

BANGLADESH 2026 ELECTIONS: AFTER THE HASINA ERA

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The 2026 parliamentary elections in Bangladesh mark a pivotal shift in the country's political and ideological landscape. Following the 2024 crisis that led to Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina's removal, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) secured a decisive victory, while Islamist parties, particularly the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, regained parliamentary visibility. This transition signals the erosion of the 1971 political consensus rooted in secular Bengali nationalism, with religious and populist mobilisation increasingly shaping governance. The electoral outcome raises critical concerns for minority security, democratic inclusivity, and domestic stability. For India, a BNP-led Dhaka introduces strategic uncertainty, demanding calibrated diplomacy on border management, transboundary water agreements, and bilateral cooperation. Bangladesh's evolving political trajectory reflects both the resurgence of religious-political identities and the challenges of reconciling liberation-era ideals with emerging realities, shaping the nation's future and regional stability.

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SHEIKH HASINA'S TENURE: AN ERA OF GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

The political transformation that took shape in Bangladesh's latest parliamentary election can only be understood through the crisis that unfolded in 2024 and led to the removal of PM Sheikh Hasina. For more than fifteen years, the Hasina government governed the country under the banner of the Awami League, presiding over a period that was characterised by sustained economic expansion, large-scale infrastructure development, and a deepening of strategic cooperation with regional partners, most notably India. During this period, Bangladesh emerged as one of South Asia's fastest-growing economies, while the political legitimacy of the Awami League remained closely tied to its stewardship of the developmental state and its historical association with the ideological legacy of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War¹, that was waged to attain liberty from the oppressive rule of West Pakistan.

Yet the apparent stability of this political order began to unravel at a time when Bangladesh seemed to be moving steadily forward on several fronts. Under the leadership of PM Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League, Bangladesh experienced more than a decade of sustained economic growth, large-scale infrastructure expansion, and significant technological modernisation. Bangladesh was preparing for a major milestone: its transition from the category of a least developed country to that of a developing nation, a step widely seen as recognition of the country's consistent economic growth and improvement in social indicators.

Large-scale infrastructure projects symbolised this transformation. The Matarbari Deep Sea Port², scheduled for inauguration in 2026, was expected to significantly strengthen Bangladesh's maritime trade capacity and integrate the country more deeply into regional shipping networks in the Bay of Bengal. Other projects such

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1. Ikhtisad Ahmed, "Bangladesh's 1971: A Polemic on Facts and Legacy," *Shuddhashar*, November 1, 2023, <https://shuddhashar.com/bangladeshs-1971-a-polemic-on-facts-and-legacy/>. Accessed on March 10, 2026.
 2. Sreoshi Sinha, "The Development of the Matarbari Port and Its Significance for the Region," National Maritime Foundation, August 15, 2023, <https://maritimeindia.org/the-development-of-the-matarbari-port-and-its-significance-for-the-region/>. Accessed on February 28, 2026.

as the Padma Bridge, the Dhaka Metro Rail, and the Bangabandhu Tunnel³ had already begun transforming internal connectivity, reducing travel times, and opening new economic corridors across the country. In the energy sector, the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant promised to enhance long-term electricity generation capacity and support Bangladesh's growing industrial base.

Alongside physical infrastructure, the government also placed strong emphasis on technological modernisation. A central pillar of this effort was the Digital Bangladesh vision, which sought to integrate information technology into governance, education, and economic development. In this context, Sajeeb Wazed Joy⁴, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) adviser to the prime minister and son of Sheikh Hasina, emerged as a key figure in shaping the country's technological transformation. Widely regarded as the architect of the Digital Bangladesh initiative, he played a leading role in expanding high-speed internet access, digitising government services, and promoting a new ecosystem of technological entrepreneurship.

One of the major elements of this digital push was the creation of 39 high-tech parks across the country, intended to encourage industrial innovation, attract foreign investment, and provide opportunities for Bangladesh's rapidly growing youth population. Complementing these initiatives were legislative frameworks such as the Information and Communication Technology Act,⁵ designed to regulate the digital sphere and support the expansion of e-governance. Together, these policies contributed to the emergence of a new technological landscape in Bangladesh, where digital platforms increasingly became part of everyday governance and economic activity.

These developments created a sense that Bangladesh was entering a new phase of national confidence. Economic indicators

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3. Israt Sultana, "7 Mega Projects in Bangladesh That Will Transform the Country Rapidly," *Business Inspection BD*, March 23, 2022, <https://businessinspection.com.bd/top-7-ongoing-mega-projects/>. Accessed on March 10, 2026.
 4. TBS Report, "Digital Bangladesh Brainchild of Joy: Sheikh Hasina," *The Business Standard*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/digital-bangladesh-brainchild-joy-sheikh-hasina-278030>. Accessed on March 5, 2026.
 5. Hasanuzzaman Zaman and Rokonuzzaman, *Achieving Digital Bangladesh by 2021 and Beyond*, Background Paper for the 7th Five Year Plan (7FYP), Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2021, vide, <https://plancomm.gov.bd>. Accessed on March 9, 2026.

were improving, infrastructure was expanding, and technological modernisation was reshaping the administrative and social fabric of the country. International observers often cited Bangladesh as a rare example of sustained development momentum in South Asia.

It was precisely at this moment, when Bangladesh appeared poised to consolidate these achievements, that the political atmosphere suddenly shifted. What began as protests linked to the government job quota system rapidly expanded into a wider wave of demonstrations. Within a short period, the protests escalated into a broader political confrontation that ultimately led to the removal of PM Sheikh Hasina and the disruption of the political equilibrium that had defined Bangladesh for more than a decade. These events disrupted the long-standing balance of power that had defined Bangladesh's political system for decades.

This removal of a democratically elected government created a political vacuum that was subsequently filled by an interim governing arrangement tasked with supervising the country's return to electoral politics. However, the political environment in which this transition unfolded significantly altered the parameters of what is known as a democratic competition. Most notably, the Awami League, the foremost party during the 1971 War of Liberation and historically one of the two principal pillars of Bangladesh's political order, found itself marginalised within the emerging political framework. The absence of such a foundational party from the electoral process represented a serious distortion of the democratic landscape. A political system that had long revolved around competition between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party was suddenly restructured without the participation of one of its central actors.

THE EVOLVING POLITICAL ORDER

The crisis of 2024 and the election that followed together represent a critical moment of ideological and institutional transition in Bangladesh's post-independence history. The developments of the past several years have not merely altered the distribution of political power; they have also reopened deeper questions concerning the ideological foundations of the Bangladeshi state. In particular, the political turbulence has revived debates surrounding the enduring

relevance of the national narrative forged during the Bangladesh Liberation War, which historically anchored the country's identity in the principles of secular Bengali nationalism⁶. The article examines the emerging contours of Bangladesh's evolving political order. **First**, it analyses the electoral data and regional patterns that defined the most recent parliamentary election, highlighting the ways in which the altered political environment reshaped electoral geography and party competition. **Second**, it explores the growing visibility of Islamist political actors and the implications of their electoral resurgence for the ideological framework that has historically underpinned the Bangladeshi state. **Third**, the article addresses the issue of minority insecurity and the broader concerns regarding democratic backsliding that have accompanied the political transition. **Finally**, it situates these domestic developments within the wider geopolitical context of South Asia, examining how Bangladesh's evolving political trajectory may affect regional alignments, particularly its relationship with India.

ELECTION DATA AND ELECTORAL GEOGRAPHY

The parliamentary election of 2026 produced a decisive outcome. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) secured a commanding victory, winning 209 seats, while its allied candidates captured three additional constituencies, bringing the alliance's total to 212 seats in the national Parliament.⁷ This result gave the BNP a comfortable majority and restored it to power after years in opposition.

The principal beneficiary of the altered political landscape, however, was also the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, which emerged as the largest opposition force with 68 parliamentary seats. When combined with the smaller Islamist parties, the broader religious political bloc significantly expanded its legislative presence.

The vote share figures reinforce this pattern. The BNP received approximately 49.6 per cent of the national vote, while the Jamaat secured nearly 32 per cent, leaving the remainder distributed among

6. Ahmed, n. 1.

7. "Bangladesh's BNP Claims Landslide Win in First Election Since 2024 Uprising." *Al Jazeera*, February 13, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/2/13/bangladeshs-bnp-claims-landslide-win-in-first-election-since-2024-uprising/>. Accessed on March 7, 2026.

smaller parties and independent candidates. The National Citizen Party, despite its visibility during the political protests that preceded the election, secured only a marginal share of the parliamentary seats.

The electoral geography also revealed notable regional trends. Islamist candidates performed particularly well in districts located along Bangladesh's western frontier, including regions bordering the Indian state of West Bengal. In several constituencies within Khulna, Rajshahi, and Rangpur divisions, the Jamaat candidates either won outright or recorded exceptionally strong vote shares.

These regional patterns highlight the interaction between local political dynamics, ideological mobilisation, and broader geopolitical narratives that have increasingly shaped Bangladesh's political discourse.

ISLAMIST RESURGENCE AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE 1971 CONSENSUS

One of the most significant implications of the 2026 election, that happened after the government broke during the crisis of 2024, was the resurgence of Islamist political forces within Bangladesh's parliamentary system. For decades after independence, the country's political identity was anchored in the legacy of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971. That struggle produced a national narrative rooted in secular Bengali nationalism, emphasising linguistic identity, cultural pluralism, and resistance against the Pakistani state.

The political dominance of the Awami League during the Hasina era reinforced this ideological framework. However, the recent rebellion reopened the debates about the changing nature of Bangladeshi national identity from being Bengali nationalism to Bengali Islamic nationalism.

The electoral success of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami reflects the broader ideological shift unfolding in Bangladesh's political landscape. The party has long remained a deeply controversial actor due to its role during the Bangladesh Liberation War, when it opposed the creation of an independent Bangladesh and aligned itself with forces supporting the West Pakistan-led military campaign. For many Bangladeshis, this historical association continues to shape

public perceptions of the party and its legitimacy within the country's political life.

In the decades following independence, particularly during the leadership of Sheikh Hasina and the rule of the Awami League, the Jamaat-e-Islami faced sustained legal and political pressure. Several of its leaders were prosecuted for alleged involvement in war-time crimes, and the party's activities were frequently restricted because of its extremist ideological positions that conflicted with the secular foundations of the Bangladeshi state.

However, the political changes that followed the collapse of the Sheikh Hasina government in August 2024 and the subsequent installation of an interim administration under Muhammad Yunus created a more permissive political environment. As the previous regime's tight control over political activity weakened, space opened up for a range of actors who had earlier operated on the margins of formal politics. Within this altered context, the Jamaat-e-Islami gradually rebuilt its organisational networks and re-entered the political arena, benefiting in part from the weakening or exclusion of some of its long-standing rivals.

While supporters portrayed this development as evidence of renewed political pluralism, critics opined that the growing visibility and influence of Islamist parties raises important concerns about the future direction of Bangladesh's political trajectory. The strengthening of such groups suggests that religious identity is once again becoming a central axis of political mobilisation, potentially challenging the secular ideals historically associated with the independence movement.

MINORITY VIOLENCE AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Periods of political instability in Bangladesh have historically coincided with heightened vulnerability for the religious minorities. The turbulence surrounding the 2024 crisis and the subsequent electoral transition has once again raised concerns about the safety and rights of the minority communities.

Bangladesh is home to significant populations of Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians, many of whom have historically supported the secular political orientation associated with the Awami League.

In the aftermath of the meticulously planned political upheaval, numerous reports emerged documenting severe and brutal attacks on minority homes, religious institutions, and businesses in various parts of the country.

Incidents like these reveal a troubling contradiction within Bangladesh's constitutional framework. While the Constitution continues to affirm religious pluralism, the repeated targeting of minorities has raised growing concerns about democratic backsliding and the slow weakening of secular protections.

So, the fundamental challenge for the country's new political leadership will be to ensure that an electoral transition does not translate into social insecurity for vulnerable communities, as it did during the interim period of eighteen months.

FOREIGN GEOPOLITICS AND THE BANGLADESH TRANSITION

The events that unfolded between August 5, 2024⁸, and the subsequent election that came about after 18 months of the forced departure of PM Sheikh Hasina, cannot be fully understood without considering the broader geopolitical context. Bangladesh occupies a strategically significant position in South Asia, situated at the crossroads of major regional economic and security networks.

Over the past decade, the country became an increasingly important partner for regional powers seeking influence in the Bay of Bengal. Infrastructure investment, maritime connectivity, and trade corridors all contributed to Bangladesh's growing geopolitical importance.

Within this context, the political upheaval that led to the removal of Sheikh Hasina inevitably attracted intense international attention. The developments were widely viewed within Bangladesh not as a spontaneous political transformation, but as a largely engineered process shaped by external strategic interests. Many observers argued that the crisis bore the hallmarks of a carefully constructed political intervention rather than an organic domestic movement.

8. Sudipto Ganguly, "What's Behind Bangladesh's Protest Against PM Sheikh Hasina?" *Reuters*, August 5, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/why-are-there-protests-bangladesh-again-2024-08-05/>. Accessed on February 27, 2026.

A significant strand of this discourse pointed towards the perceived role of the United States, whose increasing engagement with Bangladesh's political environment had already become visible in the months preceding the upheaval. In this interpretation, the transition appeared less accidental and more the outcome of deliberate political manoeuvring aimed at reshaping Bangladesh's leadership and policy orientation.

Within this framework, the emergence of Muhammad Yunus during the transitional phase was viewed by critics as part of the broader design. Yunus, whose global networks and close engagement with Western institutions have long been well known, was portrayed in these narratives as a figure positioned by the West to lead a new political arrangement that aligned more closely with Western strategic and economic interests.

At the same time, attention was also drawn to the role of smaller advocacy networks, civil society platforms, and politically active groups that had been operating in the background. According to these interpretations, such actors helped cultivate the political environment in which pressure against the Hasina government steadily intensified. After Sheikh Hasina was removed from power, the political situation in Bangladesh changed very quickly. The Awami League, which had been one of the country's main political parties for decades, was effectively pushed out of the political space and prevented from participating in the political process. At the same time, several individuals who had earlier been imprisoned on charges related to activities of terrorism were released and gradually returned to public life, which further changed the social and political atmosphere in the country.

In this new environment, the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus began laying out a roadmap for the country's political transition. One of the first major steps was the announcement of a July 2025 referendum, which the interim authorities presented as a way to seek public approval for the transitional arrangements and the reforms they proposed to introduce.

Following the referendum, the Yunus-led administration announced that national parliamentary elections would be held in February 2026, describing the move as an important step toward

restoring democratic governance. However, these announcements came at a time when the country's political landscape had already been significantly changed.

ELECTORAL OUTCOME AND VOTING PATTERNS

Parliamentary elections in Bangladesh are conducted within the institutional framework of the Jatiya Sangsad. Of the 350 seats in the national Parliament, 300 are filled through direct elections using the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system, while the remaining 50 seats are reserved for women and allocated proportionally among the political parties according to their parliamentary representation. Each parliamentary term lasts five years.⁹

Before the 2026 election, the interim administration led by Muhammad Yunus introduced several procedural reforms that altered aspects of the electoral process. Among these was the reintroduction of a "no vote" option in constituencies where only a single candidate stood for election. Another important reform was the introduction of postal voting for expatriate citizens, allowing Bangladeshis living abroad to participate in the electoral process for the first time through mailed ballots. The election was also conducted alongside a constitutional referendum linked to the political developments following the July protest movement, adding another layer of complexity to the electoral process.

The scale of the electorate reflected the magnitude of the democratic exercise. According to the final voter list released by the Election Commission, more than 127.7 million citizens were eligible to vote. Of these, approximately 64.8 million were male voters and 62.8 million were female voters,¹⁰ with a small number registered under the third-gender category. Notably, the rate of growth among female voters exceeded that of male voters, suggesting a gradual expansion of women's participation in the electoral process.

9. "Name and Composition of Parliament," Bangladesh Parliament, 2017, <https://www.parliament.gov.bd/index.php/en/mps/members-of-parliament>. Accessed on March 9, 2026.

10. "Final Voter List of Bangladesh: 2024 Parliamentary Elections," Election Commission of Bangladesh, 2024, <https://www.ec.gov.bd>. Accessed on March 5, 2026.

Significant variations also existed across constituencies. Gazipur-2 emerged as the largest constituency with more than 800,000 registered voters, while Jhalokati-1 had the smallest electorate with just over 227,000 voters.¹¹ These disparities illustrate the uneven demographic distribution across regions and patterns of population concentration in certain urban centres.

The electoral schedule was formally announced in December 2025 following consultations between the interim authorities and political parties. Although the interim leadership initially suggested that elections might take place later in 2026, political pressure from the major parties, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, resulted in an earlier timeline. The election was eventually scheduled for February 12, 2026, shortly before the beginning of Ramadan.

Candidate participation reflected intense political competition. More than 3,400 nomination papers were initially collected for the 300 constituencies, of which over 2,500 nominations were formally submitted. Nearly 28 per cent were rejected during the scrutiny process¹², leading to hundreds of appeals before the Election Commission. The election also saw an increase in female candidates, particularly from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the National Citizen Party. Limited gender-minority participation was also visible, with one third-gender candidate contesting as an independent.

Within this institutional context, the general election held on February 12, 2026, marked a significant turning point in Bangladesh's political trajectory. With more than 127 million registered voters and a turnout of 59.44 per cent,¹³ the election represented one of the largest electoral exercises in the country's recent history.

The results produced a decisive victory for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, led by Tarique Rahman. The party secured 209 of the 299 contested parliamentary seats and nearly half of the popular vote,¹⁴ enabling it to form the government with a strong parliamentary majority.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. n. 7.

The second largest share of seats was secured by the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, led by Shafiqur Rahman. The party won 68 seats and roughly 31.7 per cent of the vote, signalling the renewed electoral visibility of Islamist political forces in the post-Hasina political environment.

A smaller but symbolically important presence emerged through the National Citizen Party, led by Nahid Islam. Formed in the aftermath of the 2024 protest movement, the party secured six parliamentary seats and more than two million votes, reflecting the attempt by sections of the protest movement to transition from street mobilisation into formal politics.

However, the most consequential feature of the election was the absence of the Awami League, which had been the dominant political force in Bangladesh for more than a decade under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina. The party was banned from participating in the election following the political crisis and legal proceedings against its leadership. This exclusion definitely altered the competitive nature of the election and raised serious concerns about the democratic inclusiveness of the electoral process.

The absence of the Awami League effectively transformed the election into a limited contest primarily between the BNP and Islamist-aligned political forces. In practical terms, the removal of one of the country's largest political parties meant that a substantial segment of the electorate was left without its traditional political representation.

Historically, the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami had often acted as a political ally of the BNP in opposing the rule of the Awami League. Once the Awami League was removed from the political arena, the Jamaat again emerged as an influential actor in shaping the new political landscape.

At the same time, the July referendum introduced by the interim government created an additional layer of political complexity. Officially framed as a mechanism to obtain public endorsement for the political changes following the July protest movement of 2024, the referendum also appeared to create an alternative source of political legitimacy rooted in the street movement itself.

For the Jamaat-e-Islami, supporting the referendum allowed the party to expand its political influence without directly assuming the responsibilities of governing the state. For the BNP, however, the situation was far more complicated. If the authority of the July movement became institutionalised, it could limit the BNP's ability to exercise full political authority even after forming the government.

The BNP, therefore, found itself caught in a delicate balancing act. It could neither fully support the referendum nor openly oppose it. This uneasy position reflected the broader uncertainty surrounding Bangladesh's political transition, where competing actors were adapting to a rapidly shifting political landscape shaped by protests, new alliances, and the restructuring of political power. Now what did this election represent on ideological terms? It represented Islamist resurgence and the withering away of the 1971 political consensus of Bengali nationalism.

ISLAMIST RESURGENCE AND THE EROSION OF THE 1971 POLITICAL CONSENSUS

To truly understand the recent shifts in Bangladesh, we need to go back to the very foundation of the nation. Bangladesh was born in 1971 through the Bangladesh Liberation War, a struggle rooted in Bengali language, culture, and identity. Its creation was not merely about religion; it was about a people asserting their right to self-determination and democratic governance. This vision set Bangladesh apart from Pakistan, which had emphasised religion over culture in defining its statehood.

For decades, the Awami League, under leaders like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, embodied this ideal. Even in the midst of fierce political rivalries, the spirit of 1971 remained a central touchstone, shaping debates about national identity, governance, and legitimacy.

But with the ousting of Sheikh Hasina and the opening of political space for other actors, these foundations are being challenged. The re-emergence of the Jamaat-e-Islami is particularly striking. Historically, the Jamaat opposed the independence movement and aligned against the creation of Bangladesh, a legacy that made its political participation deeply controversial. Today, its growing visibility

signals that religious identity is once again becoming a major force in political mobilisation.

This does not erase the memory of 1971, which continues to hold deep emotional and symbolic weight for many Bangladeshis. But the political consensus built around that narrative is no longer unchallenged. Parties are increasingly leaning on religion, street politics, and alternative symbols to claim legitimacy.

The impact is clear. What we are witnessing is not just a change in government—it is a shift in the country's ideological landscape, where the balance among nationalism, religion, and democracy is being actively contested. How Bangladesh navigates this tension in the coming years will shape the nation's political and cultural path for generations.

WHAT DOES THE BNP'S WIN MEAN FOR THE COUNTRY, FOR INDIA, AND FOR THE REGION AT LARGE?

The return of the BNP, alongside the presence of the Jamaat-e-Islami, marks a clear shift in Bangladesh's political landscape. While the BNP is relatively moderate compared to the Jamaat's hardline religious stance, both parties point to a move away from the liberation-era ideals of secularism and Bengali nationalism. The trend has historical roots: in 1988, the Parliament of Bangladesh declared Islam¹⁵ as the state religion during the presidency of Hussain Muhammad Ershad. Building on this, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir¹⁶ recently stated that if the party comes to power, it will never enact any law that contradicts the Qur'an and Sunnah, emphasising governance within a religious framework.

This change suggests that religious identity will play a larger role in politics and governance, accompanied by street mobilisation, populist campaigns, and pressure group politics. Everyday life, public debate, and policy decisions may increasingly reflect religious and

15. David Bergman, "Bangladesh Court Upholds Islam as Religion of the State," *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/3/28/bangladesh-court-upholds-islam-as-religion-of-the-state>. Accessed on March 20, 2026.

16. "BNP Vision Is Equal Rights for All Faiths, Not Secularism: Fakhrul Tells *Al Jazeera*," *The Daily Star*, February 5, 2026, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/bnp-vision-equal-rights-all-faiths-not-secularism-fakhrul-tells-al-jazeera-4099091>. Accessed on March 10, 2026.

ideological priorities rather than the inclusive democratic principles established in 1971, marking a notable shift in the direction of the country's social and political environment.

What the BNP's Win Means for India

The return of the BNP to power signals a new chapter for India-Bangladesh relations. Under Sheikh Hasina, Dhaka had been a reliable partner for New Delhi, especially on matters of security cooperation and regional stability. Her ouster, however, has changed the political equation, creating an environment where bilateral ties require careful recalibration.

Historically, the BNP's previous terms (1991–96 and 2001–06)¹⁷ were marked by periods when anti-India rhetoric found space in political discourse, particularly during the 2001–06 coalition with the Jamaat-e-Islami. While India did not formally accuse the BNP government, this environment allowed certain groups sympathetic to anti-India causes to operate more openly, creating underlying tension in the relationship. In contrast, India's engagement with Hasina had been built on predictable cooperation and trust, which had stabilised regional relations over 15 years.

Even with this historical context, Tarique Rahman has signalled a pragmatic approach. The BNP's 2026 manifesto emphasises the slogan "Bangladesh Before All: Friends, yes; Masters, no," reflecting a desire for mutual respect and understanding with India. Rahman has also approached the sensitive issue of Hasina's continued refuge in India cautiously, thus, indicating that normalisation depends on reciprocal steps.

Other challenges include the safety of minorities, a politically sensitive issue for India, and the management of the porous border, where the BNP promises to take a firm stance on alleged cross-border "push-ins" and other incidents. Additionally, transboundary water disputes, including the Teesta River and the upcoming renewal of the Ganges Water Treaty, will remain central to diplomacy. The BNP has

17. "Bangladesh Election Results: What BNP's Win Means for India," *The Times of India*, February 13, 2026, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/bangladesh-election-results-what-bnps-win-means-for-india/articleshow/128302525.cms>. Accessed on March 10, 2026.

signalled willingness to explore alternatives, including China-backed plans, which India views cautiously given the strategic concerns about the Siliguri Corridor.¹⁸

In essence, the BNP's return marks a significant shift in South Asian geopolitics. For India, engagement with Dhaka will now involve a more assertive, ideologically distinct, and politically nuanced government, requiring a balance among diplomacy, security, and long-term regional stability.

What the BNP's Win Means for the Region

For the region, this change raises questions about stability, as shifts in Bangladesh's domestic politics inevitably ripple across borders, affecting trade, security, and cross-border cooperation. For India, Bangladesh's immediate neighbour and longstanding partner, a BNP-led government, particularly one with renewed space for Islamist networks, introduces strategic uncertainty, requiring careful diplomacy to maintain ties while safeguarding national interests. Over the long term, India will need to balance engagement and vigilance, supporting peaceful, democratic processes in Dhaka while preparing for scenarios where domestic politics could complicate regional partnerships and security arrangements.

The 2026 election in Bangladesh is not merely a political turnover; it is a redefinition of the nation's ideological compass. The return of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, alongside the revival of the Jamaat-e-Islami, also indicates a shift away from the secular, Bengali nationalist vision of 1971 toward a political landscape where religion, populist mobilisation, and street politics reclaim centrality. This transformation challenges the long-standing social contract, bringing both opportunity for pluralistic contestation and the risk of democratic erosion, particularly for vulnerable communities.

For India and the broader region, the BNP's ascendancy introduces strategic complexity. Bilateral cooperation, border management, and transboundary water agreements now require careful calibration, as

18. Sanjiv Krishan Sood, "Beware of a Third Front: Security Challenges for Indo-Bangladesh Borders in 2026," *The Quint*, January 28, 2026, <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/india-bangladesh-border-security-sheikh-hasina-geopolitical-hostilities-war>. Accessed on March 10, 2026.

Dhaka navigates a new balance between ideological priorities and practical governance.

Bangladesh today stands at a historical crossroads: its next steps will test whether the nation can reconcile its liberation-era ideals with emerging political realities. How it negotiates the tension among identity, governance, and democratic legitimacy will shape not just its own future, but the stability and security of the wider South Asian region.