

Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh: Overview and Issues for Congress

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Overview

Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority South Asian country of 167 million, held parliamentary elections on January 7, 2024, amid concerns about democratic backsliding and political violence. Incumbent Prime Minister [Sheikh Hasina](#) and her Awami League (AL) party secured a fourth consecutive term in a vote that major opposition parties boycotted. Strengthening democracy in Bangladesh is a stated [aim](#) of U.S. policy in the country. In advance of the elections, some outside observers [criticized](#) the ongoing government [crackdown](#) on the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other opposition forces, and some Members of Congress [expressed](#) concerns about [human rights abuses](#) in Bangladesh. The U.S. Department of State [concluded](#) that the elections “were not free and fair” and expressed concerns about reported irregularities and the arrests of thousands of political opposition members.

Background

Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy that conducts regular elections, though there are increasing concerns that it is becoming, or has already become, a one-party, “[hybrid](#)” regime that includes elements of authoritarianism and democracy. The ruling AL has increasingly dominated national politics since it was voted into power in 2009. When Prime Minister Hasina won her third consecutive term in December 2018, observers [reported](#) vote rigging, voter intimidation, and mass arrests of opposition activists. The State Department [characterized](#) the 2018 elections as “improbably lopsided” and “marred by irregularities.”

The nongovernmental organization Freedom House assesses that the AL has consolidated political power through harassment of the opposition and its perceived allies, as well as of critical media and civil society voices, and [designates](#) the country as “partly free.” In advance of the 2024 parliamentary elections, observers raised [concerns](#) as to whether the AL would allow the elections to proceed freely and fairly. The months leading up to the elections saw violent [protests](#) and the [arrests](#) of thousands of opposition party members. The BNP and other opposition parties had [called](#) for a caretaker government to oversee the

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elections, arguing that the AL could not administer a fair election. The AL rejected these demands, and the BNP and 16 smaller opposition parties decided to boycott what the BNP [termed](#) a “sham vote.”

In May 2023, the State Department [announced](#) a new visa policy that allows the United States to restrict visa issuance for any Bangladeshi nationals it finds to be undermining Bangladesh’s democratic election process. Under the policy, the State Department denotes actions that undermine Bangladesh’s democratic election process as including vote rigging, voter intimidation, the use of violence to prevent people from exercising their right to free association and assembly, and attempts to prevent political actors (such as parties and voters) from speaking freely about their views. In September 2023, the State Department [announced](#) that it was “taking steps to impose visa restrictions on Bangladeshi individuals responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh.” The announcement stated that those targeted included “members of law enforcement, the ruling party, and the political opposition,” but it did not say how many individuals were being subject to the restriction. The State Department and the U.S. Department of the Treasury previously [sanctioned](#) Bangladesh’s Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a paramilitary formation implicated in hundreds of disappearances and extrajudicial killings, and several current and former RAB officials, for engaging in serious human rights abuses.

Election Results

The opposition boycott effectively guaranteed an overwhelming AL victory. Hasina’s party secured 222 of 300 parliamentary seats; a further 62 seats went to independent candidates, many of whom are [aligned](#) with the AL, and 11 went to the Jatiya Party, an AL ally. The reported [turnout](#) of around 40% was down sharply from [over 80%](#) in 2018; some analysts posit that this low turnout undermines the legitimacy of the electoral results. One expert [described](#) the lower turnout as “a clear indication of the waning confidence of many Bangladeshis in national elections.” Exiled BNP leader Tarique Rahman expressed [concerns](#) that the already-low turnout figure was inflated through ballot-stuffing. Some analysts also [described](#) the reported turnout as “suspiciously high.”

Outlook and Issues for Congress

Some analysts [argue](#) that the flawed elections represent a “[setback](#)” for U.S.-Bangladesh relations and for U.S. policy in Bangladesh given that “U.S. pre-election policies did little or nothing to deliver a free and fair election with full participation of opposition parties.” One expert [described](#) the outcome of the elections as a “defeat” for the Biden Administration’s values-based foreign policy. Some analysts [speculate](#) that concerns about the conduct of the elections may prompt the United States to introduce trade sanctions, which could negatively impact Bangladesh’s garment sector. Nevertheless, one expert [underlines](#) that “U.S.-Bangladesh relations have actually strengthened considerably in recent years,” despite human rights and democracy concerns, pointing to the countries’ strong economic relationship and the strategic significance of Bangladesh for U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific.

Following the elections, the State Department [urged](#) all parties to reject violence, adding that, “the United States remains committed to partnering with Bangladesh to advance our shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, to supporting human rights and civil society in Bangladesh, and to deepening our people-to-people and economic ties.”

One commentator [described](#) the electoral results as a “pyrrhic victory” for the AL, and another [posited](#) that they raise concerns for governance and political stability in Bangladesh. While Sheikh Hasina’s supporters credit her with overseeing the country’s rapid economic development and successfully balancing relations with major powers, Bangladesh is facing increasing [economic pressures](#) that some analysts [argue](#) may fuel discontent with the AL government and bring the risk of further political violence.

Following the vote, 12 U.S. Senators sent a [letter](#) to Prime Minister Hasina urging her to end “the pattern of abusing laws and the justice system to target critics of the government.” Congress could consider whether or not to conduct oversight activities to examine the efficacy of U.S. policy toward Bangladesh, including U.S. programs intended to strengthen democratic systems and support civil society in the country, and U.S. sanctions intended to discourage human rights violations and democratic backsliding.

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