



BANGLADESH: Public Perceptions on Politics and the Economy

January-February 2023



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Center for Insights in Survey Research
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Cover Image Description: A busy street in the district of Sadarghat in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo: Jono Photography/Shutterstock.com

BACKGROUND

Bangladesh's next parliamentary elections are due by January 2024. The two main political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), are in an intense and often violent political standoff. The BNP has said it will boycott the parliamentary elections until the caretaker government system—Bangladesh's unique system of nonpartisan elections administration that the AL scrapped in 2011—is returned. The ruling AL contends that Bangladesh's election commission can ensure free and fair elections, but the BNP claims that elections are routinely rigged, and its supporters, members, and candidates are harassed, attacked, and unjustly imprisoned. Government critics also argue that Bangladesh's Digital Security Act (DSA), which gives the government vast powers to monitor and punish online speech, has been used to target oppositional media and dissidents. Economic and international factors are also roiling domestic politics. Bangladesh's previously booming economy has slowed and inflation is rising, which is boosting support for the opposition. Internationally, the United States has increased pressure on the Bangladesh government to improve its democratic and human rights record. In contrast, India continues to give diplomatic support to the AL, which it sees as a key regional ally. China has provided development assistance while cultivating a close working relationship with the ruling party.

METHODS

To understand the public's views on Bangladesh's political and economic dynamics, the International Republican Institute's Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR) designed and commissioned eight focus group discussions (FGDs)—one in each division of Bangladesh.¹ The FGDs were held from January 17 to February 12, 2023. Each FGD included 10 participants split evenly between men and women of various ages (18 and older) and occupation types to ensure differing perspectives and income levels. Participants were randomly selected through street intercepts in each research location according to a screening questionnaire. To capture differences in population density, four FGDs were conducted in rural areas and four in urban areas. The eight focus groups were held in:



1. Urban Dhaka
2. Urban Khulna
3. Urban Rangpur
4. Urban Sylhet



5. Rural Barisal
6. Rural Chattogram
7. Rural Mymensingh
8. Rural Rajshahi

This FGD study documents the perceptions of Bangladeshis. IRI does not endorse the views expressed during the discussions and cannot independently confirm any factual claims made by the participants. Given the small sample of the population that has participated in this study, the views expressed in the FGDs cannot be generalized to the whole population. This report's findings are suggestive of broader political and economic dynamics that need further investigation.

¹ Quotes cited in this report were translated from Bangla and have been minimally edited to ensure clarity. As much as possible, the English translations preserve the original syntax, word choice, and grammar. A Bangladeshi research firm organized, moderated, and transcribed the FGDs.

FINDING 1 | Economic struggles are common, and the government takes the brunt of the blame.

While a few FGD participants, mostly from rural areas, said their economic status is better than in the past, most participants rated their personal economic conditions poorly. Participants complained of rising prices for food, water, gas, education supplies, and other key goods and services. Some positive economic indicators cited were better road development, higher incomes, and women's empowerment. Most participants blamed Bangladesh's economic problems on the government, mentioning corruption, wasteful spending, and unresponsive policymaking. Still, a few participants credited the government with development achievements.

“

The Padma Bridge was built with Bangladesh's own money.”

(Woman, 23, Rural Barisal)

“Now the country is progressing under Sheikh Hasina.” (Woman, 24, Rural Chattogram)

“Communication and power are two essential elements for a country's development, and the government has taken significant steps toward improving both.” (Man, 29, Urban Rangpur)



“

My husband's salary did not increase but the price of daily commodities is increasing daily. We face difficulties in maintaining our family.” (Woman, 37, Rural Mymensingh)

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“

Previously, only men shouldered the expenses of their families, but now women are also contributing. Women are advancing in education, too. Previously, people didn't allow women to do many things.”

(Woman, 32, Rural Rajshahi)



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“

I saw in a children's book that there was a question: Which thing jumps? The answer was a frog, but it should be the prices of daily necessities.”

(Man, 51, Rural Rajshahi)

“Nobody is happy... So, the government should go to the public, stand with them as normal citizens, and listen to what they are saying.” (Man, 50, Urban Dhaka)

“There are some families who are suffering in this [economic] situation. Like I'm wearing a dress to walk around. Everyone sees that I'm wearing a good dress, but I can't express that I'm troubled inside.”

(Woman, 43, Urban Khulna)

“There is no development for common people... Common people are falling into the ditch.” (Man 38, Rural Chattogram)

FINDING 2 | A range of policies could improve ordinary people’s day-to-day economic life.

Some of the most common recommendations* were:

- 

Control inflation
- 

Build workers’ skills
- 

Grow the job market
- 

Reform the job quota system
- 

Encourage remittances
- 

Ensure the distribution of benefits
- 

Punish corruption, theft, nepotism, and political favoritism

*Recommendations are presented without order

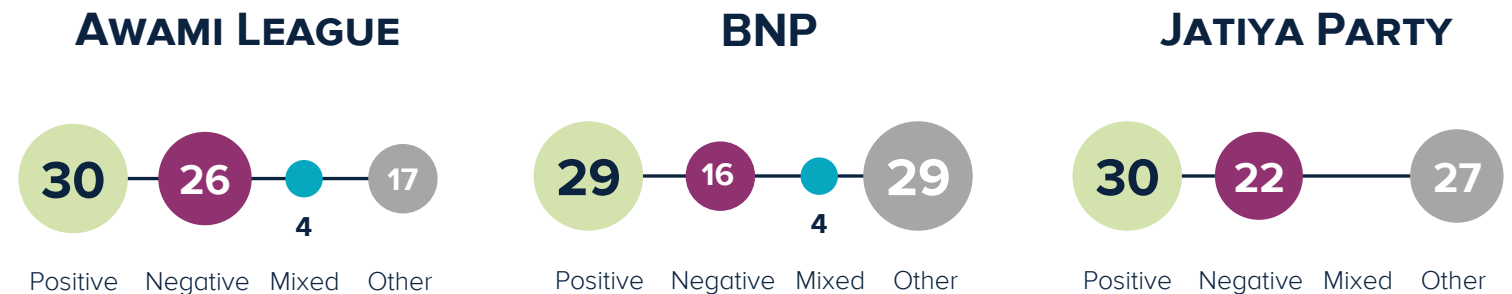
“ We see corruption everywhere. They should stop corruption.”
(Woman, 24, Urban Sylhet)

“There is no guarantee that we will get jobs after finishing our studies. Nowadays, it is so tough to get a job that you may see a master’s degree graduate pulling a rickshaw.” (Woman, 22, Urban Dhaka)

“In Saudi Arabia, people do not steal because of the fear that their hands will be cut off. When they have the call to prayer, shopkeepers go to pray and keep their shops open...We don’t need to have the same punishment but at least we should have some punishment that people will fear.”
(Woman 32, Urban Khulna)

“Although the government is providing allowances for the old, helpless, physically or mentally challenged people and many other things, we get little of them. If the government grants two taka (.02 USD) for us, it does not reach our hands.”
(Man, 55, Rural Rajshahi)

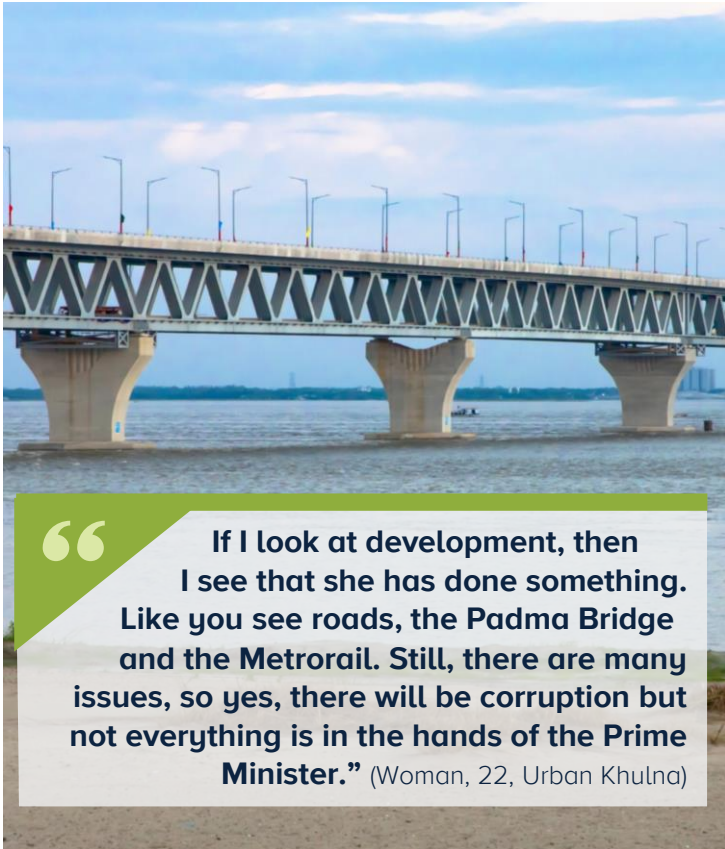
FINDING 3 | In a word association exercise,* participants were asked to write the first word or phrase that came to mind when reading the names of political parties. The Awami League and BNP had similar levels of positive associations, but the AL had more negative associations than the BNP.



*In total, 80 individuals participated in this exercise, though not all participants answered every prompt

FINDING 4 | There is disillusion with the state of Bangladesh's democracy.

Although a small number of participants praised Bangladesh's democracy for producing economic development and protecting minority rights, nearly all participants said democracy is struggling in Bangladesh. Among Bangladesh's key democratic deficiencies, participants cited the loss of personal freedoms like freedom of speech and assembly, vote rigging, opposition repression, abuse of the Digital Security Act, and lack of internal party democracy.



“If I look at development, then I see that she has done something. Like you see roads, the Padma Bridge and the Metrorail. Still, there are many issues, so yes, there will be corruption but not everything is in the hands of the Prime Minister.” (Woman, 22, Urban Khulna)

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“India's Modi has been busy chasing away Muslims from India. But the Prime Minister of Bangladesh does not drive Hindus out of the country.” (Woman, 32, Urban Khulna)

“

It's in shambles.”

(Multiple participants, Urban Rangpur)

Now, if you say something about a political issue, if I say something, I have a fear that I may be murdered for this.” (Woman, 32, Urban Khulna)

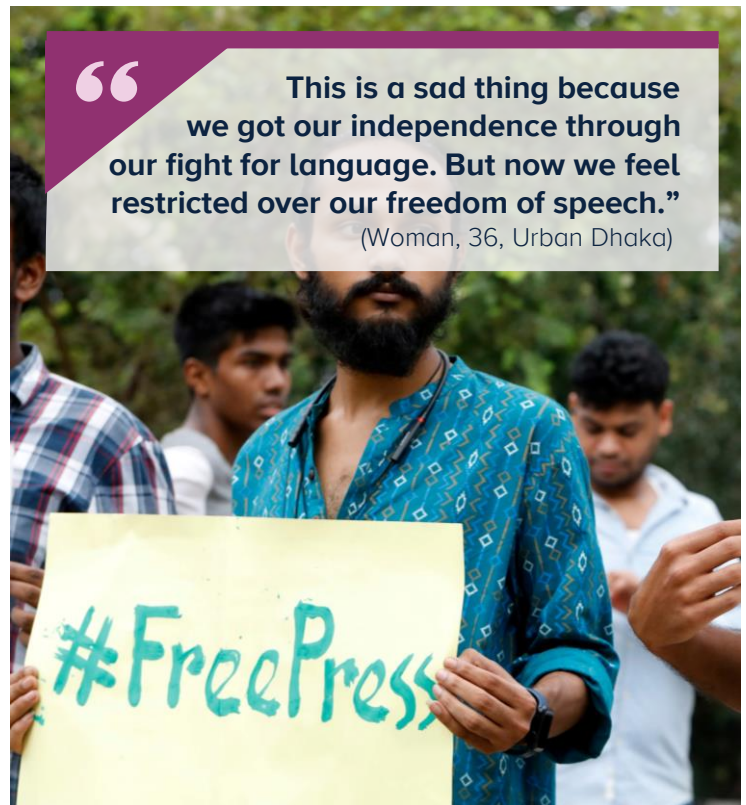
“Awami League is in power now. If the BNP tries to campaign, they face attack from the government party. They cannot do any campaigning.” (Woman, 23, Rural Mymensingh)

“We have a democratic system in our country, but it is not practiced. Democracy means we can give our opinion openly. We face problems if we express any argument that goes against the government. This is not effective.” (Man, 34, Urban Sylhet)

“

This is a sad thing because we got our independence through our fight for language. But now we feel restricted over our freedom of speech.”

(Woman, 36, Urban Dhaka)



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FINDING 5 | There is support for the return of the caretaker government system—or some form of bipartisan or nonpartisan election administration—without which few think the 2024 elections will be free and fair.

The participants were nearly unanimous in their view that a caretaker government—or some form nonpartisan or bipartisan election administration—is essential for free and fair elections. Many cited vote rigging and suppression of the opposition’s candidates, supporters, and party agents during the 2018 elections as key reasons. However, some observed that the opposition currently has more space to campaign, which is an improvement in electoral conditions.

“ I think they can form a combined government from the two political parties that can conduct a free and fair election.”
 (Man, 51, Rural Rajshahi)

“If all political parties select a neutral person and the government leaves the power in his hands, and the election takes place under him, then the election could be free and fair.”
 (Man, 50, Urban Dhaka)

“There have been some opposition party meetings being held, which gives me some hope.” (Man, 49, Urban Rangpur)



“ The 2018 election will be remembered for obstacles to going to vote centers. For this reason, no election will be unbiased under the present government party.” (Man, 51, Urban Sylhet)

HM Shahidul Islam/Shutterstock.com

“ An election under a political party cannot be free and fair...A political party will always be partial to its own party. If the election is held under a caretaker government or a neutral committee, we can hope to have a fair election.”
 (Man 28, Rural Mymensingh)

FINDING 6 | There is enthusiasm for voting and a diverse range of issues that citizens want to hear parties address on the campaign trail. However, some participants said there is no point in voting without a neutral election administration, and many participants are cynical about both the AL and BNP.

Among the key issues* to address:

					
Protect basic rights of speech and assembly	Reduce prices for gas, electricity, and other key goods	Increase wages and job opportunities	Ensure safety and security	Ensure free and fair elections	End corruption
					
Ensure a neutral judiciary and rule of law	Protect the sovereignty and independence of Bangladesh	Promote tolerant religious values	Protect the environment	Improve education and healthcare	Improve road quality

*Issues are presented without order

“

Whether it is for the Awami League or BNP, I want to vote fairly.” (Woman, 43, Urban Khulna)

“Yes, of course, I want to vote. Is it not our democratic right?” (Man 38, Rural Chattogram)

“I also want to go and vote like the others. From early in the morning, we have to dress up to go to the electoral center. It’s like a festival to us.” (Man, 70, Rural Mymensingh)



“Since this is my first vote, I want to give it.”
(Woman, 23, Urban Rangpur)

HM Shahidul Islam/Shutterstock.com

Most participants said they looked forward to voting in the next parliamentary elections. They wanted to hear candidates discuss many issues while campaigning, ranging from inflation and jobs to human rights, democracy, and good governance issues. However, several participants doubted the utility of voting without a neutral election administration in place to ensure a free and fair process.

Despite this eagerness to vote, many participants said both the AL and BNP make disingenuous promises during campaigns and doubted the prospects for change regardless of who is in power.

“

“I will go if the election takes place under a caretaker government.”
(Man, 51, Urban Sylhet)

If the current government is neutral, I will vote. Otherwise, I am not interested in voting. I have seen instances of rigging and tampering in polling centers...I am not sure if my vote even matters.” (Man, 49 Urban Rangpur)

“It used to be a joy to vote...now I think it is better not to go.” (Man, 38, Rural Chattogram)*

“

All the political parties promise that they will stop corruption and not hold strikes or destructive political programs that cause loss of life and property. But they do not keep their promise. They do these things when they are in power.” (Woman, 37, Rural Mymensingh)

“Political parties do not change their policies, regardless of who is in power. Even if the opposition party comes into power, it may not necessarily mean that things will improve. Ultimately, what matters is the people who are behind the brand. We need to vote for individuals who will work for everyone and with integrity, regardless of their party affiliation.” (Man, 39, Urban Rangpur)

“No political party has impressed me in Bangladesh, so I haven't decided whether I will vote or not. It would be better if there was an option to vote "none of the above.” (Woman, 23, Urban Rangpur)

“It does not matter whether it is Awami League or BNP in power. Both of them are doing the same thing. We the general people ultimately suffer.” (Woman, 32 Rural Rajshahi)

*Two 38-year-old men participated in the rural Chattogram group

FINDING 7 | If a caretaker government is not reinstated, participants were divided on whether the opposition should boycott the elections, with many arguing for participation.

Participants had mixed views on opposition participation in the elections. Without a caretaker government, some participants said the opposition should not legitimize the process with their participation.

Other participants, many of whom said they would support the opposition in the elections, wanted to see the opposition challenge the Awami League and believed its participation would create pressure for free and fair elections.

“

Without the caretaker government no parties should take part in it.”

(Male, 34, Urban Dhaka)

“If there is no neutral government, then people will not be able to vote. When we used to go to vote, we used to enjoy it, but now we are scared. If there is no neutral or caretaker government, then the opposition should not participate.” (Woman, 40, Rural Barisal)

“If there is no neutral environment, then I am not going because there will be no participation...Opposition parties should not participate in elections...A dirty election should not happen.” (Man, 49, Urban Rangpur)

“The BNP has done the right thing.”

(Man 40, Rural Chattogram)

“

Some of the opposition parties have the courage to fight against the current government.”

(Woman, 37, Rural Mymensingh)

“If there is no opposition, then who will I vote for?” (Man, 21, Rural Chattogram)

“The opposition parties should give the message that there is someone who has the potential to fight the government.” (Woman, 23, Rural Mymensingh)

“They should prove that they are not afraid of the government.” (Woman, 39, Rural Mymensingh)

“They should go and fight. If they don't go, it will ultimately benefit the present government. They will win by a big margin.” (Woman, 32, Rural Rajshahi)

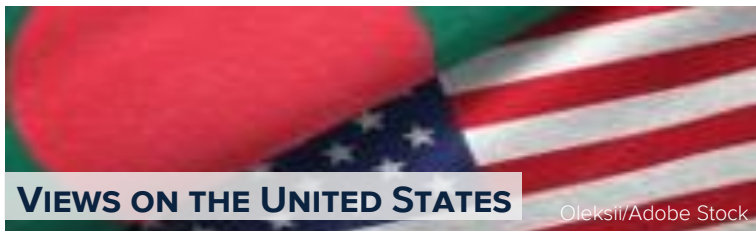


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FINDING 8 | When assessing the influence of major foreign powers in Bangladesh, participants had mixed views of the United States and China and were mostly critical of India.



Participants had mixed views of the United States. Several participants praised American aid, citing the Rohingya relief effort and COVID-19 vaccines. Some also noted the economic benefits of trade and remittances. Critics saw the U.S. as self-interested and politically biased.

“ I don't know much about the USA, but they help us in times of trouble...when we were in the Rohingya crisis and...hit by natural calamities. We must be grateful for that. They helped us during the pandemic period with different vaccination doses. Many Bangladeshis live in the United States, which also benefits our economy with remittances.” (Man, 25, Rural Barisal)



Most participants viewed China's influence as benign, but some were critical. Participants respected China's technological advancement and saw its cheap exports as positive for ordinary people. Nevertheless, several participants were wary of indebtedness to China and blamed it for the COVID-19 pandemic.

“ We get everything from China when it comes to our electronics.” (Woman, 23, Rural Barisal)

“Suppose I go to buy a blender made in some other country, it will cost 5,000 taka (50 USD). I can buy the Chinese one for 1,500 taka (15 USD).” (Man, 38, Rural Chattogram)

“ Of course, negative. They ... imposed sanctions on the RAB (Rapid Action Battalion). There is a rumor that they will impose more sanctions on Bangladesh if the election is not fair. We the general people will suffer. We may not be able to see our relatives in the USA.” (Man, 29, Urban Sylhet)

“India has a deep connection with the Awami League. Similarly, the USA has a connection with BNP. We see this in the newspaper. I think the USA may work to get the BNP back in power again.” (Man 51, Urban Sylhet)

“The USA is a clever country. They don't do anything outside of their interests. If the USA gives benefits to a country, this means they have interests in that country.” (Man, 28, Rural Mymensingh)

“ China wants to throw Bangladesh into debt so that it can take complete control of Bangladesh.” (Man, 28 Urban Khulna)

“Because in the last few years, COVID-19 has spread all over the world, so the effect of China on Bangladesh is negative.” (Man, 21, Rural Chattogram)



Oleksii/Adobe Stock

Most participants viewed India's influence in Bangladesh negatively. While some acknowledged India's historical role in Bangladesh's liberation and beneficial trade relationship, participants cited political manipulation, border killings, insufficient water sharing, economic harms, and insulting Islam. Nevertheless, many participants said Bangladesh had to deal with Indian influence because of its size and regional power.

“

During the liberation, they contributed tremendously. They were the first country that acknowledged us as a country. They provided shelter for millions of people.”

(Man, 70, Rural Mymensingh)

“

We are surrounded by India...We cannot do anything going against them now or even in the future.”

(Man, 28, Rural Mymensingh)

“

Because of our political condition and geographical location, India thinks that we are one of their states, dependent on them. It seems like slavery as if they can do anything they wish regarding Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government maintains the same sort of 'lord-slave' relationship with India.” (Male, 34, Urban Dhaka)

“India works for its own interests only.” (Man, 42, Rural Barisal)

“India has a major influence over Bangladesh's election...India is our neighbor, and they never want us to grow and develop. They always want to dominate us.” (Man 34, Urban Sylhet)

“India's cultural dominance and imposition of Hindi on us is also a negative influence. It undermines our own language and culture and creates a sense of inferiority among our people.” (Man, 42, Urban Rangpur)

“I think Indians have an influence on our religious beliefs. Muslims are sometimes insulted [in India]. This is not acceptable to us as Muslims. But we people of Bangladesh do not insult other religions like that.” (Man, 25, Rural Barisal)

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study suggest that economic and political pessimism are high among the Bangladeshi public. FGD participants commonly described daily economic struggles and expressed frustration over the state of democracy, elections, political parties, and foreign influence. Still, participants were eager to vote if the government and parties take steps to improve democratic processes and wanted to hear candidates and elected officials address key problems in the country. With Bangladesh's national elections approaching this winter, citizens' political interest is growing, but their faith in democratic institutions remains low.

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