

Pre-Election Forecast and Risk Outlook Ahead of the 2024 Bangladesh General Election

November 7, 2023

Bahauddin Foizeeⁱ | risk analyst, geopolitical analyst, columnist



Bangladesh Parliament Bhaban, by MD SAIFUL AMIN; kazal1968, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Bangladesh approaches its “constitutionally mandated” general election in early 2024, the political environment is entering a highly polarized and volatile phase. The refusal of the ruling Awami League (AL) to reinstate a neutral caretaker government, combined with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party’s (BNP) stated intention to boycott the polls under current conditions, raises serious concerns regarding electoral legitimacy, domestic stability and international acceptance of the outcome.

Current indicators suggest a high likelihood of low voter turnout, an uncontested or weakly contested election, elevated political violence in the pre-election period, and sustained domestic and international pressure following the vote. While large-scale

nationwide violence on polling day itself may be limited due to strong security deployment, post-election unrest and longer-term instability risks are significant, particularly in urban areas and among civil society groups.

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND LEAD-UP TO THE ELECTION

The political landscape is characterized by asymmetric competition. The AL controls the executive, legislature, security forces and election administration, while the BNP remains organizationally weakened due to arrests, legal cases and restrictions on assembly. The removal of the caretaker government provision in 2011 remains the central fault line of Bangladesh's electoral politics.

Given the BNP's public statements rejecting participation under the current Election Commission, it is increasingly likely that:

- The BNP will formally boycott the election or participate only marginally.
- Smaller parties and independents, some aligned informally with the ruling party, will fill the ballot to maintain a procedural appearance of competition.
- The Election Commission will proceed regardless of opposition participation, citing constitutional obligations.

This dynamic suggests that the election will be procedurally conducted but substantively non-competitive, reinforcing claims of democratic backsliding.

RISK OF VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL TENSIONS

Pre-Election Period (High Risk)

The period from November 2023 through early 2024 carries a high risk of episodic violence, particularly:

- Street clashes between opposition supporters and police during rallies and strikes.
- Mass arrests of opposition activists under public order or security laws.
- Intimidation of BNP organizers and civil society actors.

The United Nations statements and human rights reporting already indicate concern over excessive use of force by law enforcement. The continued hardline rhetoric from both major parties suggests that confrontation, rather than compromise, remains the dominant strategy.

Election Day (Moderate Risk)

On polling day itself:

- Large-scale violence is less likely, as the state is expected to deploy overwhelming security forces.
- Isolated incidents—such as candidate disqualifications, voter intimidation or clashes at polling centers—remain possible.
- Voter turnout is expected to be significantly below historical averages, particularly in urban areas.

Post-Election Period (Moderate to High Risk)

Post-election unrest is a key risk area, especially if turnout figures are contested or credibility is questioned. Potential triggers include:

- Disputed turnout data.
- Visible discrepancies between official narratives and public perception.
- Statements from foreign governments questioning the legitimacy of the vote.

While immediate nationwide protests may be suppressed, latent unrest may shift into longer-term movements.

LIKELY ELECTION OUTCOME

Based on current trends, the most probable electoral outcome is:

- A decisive victory for the AL, securing a large parliamentary majority.
- Minimal representation for the BNP, if any.
- A notable number of “independent” candidates, many of whom are expected to be informally aligned with the ruling party.

Such an outcome would technically satisfy constitutional requirements but would fail to restore public confidence in the electoral process, reinforcing the perception of a de facto one-party dominant system.

FOREIGN COUNTRIES' POSITIONS: PRE-ELECTION

Western Governments

The United States, European Union, United Kingdom and Canada are likely to:

- Continue public messaging emphasizing free, fair and inclusive elections.

- Increase diplomatic pressure, including visa restrictions or symbolic measures.
- Avoid endorsing either party, while implicitly signaling concern over democratic space.

The U.S. visa policy announced earlier in 2023 serves as a deterrent mechanism, though it is unlikely to fundamentally alter the ruling party's approach.

United Nations

The UN is expected to:

- Issue stronger statements on human rights and freedom of assembly.
- Call for restraint by law enforcement.
- Avoid direct involvement in electoral validation but highlight systemic concerns.

Regional and Non-Western Actors

India, China, Russia, and several ASEAN and South Asian states are likely to:

- Maintain a non-interference stance.
- Emphasize stability, continuity and bilateral cooperation.
- Engage with whichever government emerges from the election.

FOREIGN COUNTRIES' POSITIONS: POST-ELECTION (EXPECTED)

Following the election:

- Western governments are likely to acknowledge the results while issuing critical statements noting the absence of full political participation and questioning electoral competitiveness.
- Calls for investigations into irregularities and restraint against dissent are expected.
- Sanctions or economic penalties remain unlikely in the short term, but diplomatic relations may cool.

In contrast:

- China, India and Russia are expected to move quickly to congratulate the incumbent leadership.
- These countries will likely frame the election as an internal matter and stress sovereignty and stability.

This divergence will further widen Bangladesh's diplomatic balancing act between Western democratic expectations and strategic partnerships in Asia.

OUTLOOK FOR POST-ELECTION STABILITY

In the immediate aftermath of the election, Bangladesh is likely to experience surface stability backed by strong state control, rather than genuine political reconciliation.

Key medium-term risks include:

- Erosion of institutional legitimacy, particularly of the Election Commission.
- Growing disengagement among citizens.
- Accumulation of political grievances, which may resurface in non-electoral forms.

While the ruling party may consolidate power in the short term, the absence of a credible opposition channel increases—as the past global, regional and local record indicate—the likelihood that future challenges will emerge outside formal political structures.

CONCLUSION

As of November 2023, Bangladesh is heading toward a predictable but fragile election outcome. The primary risks do not lie in an immediate collapse of order, but in the long-term consequences of a contested mandate, declining democratic legitimacy and polarized international responses.

The 2024 election is therefore best understood not as a resolution of Bangladesh's political crisis, but as another milestone in an unresolved struggle over governance, accountability and political inclusion, with implications that will extend well beyond polling day.

ⁱ **Bahauddin Foizee** specializes in strategic risk analysis, using Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) and Scenario Modeling to evaluate domestic politics and regional geopolitics across the Asia Pacific—with deep expertise in U.S. foreign policy in South Asia—and the Middle East, along with legal, security, defense and cultural dynamics. His work supports companies, NGOs, government institutions and political actors in making informed business, investment, diplomatic, political and security decisions. He maintains strict confidentiality and does not disclose client identities or sensitive engagement details.