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Research Article

History, Agendas, and Anomalies of Bangladesh Politics

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Abstract. This article explores the political journey of Bangladesh from its birth in 1971 to the difficult present, like a long and winding river shaped by storms of ambition, ideology, and outside influence. After gaining independence, the country dreamed of unity, rebuilding, and democracy. But over time, those hopes were shaken by repeated waves of political instability, military rule, and weak attempts to build lasting democracy. Political agendas changed again and again, like a swinging pendulum moving between dreams of economic growth and infrastructure. Yet, these goals were often blocked by corruption, family-based control of power, and unfair elections. The story of democracy in Bangladesh has not only been written by elected leaders but also shaped by powerful unelected groups such as the military, business elites, and foreign powers. Each of them has left their mark on the country's political path. As the nation moved between secular ideals and the rise of religion in politics, its institutions became weaker, burdened by political bias and growing public distrust. At the center of all these are deep political problems, like cracks in a building's foundation, which have blocked the path toward a

fair and fully representative democracy. This article also looks closely at these problems and shows how they still affect political choices and make it harder for Bangladesh to build a strong and stable democratic future.

Keywords: Bangladesh politics, political history, democratic transition, political agendas, institutional anomalies.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh's political evolution since its independence in 1971 has been shaped by historical struggles, shifting agendas, and systemic anomalies. The country emerged through a war rooted in linguistic and cultural nationalism, yet its post-independence trajectory has been marked by political instability, military interventions, and contested democratic transitions. Governance has oscillated between civilian and military rule, influenced by constitutional amendments, electoral controversies, and institutional weaknesses. The political agendas of Bangladesh have been shaped by ruling parties—particularly the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—which have often prioritized political dominance over democratic consolidation. While policies have addressed economic development, social welfare, and foreign relations, governance strategies have frequently been driven by power struggles and electoral manipulation. External actors, such as India, China, and Western institutions, have also influenced national policymaking in trade, security, and development. The political landscape has been further complicated by systemic anomalies, including ideological conflicts between secularism and religious politics, rampant corruption, dynastic rule, and the politicization of state institutions. Electoral processes have been marred by allegations of vote-rigging, intimidation, and partisan control over the Election Commission, raising concerns about the legitimacy of successive governments. These structural flaws have contributed to governance challenges, democratic backsliding, and public distrust in political institutions. This article examines the history, agendas, and anomalies of Bangladesh politics by analyzing key historical transitions, shifting governance priorities, and structural weaknesses. By assessing these factors, the discussion highlights the complexities that continue to define Bangladesh's political trajectory and democratic challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly exploration of Bangladesh's political evolution reveals a complex interplay of historical legacies, institutional fragility, and contested democratic practices. Prominent scholars have significantly contributed to understanding the governance challenges and political institutions that have shaped the country's trajectory. Rounaq Jahan (2000) has critically examined post-independence governance, focusing on democratic aspirations, gender roles, and institutional capacity. Her edited volume *"Bangladesh: Promise and Performance"*, provides a comprehensive assessment of the country's first three decades of independence and highlights how political polarization and confrontational party politics have hindered

democratic consolidation. Ali Riaz (2004, 2020) offers in-depth insights into the rise of political Islam, party confrontations, and the erosion of democratic space. His analysis of the ideological transformation of Islamist actors and the collapse of political settlements reflects on judicial politicization and electoral manipulation. In *“Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh”* (Riaz & Fair, 2011), he further explores the implications of Islamist politics for state institutions. Willem van Schendel (2009) takes a historical approach, mapping the emergence of a militarized political elite and a post-colonial political order. His work discusses how a small, tightly connected power elite has continued to dominate state mechanisms through bureaucratic control, reinforcing authoritarian tendencies and centralized governance. Mubashar Hasan (2011) examines the ideological and political intersection of democracy and Islamism. He argues that the practice of political Islam in Bangladesh has remained largely pragmatic, adapting to democratic spaces while simultaneously undermining democratic norms. Md. Mehedi Hasan Shohag (2017) investigates the pragmatic nature of populist authoritarian and military-dominated rule, arguing that Bangladesh’s democracy has been shaped more by expediency and consolidation of power than ideological governance or participatory accountability. S. A. Karim (2005) offers a biographical and political account of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s leadership, tracing the challenges of state formation, national identity, and the tension between populist charisma and institutional state-building. Thomas W. Oliver (1978) documents the early role of the United Nations during the birth of Bangladesh, situating the formation of international legitimacy in the broader geopolitical landscape of the 1970s. Simon Dring (1971) and Sarmila Bose (2005) provide journalistic and scholarly perspectives on the military atrocities during Operation Searchlight, presenting some of the earliest evidence of systemic violence that fueled the Liberation War. Together, these scholarly works provide a robust foundation for understanding the political shifts, structural anomalies, and ideological contests that continue to shape Bangladesh’s democratic evolution. This study draws on their insights while integrating recent developments, integrating the history and agendas of Bangladesh politics as well as the anomalies that reflect the fluid and evolving nature of Bangladesh politics.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the political evolution of Bangladesh. Historical analysis is applied to examine critical events such as the 1971 Liberation War, post-independence instability, military governance, and transitions to democratic rule. Primary sources including political speeches, government reports, and historical documents are reviewed to understand decision-making during transformative political periods. Documentary research focuses on political manifestos and official records from major parties like the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to trace the evolution of party agendas and their influence on governance and policy. Content analysis is used to examine newspapers, scholarly articles, books, and political speeches, identifying patterns in discourse and highlighting issues like corruption, dynastic rule, electoral manipulation, and ideological divides. Secondary sources from academic, governmental, and

international publications are also utilized to ensure a comprehensive understanding. This methodological framework enables a critical and layered investigation into the structural dynamics shaping Bangladesh's political landscape.

DISCUSSION

History of Bangladesh Politics

The political landscape of Bangladesh, before its independence in 1971, was deeply shaped by the centuries-long colonial rule under the British Empire and the subsequent partition of India in 1947. Bengal, the region that now forms Bangladesh, has always been a cultural and political hub. The region's history forms the bedrock of the modern political identity of Bangladesh and helps explain the rise of the political consciousness that ultimately led to its independence. Bengal was one of the most economically significant and populous regions of British India. The British colonial administration imposed various policies, including the zamindari system, a landlord-based taxation system that concentrated wealth in the hands of a few landlords while impoverishing the peasantry. This led to an increased level of economic disparity and social divisions. The exploitation of Bengal's resources under British rule laid the foundation for the political movements that arose in the 20th century. In the 19th century, Bengal also became the birthplace of the Bengal Renaissance, a cultural and intellectual awakening. Prominent reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar emerged, challenging centuries-old social customs such as Sati (widow burning) and advocating for the education of women. These reformers were pivotal in creating a more progressive intellectual environment that set the stage for later political movements, advocating for changes within both the social and political landscapes.

However, as the 20th century unfolded, Bengal's political environment became increasingly complicated, particularly with the rise of nationalism and the growing demand for self-rule within the context of British colonialism. By the early 1900s, Bengal had become a significant center of the Indian independence movement. The formation of the Indian National Congress (INC) saw leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru emerge, promoting the idea of independence from British rule. However, Bengal also witnessed the rise of the Muslim League, a political party focused on protecting the rights of Muslims within India. Over time, the Muslim League's focus shifted toward a demand for a separate Muslim-majority nation. The 1940s were marked by a significant turning point in India's independence movement, especially with the rise of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League's advocacy for the creation of Pakistan. The League's call for partition was based on the assertion that Muslims and Hindus formed two separate nations. The culmination of this demand was the partition of India in 1947, leading to the creation of Pakistan and splitting Bengal into two parts: West Bengal, which became part of India, and East Bengal, which became East Pakistan, eventually to become Bangladesh. The partition of India in 1947 was a traumatic event for Bengal. The region witnessed widespread violence, mass displacement, and significant loss of life as communities were divided along religious lines. The newly formed Pakistan, comprising West Pakistan and East Pakistan, was fraught with ethnic and linguistic tensions. The majority Bengali-

speaking population in East Pakistan felt politically and economically marginalized by the central government in West Pakistan, which was dominated by Punjabi and Urdu-speaking elites. This marginalization was compounded by the central government's refusal to recognize Bengali as one of Pakistan's national languages. The Language Movement of the early 1950s emerged as a major expression of discontent. When the government of Pakistan attempted to impose Urdu as the sole national language, Bengali speakers in East Pakistan vehemently protested, arguing that Bengali should be recognized as an official language of the country. The movement culminated in Martyrs' Day on February 21, 1952, when police opened fire on protesting students in Dhaka, killing several. The tragic event became a defining moment in the political consciousness of the Bengali people and is still commemorated every year. After the partition, East Pakistan continued to experience political instability. In 1956, the first constitution of Pakistan was adopted, declaring the country an Islamic republic. However, it failed to address the growing discontent among the people of East Pakistan, who felt excluded from political power and economic development. The political tensions were exacerbated in 1958 when General Ayub Khan led a military coup, establishing a military dictatorship and abolishing democratic governance. This further alienated the people of East Pakistan, who were already frustrated by their marginalization. During this period of political turmoil, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerged as the central figure advocating for the rights of the Bengali people. Initially, Mujib focused on the demand for greater political autonomy for East Pakistan.

However, as the central government in West Pakistan continued to repress the Bengali population, Mujib's calls for full independence grew stronger. By the late 1960s, the political situation had reached a boiling point, and demands for autonomy transformed into calls for the creation of an independent Bengali state. In 1966, Sheikh Mujib introduced the Six-Point Movement, which outlined a set of demands aimed at securing greater autonomy for East Pakistan. The six points included the right to form a separate military, control over the region's economic resources, and the ability to manage its own tax and trade policies. The movement gained significant support across East Pakistan and laid the foundation for the eventual independence of Bangladesh. The struggle for Bangladesh's independence in 1971 was the culmination of longstanding political, economic, and cultural disparities between East and West Pakistan. Both the movements against British colonial rule and later against the Punjab-led elites of West Pakistan were motivated around ideas of and hopes for political freedom as the route to improved wellbeing and material livelihoods for the hard-pressed peasantry of East Bengal (Basu et al., 2018). Following the partition of British India in 1947, Pakistan was formed with two geographically and culturally distinct regions: West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Despite East Pakistan's demographic majority, political and economic power was concentrated in West Pakistan, leading to widespread grievances in the eastern wing. The situation escalated after the 1970 general elections, where the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, secured a landslide victory, winning 160 out of 162 seats allotted to East Pakistan in the National Assembly. This majority entitled the Awami League to form the national government.

However, the ruling authorities in West Pakistan were reluctant to transfer power, leading to a political impasse and increasing tensions between the two regions. In response to the growing demands, the Pakistani military launched Operation Searchlight. 'Operation Searchlight' is a planned genocide carried out by the Pakistani army from March 25, 1971, through which they sought to suppress the Bengali nationalist movement in March 1971 and earlier (Bose, 2005). The operation began in Dhaka, targeting political activists, students, and intellectuals, resulting in significant casualties. The brutality of the crackdown galvanized the Bengali population to seek full independence rather than mere autonomy. Simon Dring's March 30 report in the Daily Telegraph, entitled 'Tanks Crush Revolt in Pakistan', reported the deaths of 200 students at Iqbal Hall, 12 teachers, and their families in the university's residential area. 700 people were burnt to death in old Dhaka. According to various sources from home and abroad, 7,000 Bengalis were killed that night in Dhaka alone (Dring, 1971). In response to the military crackdown, leaders of the Awami League fled to Calcutta (now Kolkata), establishing a government-in-exile. They declared East Pakistan the independent state of Bangladesh, marking the beginning of the Liberation War. Following the declaration of independence, the Mukti Bahini (Liberation Army) was formed, comprising Bengali military personnel, paramilitary forces, and civilian volunteers. They engaged in guerrilla warfare against the better-equipped Pakistani military. The Mukti Bahini conducted strategic operations, including sabotage of communication lines and attacks on military installations, significantly disrupting Pakistani military operations. The Pakistani military's response included widespread atrocities against the Bengali population, with estimates of civilian deaths varying widely as well as enlisting radical religious militias, such as the Razakars, Al-Badr, and Al-Shams, to assist in suppressing the Bengali independence movement. These militias were implicated in widespread atrocities, including mass killings, rapes, and the displacement of millions. Inhuman actions of that time led to a massive refugee crisis, with approximately 10 million Bengalis fleeing to neighboring India, seeking shelter from the violence (Zakaria, 2019). The influx of refugees placed a significant burden on India, leading to increased tensions between India and Pakistan. Diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis failed, and on December 3, 1971, Pakistan's complain of a series of Indian Army incursions supported by air cover had occurred at a number of points as far north as Kashmir and as far south as Rahim Yar Kham, Pakistan launched preemptive airstrikes on Indian airbases, prompting India to officially enter the war in support of the Bangladeshi independence movement. In Washington, the CIA concluded that it was not possible to determine with certainty which side had initiated hostilities (Sarker, 2022). The joint forces of the Indian military and the Mukti Bahini achieved rapid successes against Pakistani forces. The allied forces captured key territories. On December 16, 1971, Pakistani military forces in East Pakistan, led by Lieutenant General A.A.K. Niazi, surrendered to the joint Indian and Mukti Bahini forces in Dhaka. This event marked the official emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation. The surrender is considered one of the largest in terms of the number of prisoners of war since World War II, with approximately 93,000 Pakistani military personnel and civilians taken captive (Koul, 2020). The Bangladesh Liberation War stands as a testament to the resilience and

determination of the Bengali people in their quest for self-determination and sovereignty. During the liberation war, around 200,000 to 400,000 women became victims of rape and sexual slavery (EFSAS, 2017). Estimates of the death toll vary, stretching from hundreds of thousands to some 3 million (Strahorn, 2021). The material damage caused by the war was very extensive. Hundreds of road and railway bridges had been destroyed, the six airports were not functioning, Chittagong – the main port – was full of mines and wrecks and the telecommunications network was out of action. Countless schools, health centres and houses had been damaged. Agricultural production had also suffered terribly, because millions had not been able to till their land with the loving care that was required to get a good harvest. Bullocks had been slaughtered, stocks of seeds lost and irrigation pumps and tools damaged. Fishermen had to find new boats and nets (Van Schendel, 2009). One estimate put the total destruction at more than 40 per cent of the country's annual gross national product (Oliver, 1978). The conflict not only reshaped the geopolitical landscape of South Asia but also highlighted the profound human cost associated with the struggle for independence. The events of history prove that the people of East Pakistan were gradually prepared for independence from the first day of March 1971, inspired by the nationalist spirit from 1952, 1962, 1969, and 1970 (Anisuzzaman & Mamun, 2022).

After leading Bangladesh to independence in 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the nation's first Prime Minister in January 1972. Bangladesh faced significant challenges during the immediate post-independence period relating to widespread rural poverty (Jahan, 2000). His administration faced significant challenges, including political unrest, economic difficulties, and demands for greater autonomy from various groups. In March 1973, Bangladesh held its first general elections. Mujib still retained much of his enormous personal popularity, but a store of resentment had built up among the electorate against the Awami League and it was bound to be reflected in the elections (Karim, 2005). In 1974, a devastating famine occurred, resulting in a massive death toll. In response to escalating crises, Mujib declared a state of emergency and, in January 1975, established a one-party system under the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL), aiming to consolidate power but facing criticism for suppressing democratic freedoms. On August 15, 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family were assassinated by a group of army officers, leading to political instability. Subsequent coups culminated in Major General Ziaur Rahman assuming power. He became president in 1977, initiating economic reforms and promoting private enterprise. He founded the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and emphasized food production, irrigation, primary education, and rural development. Individuals who aided the Pakistani army, or who were involved in the assassination of Mujib in 1975, have served in the governments of General Ziaur Rahman (1975-81), General Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-90), and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party led by Khaleda Zia (1991-1996; 2001-2006). General Ziaur Rahman halted the war crimes trials and they did not resume until 2010 under the ICTAA (Strahorn, 2021). However, his tenure was cut short when he was assassinated in 1981 during an attempted military coup.

In 1982, Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad seized power through a military coup, declaring himself Chief Martial Law Administrator and later

assuming the presidency in 1983. His regime was characterized by political repression and efforts to centralize power. Despite introducing economic reforms and infrastructure projects, his legitimacy was frequently questioned. Massive protests against his rule eventually led to his resignation in 1990, paving the way for the return of democracy. The system under military regimes was a combination of an imposed settlement and an informal elite pact. The imposed part of the settlement was ideological, on the one hand, and relating to the system of governance, on the other; the informal pact was based on the question of economic and social policies (Riaz, 2020). Following Ershad's resignation, a caretaker government oversaw parliamentary elections in 1991, leading to the BNP, led by Khaleda Zia, forming the government. The political landscape became dominated by the rivalry between the BNP and the Awami League (AL), led by Sheikh Hasina, Mujib's daughter. This rivalry often led to political instability, with both parties alternating in power throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. During this period, Bangladesh has faced the growing influence of Islamist communal impact in its politics by different groups. On 17 August 2005 Bangladesh experienced its own 9/11 in a shockwave of terror when a relatively unknown Islamist group, Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), detonated 500 bombs simultaneously across the country (Hasan, 2011). There are many more examples of these types of terrorism in Bangladesh. In addition to these extremist groups, both the ruling and the opposition parties, and even the Bangladesh state have employed violence at different times since Bangladesh emerged as an independent state in 1971. The state-sponsored violence such as extra-judicial, custodial deaths and indiscriminate killings of innocent civilians by government forces such as the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini in 1974–5 and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) since April 2004 have received wide press coverage but continue unabated (Riaz & Fair, 2011).

While until 2008 the state power alternated between the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) through elections, the past decade saw the uninterrupted rule of the AL, thanks to two controversial elections in 2014 and 2018; notably, since 2016 scholars and analysts have warned of gradual descent of the country towards authoritarianism (Stratfor, 2016; The Economist, 2018). The 2014 general election was marked by controversy, with the BNP boycotting the polls, leading to a landslide victory for the Awami League. The 2018 election was also contentious, with allegations of voter suppression, election fraud, and political violence, further polarizing the political environment. The 2018 election has not only been described by international media as “farcical” (New York Times, 2019) but the analysts also insist that the country has entered into a “dangerous new era” (Kugelman, 2019). The election of 2024 is also marked by controversies. In 2024, with the main opposition boycotting the election, the ruling party has been accused of fielding ‘dummies’ and threatening people to turn up on voting day. The tenure of Sheikh Hasina has been marked by allegations of authoritarian rule, targeting of the opposition, the suppression of people’s rights, and large-scale vote rigging in elections held to keep her in power (Mahmud, 2024). Throughout the last decade where opposition parties were not in action, specially, the BNP, the party that continuously boycotted national elections, and the politicization of the judiciary, nominal and

party obedient President paved the way for passing the agendas of Bangladesh politics which solely the Awami League wanted. The scenario of consolidating power, authority, and institutions, creating agendas according to the party and other beneficial interests, and implementing them easily are almost the same in every sphere of the political era of Bangladesh. Article: 70 of the Constitution of Bangladesh where any MP who resigned from their party or voted against it in parliament would lose their seat. It was a fortress built not just to defend a party, but to uphold a new nation's fragile spine. But over time, that fortress has become a cage. MPs, though elected by the people, often sit silently, their opinions shackled by the fear of losing their positions. Like actors handed scripts, they perform under party orders rather than personal conviction (Arafat, 2025).

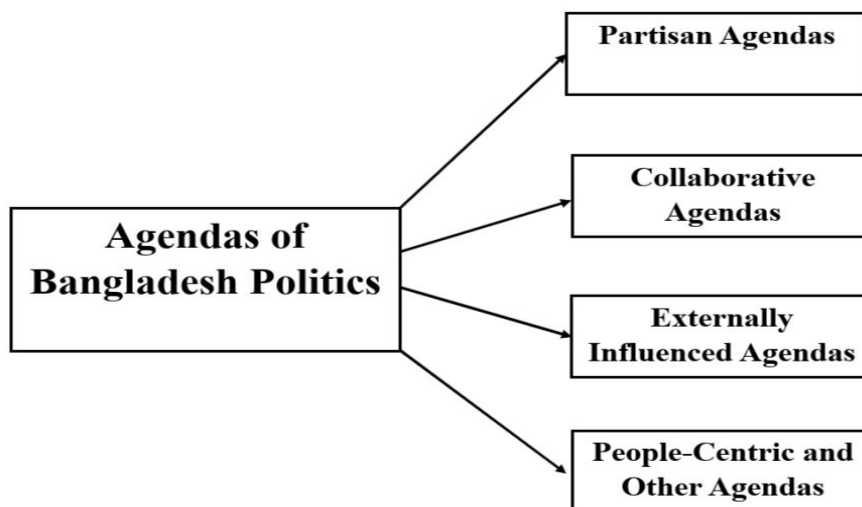
In August 2024, following months of widespread protests and political unrest, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and took asylum in India under pressure from both domestic opposition and international actors via a remarkable uprising. Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus returned to Bangladesh to lead an interim government, tasked with restoring democracy amidst institutional challenges. Yunus's administration has faced significant hurdles, including addressing corruption, stabilizing law and order, and preparing for free elections soon based on reformation procedures. Moreover, the interim government has embarked on efforts to reform the systemic anomalies, consensus among different groups remain a major challenge. In February 2025, the Students Against Discrimination and the Jatiya Nagorik Committee collaborated to establish the National Citizen Party (NCP). This initiative emerged from the momentum of the July Uprising, aiming to reshape the nation's political landscape by addressing systemic issues and promoting inclusive governance. The emergence of the NCP introduces a new dynamic to the political arena, potentially reshaping future electoral outcomes.

The political history of Bangladesh from its independence in 1971 to the present has been shaped by cycles of military rule, democratic transitions, political rivalries, and mass movements. Each period brought new challenges, from economic instability and governance crises to electoral disputes and demands for reform. The recent upheavals, including the resignation of Sheikh Hasina and the establishment of an interim government, mark a critical juncture in the country's political evolution. As Bangladesh stands on the brink of another transition, the path forward remains uncertain, with pressing concerns about political stability, electoral integrity, and governance reforms. However, the resilience of its people, the rise of new political movements, and ongoing international engagement could determine whether the nation moves toward a more stable and democratic future.

Agendas of Bangladesh Politics

Bangladesh's political journey since 1971 has been marked by diverse agendas shaped by historical legacies, ideological conflicts, and external influences. These agendas, ranging from foundational struggles for sovereignty to contemporary challenges like corruption and electoral integrity, have defined the nation's governance and societal dynamics. This analysis explores these agendas, highlighting their evolution, impacts, and ongoing challenges, offering insights into Bangladesh's

democratic trajectory. After elaborating the main four agendas of Bangladesh politics, the key agendas are given below:



Source: Developed by the Authors

Fig. 1. Agendas of Bangladesh Politics

The agendas of Bangladesh politics can be broadly understood through four major lenses, each reflecting the complex forces that shape the nation's political direction. First, partisan agendas dominate the landscape, where individual political parties pursue their own visions and ideologies, often prioritizing regime survival over long-term national interests. These agendas are driven by the desire to maintain control, enforce party loyalty, and advance policies that strengthen their grip on power rather than fostering inclusive governance. Second, collaborative agendas emerge through alliances between political parties and influential actors such as business elites, pressure groups, and segments of the military. These interactions often result in behind-the-scenes power-sharing arrangements that serve mutual interests, blending formal politics with informal influence networks. Such agendas reflect a political ecosystem where decisions are not always made in public view but negotiated in shadowy corridors. Third, externally influenced agendas are shaped by the strategic interests and conditions set by global actors. International organizations like the United Nations, World Bank, and IMF, along with powerful nations including the USA, China, and India, play a substantial role in guiding policy priorities in areas such as economic reform, human rights, and regional diplomacy. These foreign influences sometimes align with national needs but can also lead to compromises in sovereignty. Finally, people-centric and other agendas aim to respond to public needs, focusing on welfare, development, and justice. Though often sidelined by elite-driven politics, these agendas represent the genuine aspirations of citizens, surfacing in times of mass mobilization or during electoral campaigns. When amplified by social movements or civil society voices, they act as reminders of the democratic promise the country set out to achieve in 1971. Together, these agendas form a mosaic of competing interests, constantly shaping and reshaping the path of Bangladesh's

political journey. The other significant aspects of the agendas of Bangladesh politics include:

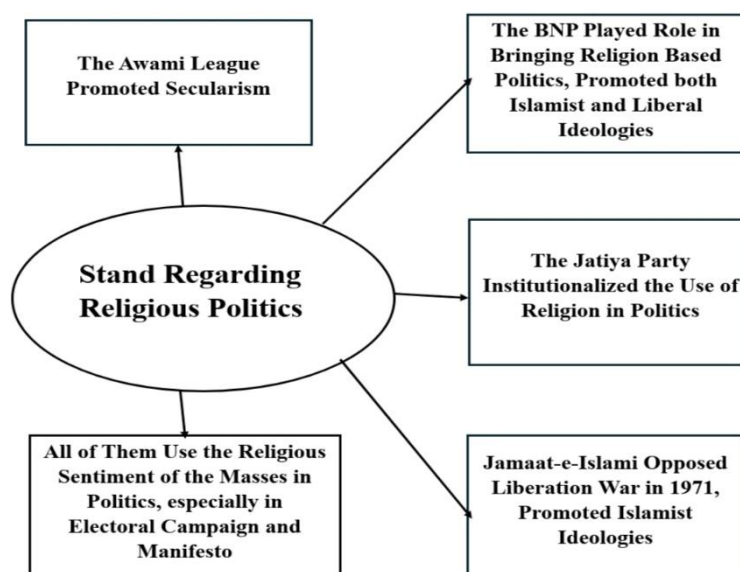
Foundations of Political Agendas

The foundations of Bangladesh's political agendas are rooted in its struggle for independence and subsequent governance challenges. The Liberation War of 1971, driven by aspirations for self-determination, economic equity, and cultural autonomy, set the stage for early nation-building efforts. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's administration (1971–1975) focused on socialist policies, nationalizing industries and centralizing governance, but inefficiencies and corruption led to public dissatisfaction, culminating in his assassination in 1975 and a shift to military rule. From 1975 to 1990, military regimes under Ziaur Rahman and Hussain Muhammad Ershad prioritized political consolidation, economic liberalization, and Islamization, with Zia emphasizing nationalism and Ershad declaring Islam the state religion in 1988. The restoration of democracy in 1991 introduced a new era of political competition, with the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) framing agendas based on contrasting ideologies. The AL, rooted in secularism and social democracy, has focused on economic growth and strong ties with India, while the BNP, pro-nationalist and conservative, has advocated sovereignty and reduced Indian influence. Military influence, though diminished since 1990, continues in security policies, as seen in the 2007–2008 caretaker government. External actors like India, China, and Western institutions (e.g., World Bank, IMF) shape agendas through trade, security, and development programs, with China's investments growing as an alternative to Western alliances.

Governance and Policy Priorities

Governance models in Bangladesh have evolved from centralized socialism to market-driven reforms. Early years (1971–1975) under Mujib emphasized state control, but the one-party system (BAKSAL) faced resistance. Military rule (1975–1990) shifted to liberalization, with Zia promoting private sector growth and Ershad continuing reforms. Post-1991 democratic governance saw AL focusing on state-led projects like the Padma Bridge and digital governance, while BNP favored privatization. Electoral systems, following a parliamentary model, have been contentious, with the abolition of the caretaker system in 2011 intensifying disputes and leading to boycotts. Economic governance prioritizes poverty reduction through programs like the Social Safety Net and microfinance (e.g., Grameen Bank), alongside infrastructure development (e.g., Dhaka Metro Rail). However, wealth inequality and project delays persist. Security policies address counterterrorism, with strict measures post-2000s reducing extremism but raising human rights concerns over agencies like the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). Foreign policy balances regional relations, with India offering trade cooperation but facing tensions over water-sharing, and China emerging as an economic partner, while the Rohingya crisis strains ties with Myanmar.

Religion-Based Politics



Source: Developed by the Authors.

Fig. 2. Stand Regarding Religious Politics among the Major Parties.

The Jamaat-e-Islami was originally a social organization born in British India before partition. Its main aim was to create a unified Indian state, yet its vision was not fulfilled due to the partition of the subcontinent. It created branches in both West- and East-Pakistan with the new objective of creating an Islamic state. When Bengali nationalists demanded separation from West-Pakistan, the Jamaat-e-Islami leaders of East-Pakistan provided full support to the West-Pakistani government. In the name of religion, they betrayed the people of their own land (EFSAS, 2017). According to the secularism of Bangladesh, religion cannot be used as a political weapon and any particular religion will not enjoy special favor. All the religions will enjoy equal rights and in order to establish a religious harmony, every religion will be encouraged (Islam & Huda, 2016). Religion will be treated as a personal affair instead of state affair (Islam, 2014). Religion has played a significant role, oscillating between secularism and Islamization. Bangladesh emerged as an independent country on 16 December 1971, based on secular-socialist principles (Riaz, 2004). Founded on secular principles in 1971, Bangladesh saw Mujib prohibit religious-based politics, but post-1975 military regimes shifted toward Islamization. In May 1977, article 38 of the constitution was revoked which had prohibited political use of religion. The revocation of articles 12 and 38, thus, paved the way for the return of religion-based political parties (Anisuzzaman, 2000).

Actually, Ershad incorporated Islam as the state religion in the constitution and made Islam as the guiding principle of his rule (Riaz, 2004). The AL reintroduced secularism in 2011 via the 15th Amendment, retaining Islam's status, reflecting pragmatic balancing. Religious parties like Jamaat-e-Islami, once influential and allied with BNP, declined post-2013 War Crimes Tribunal convictions, while Hefazat-e-Islam advocates stricter Islamic policies, influencing state actions like textbook revisions. Electoral politics sees both AL and BNP using religious rhetoric for votes, with laws like the Digital Security Act (DSA) criticized for targeting secular voices.

Minority rights, constitutionally protected, face discrimination, especially during elections, posing future challenges for balancing religious identity with democratic principles.

Political Violence and Electoral Conflicts

Political violence, rooted in historical divisions from the Liberation War, has been exacerbated by AL-BNP rivalry since 1991. The war created ideological splits, with Jamaat-e-Islami opposing independence, leading to post-war tensions. Military rule (1975–1990) suppressed opposition, setting precedents for violence, seen in the 1990 uprising against Ershad. Electoral conflicts, marked by hartals and blockades, escalated during disputed elections, with 2014 seeing BNP boycotts and violence, and 2018 facing rigging allegations. Security forces, including RAB, have been accused of excessive force, contributing to an environment of fear. Extremist groups like Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) exploit instability, with counterterrorism efforts sometimes politicized. The 2024 Monsoon Revolution, driven by student protests over job quotas, led to over 1,000 deaths and Hasina's resignation in August 2024 (Reuters, 2024), with the interim government under Muhammad Yunus facing ongoing tensions, highlighting the need for reforms to ensure electoral integrity.

Corruption and Governance Challenges

Corruption in Bangladesh has deep historical roots, tracing back to the colonial bureaucratic system, and has remained entrenched in the post-independence period due to centralized nationalization policies and the absence of strong institutional oversight during periods of military and quasi-military rule. Notable corruption cases include the Hall-Mark Group scandal, in which approximately Tk 36.06 billion was embezzled from Sonali Bank, exposed in 2012 (Prothom Alo, 2024). In the same year, the World Bank withdrew a \$1.2 billion loan for the Padma Bridge project over credible allegations of a high-level corruption conspiracy involving Bangladeshi officials (World Bank, 2012). In 2019, a nationwide crackdown on illegal casino operations revealed widespread money laundering networks linked to political actors, leading to multiple arrests and asset seizures (The Business Standard, 2024). The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), though established in 2004 to address such issues, has been widely criticized for lacking operational independence and often being influenced by political considerations. Other systemic challenges include judicial politicization and routine bribery in public service delivery. While corruption continues to hinder equitable economic development and public trust, Bangladesh has implemented partial reforms, such as the Right to Information Act (2009) and the introduction of digital governance tools like online tax systems. Civil society, particularly Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), has played a leading role in anti-corruption advocacy and institutional monitoring, though concerns remain about growing restrictions on media freedom and civic space (New Age, 2025). Anti-corruption remains a central policy priority for current governance, with broader reforms seen as essential for both democratic integrity and sustainable development.

Electoral System and Election-Related Challenges

Bangladesh's electoral system, established post-1971, evolved from controlled elections under military rule to democracy in 1991, with the caretaker government system (1996–2006) ensuring fairness. Its abolition in 2011, under AL, led to boycotts and violence, notably in 2014 (BNP boycott) and 2018 (rigging claims). The 2024 election is also marked by voter suppression and opposition crackdowns. The Election Commission (EC) faces independence challenges, with partisan appointments undermining credibility, and the judiciary's role in disputes is hampered by political influence. Reform proposals include reinstating the caretaker system, strengthening EC independence, and implementing electronic voting machines (EVMs). These challenges erode public trust, fuel polarization, and invite international scrutiny, with organizations like the UN and EU urging free and fair elections.

Role of Media and Civil Society

Media and civil society are vital for democratic oversight but face significant challenges. These are the neutral parts in a democratic system. The media informs the public through outlets like The Daily Star and Prothom Alo, with television and social media such as Facebook, X, shaping electoral narratives. However, censorship, particularly via the Digital Security Act (2018), restricts freedom, with journalists facing harassment and arrests. Civil society, including TIB and Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), advocates for democracy and human rights. Challenges include government control, funding restrictions, and polarization mirroring AL-BNP divides. Future prospects depend on media independence and civil society resilience, crucial for holding governments accountable.

Role of Women in Bangladesh Politics

Women's political participation has grown since 1971, with Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia breaking barriers as prime ministers. Reserved parliamentary seats increased representation, but face criticism for lacking meritocracy. Historical roles were limited, with women active in the Liberation War but marginalized post-independence. Barriers include patriarchal norms, violence such as gender-based harassment, and limited access to resources, with male-dominated parties hindering progress. Achievements include gender-sensitive policies like National Women Development Policy 2011 and advocacy for rights, supported by international organizations like the UN. Future prospects require addressing societal norms and ensuring safety, with education improving women's political awareness.

Bangladesh's political agendas reflect a dynamic interplay of historical struggles, ideological divides, and external pressures. Significant progress in economic development and social welfare contrasts with persistent challenges like corruption, electoral disputes, and governance inefficiencies. The emergence of new political forces and international engagements, such as the recent UN visit, underscores the need for balanced approaches to ensure stability and inclusivity as Bangladesh navigates its democratic journey.

Anomalies of Bangladesh Politics

Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh's political evolution has been shaped by a series of deep-rooted anomalies that have consistently challenged democratic consolidation. The country's initial embrace of secularism was gradually eroded by military interventions, ideological shifts, and rising religious influence. Following the 1975 assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, successive military regimes disrupted democratic governance, reintroduced religion-based parties, and institutionalized authoritarian control. Even after the return to civilian rule in 1991, the political landscape remained dominated by dynastic power struggles between the Sheikh and Zia families, sidelining internal party democracy. The two major political parties in Bangladesh are dynastic, like other well-known parties in South Asia (Amundsen, 2013). Elections have repeatedly been marred by rigging and boycotts, especially after the abolition of the caretaker system in 2011. The 2024 protests, sparked by the quota reform movement, escalated into nationwide unrest that led to Sheikh Hasina's resignation and the formation of an interim government led by Muhammad Yunus. Systemic corruption, politicization of the judiciary, and weakened institutions have undermined the rule of law and public trust. The suppression of dissent through restrictive laws and digital surveillance, combined with polarized and censored media, has stifled free expression. Co-optation of student and labor movements further diluted civic activism until the 2024 youth-led "Monsoon Revolution" reignited grassroots mobilization. Political violence, patronage-driven inequality, and economic disparities—especially among youth and rural communities—have also intensified social unrest. External influences from India, China, and Western powers have often shaped domestic decisions, raising questions about sovereignty and accountability. As of April 2025, Bangladesh stands at a political crossroads: whether the recent upheaval leads to genuine reform or temporary disruption depends on its willingness to address these structural flaws and revive the promise of a representative democracy. However, it is quite difficult to bring about changes in all aspects of the system. Movements that once sought freedom from anomalies—such as student politics and corruption—are themselves not beyond controversy after attaining power and authority. Political unrest, suppression, and systemic irregularities continue to persist. Reforming Bangladesh's political arena remains a significant challenge.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Bangladesh's political journey since 1971 reveals a continuous struggle between resilience and deep-rooted structural challenges. Emerging from a liberation war driven by linguistic and cultural nationalism, the nation has experienced cycles of democratic promise and authoritarian setbacks. From Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's secular-socialist vision to military rule under Ziaur Rahman and H. M. Ershad, followed by the entrenched AL-BNP rivalry, political agendas have shifted—from nation-building to liberalization—without dismantling systemic anomalies like electoral fraud, dynastic dominance, institutional politicization, and corruption. Military legacies and ideological rifts between secularism and religious identity have fragmented governance, while electoral irregularities—seen starkly in the 2014, 2018,

and 2024 elections—have delegitimized transitions of power. Dynastic politics, co-opted student movements, judicial politicization, media repression, and shrinking civil society space have further undermined accountability. External pressures from India, China, and others have complicated domestic autonomy amid rising inequality and governance failures. The 2024 Monsoon Revolution marked a turning point, forcing Sheikh Hasina's resignation and installing an interim government under Muhammad Yunus. As of April, 2025, this government faces the urgent task of restoring democratic order amid rising Islamist influence and political fragmentation. The rise of the National Citizen Party (NCP), born from student protests, signals growing demand for change beyond the AL-BNP duopoly, yet entrenched elites and institutional inertia remain formidable obstacles. Despite setbacks, the resilience of the Bangladeshi people endures. Grassroots mobilizations and calls for reform reflect a collective commitment to democracy. While infrastructure growth and poverty reduction show promise, they remain vulnerable without structural reform. The current transition offers both a crisis and an opportunity—either to forge a more inclusive political order aligned with the spirit of 1971, or to fall back into familiar instability. The path to upcoming elections will be decisive: a test of the interim government's sincerity, civil society's vigilance, and international support in determining whether this is the birth of a "Second Republic" or merely another broken moment in history.

Recommendations

To overcome the entrenched political anomalies and systemic dysfunctions identified in this study, Bangladesh must pursue comprehensive reforms rooted in democratic principles and public accountability. Restoring a neutral caretaker government system and reforming the Election Commission are crucial to ensure credible elections and rebuild public trust. Electoral integrity can further be safeguarded through the cautious adoption of technology, bolstered by public education and oversight. Combatting corruption requires strengthening the autonomy and capacity of the Anti-Corruption Commission, while transparency should be enhanced through digital governance and full enforcement of the Right to Information Act. Judicial independence must be secured through depoliticized appointments, and political violence curbed by dismantling armed student wings and promoting regulated platforms for youth engagement. A national reconciliation dialogue among key stakeholders is essential to address longstanding ideological divides. Security sector reform, especially of the Rapid Action Battalion, Police should prioritize human rights, and political parties must democratize internally with term limits to reduce dynastic dominance. Supporting emerging parties like the NCP can promote pluralism, while repealing restrictive laws and strengthening media freedom will revitalize civil society. Clarifying the relationship between religion and secularism is necessary to resolve constitutional ambiguity, alongside robust protections for minorities and oversight of religious organizations. Foreign policy should be diversified to safeguard sovereignty, and the Rohingya crisis addressed through multilateral cooperation. Restoring parliamentary functionality, decentralizing governance, and building institutional capacity across the judiciary, electoral system,

and public administration are vital steps toward durable reform. Socio-economic stability must be reinforced through rural investment, expanded social safety nets, and inclusive youth engagement in civic and economic life. Environmental resilience and climate adaptation should be integrated into governance planning. The success of reforms depends on political will, civic participation, and international cooperation to ensure Bangladesh moves toward a more stable and representative democracy.

Limitations

While this study offers a comprehensive analysis of Bangladesh's political evolution and anomalies from 1971 to April 2025, several limitations must be acknowledged. The qualitative approach, though effective for exploring historical patterns and political discourse, limits the ability to quantify key issues such as corruption's economic toll or the scale of electoral fraud. Reliance on content analysis and case studies introduces constraints tied to the availability and reliability of sources—especially during politically repressive periods—while classified records and internal party documents remain largely inaccessible. The study's temporal scope, ending in April 2025, captures the 2024 uprising and early actions of the interim government but cannot assess long-term reforms or the outcomes of the anticipated elections. The absence of fieldwork limits insight into grassroots perspectives and public sentiment, and the influence of external actors is evaluated through indirect indicators due to opaque diplomacy. Interpretive judgments regarding anomalies like dynastic politics and judicial politicization may reflect source biases rooted in dominant party narratives. Additionally, Bangladesh's unique political context—including its liberation war legacy and polarized two-party system—limits generalizability to other countries. Lastly, the fast-changing role of digital technologies in political mobilization, especially evident in the 2024 protests, requires ongoing study as digital authoritarianism and cyber-politics continue to evolve.

Despite these constraints, the study provides a valuable foundation for understanding Bangladesh's political landscape and highlights the need for future research incorporating empirical data, field-based inquiry, and comparative analysis.

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