



Statement of Findings and Recommendations

IRI Pre-Election Assessment Mission to Bangladesh's 2026 Parliamentary Elections

November 5, 2025

I. Summary

The International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted a pre-election assessment mission in Bangladesh from October 20-24, 2025, in advance of the country's expected February 2026 parliamentary elections. The mission, composed of international policy and elections experts, met with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including the Election Commission, political parties, Interim Government officials, and civil society representatives, to evaluate the electoral environment and prospects for democratic renewal.

The Interim Government, led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, has launched an ambitious reform agenda through 11 commissions and the National Consensus Commission, culminating in the July National Charter, a comprehensive framework of 84 proposals that addresses nearly every aspect of Bangladesh's democratic architecture. While the Charter has been broadly endorsed, its implementation remains uncertain due to procedural ambiguities and divergent party positions on timing and enforcement.

The Bangladesh Election Commission has introduced reforms to enhance participation and operational preparedness, including mechanisms for out-of-country voting. To strengthen election security, the Election Commission plans to integrate the armed forces into its election security framework. Despite these efforts, the pre-election environment remains fragile, with isolated but politically significant episodes of political violence, questions about the neutrality of local officials, and lingering distrust of security forces.

The emergence of youth-led parties and the expected significant turnout of first-time voters, including diaspora members, signal a potential shift in political engagement and the continued influence of youth activism on Bangladesh's democratic renewal. However, challenges persist as political parties' candidate selection processes lack transparency, women remain underrepresented, and concerns are mounting that the growing appeal of extremist movements and hardline groups could embolden intolerant narratives and erode Bangladesh's secular political foundations. The trajectory of the July National Charter and the extent to which political parties institutionalize democratic norms, including those advanced by the student movement, will determine the direction of Bangladesh's transition.

As Bangladesh moves toward the expected February 2026 elections, the coming months will reveal whether the promise of the post-uprising reform movement can be institutionalized through credible and peaceful polls. The Interim Government's success will depend on its ability to maintain neutrality, ensure security, and advance the National Consensus Commission's reform agenda toward tangible implementation. The July National Charter provides a blueprint for democratic renewal, but much of its realization will rest on the next parliament's political will. Sustained dialogue, transparent election administration, and credible participation by political parties will be essential to mitigate polarization and reinforce confidence in the transition.

This statement offers an impartial, objective assessment of the pre-election environment and provides practical recommendations to improve conditions for a peaceful, participatory process ahead of the expected February 2026 polls and beyond. The IRI pre-election assessment mission held 21 meetings with 59 stakeholders, including representatives from political parties, the Interim Government, the Election Commission of Bangladesh, media, international organizations, and civil society, and expresses gratitude to all who shared their insights.

II. Background

Bangladesh continues to navigate a complex democratic transition following the July 2024 uprising that ended 15 years of Awami League rule. The Interim Government, led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, entered office with broad public support and a mandate to restore democratic institutions, rebuild public trust, and ensure accountability after years of authoritarian governance.

To achieve these goals, the Interim Government established 11 reform commissions covering governance, constitutional design, the judiciary, public administration, and anti-corruption. Their recommendations were consolidated into a single reform framework intended to serve as a national blueprint for rebuilding state institutions. This process culminated in the creation of the National Consensus Commission in February 2025, a multiparty forum tasked with translating the reform commissions' recommendations into actionable political and constitutional reform.

The National Consensus Commission's mandate was to facilitate open dialogue among registered parties and bridge ideological and generational divides that had deepened over decades of polarized politics. Its deliberations produced the July National Charter, a comprehensive framework of 84 proposals addressing nearly every aspect of Bangladesh's democratic architecture. For many observers, the Charter represents the country's most ambitious reform effort since the 1991 transition to parliamentary democracy.

The Charter outlines transformative reforms to curb executive authority and strengthen institutional checks and balances. Key provisions include the creation of a bicameral legislature, the introduction of term limits for the prime minister, and amendments to Article 70 of the Constitution to allow Members of Parliament to vote independently except on confidence motions and the budget.

It also calls for an independent judiciary, a national police commission, and transparent appointment procedures for the heads of constitutional bodies, including the Election Commission, Anti-Corruption Commission, Comptroller and Auditor General, Public Service Commission, and

Ombudsman. Additional proposals address local governance autonomy, the delineation of presidential powers, and the formation of a constitutionally anchored caretaker system to manage future transitions.

While the Charter has been endorsed in principle by most major political parties, it includes a formal dissent section addressing specific clauses. This compromise enabled near-universal participation but raised concerns about the extent to which political parties would commit to implementation, particularly regarding the provisions they opposed once in power. Throughout 2025, the National Consensus Commission struggled to reconcile competing preferences over how and when to enact reforms. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) insists that the Charter should be implemented after the February 2026 elections to avoid what it describes as “procedural overreach” by the unelected Interim Government. In contrast, Jamaat-e-Islami and several allied Islamist parties advocate holding a referendum before the election to ensure reforms become binding on the next parliament.

Newer parties, such as the National Citizen Party (NCP), occupy an intermediate position, favoring simultaneous elections for the national parliament and the formation of a body with limited constituent authority. The NCP has further proposed renaming the Charter the “Bangladesh Constitution 2026”, requiring all public officials to take a renewed oath under it, a symbolic gesture aimed at reinforcing the break from past authoritarianism.

In October, the National Consensus Commission drafted an implementation plan requiring enforcement of the Charter’s provisions within nine months of the next parliament’s seating. However, the plan does not yet define penalties for missed deadlines, leaving its enforceability uncertain. These procedural ambiguities underscore how the reform process remains dependent on post-election political will.

With roughly four months remaining until the expected polls, the Election Commission has emerged as both a key institutional actor and a flashpoint for partisan criticism. The proposed Representation of the People (Amendment) Ordinance 2025 (RPO) includes significant changes aimed at enhancing transparency and rebuilding voter confidence. The revised RPO raises campaign spending limits, reintroduces the “No Vote” option, and empowers the Election Commission to annul constituency results in cases of irregularities. Following months of public consultation, the Election Commission also cancelled the use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) for the upcoming election, citing operational challenges and concerns over credibility. It further ruled that alliance candidates must contest using their parent party’s electoral symbol, rejecting proposals to permit joint symbols for coalitions.

Beyond legal reforms, the Election Commission has prioritized operational readiness. By late October, it had completed most procurement, finalized polling-station lists, and transferred field-level officials to ensure neutrality. To bolster security, the Election Commission plans to integrate the armed forces into its law-enforcement command structure under its supervision, a move supporters view as necessary for stability but one that some civil-society groups warn could risk over-militarization.

The security environment remains fragile, with political tensions periodically flaring into violence. Sporadic clashes between rival party supporters, security forces, and suspended political networks

have underscored persistent volatility in the pre-election period. Authorities have conducted widespread arrests following unauthorized demonstrations, and reports of localized attacks against party offices and activists have fueled public concern over potential unrest. These incidents highlight the continued fragility of the political transition and the risk that elite rivalries or localized disputes could escalate into broader instability as the election approaches. Beyond electoral logistics, the Interim Government has taken steps to address governance concerns and rebuild confidence among civil society. The Information and Broadcasting Adviser has pledged a forthcoming Journalist Protection Act and the merger of state-run television and radio into an autonomous public-service broadcaster. The Energy Adviser has proposed prohibiting Interim Government officials from assuming senior positions in the next government, an effort to prevent conflicts of interest and signal ethical reform.

At the same time, the International Crimes Tribunal continues to process high-profile cases linked to the July uprising. Verdicts in several high-profile cases involving former Awami League figures are expected in November.

V. Key Findings

Election Preparations

Bangladesh's electoral preparations are advancing rapidly, with the Election Commission operating on what one stakeholder described as a whole nation "mobilization". The Election Commission has made significant progress in improving the accuracy of the voter list, removing 2.1 million deceased voters and adding 4.4 million previously unregistered individuals, according to Election Commission estimates as of October 2025. Reforms may now allow citizens turning 18 on or before election day to vote, expanding participation. However, concerns remain about the historical undercounting of women on the voter roll, and efforts are underway to address this.

The Election Commission anticipates printing approximately 128 million ballots, including for diaspora voters, and deploying up to 900,000 personnel across more than 42,000 polling stations. Voting is expected to take place before Ramadan, with the election announcement anticipated two months beforehand.

The Commission's operational transparency represents notable progress compared with prior cycles, though implementation gaps remain. Despite steady operational progress, the legal and regulatory framework governing the elections remains incomplete. The RPO has been approved by the Council of Advisers but has not yet been formally enacted, leaving several key electoral provisions unresolved. The Election Commission has updated its code of conduct, but enforcement mechanisms, particularly those related to campaign finance, expenditure reporting, and candidate eligibility, remain limited. In October 2025, the Interim Government introduced a law prohibiting individuals who have been formally indicted for crimes against humanity from holding public office. The measure immediately affected those charged by the International Crimes Tribunal. Supporters view it as a step toward accountability and renewal, while critics question its consistency with the presumption of innocence. Stakeholders also expressed concern about the continued influence of unregulated financial resources, commonly referred to as "black money," and underscored the need for greater transparency in candidate finances and political party membership records.

Diaspora voting, being implemented for the first time, presents logistical and credibility challenges. Ballots will be mailed before candidate lists are finalized, and issues with diaspora voter verification, mailing infrastructure, and ballot return mechanisms remain unresolved, raising concerns that procedural mistakes regarding overseas voting could undermine public confidence and the integrity of the election.

Security remains one of the most sensitive dimensions of the electoral process. The armed forces have assumed a more prominent role in election security planning, reflecting both the government's confidence in their operational capacity and lingering public mistrust of civilian law enforcement. Close coordination between the Election Commission, the military, and the police will be essential to ensure unified command and clear operational protocols. Effective communication and defined lines of authority will help prevent localized violence and maintain public confidence in a peaceful process. The issue of information manipulation has emerged as a critical election security concern, as the spread of inauthentic information threatens to distort public perceptions and undermine informed voter choice. The Election Commission has established a crisis unit to address the proliferation of false narratives, underscoring the urgent need for authentic, accurate election-related information.

Public sentiment reflects a mix of anticipation and hope. Voters are eager for the election to conclude, and stakeholders expect turnout to reach as high as 80 percent. However, communication gaps between the Election Commission and voters persist, particularly around youth engagement and digital outreach. Tens of millions of first-time voters will require a robust voter education effort.

The Election Commission has welcomed both international and domestic election observation, accrediting 73 citizen-led observer groups across the country. The Commission's openness to domestic and international observation marks notable progress compared to prior electoral cycles. However, the accreditation criteria remain unclear, and several domestic organizations have reported inconsistencies in the application process. Some groups noted that decisions were delayed or denied without written justification, fueling perceptions of uneven treatment. Greater transparency, particularly around the rationale for rejections, would strengthen confidence in the Commission's impartiality and reinforce the credibility of observation efforts.

Overall, while Bangladesh's election preparations reflect significant logistical and administrative efforts, unresolved legal, security, and procedural challenges threaten to undermine public confidence. The Election Commission must prioritize transparency, finalize the legal framework, and strengthen coordination with security forces to ensure credible and peaceful elections.

Political Parties

Expectations ahead of the parliamentary elections are high, with many stakeholders viewing the polls as a critical test of Bangladesh's ability to consolidate the reforms initiated under the July Charter. Interlocutors expressed cautious optimism that the Charter's ambitious framework could advance long-delayed political and institutional reforms, while acknowledging uncertainty over its legal path to implementation. Parties remain divided over the referendum's sequencing, with some favoring a pre-election vote and others supporting a harmonized process alongside the parliamentary polls. Questions surrounding the Charter's constitutionality, the capacity of new

movements to evolve into viable political organizations, and public dissatisfaction with the Interim Government's management of reforms could all influence its eventual adoption.

The political landscape has become increasingly pluralistic with numerous new and reform-oriented political parties entering the race. Many are led by younger politicians seeking to channel public frustration with past governance into platforms emphasizing accountability, participation, and renewal. However, limited organizational capacity, financial constraints, and exposure to harassment have hindered their ability to mount national campaigns. While enthusiasm among first-time voters remains high, women's participation as candidates and party leaders continues to lag, constrained by safety concerns, caregiving burdens, and structural barriers within party structures.

Established parties continue to dominate the political field but face significant internal and reputational challenges. The suspension of one of the largest political parties in the country, the Awami League, from participating in the election raises questions about the representativeness of the process and whether it will contribute to increased violence on polling day. Confidence in traditional elites remains limited, and intra-party competition has at times led to localized violence. Across the party spectrum, nomination and candidate-selection processes lack transparency, often shaped by personal networks or factional interests rather than merit-based procedures. The inability of some parties to campaign freely in select localities due to security concerns and weak law enforcement has further limited open competition at the local level. due to security concerns and weak law enforcement has further limited open competition at the local level.

Observers note that political dynamics remain fluid, with shifting alliances and emerging actors competing to shape the post-reform transition. Questions persist about the extent to which the elections will reflect the full spectrum of political participation. Many stakeholders emphasized that, regardless of the outcome, the credibility of the polls will depend on all parties' willingness to engage constructively with ongoing reforms, uphold the electoral framework, and demonstrate a sustained commitment to peaceful and transparent competition.

Civic Space and Participation

Since the August 2024 uprising, civic space in Bangladesh has opened considerably, though the environment for political participation and civil society engagement remains uneven. The end of state-sponsored disappearances and the dismissal of politically motivated cases have been widely welcomed as important steps toward restoring public trust. However, law enforcement agencies continue to exercise restraint in the aftermath of the uprising, and their limited presence has contributed to sporadic insecurity at the local level. While the overall climate for expression has improved, uncertainty persists regarding the extent to which civic actors can operate without administrative or political interference.

Civil society organizations report a gradual easing of restrictions, yet structural barriers remain. The Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) law continues to impose bureaucratic hurdles on registration and funding, constraining the ability of smaller or advocacy-oriented groups to operate freely. Although the Interim Government has reduced administrative processing time from 45 to 30 days, many organizations noted that approvals remain inconsistent and overly centralized. Civil

society actors emphasized the need for clearer procedures and more predictable regulatory oversight to foster an enabling environment for participation, particularly for locally-based and human rights-focused organizations. Domestic election observation has expanded in principle, with 73 organizations accredited to monitor the polls. However, only a fraction of these groups possess prior observation experience or the institutional capacity to conduct nationwide observation. Most rely on limited volunteer networks and external funding. Stakeholders stressed the need for capacity-building support to ensure that citizen-led observation contributes meaningfully to the transparency and credibility of the process.

Women remain underrepresented across all aspects of the electoral process. Social norms, security concerns, and caregiving responsibilities continue to constrain women's participation, particularly at the local level. Several interlocutors observed that women active in political and civic life continue to face harassment, both online and in public spaces. The voter list continues to reflect an imbalance, and female candidacy rates remain low despite party-level commitments to nominate women for at least five percent of candidate slots. While the July Charter includes a proposal to increase the threshold to ten percent, it would not take effect until a future electoral cycle. Overall, while conditions for civic engagement have improved since the transition, more work can be done to improve the conditions for democratic elections. Progress will depend on consistent enforcement of legal protections, transparent regulatory practices, and active efforts by both government and civil society to expand participation in the political process.

VI. Recommendations

The mission offers the following recommendations for consideration by the Election Commission, government institutions, political parties, and other electoral stakeholders. If implemented during the remaining pre-election period and beyond, these measures could help advance credible and peaceful elections.

Finalize Implementation of the July Charter

- Political parties should commit to finalizing and operationalizing the July National Charter, including clarifying timelines, resolving outstanding differences over specific provisions, and publicly affirming their intent to uphold its democratic reforms.
- The Interim Government and the Election Commission should work jointly with political parties to establish a clear, legally sound framework for conducting the referendum on the July Charter.
- Decisions regarding the sequencing and timing of the referendum should be guided by transparent legal interpretation and broad political consensus. Clear and consistent communication with the public about the referendum's purpose, process, and implications will be essential to maintaining confidence in both the reform agenda and the electoral process.

Strengthen Civic Education and Support Democratic Reform

- Robust civic education initiatives are essential to ensure public understanding of the July Charter. The Election Commission, political parties, media, and relevant institutions should prioritize nationwide efforts to educate voters on the content and implications of proposed reforms, including constitutional changes and electoral procedures.

- Civic education efforts should be broad-based, accessible, and tailored to reach first-time voters, youth, women, and marginalized communities.

Encourage Women's Political Participation

- Women remain underrepresented in all facets of political life. Political parties should ensure the protection of women's rights and elevate women's leadership by actively recruiting women candidates, providing leadership training, and supporting participation beyond reserved seats.
- Parties should also engage more women, both as candidates and as voters in the electoral process.

Ensure Transparent Candidate Selection Process

- Political parties should strengthen internal democratic practices by ensuring candidate selection processes are transparent, systematic, and free from coercion or favoritism.
- Parties should mitigate local-level violence during nomination periods and safeguard women's participation as candidates and campaigners.

Coordinate Security Planning

- The Election Commission should enhance coordination with the military and police to proactively de-escalate local tensions and prevent election-related violence.
- Joint planning, clear communication protocols, and integrated response mechanisms are essential to maintain public safety and reinforce voter confidence throughout the election period.

Enhance Transparency and Credibility in Citizen Election Observation

- The Election Commission should publish clear and accessible criteria for accrediting citizen observer organizations, including eligibility requirements, evaluation standards, and review timelines.
- In cases of rejection, written explanations should be provided to strengthen accountability and foster trust.
- Accredited citizen observers should publicly reaffirm their commitment to neutrality and non-partisanship to ensure that observation efforts are credible and independent.
- The Commission should host periodic briefings with accredited observer groups to share updates, address concerns, and reinforce best practices ahead of election day.

Foster Transparency in Political Financing

- The Election Commission should propose legal amendments mandating public access to information on political fundraising and campaign expenditures. Such reforms would allow citizens, media, and civil society to monitor financial flows and assess compliance with electoral regulations.
- Clear penalties for violations, including non-disclosure or misreporting of funds, should be established and reinforced. Independent audits and civil society monitoring should be encouraged to promote accountability and public trust.

Promote a Free, Independent, and Trustworthy Information Environment During Elections

- Media outlets should uphold professional standards of neutrality and avoid partisan bias in election coverage. Editorial independence must be protected, and journalists should operate free from political or economic pressure.
- Civil society and the Election Commission should collaborate on voter-education initiatives to help citizens identify false or misleading information and understand the impact of online behavior on democratic processes.

About the Mission

The mission brought together a wide-ranging group of experts, including representatives from IRI and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), as well as regional and electoral specialists, reflecting the international community's support for Bangladesh's democracy and its commitment to supporting this electoral process. The mission's activities were conducted in accordance with the [*Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation*](#), an agreement that establishes the standards for impartial and professional election observation.

A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, IRI advances freedom and democracy worldwide by helping political parties become more responsive, strengthening transparent and accountable governance, and increasing the role of marginalized groups in the political process. Since 1983, IRI has monitored over 258 elections and is recognized for its impartiality and professionalism. More information is available at www.iri.org.

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