



Research Article

A Nation's Cry: Democracy, Human Rights, and the Struggle for Good Governance in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper examines the persistent challenges facing democracy, human rights, and good governance in Bangladesh, highlighting how historical, political, administrative, and institutional weaknesses have impeded democratic consolidation since independence. Although parliamentary democracy was restored in 1991, recurring electoral irregularities, political polarization, and the monopolization of state institutions by ruling parties have weakened democratic legitimacy and limited meaningful political competition. The abolition of the caretaker government system and controversial elections, particularly in 2014 and 2018, further undermined public confidence in the electoral process. Recent student-led movements in 2024–2025 reflected growing public dissatisfaction with political exclusion and governance failures, emphasizing the demand for democratic reforms. The study also identifies bureaucratic politicization, centralized decision-making, corruption, and weak administrative accountability as major barriers to effective governance and public service delivery. Merit-based recruitment, professional development, and institutional autonomy are recommended to strengthen administrative capacity. Furthermore, persistent human rights concerns—including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, custodial deaths, violence against women, and restrictions on civil liberties—continue to challenge the rule of law despite constitutional guarantees. Independent oversight bodies, such as the Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, Human Rights Commission, and judiciary, require greater operational and financial independence to ensure accountability and justice. The paper concludes that Bangladesh's democratic future depends on comprehensive institutional reforms that promote free and fair elections, judicial independence, bureaucratic professionalism, protection of human rights, and active citizen participation. Strengthening civil society, safeguarding freedom of expression, and fostering inclusive political dialogue are essential for rebuilding public trust and establishing a transparent, accountable, and participatory system of governance capable of fulfilling the democratic aspirations envisioned at the nation's independence.

Keywords

Bangladesh, Challenges, Governance, Human Rights

1. Introduction

The state of democracy, human rights, and good governance in Bangladesh remains deeply troubled and urgently in need of reform. While the country has made significant strides

in socio-economic development and digital connectivity in recent years, fundamental democratic norms and human rights

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protections are under severe strain [6]. Reports from independent human rights organisations and civic space monitors describe a political environment marked by widespread violence, shrinking civic space, and increasing attacks on journalists, political activists, minorities, women, and children [2].

The major political shift in August 2024, triggered by mass protests that led to the ouster of a long-standing government, ushered in an interim administration led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus. Although this transition created an opportunity for democratic reform, the anticipated improvements in human rights and the rule of law have not materialised fully. Throughout 2025, Bangladesh experienced a marked escalation in political and mob violence, including at least 914 incidents resulting in 133 deaths and over 7,500 injuries, alongside widespread legal actions and mass arrests tied to political disputes and election tensions (Human Rights Support Society [16]). Violence against journalists and attacks on media institutions have also increased, posing a significant threat to freedom of expression and information [45].

As Bangladesh heads toward the February 2026 general election, concerns about electoral credibility, civic space, and public safety persist. Several international organisations have reported rising targeted killings, mob violence, and intimidation of media outlets and activists, raising questions about the country's ability to hold genuinely free, fair, and participatory elections [39]. Surveys of journalists reveal widespread fear of physical assault, verbal harassment, and digital intimidation as election campaigns intensify [3].

Rule of law challenges are compounded by violence against religious minorities, including a recent surge in attacks against Hindu communities, which has drawn international attention and heightened concerns about minority protection [50]. These issues highlight not only continued patterns of political violence but also systemic weaknesses in governance and accountability.

Despite stated commitments by political leaders to uphold democratic principles and human rights, distrust in public institutions remains high and allegations of corruption, impunity, and politicised law enforcement are widespread. Common citizens, civil society groups, and opposition parties continue to call for transparent electoral processes, strengthened rule of law, and genuine accountability mechanisms across the public sector.

This paper aims to uncover and analyse these pressing realities by examining key elements of democracy, human rights, and good governance in contemporary Bangladesh through credible evidence and documented facts.

2. Conceptual Voyage

This study is grounded in three interrelated concepts—de-

mocracy, human rights, and good governance—which together provide the analytical lens for assessing the contemporary governance situation in Bangladesh.

2.1. Democracy

Democracy broadly refers to a system of governance in which political authority originates from the people and is exercised through their elected representatives. Although democracy has been popularized globally—often influenced by Western political traditions—its conceptual foundations are diverse and contested, ranging from classical thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle to modern theorists like Schumpeter and Dahl [8]. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes procedural and institutional dimensions of democracy [9]. Democracy is defined as a system of governance in which leaders derive their authority from a universal electorate with genuine political choices and rights [58]. Furthermore, political competition, inclusiveness, and electoral responsiveness are highlighted as the core attributes of democracy [10].

Synthesizing these views, democracy in this study is understood as a representative system characterized by periodic free and fair elections, political pluralism, rule of law, accountability, and meaningful citizen participation [8, 23].

2.2. Human Rights

Human rights are inherent and universal entitlements that accrue to individuals by virtue of being human. Rooted in centuries of philosophical debate, modern human rights norms are codified most comprehensively in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Human rights encompass civil, political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, ensuring dignity, equality, liberty, and security without discrimination [1, 37, 62]. Core elements include the right to life and liberty, freedom of conscience and association, access to justice, political participation, and protection under the rule of law.

2.3. Good Governance

Good governance refers to the manner in which power is exercised in managing public affairs and resources. The World Bank [63] conceptualizes governance as the use of authority in economic and social management, while the notion of “good” governance emphasizes transparency, accountability, effectiveness, participation, and rule of law [42, 54]. Crucially, good governance is unsustainable without democratic institutions and respect for human rights.

Drawing from this theoretical synthesis, the study employs eight common analytical criteria—free elections, accountability, rule of law, access to justice, civil society engagement, judicial independence, media freedom, and anti-corruption—to evaluate the state of democracy and human rights in Bangladesh.

3. Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance in Bangladesh Constitution

The Bangladesh Constitution is considered one of the best constitutions in the world which was made following and reviewing the constitutions of the UK, the USA, and India. The preamble of the constitution pledging that-

'It shall be a fundamental aim of the state to realize through the democratic process a socialist society, free from exploitation a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality, and justice, political, economic and social will be secured for all citizens' [7, 9].

Therefore, the preamble of the Bangladesh constitution enumerated most of the cardinal features of democracy and human rights. Besides, Articles 7 (1) and 11 of the Constitution specifically highlights democracy and democratic governance. According to article 7 (1),

'all powers in the Republic belong to the people, and their exercise on behalf of the people shall be effective only under, and by the authority of the constitution' [9].

Similarly, Article 11 stated that-

'The republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed and in which effective participation by the people through their elected representatives in the administration at all levels shall be ensured' [7].

These two articles provide and permit the basic criteria of democracy in Bangladesh.

However, Article 70 states:

"A person elected as a Member of Parliament at an election at which he was nominated as a candidate by a political party shall vacate his seat if he resigns from that party or votes in Parliament against the party."

This provision is contradictory to the real spirit of democracy and for that reason; most of the MPs support their own political parties' agenda even if that is against the public interest.

In theory, Bangladesh has been recognized as a representative democratic state like Westminster and it has ratified most of the important treaties and conventions of human rights. How far these principles have been implemented and practice in Bangladesh is the main quest of this study. For searching for the answer to this question, the following section highlights current practice and the state of democracy and human rights in Bangladesh.

4. The Current State of Democracy, Human Rights, and Good Governance in Bangladesh

This section analyses the contemporary condition of de-

mocracy, human rights, and good governance in Bangladesh through the eight core elements outlined in the conceptual framework, beginning with the foundational criterion of periodic, free, fair, and participatory national elections.

4.1. Periodic Free, Fair, and Participatory National Elections

Regular, competitive, and credible elections constitute the cornerstone of democratic governance. Bangladesh, since its independence in 1971, has constitutionally adopted a parliamentary system in which executive authority rests with the prime minister, while the president performs largely ceremonial functions. Although Bangladesh formally operates a multiparty system—with more than 100 registered political parties—the political landscape has long been dominated by two major blocs led by the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), resulting in highly polarized and confrontational politics [20, 24].

Since independence, Bangladesh has held eleven parliamentary elections. Scholarly consensus and observer reports indicate that only the four elections conducted under non-party caretaker governments (1991, 1996, 2001, and 2008) met minimum standards of electoral competitiveness and credibility [11, 21, 63]. In contrast, elections held under partisan governments—particularly in 2014 and 2018—have been widely criticized for systemic irregularities, voter suppression, pre-election intimidation, and the marginalization of opposition parties [19, 31].

The 11th parliamentary election of 30 December 2018 exemplifies this democratic regression. The AL-led alliance secured 288 of 300 seats, leaving the BNP-led alliance with only eight seats, effectively eliminating parliamentary opposition and weakening democratic checks and balances. Independent observers and rights organizations reported widespread arrests of opposition activists, election-related violence, ballot manipulation, and restrictions on media coverage both before and after polling day [48]. Similar concerns arose from the 10th parliamentary election in 2014, which was boycotted by major opposition parties, resulting in 154 uncontested seats and raising serious questions about electoral legitimacy.

Developments since 2024–2026 have not substantially reversed this trajectory. Despite political transitions and reform promises following mass protests in 2024, international democracy indices continue to classify Bangladesh as “partly free” or “electoral autocratic,” citing weak electoral integrity, politicized administration, and persistent repression of opposition activity [12].

Overall, Bangladesh's electoral history reflects a pattern of procedural democracy without substantive competition. The absence of credible elections has entrenched one-party dominance, fostered confrontational politics, and contributed to chronic instability, undermining citizens' rights to political participation, accountability, and democratic governance.

4.2. Accountability

Accountability refers to the obligation of public officials and institutions to explain, justify, and take responsibility for their actions, particularly regarding the use of public authority and resources [38]. It is widely regarded as a cornerstone of democratic governance and public administration, as it provides mechanisms through which power holders are answerable to citizens and oversight bodies [4, 5, 34] conceptualizes accountability as a structured relationship in which an actor must justify conduct before a forum empowered to evaluate performance and impose sanctions.

In Bangladesh, accountability remains structurally weak and politically constrained. Persistent allegations of corruption, politicization of public institutions, and executive dominance over oversight mechanisms have significantly undermined accountability across politics and administration [17]. Although constitutional bodies such as parliamentary standing committees and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) formally exist, their effectiveness is limited by partisan influence, selective enforcement, and lack of institutional autonomy [19]. By 2026, despite occasional high-profile investigations, the ACC continues to face criticism for focusing disproportionately on opposition figures while avoiding systemic corruption involving ruling elites (Transparency International Bangladesh [51].

Moreover, parliamentary oversight has weakened due to the absence of a strong opposition following successive non-competitive elections. Although nearly 50 parliamentary committees are in place, their reports rarely translate into sanctions or policy reform, reinforcing a culture of impunity. Consequently, accountability mechanisms in Bangladesh function more symbolically than substantively, contributing to governance failure and declining public trust.

4.3. Transparency

Transparency is intrinsically linked to accountability and refers to the availability, accessibility, and reliability of information regarding government decisions, policies, and resource allocation. Effective transparency enables citizens, media, and civil society to scrutinize state actions and reduces opportunities for corruption and abuse of discretion.

Bangladesh enacted the Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2009, which formally guarantees citizens' access to public information. However, in practice, transparency remains limited. By 2026, studies indicate that many public agencies either delay, deny, or selectively disclose information, often citing national security or administrative convenience [52]. Journalists and information seekers frequently face harassment, legal intimidation, or bureaucratic resistance when attempting to access sensitive data, particularly related to public procurement, health, infrastructure, and security sectors.

High-profile corruption cases—such as illicit wealth accumulation by politically connected officials and bureaucrats—continue to surface in media reports, highlighting systemic

transparency deficits [12, 48]. These patterns demonstrate that while legal frameworks for transparency exist, political will and institutional safeguards necessary for effective implementation remain weak.

4.4. Rule of Law

The rule of law is a foundational pillar of democracy, human rights, and good governance, ensuring equality before the law, legal certainty, and protection from arbitrary state action. The Constitution of Bangladesh enshrines these principles through guarantees of equality (Article 27), protection of life and liberty (Article 31), and judicial remedies for enforcement of fundamental rights (Articles 44 and 102) [9].

Despite these constitutional commitments, the practical application of the rule of law in Bangladesh remains deeply problematic. Confrontational politics, politicized law enforcement, and weak judicial accountability have produced a pattern of selective justice and systemic rights violations. Extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, custodial torture, and arbitrary arrests have been repeatedly documented by domestic and international human rights organizations [20, 35, 59].

Recent global indices continue to reflect these challenges. Bangladesh's position in the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index has remained among the lowest in South Asia, reflecting deficiencies in constraints on government power, criminal justice, and fundamental rights protection [60]. By 2026, public perception surveys also indicate widespread fear and insecurity among citizens, particularly political activists, journalists, and marginalized groups.

4.5. Independence of the Judiciary

Judicial independence is essential for upholding the rule of law and safeguarding constitutional rights. It requires that judges exercise their authority free from interference by the executive or legislature and those appointments, promotions, and disciplinary actions are based on merit and institutional norms rather than political loyalty [28].

Although the formal separation of the judiciary from the executive was implemented in 2007, substantive independence remains constrained in Bangladesh. Executive influence persists in judicial appointments, promotions, and transfers, particularly within the higher judiciary. The forced resignation of former Chief Justice S. K. in 2018 remains a landmark example of executive interference, with long-lasting implications for judicial autonomy and morale [43].

By 2026, concerns over supersession, politicized appointments, and the continued use of executive magistrates in judicial functions—such as mobile courts—underscore unresolved structural tensions between the executive and judiciary. These practices weaken public confidence in judicial neutrality and compromise access to impartial justice.

In sum, while Bangladesh possesses constitutional and legal frameworks supportive of accountability, transparency, rule of law, and judicial independence, their implementation remains deeply flawed. The persistent gap between legal ideals and political practice continues to undermine democracy, human rights, and good governance in the country.

4.6. Access to Information and Justice

Access to information and access to justice constitute two fundamental pillars of democracy and human rights. Access to information empowers citizens to understand their rights and entitlements, scrutinize government actions, and demand accountability, while access to justice ensures the enforcement of those rights through fair and impartial legal mechanisms. In Bangladesh, the enactment of the Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2009 and the establishment of the Information Commission marked important institutional steps toward transparency and citizen empowerment. In addition, citizen charters have been introduced in public offices to inform service recipients about procedures, timelines, and responsibilities.

However, empirical evidence suggests that these mechanisms remain largely ineffective in practice. Studies conducted in public service institutions, including health facilities, reveal low public awareness of RTI provisions and citizen charters, even among frontline service providers [32]. By 2026, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) reports indicate that bureaucratic resistance, fear of reprisal, and poor institutional capacity continue to limit citizens' ability to obtain information, particularly in sensitive sectors such as health, procurement, policing, and local government [52]. Consequently, legal entitlements to information have not translated into meaningful transparency for ordinary citizens, underscoring the need for nationwide awareness and capacity-building initiatives.

Access to justice remains even more constrained, especially for women, minorities, the poor, and politically marginalized groups. Structural barriers such as legal costs, procedural delays, lack of legal aid, and elite dominance over both formal courts and informal dispute-resolution mechanisms (*salish*) systematically exclude vulnerable populations [33, 62]. Despite the formal separation of the judiciary from the executive in 2007, executive influence over lower courts and law enforcement persists, limiting judicial independence and impartiality [32, 65]. Reports of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and custodial torture documented through 2024–2026 further illustrate profound failures in ensuring access to justice and legal remedies [20, 36].

4.7. Engagement of Civil Society

The engagement of civil society is essential for democratic accountability, human rights protection, and participatory governance. Bangladesh has a long tradition of civil society activism, with non-governmental organizations contributing

to development, advocacy, and rights awareness since independence [60]. Organizations such as the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), and Odhikar play critical roles in monitoring governance, documenting rights violations, and providing legal assistance.

However, since the mid-2010s—and continuing through 2026—civil society space has increasingly contracted. Legal and administrative restrictions, surveillance, funding constraints, and intimidation of activists have limited the ability of independent organizations to operate freely [6]. Political polarization has also affected media houses, think tanks, and professional associations, eroding public trust in civil society neutrality [64]. Moreover, government responsiveness to civil society recommendations remains minimal, with policy inputs often ignored unless aligned with ruling party interests.

Despite these constraints, rights-based organizations continue to document abuses, support victims, and pursue public interest litigation, particularly in cases involving violence against women, environmental degradation, and extrajudicial actions. Their resilience underscores both the importance and vulnerability of civil society engagement in Bangladesh's democratic landscape.

4.8. Freedom of Association, Press, and Media

Freedom of association, assembly, and expression are constitutionally guaranteed in Bangladesh under Articles 37, 38, and 39 of the Constitution. In theory, these rights provide citizens with platforms to organize, protest, and express dissent. In practice, however, these freedoms remain heavily circumscribed. Public assemblies and political demonstrations—particularly by opposition parties—are frequently restricted, dispersed, or prohibited under the pretext of public order and security, often through the imposition of Section 144 and preventive arrests.

Press and media freedom has further deteriorated in recent years. While Bangladesh hosts a large number of print and electronic media outlets, journalists face growing risks of harassment, arrest, violence, and self-censorship. The misuse of restrictive laws—first the ICT Act (Section 57) and later the Digital Security Act (2018), replaced by the Cyber Security Act (2023)—has continued to criminalize critical reporting and online expression [3, 25]. By 2026, Bangladesh consistently ranks among the most dangerous environments for journalists in South Asia, according to international press freedom indices.

Overall, although constitutional and legal guarantees exist, the practical exercise of freedoms of association, expression, and media remains severely constrained. These limitations further weaken democratic participation, undermine human rights protections, and consolidate authoritarian tendencies within Bangladesh's governance framework.

4.9. Combating Corruption

Corruption remains one of the most formidable obstacles to good governance, democratic accountability, and sustainable development in Bangladesh. It distorts public policy, undermines the rule of law, erodes public trust in state institutions, and deepens socio-economic inequality by facilitating the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of political and administrative elites. In Bangladesh, corruption is not confined to isolated incidents but has become systemic, deeply embedded in both political decision-making and public administration.

Political corruption is manifested through patronage politics, politicized allocation of public resources, manipulation of public procurement, and the formulation of policies that disproportionately benefit ruling elites and their affiliates. Administrative corruption, on the other hand, permeates the bureaucracy through bribery, rent-seeking, abuse of discretion, and collusion between public officials and private actors. This nexus between political authority and bureaucratic power has long been identified as a central cause of governance failure in Bangladesh [17].

Bangladesh's persistent struggle with corruption is reflected in international indicators. Transparency International ranked Bangladesh as the most corrupt country in the world for five consecutive years between 2001 and 2005. Although the ranking has improved marginally since then, the situation remains alarming. In the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2024, Bangladesh scored 24 out of 100 and ranked among the lowest-performing countries globally, indicating stagnation rather than substantive progress. These scores point to chronic weaknesses in institutional integrity, enforcement capacity, and political commitment to anti-corruption reforms.

Recent years have further exposed the depth of corruption through high-profile scandals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale corruption was uncovered in the health sector, including procurement fraud involving substandard personal protective equipment, fake COVID-19 test certificates issued by Regent and JKG hospitals, and bribery in access to testing and treatment facilities [19, 49]. Although some officials and politically affiliated local leaders were arrested and disciplinary actions were taken—including forced retirements—these responses were widely criticized as selective and insufficient to address systemic corruption.

By 2026, similar concerns persist in mega infrastructure projects, the banking and financial sector (loan defaults and capital flight), local government, and social safety-net programs. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), despite its constitutional mandate, remains institutionally weak and politically constrained, often accused of targeting opposition figures while avoiding cases involving influential ruling elites [53]. As a result, impunity continues to dominate the political-administrative culture.

The economic consequences of corruption are substantial. Corruption increases transaction costs, discourages foreign

and domestic investment, misallocates public resources, and weakens service delivery. Earlier UNDP estimates highlighted that bureaucratic corruption and inefficiency significantly reduce investment and GDP growth [55]. These findings remain relevant today, as persistent governance deficits continue to undermine Bangladesh's long-term development prospects.

In sum, despite formal anti-corruption institutions and periodic enforcement actions, corruption in Bangladesh remains pervasive and structurally entrenched. Without genuine political will, institutional independence, and systemic reforms, efforts to combat corruption will continue to fall short, thereby weakening democracy, human rights, and good governance.

5. Crisis and Challenges of Democracy, Human Rights, and Good Governance in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's democratic landscape in 2024–2025 underwent dramatic upheaval as longstanding structural weaknesses in governance, political representation, and human rights culminated in a mass student-led uprising that effectively ended the 15-year government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina [12, 45]. Nevertheless, the political transition that followed has revealed both opportunities and persistent systemic deficits that continue to challenge democratic consolidation.

5.1. Election Engineering and Preventive Representation

Election engineering—the manipulation of electoral processes, timing, and institutions to favor incumbents—has been endemic in Bangladesh for decades. Prior to 2024, parliamentary polls were routinely criticized for widespread irregularities, pre-election repression, and institutional capture by the ruling party. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2024 recorded a significant regression in Bangladesh's democratic performance, with the country slipping 25 places globally, largely due to election irregularities and political instability [45]. These dynamics fed public disillusionment and helped catalyze the 2024 Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, which demanded not only policy reform but structural transformation of electoral governance [47].

Following the August 2024 overthrow of Hasina's government and the installation of an interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, there have been efforts to reform the Election Commission and related institutions ahead of the expected February 2026 national election. However, such reforms remain incomplete, with major stakeholders—including the International Republican Institute—stressing that sustained engagement with political parties and civic groups is necessary to build trust and ensure a genuinely participatory electoral process.

Political Violence and Human Rights Erosion

The roots of the 2024 uprising lay in both political grievance and human rights violations. Under the Hasina government, state security forces were accused of using extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detentions to suppress political dissent and opposition activism [20]. The violent crackdown on student protesters in July–August 2024 resulted in over 1,400 deaths and thousands of injuries, according to United Nations monitoring, and has been described as among the gravest breaches of political rights in Bangladesh's history [29].

Post-transition human rights challenges persist. The interim government established commissions to investigate past abuses including enforced disappearances and custodial deaths; yet accountability remains constrained by slow institutional reforms and resistance from entrenched security apparatuses [20, 29]. Furthermore, reports indicate retaliatory detentions and politically motivated prosecutions against former regime supporters, raising concerns about selective justice and uneven human rights protections [20].

5.2. Shrinking Civic Space and Press Freedom

Freedom of expression and media autonomy—critical underpinnings of democratic governance and human rights—were severely restricted under the Hasina government through laws such as the Digital Security Act, which was used to criminalize dissent and intimidate journalists. Although the interim government formed a Media Reform Commission in late 2024 and sought to review media regulations, civil society reports remain alarmed by continued attacks on independent media outlets and threats to journalists' safety, particularly in the lead-up to the 2026 elections [20].

5.3. Governance and Institutional Reform

The 2024 uprising highlighted deep institutional weaknesses, including the politicization of the judiciary, law enforcement, and civil service. Human Rights Watch's 2025 roadmap for reform emphasizes the urgent need to strengthen separation of powers, reestablish political neutrality across state institutions, and institute robust oversight mechanisms [20]. While the interim government has expressed commitment to these objectives, progress has been uneven and hampered by political contestation and slow legislative action.

5.4. Confrontational Political Culture

Bangladesh's political system has long been undermined by confrontational politics, weak accountability, bureaucratic inefficiency, and corruption. These challenges have compounded over decades, culminating in the mass student-led uprising of 2024–2025, which led to the fall of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government. The persistence of these structural issues has hampered the consolidation of democracy, respect for human rights, and effective governance [12, 46].

Confrontational politics remains a defining feature of Bangladesh's political landscape. Successive governments have monopolized state institutions and resources, enforcing a "winner-takes-all" culture that marginalizes opposition parties and stifles inclusive governance [39]. Political polarization reached a peak under the Hasina administration, as demonstrated by systematic harassment of opposition leaders, interference in electoral processes, and violent suppression of protests. The 2024–2025 student movement emerged in response to these conditions, challenging not only the government's policies but the broader culture of political impunity [61]. This movement mobilized mass support and exposed the fragility of institutions that had been captured by partisan interests, ultimately catalyzing the regime's collapse [12].

5.5. Absence of Strong Political Leadership

Bangladesh has historically suffered from weak political leadership, exacerbated by the assassination of key national leaders in 1975 and repeated interference by military and bureaucratic elites [18]. Leadership vacuum at the national and local levels hindered the development of effective governance structures. The dominance of dynastic politics, patronage networks, and ideologically aligned civil service appointments limited the emergence of meritocratic and strategic leadership [41, 43]. While the interim government of 2025 has emphasized technocratic appointments and merit-based leadership in key ministries, institutional reform remains incomplete, and the legacy of weak leadership continues to impede long-term governance reforms.

5.6. Lack of Accountability and Transparency

Endemic corruption, weak oversight, and limited bureaucratic transparency have prevented meaningful accountability in Bangladesh [12]. Elected officials frequently prioritize personal patronage over constituent interests, while institutional checks—including parliamentary committees, anti-corruption commissions, and judicial review—remain ineffective or co-opted. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, political and bureaucratic collusion facilitated large-scale mismanagement of public resources, from hospital supply fraud to misappropriation of relief funds, highlighting systemic governance failures [19]. Despite recent efforts by the interim government to enhance transparency, including digitization of public services and oversight reforms, substantial gaps remain in both implementation and public awareness [56].

5.7. Corruption and Nepotism

Corruption remains a pervasive threat, affecting both political decision-making and administrative execution. Political elites historically use state resources to reward allies, consolidate power, and marginalize dissent, while bureaucrats are incentivized to prioritize loyalty over competence [44]. High-profile scandals in recent years—including fraudulent Covid-19 testing and hospital procurement—exposed entrenched

networks of political-bureaucratic corruption [30]. Such practices erode citizen trust, distort resource allocation, and undermine the rule of law. The interim government has initiated prosecutions against corrupt actors, including local government officials and former regime allies, but sustainable reform will require structural changes to recruitment, promotion, and oversight mechanisms across the civil service.

5.8. Lack of Strategic Vision

The absence of long-term strategic vision has impeded governance innovation in Bangladesh. Political leaders and civil servants have historically focused on short-term political gains rather than systemic reform [27]. Donor-driven reform initiatives, including public service restructuring, have frequently stalled due to inconsistent political support, bureaucratic resistance, and lack of integration with national development priorities [44]. The interim government has pledged to strengthen strategic planning and align administrative reforms with socioeconomic development goals, yet entrenched interests and bureaucratic inertia continue to challenge implementation [24].

5.9. Bureaucratic Complexity and Traditionalism

Bangladesh's bureaucracy is characterized by excessive hierarchy, procedural formalism, and centralized decision-making, which hinders efficiency and innovation [13]. Overlapping responsibilities, rigid communication channels, and procedural red tape impede timely policy implementation and encourage rent-seeking behavior [14]. For example, delayed land acquisition, tendering, and fund disbursement frequently result in project overruns and inefficiencies, as evidenced in multiple development initiatives during 2021–2024. The interim government has attempted to streamline procedures and digitize public service delivery; however, success is limited by resistance from entrenched bureaucratic structures and lack of trained personnel [22].

Bangladesh's challenges in democracy, human rights, and good governance are multi-dimensional. Confrontational politics, weak leadership, pervasive corruption, lack of strategic vision, and bureaucratic rigidity have historically hindered institutional development. The 2024–2025 student movement and the fall of the Hasina regime represented a watershed moment, revealing both the fragility and potential for reform within the political system. However, the success of the ongoing transition and the consolidation of democracy will depend on strengthening accountability mechanisms, enhancing bureaucratic professionalism, and institutionalizing inclusive political practices ahead of the 2026 national elections.

5.10. Centralized Decision-Making

Bangladesh has historically followed a highly centralized

system of policymaking and resource allocation, which has weakened local governance and hindered public sector innovation [44]. Intergovernmental transfers remain unstable and are often politically biased, favoring local governments aligned with the ruling party, while ignoring formal rules and norms. Centralized decision-making discourages creativity and initiative among lower-level officials, who feel excluded from meaningful participation in policy formulation. As a result, employees are less motivated to propose innovative solutions, and the implementation of policies at the local level suffers [40]. For instance, despite the legal framework for local government decentralization, municipal offices in opposition-held areas frequently receive fewer grants and resources, which directly undermines local development initiatives. The lack of a genuine decentralization strategy has contributed to inefficiency, mismanagement, and inequitable development outcomes across regions [63].

5.11. Politicization of the Bureaucracy

The politicization of Bangladesh's bureaucracy remains a persistent barrier to institutional efficiency and innovation. Ruling governments systematically align bureaucratic appointments, transfers, and promotions with political loyalty rather than merit, undermining professional standards and eroding public trust [15]. Political influence over personnel decisions discourages civil servants from acting independently and encourages their participation in corrupt practices. During the 2010s and early 2020s, both the Awami League and BNP-led governments engaged in selective promotions and postings to consolidate political control over the bureaucracy [26]. This patronage-based system reduces transparency, decreases responsiveness to citizen needs, and limits the capacity for innovation in public service delivery. Following the 2024–2025 student-led movement that toppled the Hasina government, the interim administration has taken steps to reduce overt political interference, yet entrenched networks of loyalty continue to constrain reforms [12].

5.12. Social Instability and Inequity

Bangladesh continues to face significant social instability and inequity, which undermine governance and innovation. While large-scale ethnic or religious conflict is limited, persistent class inequality, widespread poverty, gender discrimination, and inadequate access to health and social security create a volatile social environment [57]. Over 40 percent of the population remains below the national poverty line, leaving large segments of society preoccupied with basic survival rather than civic engagement or productive innovation. Social instability is exacerbated by labor disputes, uneven economic opportunities, and corruption, which together reduce trust in public institutions and hamper inclusive policymaking. The events of 2024–2025, including widespread student protests,

highlighted the pent-up frustration among youth and marginalized groups regarding inequitable access to education, public services, and political representation [12].

5.13. Illiteracy and Lack of Education

Education and literacy are fundamental to enabling citizens to engage with government programs, participate in policy-making, and hold officials accountable. Despite notable progress in primary education, Bangladesh's literacy rate remains a challenge, with UNESCO estimating around 51 percent of adults literate in 2025—still below the average for comparable lower-middle-income countries [58]. Rural populations, in particular, face limited access to information about government initiatives, digital governance programs, and citizen services, which hinders innovation adoption and service utilization. The government's attempts to implement e-governance and digital service platforms have been constrained by low awareness and limited digital literacy among citizens. Consequently, low education levels directly impede both public sector reform and citizen participation in governance.

6. Concluding Remarks

A comprehensive review of Bangladesh's political, administrative, and social landscape reveals that, despite over five decades of independence, the country remains in a fragile state of democracy and governance. While Bangladesh emerged from 72 years of British colonial rule and nearly two decades under Pakistani administration with aspirations of establishing a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people," these aspirations have been consistently undermined by political instability, militarization, and partisan politics [12]. The post-liberation era was marked by political vacuums, which allowed military interventions and authoritarian regimes to dominate governance for nearly 16 years, leaving a legacy of weak institutions and centralized power structures. The return to parliamentary democracy in 1991 marked a significant milestone; however, recurring confrontational politics, electoral engineering, and party monopolization have hindered the consolidation of democratic norms [12, 39].

Elections, the cornerstone of democratic legitimacy, remain highly contested and often lack fairness and competitiveness. While elections under non-partisan caretaker governments in 1991, 1996, 2001, and 2008 demonstrated relative credibility, subsequent amendments to the constitution—including the 15th amendment—eliminated institutional mechanisms to ensure impartial electoral oversight [50]. The 2014 general election, boycotted by major opposition parties, and the 2018 election, dominated by the Awami League-led alliance with over 90% of parliamentary seats, exemplify the erosion of electoral legitimacy. The political monopoly of ruling parties has systematically marginalized opposition voices, weakened parliamentary oversight, and fostered a *de facto* one-party governance system. The student-led movements of 2024–2025,

which culminated in the fall of the Hasina government, highlighted the growing frustration of youth and civil society with political exclusion and governance failures [12]. These movements underscore the urgent need for inclusive dialogue and consensus-building among political parties to establish free, fair, and competitive elections.

The bureaucracy, intended to be a neutral and professional machinery of government, continues to face politicization, inefficiency, and lack of accountability [17, 20, 22]. Personnel decisions are often influenced by political loyalty rather than merit, undermining administrative effectiveness and facilitating corruption. Bureaucratic complexity, centralization of decision-making, and resistance to innovation further impede service delivery and development outcomes [44, 60]. To address these challenges, the government must prioritize merit-based recruitment and promotion, provide structured capacity-building programs, and ensure bureaucratic independence from political interference.

Human rights and the rule of law in Bangladesh remain under severe strain. Reports of extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, custodial deaths, violence against women and children, and harassment of journalists persist despite formal legal protections [12, 20]. While civil society organizations such as ASK, Odhikar, and BLAST continue to advocate for accountability and justice, they face harassment and institutional obstacles, limiting their effectiveness. To restore confidence in governance, law enforcement agencies must operate transparently and be held accountable, while the judiciary must be fully insulated from political interference. Independent institutions such as the Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, and Human Rights Commission require strengthened financial and operational autonomy to function effectively.

Finally, promoting inclusive governance requires active citizen engagement and the protection of civil liberties. Freedom of expression, assembly, and association—enshrined in Articles 37–39 of the Constitution—must be safeguarded to enable meaningful public participation. Civil society and media institutions play a critical role in monitoring governance and promoting transparency; their independence should be protected from political and partisan pressures. Without these measures, the consolidation of democracy, human rights, and good governance in Bangladesh will remain incomplete, leaving the country vulnerable to recurring crises of legitimacy, accountability, and social stability [12].

In conclusion, the path toward a resilient democracy in Bangladesh requires simultaneous reform across multiple dimensions: electoral integrity, bureaucratic professionalism, judicial independence, human rights protection, and inclusive civic participation. Only through sustained dialogue, institutional strengthening, and social accountability can Bangladesh achieve the democratic aspirations envisioned at its inception and ensure governance that genuinely serves the people.

Abbreviation

ACC	Anti-Corruption Commission
AL	Awami League
ASK	Ain and Shalish Kendro
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
HRD	Human Rights Declarations
HRSS	Human Rights Supports Society
HRWC	Human Right Watch Committee
IRCT	International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims
OMTC	Organisation Mondiale Contre la Torture
RTI	Right to Information
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UK	United Kindom
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
USA	United State of America
WB	World Bank
WOAT	World Organisation Against Torture

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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