

## Polity IV Country Report 2010: Bangladesh

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2009</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2010</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Polity:</b></td> <td>5</td> <td>5</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Democ:</b></td> <td>6</td> <td>6</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Autoc:</b></td> <td>1</td> <td>1</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Durable:</b></td> <td></td> <td>1</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>Tentative:</b></td> <td></td> <td>Yes</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2009	2010	Change	<b>Polity:</b>	5	5	0	<b>Democ:</b>	6	6	0	<b>Autoc:</b>	1	1	0	<b>Durable:</b>		1		<b>Tentative:</b>		Yes		
Score:	2009	2010	Change																						
<b>Polity:</b>	5	5	0																						
<b>Democ:</b>	6	6	0																						
<b>Autoc:</b>	1	1	0																						
<b>Durable:</b>		1																							
<b>Tentative:</b>		Yes																							
SCODE	<b>BNG</b>	CCODE	<b>771</b>	Date of Report	<b>1 June 2011</b>																				
<b>Polity IV Component Variables</b>																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
2	2	4	5	3	4																				
<b>Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)</b>																									
End Date	5 January 2009		Begin Date	6 January 2009																					
<b>Polity Fragmentation: No</b>																									
<b>Constitution</b>	1972																								
<b>Executive(s)</b>	Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (AL), directly elected by parliament, assumed office 6 January 2009 President Zillur Rahman (AL), elected unopposed 11 February 2009																								
<b>Legislature</b>	Unicameral: Jatiya Samsada (330 seats; 300 directly elected, 30 reserved for women candidates who are selected by members of parliament; most recent elections, 29 December 2008) Bangladesh Awami League (AL): 230 Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP): 30 Jatiya Party (JP): 27 Other: 9 Independents: 4																								
<b>Judiciary</b>	Supreme Court																								

### Narrative Description:<sup>1</sup>

#### **Executive Recruitment: Transitional or Restricted Elections (7)**

After a short but bloody civil war with Pakistan in which more than one million East Bengalis were killed, Bangladesh gained formal independence in 1971. Early attempts at democratic rule faltered and by 1975 the military had assumed firm control of the political institutions of the state. In 1990 Begum Khaleda Zia ur-Rahman, leader of the Bengal Nationalist Party (BNP), and Sheikh Hasina Wajid, head of the Bangladesh Awami League (AL), joined together to force the resignation of President Ershad and restore

<sup>1</sup> The research described in this report was sponsored by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The PITF is funded by the Central Intelligence Agency. The views expressed herein are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the US Government.

democracy to Bangladesh after 15-years of military rule. Between the return of electoral politics in 1991 and the current political crisis that began with Awami League's boycott of the January 2007 elections, two powerful women alternated executive power: Khaleda Zia is the widow of General Zia ur-Rahman (leader of Bangladesh from 1975 until his assassination in 1981)' Sheikh Hasina is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (former prime minister and president of the country who was assassinated by General Zia in 1975).

While both women were elected in competitive processes that were deemed "free and fair" by international observers – Zia in 1991, Hasina in 1996 and Zia again in 2001 – executive recruitment has been plagued by opposition claims of fraud and by widespread electoral boycotts. In the troubled 1996 election Khaleda Zia was re-elected in voting boycotted by the three main opposition parties. Following massive street protests a caretaker government assumed power and rescheduled elections, which were subsequently won by Sheikh Hasina. After being the first chief executive in the history of the country to serve a full term in office, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stepped down in mid-July 2001 as a neutral caretaker government paved the way for the October elections. In an election process marred by violence, the BNP, in alliance with the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami party and two smaller parties, won a landslide victory. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was sworn in on 10 October 2001 amidst unsubstantiated AL claims of electoral fraud.

Zia's term ended in October 2006, and her government was supposed to be replaced, under terms of the constitution, by a caretaker government that would prepare for the next election, scheduled for 22 January 2007. However, the neutral, former Supreme Court Chief Justice refused to lead the caretaker government and Iajuddin Ahmed, the president serving in Zia's administration, was appointed to lead the interim government. The apparent violation of neutrality in the naming of the caretaker government triggered an immediate and strong reaction by the opposition Awami League and accusations that Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party were manipulating the situation to gain insurmountable advantages to guarantee BNP victory in the elections. Tensions continued to build through the end of 2006. On 4 January 2007, the Awami League announced a boycott of the election, triggering widespread civil unrest.

The military intervened and a state of emergency was declared by President Iajuddin Ahmed on 11 January 2007, civil liberties were curtailed, and elections were postponed indefinitely. On January 12 an interim government was established under the direction of Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed who ruled under the provisions of Emergency Powers Regulations. The new government announced that new elections could not be held until it had completed a thorough reform of the electoral process and had brought Bangladesh's rampant corruption under control. On February 7 the judiciary was separated from the executive branch in accordance with a December 1999 ruling by the Supreme Court, a ruling that successive governments had failed to implement. Also, in February, a new election commission and an anti-corruption commission (ACC) were set up by the military-backed interim government and, on March 8, all political activity was banned. By September 2007, nearly 200,000 politicians, officials, and private citizens had been detained and/or arrested by the ACC, including both former-Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina Wajed and Khaleda Zia, whose intense rivalry had distorted politics in Bangladesh since 1991. The government had attempted to exile the two leaders in April 2007 but had changed their strategy in order to publicly discredit them and dismantle their party-patronage systems. In a sign that the government was easing its control, on September 9 it announced that political parties would be allowed to conduct "indoor politics," however, public activities continued to be prohibited.

On 12 May 2008, Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed announced that new elections would be held in December 2008 and, in preparation, parts of the Emergency Powers Rules (EPR) would be suspended, the ban on indoor politics would be lifted, and discussions with political parties would be held on 22 May. The two main parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), refused to participate until their leaders were released from custody. On 22 July 2008 the government completed its overhaul of the electoral role. In September 2008, the interim government appeared to abandon its attempt to purge the entrenched leadership of the main parties and both Khaleda Zia (BNP) and Sheikh Hasina Wajed (AL) were released on bail in order to lead their parties in December elections. Parliamentary elections were held on 29 December 2008 and resulted in a landslide victory for the Awami League (230 seats) and its Grand Alliance (263 seats total). The BNP-led Four-Party Alliance won only 33 seats. The elected government, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazad, took over from the military-backed interim Government on 6 January 2009.

### **Executive Constraints: Substantial Limitations (5)**

In practice, Bangladesh's prime ministers usually decide on major government policies with little or no involvement by Parliament. Helping to solidify executive power is a law that stipulates that any member of Parliament who votes against their respective party automatically loses their seats. The prime minister's broad constitutional powers have been magnified in recent years by the frequent boycotts of the National Assembly by opposition parties. While BNP MPs boycotted the legislature during much of the period of AL dominance in the late 1990s, in turn, AL MPs have sporadically boycotted the National Assembly since losing power to the BNP in the October 2001 elections. Since the return to power of the AL in January 2009, the BNP has fully participated in the legislative process although their small number of seats in the National Assembly provides them only a limited check on the power of the prime minister.

The country's judiciary is largely independent from executive branch interference. However, there continues to be formal executive control over the country's lower courts despite a 1999 High Court order which dictated that these courts should be under the supervision of the judicial branch. In 2003 the Supreme Court extended the deadline, for the 15<sup>th</sup> time in 4 years, for the formal separation of the judiciary from the executive branch.

### **Political Participation: Political Liberalization: Persistent Overt Coercion (8)**

Political participation in Bangladesh is highly factional in nature and continues to be shaped by a very small, relatively homogenous elite. This elite is comparatively recent in origin, ideologically compatible and has strong roots in the countryside. Within this ruling oligarchy, leadership is highly personalized and maintained through the establishment of patron-client bonds. Despite the return of multiparty electoral politics to Bangladesh in 1991, the competition between these rival patronage networks, institutionalized in the form of the BNP and the AL, continues to produce chronic social instability and political violence, and is partially responsible for the political crisis currently engulfing the country.

The current conflict between Khaleda Zia (BNP) and Sheikh Hasina (Awami League) is a continuation of the longstanding factional acrimony between these two families that goes back three decades. Since winning independence in 1971, Bangladesh has seen two presidents assassinated, four coups, and at least eighteen failed takeover attempts. While the last decade has seen the re-establishment of democracy in Bangladesh, democracy is far from consolidated. Claims of government fraud and intimidation are common and violence is a permanent feature of Bengali politics. Once in power, each party attempts to use the coercive apparatus of the state to weaken its opposition. For example, in December 2001 the BNP government levied corruption charges against eight former AL ministers, including former Prime Minister Hasina.

Rather than using the institutional channels of government to voice their opposition to government policies, since the mid-1990s the parliamentary opposition has preferred to air their discontent through street protests and strikes (*hartals*). Confrontations between government and opposition activists during these *hartals* are often violent. In January 2002, in the country's first national strike since the October 2001 election, the police attacked two former AL ministers. Moreover, both the Zia and Hasina governments have made extensive use of the 1974 Special Powers Act (which allows authorities to detain suspects without charges for up to 120 days) to harass and intimidate political opponents.

Political violence and state repression have been major sources of instability in recent years. More than 140 people have died in bomb attacks by both opposition and government forces since 1999. In August 2004, 18 opposition supporters were killed in a grenade attack. Awami forces claim the attack was an attempt to assassinate their leader. Violence between these groups continued throughout 2005 and 2006, primarily in the form of bombings and assassination attempts. Political participation has been heavily restricted under the state of emergency issued by President Ahmed, following the cancellation of the January 2007 general election, however, demonstrations continued despite the restrictions. Tensions between the polarized factions led by the rival leaders, Zia and Hasina, continued to escalate through late 2006. On 4 January 2007, Sheikh Hasina announced that the Awami League would boycott elections scheduled for 22 January 2007; this announcement was followed by large and widespread demonstrations and counter-demonstrations. On 11 January 2007, President Iajuddin Ahmed, announced that he was declaring a state of emergency and indefinitely postponing legislative elections, apparently at the behest of the military leadership. The interim government immediately resigned and a "neutral" government led by Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former central bank governor, was sworn in on 12 January. With the backing of the military, the new government has embarked on a halting anti-corruption drive apparently designed to dismantle the strangle hold that the Zia-Hasina feud has had on Bangladesh politics. Both leaders were

briefly arrested and some attempt was made to drive them into exile but these efforts have been rescinded almost immediately after they were initiated, suggesting deep divisions within the military reflecting the divisions within the country at large. Under the constitution, a state of emergency can last no more than 120 days, however, the military remained in control until it finally announced that preparations were sufficient for new elections. The elections were held on 29 December 2008 and resulted in a massive victory for the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina Wazed. The new civilian government was sworn in on 6 January 2009. A crisis almost immediately followed the reinstatement of civilian rule when, on 25 February 2009, the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) border guards staged a violent mutiny at their headquarters in the capital, Dhaka, during which 74 people, mostly army officers, were killed. The mutineers were surrounded by regular armed forces and surrendered the following day. As many as 3,700 people were arrested as a result of the mutiny.

2010 has seen a rise in the old factional tensions that underlie Bangladeshi politics. In June 2010 the BNP, with the support of Jamaat-e-Islami, staged its first nation-wide strike since the December 2008 election. Another series of strikes were called in November after the leader of BNP, Khaleda Zia, was evicted from her military-owned home. The BNP called the walkout, which brought much of the country to a standstill, in protest at the “misrule” by the Awami-League led government. These political protests have coincided with increasing labor unrest in the country. Protests staged by the country’s garment workers turned violent in December 2010 as four protestors were killed by the police. The garment workers were angry over the failure of the Government to increase their wages. The Government had initially agreed to hike the wages of labor after massive protests earlier in the year.

Tensions between the AL and the opposition parties have also increased in response to the creation of a war crimes tribunal in March 2010. This tribunal was created to investigate war crimes committed during the country’s war for independence in 1971. The BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami have argued that this tribunal is being used as a political tool to silence criticism of the government and weaken their parties. In December 2010 a senior BNP politician was arrested on charges of instigating violence during an opposition-sponsored general strike in June 2010. The AL-led government then requested that he be charged for war crimes that he allegedly committed in 1971. In July 2010 leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami were arrested for “offending public religious sentiment” and then subsequently charged with war crimes. The opposition parties have dismissed the tribunal as a political show trial. Given the super majority that the AL controls in the parliament, one must consider whether the party will use its current clout in an attempt to further entrench its dominance as a one-party regime and impose restrictions on opposition activity (i.e., factional-restricted competition).