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Bangladesh 's Political Reset: The 13th National Election and Aftermath

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Abstract

The 13th Jatiya Sangsad election of 12 February 2026 marks a turning point in Bangladesh's political trajectory of recent years. Conducted without the Awami League, the election produced a decisive two-thirds majority for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) under Tarique Rahman, alongside the emergence of Jamaat-e-Islami as the principal opposition and the entry of new, youth-led parties into parliament. This article analyses the structural shifts underpinning this electoral outcome, including the BNP's strategic repositioning, Jamaat's recovery, and the fragmentation of smaller parties. It further examines the post-election governance agenda, centred on constitutional reform, welfare expansion, and institutional restructuring, while assessing its evolving 'Bangladesh First' foreign policy and its implications for relations with major powers, particularly India. The article argues that while the election represents a political reset, its consolidation remains uncertain.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh



Introduction

The 12 February 2026 *Jatiya Sangsad* election in Bangladesh has been notable for many reasons: a multiparty participation featuring 51 political parties baring Awami League, over 2,000 electoral

candidates, a 59.44 per cent voter turnout, the introduction of 'No Vote' option and inclusion of postal ballots for the country's 15 million diaspora population. It was also unique because it was the first time that the Awami League (AL), which led Bangladesh's independence movement under Sheikh Mujibur

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Rahman, was barred from participation because of the May 2025 ban on its activities while former political allies Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JeIB), contested as rivals. The BNP secured a landmark two-thirds majority, ushering in its post-Khaleda Zia period with a return to power under the leadership of Tarique Rahman, Bangladesh's newly elected prime minister. However, this election also enabled several small, newly formed parties, including the one emerging from student movement, to secure seats in the 13th national parliament. A national referendum on the 'July National Charter', a 28-page reform blueprint, was held concurrently with the parliamentary election, receiving 68.06 per cent popular support. As a result, it requires the newly elected government to implement term limits and judicial reforms within 180 working days.

The BNP's success

The emphatic victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in the national election represents its comeback from political marginalisation. After nearly two decades as the main opposition, its political trajectory has been marked by significant legal and organisational hurdles. As such, its decisive mandate of 209 seats of the

300 seats on the ballot during the 12 February election signifies the party's historic return as the sole architect of Bangladesh's post-2024 uprising governance.

After its founding by then President Ziaur Rahman in 1978, the party's vote share had hovered between 30 and 41 per cent from its first victory in the 1979 national election until 2008.¹ However, in the 12 February election, the BNP secured its highest-ever popular vote of 49.97 per cent,² indicating that it successfully absorbed a large share of 'floating' voters, including those who had previously supported the Awami League. While this electoral dominance mirrors the BNP's 2001 performance, when it secured 193 seats, what distinguishes the current outcome is the party's independent participation, unlike earlier elections when it relied on alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami, and hence demonstrating its own organisational strength.

The 2026 election also marked a definitive transitional phase for the BNP. Firstly, Tarique Rahman returned to Bangladesh after 17 years of exile in the United Kingdom to formally takeover as the chairman of the party from his mother Begum Khaleda Zia who led the party between 1991 and 2018. Secondly, Rahman's "31-point reform" agenda

replaced his father Ziaur Rahman's "19-point programme" (which had laid the party's ideological foundation) as the BNP's core framework.³ Under Tarique Rahman's leadership, the BNP adopted new strategies to appeal to a broader voter base, including Gen Z, religious minorities, moderate and secular-leaning constituencies, as well as business-class voters, by repositioning itself as a nationalist and centrist party championing liberal democracy, religious freedom, and minority protection in its campaign. This shift, however, was also facilitated by the exclusion of the Sheikh Hasina's Awami League from the electoral process, which enabled the BNP to attract previous League sympathisers, especially Hindu voters who felt vulnerable under the post-uprising interim rule which saw Islamist resurgence in the social sphere. Moreover, contesting independently without the "Islamist" baggage of its earlier alliance with Jamaat also helped it appeal to nationalist and secular voters.

The BNP's appeal was further bolstered by the young National Citizens Party's decision to join the Jamaat alliance by prompting a shift of many of the youth party sympathisers towards Tarique Rahman's measured and pragmatic electoral campaign ahead of the 12

February voting. Interestingly, a factor that is consistent across the victories of the BNP over the years highlights that it has performed far better when the elections have been held by a neutral caretaker government such as in 1991, 2001 and 2026. On the otherhand, the party's poorest performances, including where it boycotted, happened when elections were conducted under the ruling party patronage (Awami League) such as in 2014, 2018, and 2024, which it viewed as rigged.

As such, the BNP's decisive mandate by polling nearly half of the total votes polled is more than a return to power and represents a structural reset. Firstly, moving beyond its earlier anti-AL rhetoric, the party this time presented a governance blueprint that combined immediate, transactional promises, such as Family Cards for 45 million people, and long-term roadmap to achieve a one-trillion-dollar economy by 2034.⁴ Secondly, the party utilised sophisticated social media campaigns, rebranding Tarique Rahman's leadership for a new generation as the "engine of the 2024 spirit."⁵ Thirdly, its candidate selection included fresh, young faces with relatively cleaner images and many of whom were active during the 2024 July Uprising. This can be described as its tactical move of co-option to project an image of a

“reformed” BNP.⁶ Its 49.97 per cent vote share aside, the party secured around 70 per cent of parliamentary seats – a classic outcome of the First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system, which amplified its advantage in “winner-takes-all” contests against a fragmented opposition.

Jamaat’s Recovery

While the election marked the return of the BNP to power, it also saw the return of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh to political and electoral prominence after navigating years of political wilderness, including a ban on its electoral activities by the Sheikh Hasina government which lasted from 2013 until its revocation by the Supreme Court in 2025 under interim government following Hasina’s ouster in August 2024. The Jamaat demonstrated its best electoral performance ever in the country, that is being seen as another significant structural shifts in the country’s political history. The Islamist party won 68 seats and secured 31.76 per cent of the popular vote share.⁷

When compared to its previous performances (1991, 1996, and 2001), this marks its strongest showing since 1991, when it won 18 seats with a 12.1 per cent vote share. However, unlike earlier elections when Jamaat’s presence was limited to that of a

minor party (1991, 1996) or a coalition partner (2001), the 12 February election elevated it to the status of principal opposition. The 2026 results also revealed Jamaat’s expanding foothold in urban areas (including 11 city corporations), which marks a departure from its earlier concentration in rural constituencies.⁸ Moreover, it secured victories in constituencies previously dominated by the Awami League and the BNP, with 55 of its 68 seats coming from constituencies where Jamaat had never won before.⁹

Given the party’s de-registration lasting over a decade (2013-2025) and multiple bans, Jamaat’s re-emergence as the official opposition party in the *Jatiya Sangsad* reflects the success of its calculated strategy by leveraging its post-uprising resurgence through rebranding and alliance formation. The rebranding efforts followed two paths: first, coopting the July Uprising sentiment by positioning their cadres as “frontline defenders” of the change in order to shed its historical baggage of 1971; and second, moderating its hardline Islamist rhetoric by adopting themes such as state reform, democratic pluralism, and even acknowledging “past mistakes” to attract moderate voters and reassure international observers. Yet, it simultaneously continued to preserve and propagate its revisionist

ideology thereby maintaining its long-term objective of establishing Sharia-based governance.¹⁰

Jamaat's rise as the principal opposition was also facilitated by its decision to form an 11-party electoral alliance after the BNP—its previous partner—decided to contest independently. The coalition included both smaller Islamist parties as well as the National Citizens Party (NCP), which emerged from the July Uprising of 2024.¹¹ Having NCP as its alliance partner enabled Jamaat to position itself as one of the heirs of the anti-Hasina Uprising of 2024 and recasting its image from a '1971-burdened' party to a '2024 liberation' force for a new generation. Moreover, the alliance's one-ballot policy of fielding a single candidate per constituency prevented vote splitting and enhanced organisational discipline, an advantage that smaller parties, such as the secular left, lacked.

Yet, despite leading such a broader alliance, Jamaat-e-Islami failed to secure a governing mandate and was restricted to 68 seats. The party's emphasis on 'ethical governance' without a clearly articulated economic policy, internal rifts within the alliance, and persistent concerns among women and secular voters regarding its social agenda proved

to be decisive factors limiting its electoral success.

Performance of Smaller Parties

The participation of smaller parties shows that the 12 February election was comparatively competitive and participatory election in its history even as Awami League was banned. Across the ideological spectrum from left-wing and secular to centrist and Islamist, smaller parties secured parliamentary representation. The most prominent among the smaller parties was the National Citizens' Party (NCP), which was formed by student and young leaders of the July 2024 uprising and sought to position itself as a political platform for Gen Z of the country. However, its decision to enter into an alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami (framed as political rather than ideological) just two months before the election proved costly for a party that had aspired to emerge as a "third force" to challenge the AL-BNP bipolarity that has defined the politics of Bangladesh for much of the last four decades. The NCP contested only 32 seats and won six with a 3.05 per cent of the vote share.¹² Nevertheless, the 13th Jatiya Sangsad now includes notable Gen Z representation from the NCP, with Nahid Islam appointed as the opposition chief whip.¹³

Other smaller and secular parties which secured a representation in the parliament included Ganosanhati Andolan (Zonayed Saki), Gono Odhikar Parishad (Nurul Haq Nur) with a seat each.¹⁴ Although numerically limited, the presence of these parties ensures a secular, left-wing democratic voice in an otherwise centre-right and Islamist-dominated parliament. However, the most significant shift was observed in the trajectory of the Jatiya Party (Ershad), once a major force during the Awami League's tenure. Its historical proximity to the ousted Awami League contributed to its political isolation, facing sharp criticism and attacks from both the NCP and Islamist groups, while also grappling with internal divisions. Despite contesting 195 seats, the party failed to secure a single seat, marking its electoral eclipse.¹⁵

On the Islamist front, besides Jamaat, the February election witnessed a record number of candidates fielded by Islamist political parties,¹⁶ which also collectively secured their highest-ever seat share.¹⁷ It saw smaller parties like Bangladesh Khilafat Majlis and Islami Andolan Bangladesh gaining a foothold, thereby reflecting a broader yet fragmented religious conservative vote.¹⁸

The BNP Government and its Challenges

With a decisive electoral mandate, the BNP formed the government under the leadership of Tarique Rahman on 17 February 2026. His cabinet includes 25 cabinet ministers and 23 junior ministers of state. In line with the party's election manifesto, the BNP government outlined its priorities to restore democracy, introduce short-term economic measures; strengthen the rule of law and equal rights, curb corruption; and build a self-reliant Bangladesh. A comprehensive 180-day priority plan was also announced which centred on three key areas: controlling the prices of essential commodities, improving law and order, and ensuring a stable supply of electricity and energy.¹⁹

Among its electoral commitments, the BNP government has initiated several welfare and social protection schemes, including the Family Card (launched on 10 March), Farmers Card, an agricultural loan waiver (approved in a cabinet meeting on 26 February), a sports allowance (launched on 30 March), a canal excavation programme (launched on 16 March), and financial support for religious leaders and scholars (launched on 14 March).²⁰

Nevertheless, despite forming the government with such a dominant mandate, it faces several challenges in the governance of the country which saw a people's uprising ending Sheikh Hasina's extended tenure in government and asking for a change. Accordingly, the BNP must now balance its traditional nationalist base with the liberal aspirations of Gen Z voters who led the 2024 Uprising. It become all the more important given that alongside the parliament election Bangladesh also held a referendum on the constitutional and administrative reform measures. With a 68 per cent people voting 'Yes', the Tarique Rahman government would need to lead the parliament to establish a Constitutional Reform Council to implement the Charter's provisions within 180 working days.

There is roughly 80 per cent alignment between the BNP's 31-Point Reform Plan and the July Charter, both of which serve as foundational blueprints for the establishment of what the uprising leadership described as the "Second Republic". Together, they aim to dismantle executive over-centralisation through comprehensive constitutional reform. Measures such as a two-term limit for the prime minister and the introduction of a bicameral legislature are intended to rebalance

power and ensure broader national representation beyond the traditional winner-takes-all system. Yet, central to this transformation are the proposed permanent reinstatement of a non-partisan caretaker government and the establishment of an independent Supreme Judicial Council, both designed to insulate electoral and judicial processes from political interference. While the 31-Point Plan outlines a detailed socio-economic vision, including a "trillion-dollar roadmap" and localised social safety nets, the July Charter provides the ratified legal mandate, effectively framing the post-uprising transition as a formal process of constitutional evolution focused on transparency, accountability, and decentralisation of state power.

The first difference between the new government and the opposition was witnessed during oath-taking ceremony of the newly elected members of parliament on 17 February, who, besides being sworn in as members of parliament, were also supposed to take an additional oath as members of the Constitutional Reform Council. While BNP MPs took the oath as members of parliament, swearing allegiance to the Constitution, they refused to take the Reform Council oath, arguing that the Council must first be formally adopted by parliament. Although

both Jamaat and the NCP initially threatened a boycott, their MPs ultimately participated in the oath-taking proceedings.²¹

The disagreement over the Constitutional Reform Council remains a key point of contention with the Jamaat-led alliance demanding that the government convene, or at least initiate steps towards convening, the Council by 15 March, arguing that the referendum mandate renders the July Charter legally binding under the July National Charter Implementation Order of 2025.²² The BNP, however, maintains that the Charter Implementarion Order lacks a legal basis, insisting that constitutional amendments must precede any implementation, and has accordingly challenged its validity in court by describing it as unlawful.²³ Consequently, the issue remains deadlocked despite two rounds of parliamentary discussions, opposition walkouts, and calls for street protests.

The government's administrative moves have also come under scanner. For instance, when it removed Bangladesh Bank Governor Ahsan H. Mansur in March, justifying it as part of broader institutional restructuring, his replacement, Md Mostaqur Rahman, an industrialist, drew criticism, with the opposition labelling it as the "formal beginning of government-backed mob culture"²⁴. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) also

raised concerns, noting that the appointment marked the first instance of a businessman leading the central bank and questioning his ability to act impartially, given his corporate linkages as a loan-defaulting businessperson.²⁵ This reshuffle extended to key state institutions, including the administration, International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), police, and army, within 30 days of the new government assuming power.²⁶ While the government has defended these changes as necessary for structural reform, the opposition has characterised them as politically motivated.

On his first working day, Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed declared that "mob culture in Bangladesh ends", while Prime Minister Tarique Rahman emphasised in his first public address that law enforcement agencies would take strict action against major drivers of disorder, including drug trafficking, gambling, and extortion. However, ongoing reshuffles in the police and army, along with the rollback of certain reform ordinances, have raised concerns among people about the sincerity of the government in undertaking reforms. According to a Human Rights Support Society report, March 2026 alone witnessed 25 mob attacks, 13 deaths, and 113 incidents of political violence (18 killed and 913 injured).²⁷ Incidents

such as the killing of a pir in Kushtia, attacks on queer individuals in Shahbagh, and the arrest of cartoonists and political activists for criticising the government have drawn sharp criticism, with observers noting continuities with repressive practices of previous regimes.²⁸

The government also reviewed 133 ordinances enacted by the previous interim administration, which were mandated to be placed before parliament within 30 days of the first parliamentary sitting and approved; failure to do so would cease to have legal effect. Of the 133 ordinances, the BNP retained 98 unchanged, retained 15 in revised form and repealed 20.²⁹ Among those allowed to lapse included key ordinances aligned with the July Charter, such as those concerning the establishment of an independent secretariat for the Supreme Court, judicial appointments, the National Human Rights Commission, the prevention and remedy of enforced disappearance, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the Police Commission. This decision has been widely criticised by the opposition parties and Transparency International Bangladesh as a “breach of trust and consensus.”³⁰

Externally, the West Asian crisis since late February when the United States and Israel launched a new war

against Iran, has since led to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, through which the Gulf oil and gas is shipped out, has triggered a global fuel crisis. Bangladesh, which imports approximately 95 per cent of its energy from the region, has since experienced severe supply disruptions, leading to panic buying, hoarding, violence at petrol pumps, fuel smuggling, transport fare hikes, inflation, agricultural stress, power shortages, and the shutdown of fertiliser factories. Even as the government responded with measures such as fuel rationing, anti-hoarding crackdowns, price freeze, and energy source diversification, it has failed to assuage the situation.

Foreign Policy and Implications for India

When the Tarqieue Rahman-led BNP campaigned for the 13th general election, it promised to pursue a ‘Bangladesh First’ foreign policy under the slogan of “*Na Pindi, Na Dilli, Shobar Aagey Bangladesh* [Not Rawalpindi, not Delhi—Bangladesh First]”. It positioned the party as a pragmatic, nationalist force committed to safeguarding Bangladesh’s sovereignty above all else—“a friend to all and a ‘slave’ to none.” In his first post-election press conference, Rahman reiterated that his government will pursue a ‘Bangladesh First’ foreign policy that

will seek to protect the country's national interests while maintaining balanced relations with neighbouring countries such as China, India, and Pakistan.³² His Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman further emphasised that Dhaka will pursue a bold, responsible, and interest-driven foreign policy by maintaining constructive engagement with all partners, while seeking to revive the assertive foreign policy approach of the party founder President Ziaur Rahman, including reviving SAARC as the government's main vision for regional development.³³ He further noted that it will be guided by principles of independence and sovereignty, non-interference, mutual benefit, and national dignity.³⁴

When it comes to the United States, Washington which maintained strong relations with the Interim Government of Muhammad Yunus and backed the elections, made early overtures to the BNP as it became clear that the party was headed to a landslide victory. Bangladesh, according to US policymakers, occupies a strategically significant position among American partners, particularly within the Indo-Pacific framework, signalling a broader geopolitical alignment vis-à-vis China.³⁵ As such, while commending Tarique Rahman on the victory, President Donald Trump urged him

to implement the pending trade agreement between the two countries, finalised by the Yunus administration but deeply contested domestically, besides concluding defence deals. Washington has sought to deepen bilateral ties with Dhaka and transform it into a multidimensional cooperation by expanding into areas such as trade, energy, agriculture, and maritime security. Nevertheless, BNP's decision to retain Khalilur Rahman, known for his pro-US stance, from the previous interim administration as the new foreign minister raised accusations of American "election engineering" by its political opponents. While the government has rejected such opposition claims of its secret agreements with Washington, it has stated that all interim-era agreements will be subject to review and finalisation.

On the otherhand, China, for its part, has sought to advance the Bangladesh–China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including the implementation of the long-pending Teesta River project negotiated during the interim government period.³⁶ It has also expressed interest in expanding cooperation in information and communication technology, diplomacy, training, and media, and has proposed a

memorandum of understanding (MoU) to institutionalise these efforts. Moreover, as part of efforts to increase the engagements with the government, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has invited BNP for dialogue in Beijing which is scheduled to happen in April during which the two sides are expected to discuss the ways to further the bilateral relations between the two countries.

Compared to the US, India, and China, the BNP government's engagement with Pakistan has been somewhat minimal, although developments in diplomatic relations during the previous interim rule seem to maintain the momentum. The Pakistan foreign minister had called for strengthening bilateral cooperation and expanding ties across diverse sectors.³⁷ In a courtesy call with the Bangladesh home minister after the government took over, the Pakistan High Commissioner to Bangladesh discussed growing bilateral cooperation in areas such as safe city initiatives and database registration systems, counterterrorism efforts, police training, the drone sector, the exchange of criminals or prisoners, and broader regional developments.³⁸ Talks were also held on joint initiatives in the media, culture, and knowledge-based sectors for people-to-people

connectivity, as well as in the industrial sector to boost bilateral trade ties.

The foreign policy reset also reflects cautious optimism in Bangladesh's relations with India, which strained after the ouster of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 with the Interim Government's hardline approach and open embrace of Pakistan acting as contributing factors. Bilateral ties have shown signs of improvement, with both sides working to restore services that had been suspended during the interim period. Following BNP's win, New Delhi expressed its 'readiness to support' Dhaka's endeavour to build a democratic, progressive, and inclusive nation. A joint understanding has reached on maintaining a balanced partnership for the welfare of both countries based on mutual interest, rooted interdependence and not over-dependence. Positive developments include Bangladesh resuming visa services of all categories for Indian citizens, resumption of Kolkata-Agartala bus service via Dhaka, New Delhi's announcement of Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) full scholarship programme for Bangladeshi students for the present academic year, steps towards positive people-to-people connectivity. India also reaffirmed its support for

Bangladesh to pursue justice for Pakistan's 1971 atrocities. Additionally, India has supported Bangladesh's energy needs during the ongoing West Asian crisis by supplying diesel through the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline in a timely and cost-effective manner. Nevertheless, key issues such as the renewal of the Ganges Water Treaty, border management, and the extradition request of Hasina are likely to remain central to bilateral diplomacy. How the two countries navigate these contesting issues while securing their strategic interests will therefore be the test.

Overall, Bangladesh under the BNP government has thus far pursued a balanced foreign policy with key neighbouring nations, characterised by diversified engagement and strategic autonomy. This is also reflected in its diplomatic outreach, including reports that Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's first foreign visit may be to Bhutan, signalling an effort to avoid overdependence on any single regional power such as India, China and Pakistan. Bangladesh's priorities are somewhat clear: a foreign policy rooted in strategic autonomy. While no major internal challenges have emerged on the foreign policy front, the US trade agreement continues to attract criticism for its perceived asymmetry. The key challenge ahead

will be managing the complex dynamics among the United States, China, India, and Pakistan while adhering to the 'Bangladesh First' doctrine.

For India, the evolving political landscape in Bangladesh necessitates a calibrated and proactive approach:

- (i) improve relationship with the BNP leadership and at the same time establish linkage with other political parties, including the Jamaat and NCP;
- (ii) encourage track II initiatives through think tanks, media houses, etc., to engage with the new leadership at all levels;
- (iii) build new, and consolidate old linkages with the military;
- (iv) proactively discuss the Water treaty, which is going to expire in December 2026; and
- (v) keep pushing the envelope on connectivity and bilateral economic cooperation.

Conclusion

So far, the decisions taken by the Tarique Rahman government have been very cautious and, in several aspects, somewhat progressive. There is little visible evidence of overt vengeance politics, and its public rhetoric has remained largely non-divisive, signalling an attempt

to move beyond the polarisation that has long characterised Bangladesh's political landscape. The emphasis on institutional reform, welfare delivery, and a rules-based governance framework suggests an effort to balance immediate political consolidation with longer-term structural change. Nonetheless, the BNP-led government's approach has generated significant controversy, particularly on the domestic front where the contentious issues surrounding the Constitutional Reform Council, institutional reshuffles, ordinance rollbacks, and law-and-order challenges reveal the limits of consensus in a fragmented political environment.

On the foreign policy front though, the government has so far maintained a careful balancing act by simultaneously engaging with the United States, China, India, Pakistan and other regional actors under its "Bangladesh First" doctrine. While this approach reflects strategic pragmatism and autonomy, sustaining such equilibrium amidst broader geopolitical churning and unfolding US-China competition will require diplomatic agility and internal policy coherence. In such context, Tarique government's political reset is unlikely to proceed smoothly unless domestic contestation around issues, institutional transition, and external uncertainties are not managed carefully. ■

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