity, and economic growth (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2023). Hence, healthy and educated citizens are more innovative, can more easily adapt to new technology, and help make industries more competitive on a global scale.

Reforming Education, Health, and Research Systems

Education reform means enhancing the education structure, quality, and relevance of the education system. In contemporary literature, education should be based on skills, not rote learning, but on skills, critical thinking, digital literacy, and problem-solving. Some of the effective reforms involve updating curricula, training teachers, improving technical and vocational education, improving school infrastructure, and ensuring equitable access across all categories. Countries that have successfully reformed their education systems, such as Finland and South Korea, are widely associated with high levels of innovation and productivity, as these reforms have contributed to a more qualified and adaptable workforce.

Moreover, Policy proposals outlined in the 31-point reform agenda emphasise addressing healthcare access, workforce shortages, and infrastructure gaps. WHO states that a healthy system should provide preventive care, timely treatment, affordable services, and a well-trained medical staff (WHO, n.d.). Healthy citizens are more productive, go to work, and learn better, which directly supports the country's development. Investment in primary care, digital health, and modern medical technologies can mean much to population well-being and the reduction of long-term disease burden.

In the long run, innovation and economic growth are necessitated by Research and Development (R&D) investment (Sarpong et al., 2022). R&D involves conducting scientific research, technological and industrial innovation, and institutional partnerships between universities and industry. Countries that focus on R&D are more productive and competitive, such as Japan, Germany and the United States (Ahmed & Meraj, 2024). R&D promotes new product development and manufacturing, enhances digitalisation, and attracts talented workers. The development economics literature underscores that the ability to innovate is one of the key drivers of national development in the 21st century. Therefore, a coordinated approach to enhancing human capital is created through education, health, and R&D.

Human Capital, Skills Development, and Global Competitiveness

The world's competitiveness is based on a country's ability to develop, provide well, and maintain a skilled and healthy workforce. As stated by Virjan et al. (2023), the World Economic Report consistently shows that the most important indicators of a competitive economy are the quality of education, health standards, and an economy's capacity to innovate. Having a high level of human capital enables countries to adapt to technological change, attract foreign investment, and develop high-value industries. Furthermore, countries with skilled labour are better

positioned to take advantage of new industries, including artificial intelligence, biotechnology, renewable energy, and advanced production.

Reform in education directly aligns with skills development, so that at the end of their studies, students will be equipped with employability and future-readiness skills, which is also emphasised in policy-oriented discussions of skills development. As stated by Yusof and Ariffin (2021), skill-based education minimises unemployment, facilitates entrepreneurship and reinforces national output. On another note, the health system changes ensure that employees are strong, vigorous, and able to engage in economic activities to the fullest. An efficient population is more creative and plays a greater role in the country's accomplishments.

Competitiveness is enhanced through R&D investment, which promotes new technologies and innovation and strengthens existing industries. Countries that are driven towards innovation enjoy a competitive edge in global trade, technology superiority and economic strength. Investment in research by a country also attracts qualified scientists, engineers, and businesspersons to remain in the country, thus minimising brain drain. Overall, high human capital, developed through education, health, and research and development, can help a nation compete in the global arena and equip its people to meet future challenges (Rachmad, 2025). Furthermore, nations that place greater emphasis on the development of human capital have a higher chance of achieving sustainable growth, technological advancement, and higher standards of living.

Human Capital Theory is a strong supporter of human capital development, proposed by two economists. According to Abraham and Mallatt (2022), individuals are assets, and the more they invest in education, health, and skills, the more productive they are, just as machines are key components of human capital theory. This theory holds that advanced schooling, training, and healthcare increase an individual's income potential and the growth of a nation's economy within the context of broader policy priorities. Contemporary developments in the theory also include the contribution of endogenous growth theory, which posits

that human capital drives innovation, research, and the creation of knowledge, thus serving as the driving force behind long-term growth (Carayannis & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). It implies that nations that invest in a qualified workforce, a healthy population, and research and development have greater technological advancement and competitiveness. All in all, the theory supports the view that human capital is the primary driver of sustainable economic development.

The findings of the secondary study are organised into themes, and the results outline how human capital development in Bangladesh is shaped by reforms in the education, health, and research systems. Apart from that, the thematic analysis reflects consistent progress, measurable improvements and clear opportunities for future strengthening.

Structural educational reform plays a critical role in creating the foundations for skill development by expanding access to schooling and improving completion rates. Bangladesh has made notable progress in ensuring widespread access to schooling. According to data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, the net primary enrolment rate is 97.8% nationwide, reflecting a strong commitment to universal education (General Economics Division et al., 2009). The overall school completion rates have also improved, and in Bangladesh, the majority of students now finish primary school, compared to two decades ago. Therefore, these subsequent gains reflect the positive effects of long-term policy development in Bangladesh and help expand community schools.

The national education policy report of Bangladesh also highlights a crucial finding related to women's education: female secondary enrolment has increased in the nation. It is among the highest in South Asia (Sosale et al., 2019). Stipend programmes, free book distribution and targeted educational support in rural districts contributed substantially to this growth. These improvements in terms of standard educational practices ensure a more gender-neutral future workforce. Additionally, Bangladesh has also introduced curriculum reforms to strengthen foundational skills among the people. The new competency-oriented

curriculum reforms help students develop foundational skills. The new competence-oriented curriculum implemented in 2023 also helps emphasise critical thinking, communication, and digital literacy. This shift moves learning away from rote memorisation and better prepares students for modern workplaces and higher education. The educational reform, prompted in 2023, aims to align student learning with the nation's changing economic needs. The early monitoring by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board indicates that the majority of schools in Bangladesh have adopted digital content in at least one subject, demonstrating early educational success in implementing progressive education.

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has gained increasing policy attention in Bangladesh over the past decade, with enrolment in vocational streams expanding steadily as part of broader efforts to strengthen skills development and workforce readiness (Asian Development Bank, 2024). This expansion reflects the government's focus on preparing students for labour markets that demand specific practical skills. The public-private partnerships supported the establishment of industry-linked training centres in Dhaka, Gazipur, Chattogram and Bogura. These centres link students with prominent industry experts across garments, shipbuilding, agro-processing, and IT services.

Digital learning also became a breakthrough after the rollout of the "Digital Bangladesh Programme". With a population of over 170 million, Bangladesh is the eighth most populous country in the world. Its education system serves more than 40 million students and employs nearly 1 million teachers (UNESCO, 2025). These developments indicate that education reforms in Bangladesh are significant in expanding both access and relevance and in strengthening human capital for effective future growth. In this context, it is evident that education reform is moving toward a skill-based, technology-supportive system that prepares students for the modern labour market. Increased enrolment, gender parity, curriculum updates and vocational expansion reflect measurable human capital involvement.

Health Systems and Workforce Productivity

A healthy population significantly contributes to higher work participation, improved school attendance and reduced economic loss from illness. The health system of Bangladesh reflects a consistent improvement in primary care, maternal health and life expectancy. The data from the Bangladeshi Health Bulletin indicate that the nation's life expectancy has increased to 73.8 years and has been steadily rising over the last two decades. This improvement reflects an expanded immunisation programme, community health services, and greater public awareness, resulting in measurable improvements in population health for the nation. For example, the expanded immunisation programme has increased coverage to 98% for the Rubella and Measles vaccines. Such widespread vaccination reduces the disease prevalence and also supports effective early childhood development. The mental and child health indicators show positive results in the Bangladesh Maternal Mortality Survey, indicating that maternal mortality has significantly reduced among live births (Uddin et al., 2024). These findings indicate a sustained long-term decline in maternal mortality. Skilled birth attendance numbers have also increased in recent days, significantly reducing health risks and supporting stable family well-being.

Community clinics are a considerable source of human capital advancement. According to the Community Clinic Trust report, community clinics subsequently reduce patients' total travel costs and enhance early detection of significant illnesses. Additionally, health financing in Bangladesh has seen an upward trend in recent times, as the Government has allocated Tk 41908 crore to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for the Fiscal years 2025 and 2026 (TBS Report, 2025). This allocation was announced by the Finance Adviser, Salehuddin Ahmed, via a pre-recorded speech telecast on the 2nd of June 2025. During this speech, he placed the national budget of Tk 787999 crore for the financial year 2026 (TBS Report, 2025). This government health initiative has prioritised maternal health, infectious disease control, and medical education. Apart from that, investments in digital health have also

expanded with the use of telemedicine. Digital records and mobile health platforms have strengthened disease surveillance and treatment efficiency.

The health workforce in Bangladesh is growing significantly, as the Bangladesh Medical and Dhaka councils report that the country now has more than 120000 registered physicians and nurses. New medical colleges in Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Sylhet have increased the training capacity of medical professionals, reducing regional health disparities. Consistent improvements in life expectancy, vaccination, maternal care, and community health services indicate that investment in Bangladesh's health services can strengthen human capital productivity.

Research, Innovation, and Global Competitiveness

Bangladesh is expanding the total research capacity of its universities, healthcare, agriculture and digital technology. The Bangladesh Statistical Bureau has reported that research and development expenditure constitutes a modest but gradually increasing share of the nation's GDP. This trend suggests a gradual improvement in the nation's global competitiveness through strong productivity management. Public universities in Bangladesh have produced a substantial body of research in specific disciplines, such as climate science, agriculture, and renewable energy. Dhaka University, BUET, and the University of Chittagong have recorded steady growth in the number of peer-reviewed publications over the last two decades. Apart from that, agricultural research institutions such as BRRI and BINA have developed various rice and crop varieties that enhance the nation's overall productivity (Bin Rahman & Zhang, 2023). These innovations in agriculture help ensure food security and rural income generation, and research in these agricultural sectors can significantly reduce dependence on imported seeds and improve overall domestic yield stability.

The ICT sector demonstrates another area of progress. The Bangladesh High-Tech Park authority has reported that the IT workforce

has surpassed 2 million workers, reflecting significant growth in software development and digital services (SAMENA, 2017). Research partnerships in Japan, India and Korea supported technology training and industrial innovation, especially in robotics, semiconductor assembly and AI applications. Apart from that, research in the medical and pharmaceutical fields has also expanded. Therefore, research on vaccine production increased after the collaboration of different research institutions, and this collaboration can enhance the total laboratory capacity. Lastly, energy research is advancing to support Bangladesh's competitiveness in international markets, especially in sustainable energy use. Lastly, the increased research output and technological expansion in pharmaceuticals, engineering, and agriculture demonstrate Bangladesh's growing capacity to compete globally through knowledge-based industries.

Education Reform Commitments and Systemic Transformation

Human capital development in Bangladesh is advancing through reforms in education, health and research systems. The discussion supports those reforms that, when interacting with specific national development priorities, such as labour market demands or educational resilience, and when strengthening Bangladesh's international competitive positioning, are beneficial. Overall, the results indicate that Bangladesh is making significant progress toward achieving a skilled and healthy workforce to support a research-driven economy. A skilled and healthy workforce is important for the attainment of dynamic government and institutional initiatives (Tahir & Babar, 2024).

In Bangladesh, education reform is still the most significant stimulus to human capital growth. The enhanced net enrolment, gender balance, and school completion indicate that national policies have long-term benefits. Nevertheless, the debate should focus on whether these gains translate into employable skills, despite the country having a primary

enrolment rate of 97.8% and a high participation rate in secondary education. Labour market and skills analyses for Bangladesh reveal persistent skill mismatches and gaps between workforce competencies and employer requirements, pointing to challenges in employability and labour market alignment (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Bangladesh's economy has been growing at an average rate of 6.5% a year over the last decade, but that growth has not reduced youth unemployment. On the other hand, the percentage of young people without work remains higher at 11.5%, compared to the overall unemployment rate of 4.6% in 2022 (Schipper et al., 2025). This points to the incompatibility between what is taught in the classroom and what the employer expects. For example, many graduates lack basic digital skills such as data handling, software use, or technical training needed in ICT and manufacturing jobs, even after completing formal education. Implementing a competency-based curriculum and increasing technical education are reasonable steps to take, yet teacher training, new textbooks, and alliances with industries will determine their successful implementation. The increase in vocational enrolment shows that students are becoming more confident in technical career ladders, but as the digital and sophisticated manufacturing industries require more specialised skills (Laundon et al., 2023). Bangladesh's rapid digitalisation is another important factor that can help shape human capital overall. With more than 20,000 smart classrooms and smartphone-driven online learning, digital education in Bangladesh is becoming increasingly accessible to the nation. However, digital access gaps remain in rural areas, particularly in hill and coastal districts. According to the ICT Division report, only a small number of rural students have reliable internet access, which limits equitable learning opportunities (Kormos & Wisdom, 2021). Addressing this gap is essential because digital literacy now reforms the foundation of global competitiveness. Countries such as Vietnam and Malaysia rapidly increased their skilled workforce by expanding broadband access in rural schools. Bangladesh's progress will similarly depend on improved digital infrastructure and low-cost devices for students. Health indicators also show significant improvement, and these gains directly support the total workforce productivity. The increase in the total life expectancy to 73

years and high vaccine coverage reflect a well-functioning primary health system. However, urban and rural disparities still influence the total health outcomes.

There is also an uneven distribution of available health service providers, with Dhaka having a significantly higher number of doctors per 1000 people than Sherpur or Sunamganj. The uneven distribution of healthcare professionals reduces rural households' ability to maintain consistent health and can affect school attendance and labour participation (Malik et al., 2024). The investment in community clinics in Bangladesh can help address the uneven distribution of health services. However, additional workforce deployment and telehealth expansion are urgently needed to ensure balanced, high-quality service delivery.

There is also an increasing challenge of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). According to the Bangladesh NCD Risk Factor Survey of 2023, a quarter of adults are hypertensive, and 11% of people have diabetes, which affects workers' productivity in the Middle Ages. Because human capital is strongly dependent on health quality, workplace wellness programs, early screening, and lifestyle awareness campaigns should be included in future national strategies. Other nations, such as Thailand and Singapore, have minimised NCDs through preventive health interventions, which can serve as a model for Bangladesh.

The connections among education, health, and research systems can determine a nation's competitive position, as in Bangladesh's. Human capital development fails to advance when these sectors, such as education, health, and research systems, operate without collaboration (Nuruzzaman et al., 2022). Healthy people learn and educate more effectively, and they can contribute to innovation. Bangladesh's policy trend towards integrated development reflects the growing recognition of the linkage between health, education, and the workforce. Global competitiveness now considerably determines nations' ability to deliver skilled and healthy citizens. Recent significant investments by Bangladesh in the health and community sectors support the nation's global shift toward a highly skilled workforce, which contributes to improved

international competitiveness. For example, India's investment in the National Education Policy and South Korea's R&D-intensive economic model reflect the need for coordinated reforms to achieve strong global competitiveness.

In summary, this discussion underscores the sustained improvement in human capital indicators; however, it also emphasises the need for deeper reforms in digital equity, research funding and health workforce distribution in all regions. Therefore, continued reforms can support the country's transition to a competitive, innovation-driven economy.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes that human capital development in Bangladesh has advanced through important reforms in education, health, and research systems, which together form the foundation for long-term national progress. The analysis shows that improvements in school enrolment, gender parity, and digital learning are strengthening the future workforce, while health system gains such as rising life expectancy and high immunisation coverage support productivity and overall wellbeing. At the same time, the expansion of research and innovation capacity, particularly in ICT, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals, has created new opportunities for sustained economic growth. The chapter further demonstrates that these reforms contribute directly to national competitiveness by improving skills, supporting labour force participation, and promoting knowledge-based development, while also highlighting the importance of coordination across education, health, and research sectors. The significance of this chapter lies in its emphasis on human capital as a systemic and integrated process, showing that continued investment, balanced workforce deployment, skills-oriented education, accessible healthcare, and strengthened research collaboration are central to Bangladesh's transition toward a more innovative, productive, and high-performing economy.

While human capital development remains a foundational driver of long-term productivity and competitiveness, its effectiveness is closely shaped by broader structural conditions, including climate resilience, infrastructure capacity, and digital systems. Education, health, and research outcomes cannot be sustained in the absence of resilient physical infrastructure, adaptive governance mechanisms, and digitally enabled public services. As Bangladesh continues to face intensifying climate risks and technological change, the interaction between human capital and these systemic enablers becomes increasingly critical. Building on the discussion of human capital reform, the following chapter therefore turns to the interconnected challenges of climate resilience, infrastructure modernisation, and digital transformation as essential components of sustainable national development.

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Chapter 15:

Climate Resilience, Infrastructure Modernisation, and Digital Transformation

This chapter engages with the following points of the BNP's 31-Point Charter (adopted on 13 July 2023):

Point 3; Point 17; Point 18; Point 28; Point 30

Abstract

This chapter examines the interconnected roles of climate resilience, infrastructure modernisation, and digital transformation in shaping Bangladesh's capacity to respond to environmental and development challenges. Drawing on international climate governance literature, infrastructure studies, and digital transformation frameworks, the chapter analyses how governance quality, decentralisation, and institutional accountability influence adaptive capacity in climate-vulnerable contexts. The discussion situates Bangladesh within global debates on climate-resilient infrastructure, ICT-enabled governance, and market-oriented development, highlighting the relevance of transparent institutions, resilient transport systems, and digitally enabled public services. By interpreting selected reform proposals within the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's 31-Point Programme as a development-oriented policy framework, the chapter explores how governance reform, infrastructure investment, and digital systems can jointly support climate adaptation, economic competitiveness, and inclusive development. It concludes that sustainable climate resilience requires integrated governance structures, modern infrastructure, and digital transformation strategies that reinforce institutional trust and long-term national stability.

Introduction

Bangladesh is entering a critical phase in its development trajectory, where climate resilience, infrastructure modernisation, and digital transformation have become central to long-term sustainability and economic competitiveness. As one of the countries most exposed to climate-related risks, particularly within low-lying coastal and delta regions, Bangladesh faces increasing pressures from floods, cyclones, salinity intrusion, and environmental degradation, which directly affect physical infrastructure, public services, and economic productivity (Abbass et al., 2022; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023). At the same time, global development research increasingly recognises that climate adaptation cannot be achieved solely through technical solutions, but requires strong governance frameworks, institutional accountability, and inclusive decision-making structures (Shi & Moser, 2021; New et al., 2022).

Within this context, infrastructure modernisation plays a dual role as both a development catalyst and a climate adaptation mechanism. International evidence suggests that climate-resilient transport systems, ports, and urban infrastructure reduce long-term economic losses while enhancing trade connectivity and national competitiveness (Marcus et al., 2024; World Bank Group, 2025). For climate-vulnerable economies such as Bangladesh, infrastructure resilience is therefore closely linked to governance quality, transparent procurement, and decentralised planning capacities (Nancy & Eyyazo, 2024). These insights highlight the importance of institutional design in determining whether infrastructure investments translate into sustainable and adaptive development outcomes.

Parallel to infrastructure reform, digital transformation has emerged as a key enabler of climate resilience and state capacity. Research on ICT-enabled governance demonstrates that digital systems can improve early-warning mechanisms, disaster response coordination, public service delivery, and regulatory transparency, particularly in developing country contexts (Aslam & Khurram, 2025; Talukder, 2025). However, the

effectiveness of digital transformation is strongly conditioned by political openness, institutional independence, and the protection of digital rights, as highly centralised or opaque governance environments tend to undermine trust in digital systems (Freedom House, 2024). Comparative experiences from digitally advanced states such as Estonia, Singapore, and South Korea further illustrate that successful digitalisation depends on accountable institutions and a skilled workforce capable of managing technological change.

Against this background, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) 31-Point Reform Programme can be examined analytically as a development-oriented policy framework rather than solely as a political agenda. Several strands of international literature suggest that governance principles emphasised in the programme—such as decentralisation, administrative accountability, judicial independence, and transparency—are closely aligned with global approaches to climate governance, infrastructure resilience, and digital transformation (Hossain, 2025; Van Assche et al., 2022). When interpreted through a development lens, the programme reflects key elements of adaptive governance theory, which stresses flexibility, learning capacity, and multi-level institutional coordination in responding to complex environmental and technological challenges (Van Assche et al., 2022).

Methodologically, this chapter adopts a qualitative, secondary-source-based analytical approach. It draws on peer-reviewed academic literature, international policy reports, and comparative governance studies to examine how climate resilience, infrastructure systems, and digital governance interact in climate-vulnerable contexts such as Bangladesh. A thematic and interpretive analytical framework is applied to identify recurring governance patterns, institutional constraints, and policy mechanisms discussed in the literature, rather than relying on inferential statistical testing (Christou, 2022; Aithal & Aithal, 2024). This approach allows for a critical assessment of how governance quality, institutional reform, and digital capacity shape climate adaptation and infrastructure outcomes.

By integrating insights from climate governance research, infrastructure development studies, and digital transformation literature, the chapter provides a system-level perspective on national resilience. It positions climate resilience not as a set of isolated projects, but as an outcome of coordinated governance structures, modern infrastructure, and digitally enabled public institutions working together to support sustainable development and long-term national stability in Bangladesh.

Global Climate Change Challenges and Governance Responses

Climate change is widely described in the global literature as a major and transformative threat that calls for deep changes in governance and development priorities. The IPCC notes that rising temperatures, stronger cyclones, sea-level rise, and ecosystem degradation are progressing faster than many countries can adapt to them (Abbass et al., 2022). South Asia, and Bangladesh in particular, is frequently identified as a climate hotspot. This vulnerability is intensified by high population density, low-lying geography, and heavy reliance on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture and fisheries.

Existing studies suggest that global climate challenges of this scale require governance approaches that prioritise transparency, decentralisation, and community-based adaptation. As New et al. (2022) argue, effective climate governance depends on institutions that can anticipate environmental shocks, distribute resources efficiently, and include vulnerable groups in decision-making processes. In this context, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) 31-Point Reform Agenda reflects key principles found in global adaptation frameworks (Hossain, 2025). The emphasis placed on administrative accountability, the rule of law, decentralised governance, and institutional reform closely mirrors international research, which consistently shows that meaningful climate action depends on strong and credible institutions. Therefore, the agenda

of BNP can be read as outlining a governance framework that aligns with the world literature on the strategic bases of climate resilience.

Infrastructure Needs for Climate-Resilient Development

Literature on infrastructural development notes that the development of a resilient transport infrastructure is not only crucial for economic competitiveness but also for climate adaptation. According to the World Bank, ADB, and OECD, infrastructure modernisation is considered one of the key pillars of national resilience, as well-developed transport networks make the nation less susceptible (Marcus et al., 2024). Climate-vulnerable roads should be raised to improve drainage and use climate-resistant materials. Railways should be fitted with modern signalling, electrification, and frequent maintenance to adapt to changes in temperature and the danger of floods. Bangladesh is also facing this challenge in the current context of infrastructure management. The country's low-carbon inland waterways must be dredged and governed more effectively, and modernised port facilities must be made viable amid sedimentation and riverine climate repositioning. Ports require digital infrastructure to withstand cyclones and automate logistics to maintain trade reliability.

In the case of Bangladesh, literature has continued to point to infrastructural shortages as one of the biggest impediments to development. Among the existing challenges, outdated railways, congestion in Chittagong and Dhaka, inefficiency in river transport, and the lack of cyclone and storm resilience in coastal structures can be identified. These loopholes dent the country's ability to absorb climate shocks and minimise the likelihood of regional trade convergence. In this respect, the BNP's 31-Point Agenda is quite consistent with international recommendations (Dhaka Tribune, 2023). Its emphasis on tackling corruption, strengthening transparent procurement, expanding local government involvement, and modernising state institutions can be

interpreted as addressing governance bottlenecks that have historically constrained infrastructure delivery.

The rule-based administration, financial responsibility and decentralised planning by the BNP help promote evidence from around the world that strong institutional controls, clear contracts and foreseeable regulatory conditions determine the success of large infrastructure projects. As per Nancy and Eyyazo (2024), no governance vacuum can bring resilience to infrastructure; instead, it must have well-established, credible, and corruption-free institutions. In this regard, the BNP reform agenda can be interpreted as broadly consistent with these governance requirements. In addition, the idea of BNP to improve regional connectivity, promote balanced development, and ensure sustainable transport infrastructure is an added value to the world literature, highlighting the necessity of an integrated, climate-smart infrastructure system.

ICT-Based Governance and Market-Oriented Reforms

Literature on digital transformation states that ICT-enabled governance improves service delivery, enhances transparency in the public sector, and increases market competitiveness. Moreover, BNP's Rule 7 promotes a disaster alert app and a digital land system to maintain stability in line with the UN SDGs. According to Aslam and Khurram (2025), ICT-enabled governance includes tools such as e-governance platforms and data-based identification systems. In addition, policy instruments that rely on data and automated public services play an important role in reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies and improving institutional responsiveness (Talukder, 2025). Research also shows that successful digital transformation depends on political openness, institutional independence, and the protection of digital rights, all of which are essential for building public trust in digital systems. Experiences from digitally advanced countries such as Estonia, Singapore, and South Korea demonstrate that

ICT-based reforms can enhance administrative efficiency, attract foreign investment, and strengthen citizen participation.

Governance Standards within the 31-Point Reform Agenda

The BNP's 31-point agenda is broadly consistent with international standards on ICT governance. Its emphasis on freedom of expression and the decentralisation of public administration creates a political environment in which digital governance initiatives can function effectively. This is significant because the literature repeatedly shows that ICT reforms tend to fail in systems that are highly centralised, opaque, or excessively politicised. The reforms proposed by BNP—such as strengthening press freedom, ensuring the independence of public oversight bodies, and rejecting coercive surveillance practices—closely reflect internationally recognised principles for building trustworthy digital ecosystems (Freedom House, 2024).

In addition, BNP places strong importance on youth development, employment generation, and the expansion of education, all of which are essential for building the human capital needed for digital transformation. Existing studies consistently recognise that digital reforms can only succeed when they are supported by a skilled workforce in fields such as ICT, engineering, data science, and entrepreneurship. BNP's focus on fostering a knowledge-based society therefore situates its agenda within internationally acknowledged digital development frameworks. Furthermore, its commitment to market-oriented reforms, decentralised economic governance, and regulatory transparency aligns with a broad body of global literature that emphasises the role of competitive and open digital markets.

Adaptive Governance Theory and Climate Resilience

Adaptive Governance Theory provides an effective paradigm for understanding how countries can cope with complex issues such as climate change, infrastructure modernisation, and digital transformation. As noted by Van Assche et al. (2022), Adaptive Governance Theory claims that during times of high uncertainty, such as those surrounding environmental, technological, economic, etc., states need flexible, decentralised, transparent, and continuous learning governance systems. Moreover, adaptation becomes effective when institutions distribute authority among the levels of government, ensure accountability, and enable the open flow of information, enabling society to respond promptly to the risk posed.

This theory is closely aligned with the reform-oriented dream of the BNP 31-Point Agenda, emphasising decentralised administration, strengthened regulatory authority, anti-corruption practices, and community involvement. These values reflect the theoretical need that climate resilience and infrastructure planning should be based on trustworthy, responsible, locally responsive institutions. The development of adaptive governance logic that resilient roads, railways, waterways, and ports are based on firm institutional trust and coordination is supported by the BNP's dedication to empowering local government and maintaining transparency (Sundram, 2025). Moreover, Adaptive Governance Theory emphasises the necessity of open digital systems and citizens' access to information, facets that BNP pledges through its digital-rights and ICT reform, as well as its anti-surveillance promises. Therefore, the theory offers a consistent conceptual framework to connect climate resilience, infrastructure modernisation, and ICT-based governance reforms presented in the BNP agenda.

Infrastructure Modernisation and Economic Competitiveness

A second theme highlights the world's shift towards climate-resilient infrastructure, particularly in transportation systems such as roads, railways, waterways, and ports. In line with Shahzad et al. (2025), resilient infrastructure enhances trade, connectivity, and economic productivity, especially in climate-prone developing countries. These priorities are reflected in the BNP's policy framework, particularly in Points 28 and 29, which emphasise nationwide infrastructure modernisation, improved transport and logistics networks, and adaptive strategies to address climate-related risks. In this regard, the BNP's approach aligns with global recommendations that view green transport corridors and robust logistics systems as central components of climate-responsive development strategies.

Efficiency Gains through Public Sector Digital Transformation

ICT-based governance is a third theme in international research, highlighting the capacity of digital systems to enhance transparency, coordinate emergency responses, and improve access to government services (Freedom House, 2024). Digital transformation enables closer monitoring of climate hazards, faster dissemination of alerts, and more efficient resource allocation. In this respect, the BNP emphasises the development of information and communication technologies within governance structures, as articulated in Point 30, which prioritises ICT expansion as a means of improving institutional capacity and public service delivery. The international literature repeatedly stresses the importance of cyber-safe and people-oriented digital platforms, a need that is also reflected in the reform-oriented commitments of the BNP.

Market Reforms and Private Sector Participation

The fourth theme focuses on the increasing importance of market reforms in supporting climate-resilient development. Research shows that attracting private investment in areas such as infrastructure, renewable energy, and digital systems is essential for building long-term resilience. In this context, BNP's Point 17, which emphasises economic freedom, market competition, and support for business activity, aligns with broader global trends (The Daily Star, 2024). In addition, Point 18, which addresses job creation through modernised industry, supports the literature's view that economic reform should move forward alongside infrastructure modernisation. Overall, the BNP agenda reflects internationally recognised good practices by encouraging cooperation between the state and the private sector within a market-friendly and investment-oriented framework.

Climate Resilience in Bangladesh: Governance and Development Dimensions

As the analysis has shown, climate resilience in Bangladesh needs to be a complex combination of governance reform, infrastructure modernisation, digital transformation, and economic restructuring, along with a market orientation. Based on Shi and Moser (2021), climate adaptation is not only a technical issue but also a governance issue. However, when there is transparency, accountability and a stable rule of law, such countries are in a better position to enforce climate policies, organise emergency rescue efforts, and defend against mismanagement of resources. In this respect, the 31-Point Programme of BNP, in particular Point 3, which demands the creation of a corruption-free administrative system, reflects the importance of governance quality in addressing climate challenges (The Daily Citizen Times, 2023). Such pledges suggest that BNP recognises the institutional shortcomings that currently inhibit

effective action on climate and offers a governance framework that raises levels of trust among people and leads to more effective implementation of climate adaptation programmes.

Infrastructure Resilience as a Development Prerequisite

The recent intensification of floods also directly influences Bangladesh's modernisation, as it affects infrastructure development. The literature also focuses on infrastructure resilience as a central prerequisite for climate-adapted development, alongside governance. The roadways, bridges, railways, ports, and waterways in Bangladesh are highly susceptible to rising temperatures, increased monsoon rains, salinity intrusion, and more frequent cyclones. The World Bank, ADB, and IPCC indicate that climate-resilient infrastructure has been a significant factor in reducing long-term economic losses and improving nations' competitiveness in global markets (World Bank Group, 2025). The points on the modernisation of national infrastructure on a mass scale and the points on regional development of the country, which BNP promises in its Points 28 and 17, are consistent with these academic views. These pledges highlight that the party acknowledges that infrastructural development should be climate-resilient and that the development of urban and rural areas should be equitable. This type of infrastructure renewal not only enhances adaptation capacity but also increases economic opportunities, connectivity, and disaster resilience, which the global literature supports.

The digital transformation has also become a key factor in the resilience of the modern climate. Studies have shown that ICT-enabled governance can enhance early-warning systems, disaster surveillance, emergency response, and service provision to the people, thereby increasing the state's responsiveness and adaptability to climate-related destabilisers. However, studies have shown that significant gaps in ICT growth are a crucial challenge for the BNP to improve its capabilities in

taking climate change actions. Point 30 of BNP, aimed at enhancing ICT capacity, expanding digital systems for governance, and improving access to public services, aligns with the global vision of digital-driven reform of the public sector (Tasreen, 2025). As analysed in the context of existing literature, all these initiatives suggest that digitalisation is framed within the programme not as a shallow modernising attempt but as a structural change that would further promote transparency, responsiveness, and the state's capacity, which are the main elements of a climate-resilient governance framework.

Lastly, the literature consistently observes that economic resilience and climate resilience are mutually dependent. Mismanagement, inadequate early-warning mechanisms, insufficient or poorly maintained cyclone and flood shelters, limited rescue capacity, and a lack of resources to protect both human lives and domestic livestock are key challenges to maintaining infrastructure growth in Bangladesh. Competitive markets, the involvement of the private sector, and policy regimes that are friendly to investment are the primary factors in attracting capital into renewable energy, resilient infrastructure, and digital innovation (Machen & Nost, 2021). The amount of funds required to make the necessary transformation is too large to be financed only by the public sector. This issue is addressed in the BNP's 31-Point Programme through Point 17, which supports economic freedom and a competitive market, and Point 18, which places strong emphasis on industrial modernisation and job creation (Chowdury, 2024). Together, these priorities reflect an understanding that climate resilience cannot stand alone and must be part of a wider economic vision that encourages innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable industrial growth. By actively promoting private sector involvement and nurturing a competitive economic environment, the BNP programme follows global approaches that view market-based solutions and technological progress as key drivers of long-term resilience. Overall, this discussion shows that the 31-Point Programme of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is closely aligned with international perspectives on climate adaptation, infrastructure renewal, digital transformation, and market reform. The programme presents a unified

vision that brings together institutional reform, technological advancement, and economic competitiveness in a coherent and practical way.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined climate resilience, infrastructure modernisation, and digital transformation as interdependent pillars shaping national development capacity in climate-vulnerable contexts, with particular reference to Bangladesh. The analysis demonstrates that climate risks—such as cyclones, flooding, river erosion, salinity intrusion, and waterlogging—pose persistent threats not only to physical infrastructure but also to economic productivity, social stability, and institutional performance. International research consistently associates effective climate adaptation with governance systems that prioritise accountability, decentralisation, and institutional credibility, rather than with isolated technical interventions.

The discussion highlights that infrastructure modernisation plays a central role in enhancing both economic competitiveness and adaptive capacity. Climate-resilient transport networks, ports, waterways, and urban systems are widely recognised as critical for reducing long-term economic losses and maintaining trade reliability under environmental stress. However, the literature also emphasises that infrastructure resilience depends on governance conditions such as transparent procurement, regulatory oversight, and predictable institutional arrangements. In this respect, policy approaches that emphasise institutional reform and decentralised planning can be interpreted as consistent with internationally recognised principles for resilient infrastructure development.

The chapter further underscores the growing importance of digital transformation as a complementary mechanism for climate resilience and institutional effectiveness. ICT-enabled governance has been shown to improve early-warning systems, disaster response coordination, service

delivery, and administrative transparency, particularly when supported by political openness and protections for digital rights. Comparative international experiences suggest that digital systems are most effective when embedded within accountable institutions and supported by skilled human capital, rather than when implemented in highly centralised or opaque governance environments.

By situating these themes within broader debates on adaptive governance, the chapter illustrates how flexibility, multi-level coordination, and continuous institutional learning are increasingly viewed as essential for managing complex climate and technological challenges. Adaptive governance theory provides a useful conceptual lens for understanding how governance quality, infrastructure resilience, and digital capacity interact to shape long-term development outcomes in environmentally exposed countries.

The chapter contributes an integrated analytical perspective showing that climate resilience cannot be achieved through isolated policy measures or sector-specific investments alone. Instead, it requires coherent governance frameworks, climate-sensitive infrastructure planning, and digitally enabled public institutions operating in a mutually reinforcing manner. The significance of this chapter lies in its demonstration that long-term resilience and sustainable development in Bangladesh depend on the alignment of institutional reform, infrastructure modernisation, and digital transformation within a transparent, accountable, and adaptive governance environment.

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