



PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

A credible electoral process propels the renewal of democracy

Dhaka, 14 February 2026

This is the preliminary statement of the EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM). The mission will later publish a final report, including detailed analysis and recommendations for future electoral reform. The EU EOM may also make additional statements on election-related matters as and when it considers it appropriate.

Summary

The 2026 parliamentary elections were, credible and competently managed, marking a pivotal step towards restoring democratic governance and rule of law. For the first time since 2008, elections were genuinely competitive, conducted under a renewed legal framework that largely accords with international standards and with fundamental freedoms broadly respected. However, sporadic, localised political violence and persistent fear of mob attacks, often triggered by manipulated online narratives, harmed the democratic process. The limited political space afforded to women undermined their equal participation. The Bangladesh Election Commission (EC) worked independently and transparently, maintaining the confidence of stakeholders, and upholding the integrity of the polls.

The electoral legal framework is conducive to the conduct of democratic elections, with the 2025 amendments strengthening inclusion and credibility. Further reform is, however, required to enhance legal certainty and close loopholes that diminish institutional accountability and transparency, as well as to revise or repeal laws that unduly restrict freedom of expression.

The newly appointed EC adopted a proactive approach to rebuilding public trust in the elections, enabled and supported by the Interim Government and other stakeholders. The EC displayed transparency and openness, responding promptly to media queries, sharing information of public interest, and maintaining dialogue with political parties. However, its new and stringent campaign rules were not consistently enforced, at times feeding perceptions of bias and generating grievances about an uneven playing field in some constituencies, voiced by many parties, including the two main electoral alliances.

Election day preparations were undertaken both, professionally and on time, lending integrity to the polls amid a generally positive atmosphere. Some 770,000 voters living abroad were enfranchised through a postal ballot; the training of more than 850,000 polling staff was well-delivered; and the distribution of materials went smoothly. On election day, dedicated poll workers managed the voting efficiently, while the constant presence of party agents from both major coalitions enhanced integrity. Regrettably, less than half of voting places were accessible to voters with reduced mobility, limiting their right to independent participation, in the absence of the right to a postal ballot.

Vote counting and tabulation of results were competently handled, yet integrity safeguards were not uniformly implemented. Whilst efficient, the requisite checks were not always performed during ballot counts. Party agents could follow the process and regular updates on constituency results were released by returning officers, which helped to build public confidence in the accuracy of the results.

The candidate registration process laid the foundation for genuinely competitive elections. The EC efficiently and transparently handled 645 appeals, reinstating two-thirds of appellants, effectively upholding the right to stand. Some 2,000 candidates contested, including 275 independents. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP-) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI-) led alliances were the primary contenders in the field of 51 contesting parties. Student leaders, who spearheaded the 2024 uprising, for the most part either stood as independents or within the National Citizens Party (NCP) that was in a seat-sharing agreement with JeI. Overall, voters were offered a broad range of political alternatives.

The campaign was dynamic and candidates enjoyed freedom of assembly and expression. Key contenders held mass rallies, drawing hundreds of thousands in person and tens of millions more online. At the local level, campaign banners draped the streets, and marches and door-to-door canvassing dominated. By the end of the campaign, rhetoric heightened, with the focus shifting from policies to personal insults and mutual allegations of misconduct, amplified in social media, with JeI-leaning networks far more effective in attracting interest than those for BNP. Intra-party conflicts, local patronage networks and varying financial means affected the playing field in several constituencies.

Women candidates were, regrettably, almost absent from these elections. Only four per cent of the contestants were women, with BNP fielding 10, and NCP two candidates, while JeI and 30 other parties did not have any, evidencing a clear lack of political will to advance women in national politics, despite apparent commitments in the July Charter. Other deterrents included patriarchy, discrimination, digital and physical harassment and character assassination.

Indigenous communities and religious minorities felt their hopes for improvement of their situation dashed by the absence of special measures to ensure their political representation, either in present law or in the July Charter. They also were concerned by increasing religious overtones within public discourse, including online, and expressed an entrenched fear of physical violence.

Sporadic political violence peaked during the first week of February, but the impact of these incidents remained localised and did not indicate any systematic pattern. The EU EOM received and corroborated reports of some 56 campaign-related incidents involving physical violence, resulting in at least 200 casualties in 27 districts; the IG cited five deaths linked to political activity since calling the elections. Episodes of intimidation and harassment of campaigners, particularly women, and attacks on property, were also reported. Most incidents pitted BNP and JeI supporters against one another, with former BNP affiliates, contesting as independents, also frequently embroiled in confrontations.

The digital quest for the 55.6-million strong youth vote was equally fierce, leaving little space for respectful political debate. The EU EOM identified at least 20 viral disinformation incidents, with manipulative content reaching at least 1 million views each within 24-hours. Influencers and deceptive media accounts, including some from outside Bangladesh, were the prime vector of disinformation on Facebook and TikTok. National fact-checking initiatives countered those narratives, yet social media platforms were slow to respond, enabling the pollution of the digital information environment.

Several private media outlets made efforts to offer balanced coverage of elections, yet the BNP received most of the visibility. Sustained pressure from state and non-state actors, economic vulnerability, incidents of digital-led violence and harassment, alongside inadequate police protection, curbed media freedom and fostered self-censorship, reducing the space for analytical reporting. In the positive, some talk shows were held with several contestants, helping voters to make informed choices.

Civil society made an important contribution to restoring public trust in the electoral process. Eighty-one citizen observer groups were accredited to monitor the polls, adding to transparency. Young activists engaged in nation-wide voter education activities, aimed to close digital literacy gaps, campaigned for a “yes” vote in the referendum and advocated enhanced respect for human rights.

The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) has been present in Bangladesh since 29 December 2025, following an invitation from the Bangladesh authorities. The EU EOM is led by Chief Observer Ivars Ijabs, Member of the European Parliament and at full strength comprised 223 observers from all EU Member States, Canada, Norway and Switzerland. A delegation of the European Parliament was integrated into the Mission. The EU EOM assessed the electoral process against national law and international standards for democratic elections Bangladesh has adopted. On election day, the EU EOM observed in 805 polling centres in all 64 administrative districts. This is a preliminary statement. The final assessment of the elections will depend, in part, on the conduct of the remaining stages, including the handling of possible post-election complaints and appeals. The EU EOM continues to observe post-election developments and will publish a final report, including recommendations, afterwards. The EU EOM is independent in its findings and conclusions; it adheres to the

Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation endorsed at the United Nations in October 2005.

Preliminary Findings

BACKGROUND

The parliamentary elections were a key step towards restoring democratic governance after the July 2024 mass uprising that ended the 15 years of repressive Awami League (AL) rule. The pre-election environment was shaped by wide-ranging legislative and institutional reforms initiated by the Interim Government (IG), aimed at rebuilding trust in state institutions, improving respect for human rights, reducing corruption, and strengthening the separation of powers. At the same time, there were electoral security concerns, limited public confidence in law-enforcement, discontent about the extent of implementation of the reform agenda, and fear of disinformation, including from outside Bangladesh.

On 11 December, the Bangladesh Election Commission (EC) slated the elections for 12 February 2026 to be held concurrently with a referendum on the July Charter, a political agreement adopted in October 2025 to consolidate proposals on governance reform. All major political parties endorsed the Charter, with some attaching reservations to specific provisions. In this period, new political actors emerged, such as the student-led National Citizen Party (NCP). Previously suppressed parties also resumed public activity, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which had boycotted several previous elections, and Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), banned between 2013 and 2024.

AL, which as a party was suspended from contesting the elections, and its affiliates continuously sought to undermine the IG and the legitimacy of the elections. In a concerted effort, AL-leaning social media accounts called for a boycott of the elections. Such efforts intensified in January; by election day, posts on TikTok with AL hashtags reached some 183 million views in total.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Recent electoral reforms strengthened inclusivity, amid concerns over legal coherence.

The electoral legal framework is grounded in the 1972 Constitution and numerous statutory laws, aiming to ensure inclusive participation through direct universal suffrage. Although relatively comprehensive and broadly aligned with international standards, the legal framework remains structurally fragmented across numerous acts and ordinances, amended over time through a piecemeal approach. Recent reform initiatives, encompassing constitutional proposals under the July Charter, amendments to the Representation of the People Order (RPO) and recommendations of the Electoral Reform Commission, proceeded in parallel rather than through a coherent legislative sequence. This fragmentation is compounded by enforcement deficits, undermining legal certainty, as well as a lack of institutional accountability, reducing the overall effectiveness of electoral governance.

The inclusivity and credibility of the 2026 parliamentary elections were strengthened through two major amendments to the RPO, approved by the IG on 25 November and 8 December 2025. Key improvements include extending postal voting to registered out-of-country residents and to eligible prisoners, granting the Electoral Enquiry and Adjudication Committees (EEACs) magisterial powers to conduct summary trials for violations of the Code of Conduct and certain electoral offences, and empowering the EC to declare the election of a returned candidate void at any time during their tenure, if false or inconsistent information is found in a candidate's affidavits or financial returns.

The May 2025 amendment to the Anti-Terrorism Ordinance, its immediate application to ban all activities of the AL and its affiliates, and the subsequent suspension of the party's registration by the EC until conclusion of the trials by the International Crimes Tribunal, raised concerns regarding the proper implementation of the legal framework, as well as to proportionality, and to compliance with due process. Notwithstanding these measures, no individual candidates were disqualified solely on the basis of past affiliation with the AL.

The Parliament is unicameral and composed of 350 members elected for a five-year term: 300 are directly elected in single-member constituencies under the first-past-the-post system; 50 seats are reserved for women, nominated by parties in Parliament proportional to their share of the 300 seats.

ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION

Election Commission operated transparently and was largely trusted by stakeholders.

The EC has constitutional status as an independent body, and considerable powers to implement its mandate. The EC may require assistance from any executive authority, although its ability to direct government bodies remains at the President's discretion. All five EC members, including the Chief Election Commissioner, were appointed by the President in November 2024, following a legally prescribed selection process by a committee. While allowing for nominations by political parties and professional organisations, the time given by law to the committee to propose candidates is 15 days and no public call or hearing is foreseen, to the detriment of transparency.

The EC steered election preparations professionally, demonstrating the capacity and willingness to deliver a credible process. It displayed transparency and openness by engaging with stakeholders, maintaining dialogue with political parties, observers, and civil society, as well as by responding to media enquiries, and by promptly publishing information of public interest. Co-ordination cells with law enforcement agencies were established to monitor the pre-election environment, including online, aimed at ensuring security at the polls, as well as at facilitating timely interventions. Distribution of electoral materials and training of more than 850,000 polling staff was carried out through the EC's district and sub-district offices and was assessed positively by the EU EOM.

In the run up to the elections, there was stakeholder confidence in the EC's operational competence and independence. At the same time, the Commission and the returning officers (ROs) came under frequent criticism for not ensuring a level playing field in some constituencies, as stringent campaigning rules were not evenly enforced against all actors. Nearly all of the 69 ROs, appointed by the EC to oversee the conduct of the polls in 300 constituencies, came from the ranks of district executive chiefs, while some 600 assistant ROs were senior *upazila* (sub-district) officials, all government appointees.

The EC successfully took on the challenge of expanding postal voting to enfranchise voters abroad, as well as large numbers of electors in country who could not vote in person. To this end, a special mobile application was developed for the registration of postal voters and tracking of ballots, providing integrity safeguards for ballot delivery to the intended recipient. Of more than 770,000 overseas voters who requested ballots, votes of nearly 500,000 reached the ROs before the closing of the polls. In-country postal voting, barely used in prior elections, was available to government officials and other personnel on election duty, as well as to prisoners. Over 760,000 in-country voters requested postal ballots; nearly 670,000 arrived in time for the count.

The EC conducted a broad and visible voter education campaign, supported by the EU and other development partners, with dozens of video clips aired across traditional and social media, as well as outdoor materials, explaining campaign rules, duties of polling officials, and key electoral procedures. The EC also encouraged participation in the referendum, without advocating any vote preference.

VOTER REGISTRATION

An inclusive voter registration system, but more effort needed for effective enfranchisement.

Following the EC's extensive registration drive in 2025, more than 127.7 million voters registered for these elections, an increase of 8 million compared with the January 2024 poll. Under the active registration system, eligible citizens must apply to be included on the lists, and may do so continuously throughout the year at the designated EC offices. The voter lists closed on 31 October 2025, with voters who turned 18 before that date being eligible for inclusion.

The completeness and accuracy of voter lists was assessed positively by most EU EOM interlocutors, while a few pointed out that the system does not accommodate population mobility, and that requests for a change of address are processed slowly. As a result, those who migrate internally due to employment, education or are displaced by natural disasters often find it difficult to register in their new places of residence and need to travel back to their home constituency to vote. Cheaper and more feasible solutions, such as postal voting, are not available to all such categories of voters.

REGISTRATION OF CANDIDATES

The nomination process attracted broad participation, although numerous disqualification criteria are unduly restrictive.

Contesting the parliamentary elections required Bangladeshi citizenship and a minimum age of 25. Eligibility criteria are largely aligned with international standards, yet certain provisions are disproportionate and unduly limit the right to stand. These include the disqualification of persons who have held an executive post in a foreign funded non-governmental organisation, have left the public service in the past three years, or have failed to pay a utility bill. Other grounds for disqualification include, among others, insolvency, foreign citizenship, certain criminal convictions, as well as being a loan defaulter or a partner or director in a company that defaulted before the nominations, or being a fugitive. Independent candidates must provide signatures from at least one per cent of registered voters in the constituency. A candidate can contest up to three constituency seats.

An efficiently conducted and inclusive candidate registration process laid the foundation for genuinely competitive elections. In total, 2,569 candidates submitted nominations, among them only four per cent were women. Nineteen per cent of nominees were independents. The ROs initially rejected 723 candidates, with a much higher proportion among independents (48 per cent) than among party nominees (19 per cent). Upon the conclusion of the adjudication of 645 appeals, 421 candidacies (two-thirds of the applicants) were reinstated by the EC. More than half of these (185) were independents. The appeal proceedings were conducted in a transparent and adversarial manner, with adequate opportunity for the appellants to be heard.

A total of 2,026 candidates contested the elections, including 275 independents, among whom some 80 were formerly BNP affiliated, but did not receive the party nomination. Only BNP, Islami Andolan Bangladesh (IAB), JeI, and the Jatiya Party had candidates in at least half of the races. BNP and JeI formed electoral alliances, comprising 5 and 11 parties respectively, covering all constituencies. However, in 102 and 78 constituencies, coalition partners fielded more than one candidate, and at times engaged in direct competition against one another, in particular within the BNP-led alliance.

CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT

A competitive campaign offered voters a genuine choice, but was marked by divisive rhetoric and isolated, yet serious, security incidents.

The campaign was pluralistic, dynamic and competitive, and voters were presented with a wide choice of distinct political agendas. Fundamental freedoms of assembly and expression were respected. Although political parties were generally able to compete on a level playing field, candidates in some constituencies faced disadvantages due to links between rival candidates and district or local authorities, and unequal access to financial resources. The BNP and JeI were the most visible in the campaign, while IAB, the NCP and others, including independents, were present to a lesser extent.

Political parties and candidates employed a wide range of campaign methods, including printed materials, outdoor advertising, in-person events, street campaigning, and digital outreach. Senior party figures led high-profile rallies attended by tens of thousands and followed live on Facebook by over 40 million each. In the digital space, official pages were primarily used for self-promotion, while unofficial supporting accounts were used for attacking opponents. The EU EOM observed some 200 campaign events, most of which had adequate police protection and were generally peaceful, although

confrontational rhetoric emerged at times. The tone of the campaign hardened closer to elections, with parties frequently exchanging accusations of an uneven playing field, threats, and violence.

Some campaign rules were overly prescriptive and not consistently enforced, leading to perceptions of impunity and bias. The RPO and the Code of Conduct narrowly define permitted campaign activities and materials, including their content, format and placement. The EU EOM noted a high number of minor violations by most main contestants, including the display of oversized or non-permitted campaign materials, campaigning in prohibited locations, and use of non-permitted sound systems. There were also some credible reports of illicit campaigning, including promises of spiritual rewards in exchange for votes, and distribution of money, food, or prizes.

Responding to these violations, the EEACs were proactive and, despite limited resources, played an overall positive role. They not only responded to complaints and conducted summary trials (more than 50), but also initiated investigations and reached out to local communities informing them about the Code of Conduct and encouraging them to report violations. The EEACs dealt with more than 510 cases concerning Code of Conduct violations and disputes between party supporters. The EEACs mostly issued warnings, but also imposed fines on at least 55 persons and referred 15 cases to the police.

Politically motivated violence affected the campaign in some highly contested constituencies, peaking in the first week of February. Those incidents were localised and did not indicate any systematic pattern. During the campaign the EU EOM received and corroborated reports of at least 56 distinct incidents involving physical hostilities between supporters of competing candidates or rival party factions, resulting in at least 200 injuries across 27 districts. The IG cited five deaths linked to political activities since the calling of the elections on 11 December 2025. Additional incidents included threats and intimidation, harassment of supporters, targeted attacks on campaign offices, and arson. Most cases involved BNP and JeI candidates and their supporters, as well as BNP factional disputes and, in some instances, the NCP and independent candidates. While the police publicly emphasised a preventative approach, many contestants assessed these measures as insufficient.

MEDIA

Legal framework requires urgent reform to reduce self-censorship and protect media freedom.

The media landscape is diverse and dynamic, yet suffering from long-standing systemic problems, with editorial self-censorship deeply entrenched. Sustained pressure from state and non-state actors, economic vulnerability, incidents of online and offline harassment, alongside inadequate police protection, narrowed the space for political pluralism and analytical reporting. The coordinated, digital-led mob attacks on *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star* evidenced failed efforts to contain disinformation, exposed the media's vulnerability, and had a chilling effect on campaign coverage.

The legal framework governing media and digital rights has marginally improved under the IG, yet many restrictive laws remain in force, departing from international standards for freedom of expression. Additionally, many obvious gaps remain especially in addressing digital media and the use of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence. Further vague definitions in the Penal Code and the Cyber Security Ordinance open an opportunity to prosecute legitimate forms of expression.

The BNP and JeI, alongside the IG, dominated the news coverage across traditional media monitored by the EU EOM. The state-funded BTV focused predominantly on the government's agenda, with 37 per cent of its prime-time newscast featuring the IG; the rest of BTV's news was equitably shared between BNP and JeI. The prime-time news of private broadcasters also focused on the BNP and JeI. The representatives of the two main electoral alliances were the most frequent guests on the evening talk shows. Among other contestants, only some independent candidates received meaningful coverage.

On a positive note, several private TV channels (*Jamuna TV*, Channel 24, *Somoy TV*, News 24, Channel I and RTV) organised talk shows with candidates, helping voters to directly compare contestants in several constituencies. EU EOM observed candidates being treated equitably, with the audience

sometimes given an opportunity to ask questions. However, the BNP and JeI national leaders did not hold any pre-election debates, which would have facilitated a first-hand comparison of their policies.

The most common news topics were parties' platforms, electoral security, as well as transitional justice and corruption. However, live coverage of campaign rallies by national leaders of the BNP and JeI, alongside news on reciprocal accusations by the BNP, JeI and NCP, outweighed analytical reporting.

National newspapers *Bangladesh Pratidin*, *Jugantor*, *Kaler Kantho*, *Prothom Alo* and *Amar Desh* allocated most of their coverage to the BNP, with JeI receiving around two-thirds of the BNP's share, while the NCP, smaller parties, and independents got much less coverage.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL RIGHTS

The online campaign was dominated by information pollution from partisan accounts, with inadequate reaction from social media platforms.

Social media was the key channel for swaying the 55.6-million strong youth vote, yet the quality of political debate was diminished by high volumes of disinformation. Partisan accounts advanced their political agendas, while disparaging their opponents, with the JeI and NCP jointly reaching ten times higher views than the BNP (129 versus 13 million), as monitored by the EU EOM. While Facebook and YouTube were impactful, TikTok proved to be particularly important, with trending hashtags dominated almost entirely by political content created in support of BNP and JeI.

The discourse was heavily polarised, with political mudslinging primarily observed on public groups and partisan accounts. From 22 January, at least a fifth of posts placed by NCP and JeI-leaning accounts aimed to discredit the BNP, most commonly alleging corruption, claiming that candidates were loan defaulters and extortionists, and framing the BNP as “a pro-India” party. On BNP-leaning accounts, the share of negative posts was slightly lower, primarily accusing JeI of exploiting religious sentiment. The EU EOM analysed over 40,000 posts with an equal share of BNP-, NCP-, and JeI-leaning ones.

Disinformation was diffused on a viral scale, including from outside Bangladesh. EU EOM monitoring identified 23 viral incidents of wide-spread dissemination of divisive content in a 24-hour window, with an average of 1 million views. The main narratives exploited BNP-JeI tensions. There were also several viral, manipulated videos alleging that BNP candidates assaulted women; this claim was recycled in at least 1,000 posts labelling the party as “women abusers” and, notably, at the end of the campaign, JeI support accounts spun this narrative to portray the JeI as the party of “women protectors”.

Although prohibited by law, artificial intelligence (AI) was often used to mimic organic support and to confuse voters. The EU EOM identified 161 AI-generated videos, with over half promoting JeI and one fifth the BNP, while the rest contained fabricated statements and voice-cloning of politicians.

National, multi-pronged efforts to counter disinformation were constructive, yet slow responses from social media platforms reduced the positive effects. The EC's Law and Order cell monitored the spread of harmful content at the national level, while in the districts, police manually checked content on AL-affiliated Facebook pages. Several fact-checking initiatives reported on false narratives and flagged suspicious accounts. However, not all social media platforms responded adequately. Only TikTok had a formal agreement with the EC, offering country-specific support. Google did not have a country-specific election cell, while Meta's approach enabled viral disinformation incidents that compromised the integrity of the information environment.

PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH

Youth actively participated in the electoral process across the political and civil society spectrum.

For the generation that spearheaded the July 2024 uprising, these elections were both a first experience of competitive politics and an attempt to tackle the enduring dominance of veteran politicians. Since 2024, two youth organisations transitioned from protest movements into political parties: *Gono Odhikar*

Parishad (GOP), which emerged from the 2018 quota reform protests, and the NCP, formed by part of the leadership of the uprising. In coordination with the BNP, the GOP fielded 93 candidates, while the NCP contested 32 constituencies within the JeI alliance. The latter coalition triggered internal splits within the NCP, amid concerns about the party's departure from its initial secular positioning.

Youth political activity was particularly pronounced on university campuses. Following decades-long hiatuses, five student union elections were held from mid-2025 onwards; all were won by the JeI-affiliated *Chhatra Shibir*. Beyond party politics, youth pressure groups such as *Inqilab Moncho* and Students Against Discrimination held demonstrations demanding justice for the December 2025 killing of youth leader Sharif Osman Hadi, and campaigned for a “yes” vote in the referendum. Overall, voters aged 18 to 37 (some 44 per cent of all registered voters) were a decisive segment of the electorate.

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Powerful patriarchy and gender-based violence, together with inaction by political parties, effectively excluded women from political life.

Despite the central role women played during the 2024 uprising, sexual discrimination, harassment and oppression of women are widespread in the political arena, with violence against them, both physical and digital, reported to and observed by the EU EOM. Deep-seated misogyny and a general tolerance of subjugation, exacerbated by traditionally embedded patriarchy, relegate women to the private sphere, undermining their participation in electoral politics.

The participation of women in the elections, as candidates and as political leaders, was minimal. Women accounted for just four per cent of total candidates, about half of whom were independent. Despite agreement in the July Charter to a five per cent political party quota of female nominees for future elections, to rise progressively over subsequent electoral cycles to 33 per cent, the major parties nominated very few women. Ten were from BNP, two from NCP, and none from JeI or from another 30 of the 51 contesting parties.

Women were almost invisible in campaigning, constituting only some eight per cent of speakers at rallies observed by the EU EOM. Further, parties did not often place women in winnable party strongholds. EU EOM observers received credible reports of harassment or intimidation of women campaigners in almost one-third of all districts.

In the parliament, an additional 50 seats are reserved for women, allocated to political parties according to their proportion secured among the other 300 seats, a mechanism rejected by the women's movement as ineffective, as these seats are not directly elected, depriving the women of genuine political power and undermining meaningful connection with voters.

PARTICIPATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND MINORITY GROUPS

Absence of affirmative action measures undermined the relevance of the elections to minorities.

Religious and ethnic minorities, comprising about ten per cent of the population, traditionally under-represented in parliament, were deterred from participation in political life due to fears of violence. Minorities were concerned by the absence of special measures to ensure their political representation either in the law or in the July Charter, and by the increasing religious overtones of public discourse.

Online hate speech targeting minorities was observed in the run-up to the elections. The EU EOM detected over 100 region-specific Facebook groups called “Protect Our Sisters” that adopted a seemingly coordinated structure and shared identical content portraying Hindu and Christian men as sexual predators, labelling them as “thugs” and “rapists”, and calling for “retaliation”.

Indigenous peoples, about one per cent of the population, related to the EU EOM concerns at the irrelevance of these elections to them, seeking elections instead to the regional and district councils of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), as agreed in the CHT Peace Accord, to vindicate their right to

effective representation. The legal framework inhibiting registration of a regional party was also criticised as a key barrier to representation.

Persons with disabilities exercised their right to vote, but were denied the dignity and independence due to them under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, by inadequate infrastructure and the lack of measures introduced to ensure their voting rights.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND CITIZEN OBSERVATION

Active interest in citizen observation, despite most groups lacking experience and resources.

Although the EC 2025 guidelines on election observation were rather restrictive, and not fully conducive to independent monitoring, citizen observers found them acceptable. Most of the 81 newly accredited organisations are grassroots CSOs with little funding and no prior experience in election observation. The EU-supported Alliance for Fair Election and Democracy developed a sound methodology incorporating a long-term component as well as a statistically representative sample on polling day, with some 2,500 short-term observers. Other notable alliances such as the Election Observer Society, the Voice Network and the National Network for Elections and Democracy fielded thousands of observers, but lacked resources for in-depth training and robust reporting.

VOTING, COUNTING AND TABULATION

Transparency and credibility were preserved throughout an orderly election day and well-managed tabulation, although isolated disturbances occurred.

The election day was overall orderly, festive and calm, with competent polling staff efficiently facilitating voting in polling stations observed by the EU EOM. The counting of the ballots and the tabulation were equally well-conducted, in the presence of party and candidate agents. The EC gave little information during the election day but pro-actively debunked false narratives via its Facebook page, upholding information integrity. The turnout was announced by the EC at 59.44 per cent.

The opening of polling centres (PC) was well organised and timely. All necessary materials were present, and procedures were duly followed in almost all polling centres observed. Nevertheless, a handful of polling premises were assessed as poorly suited for the purpose.

Voting was orderly and professionally managed. In 97 per cent of the 707 PC observed the overall assessment of the process was positive, as poll workers were routinely implementing voting procedures. However, it was also observed that voters were not always identified by matching their face with the photograph on the list and secrecy of the ballot was not fully respected in 5 per cent of observations, with the privacy of the voting compartment being inadequate or it not being used by voters. Just over 52 per cent of the polling centres observed were accessible to people with reduced mobility.

Counting was efficient in all EOM observations, but integrity safeguards were not uniformly implemented. In one third of observations the number of votes cast was not established before the ballot boxes were opened. In a quarter of observations, votes were counted by only one staff member and not re-checked. On the positive, the polling agents and observers had a clear view of the process and signed the statement of PC results in all but three cases, signalling the acceptance of the outcome.

Results tabulation was transparent in all but three of the Mission's 120 observations. Polling agents and observers were able to follow PC results entry, and regular updates on constituency results were released by ROs. By the time of finalising this report, the EC has not published any preliminary results on its website, while media independently tallied results and kept voters informed. The JeI and NCP publicly challenged results in several constituencies in Dhaka.

The overall transparency and integrity of the process was enhanced by the consistent presence of polling agents of both leading electoral alliances during voting, counting and tabulation, as well as the unimpeded access of media, as observed by the EU EOM. Citizen observers were present in eight per

cent of observations. In a handful of instances, EU EOM observers were asked to reduce their observation times, and one team was denied access to the ballot count.

Around one third of all poll workers were women, yet there were only three per cent female presiding officers. About one third of assistant presiding officers, 45 per cent polling staff and 22 per cent of ROs encountered were women, as were one fourth of all party agents.

No systematic violations were recorded on election day, despite social media teeming with allegations of malpractice. The EU EOM observed, was informed by parties and corroborated at least 60 isolated incidents across half of the districts. Those included physical altercations, attempts to capture polling centres, pressure on voters, and vote buying. Several people were arrested; some received prison sentences. To curb potential vote buying, the Bangladesh Bank imposed a 96-hour restriction on cash transfers. Security personnel were deployed in force in all PCs to deter violence and nearly 90 per cent of polling centres observed had CCTV cameras, a measure to uphold law and order, that was positively judged by all stakeholders. Judicial magistrates conducted at least 60 summary trials and imposed prison sentences for serious offences.

ELECTORAL DISPUTES

Flexible and transparent appeals process expanded candidacy but sparked legal and political debate.

Appeals against ROs' decisions on candidate nominations were examined by the EC in a generally transparent and efficient manner. The EC adopted a pragmatic approach that supported inclusiveness, distinguishing between curable technical deficiencies and constitutional or statutory grounds for disqualification. Appeals were accepted where candidates demonstrated substantial compliance in remedying deficiencies. The EC's flexibility in the random verification of ten supporters' signatures per independent candidate mitigated difficulties caused by the requirement to record voters' identification numbers rather than national identification numbers, as well as by the reported intimidation and harassment of some signatories.

The EC's handling of disqualification rules sparked significant legal and political debate, as it adopted broad eligibility interpretations in both dual-citizenship and loan-default cases. For dual citizenship, the EC allowed most candidates to run once they had applied for renunciation and completed administrative steps, without waiting for formal confirmation by the foreign state; an approach consistent with the constitutional text and international standards, although it triggered allegations of bias towards some contestants. In loan-default cases, however, the EC restricted disqualification mainly to principal borrowers, excluding most guarantors, a move that expanded candidacy but diverged from existing laws, raising concerns about legal consistency and the robustness of integrity safeguards.

Around 95 writ petitions were filed before the High Court Division (HCD) of the Supreme Court, based on constitutional provisions on the protection of fundamental rights, namely the right to stand. The HCD adjudicated cases promptly and in accordance with applicable procedures. Although the absence of statutory deadlines for filing and adjudicating petitions and appeals created uncertainty for electoral contestants, the EC and voters alike, both the HCD and the Appellate Division largely upheld the EC's decisions, including on dual citizenship, loan default, and signature collection by independent candidates, emphasising that post-election tribunals constitute the appropriate forum for disputes concerning candidate disqualification.

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