



# NDI/IRI JOINT TECHNICAL ASSESSMENT MISSION (TAM)

Final Report, March 2024





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# CONTENTS

<b>METHODOLOGY AND MISSION OVERVIEW</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>POLITICAL BACKGROUND</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>PRE-ELECTION PERIOD (DECEMBER 1, 2023-JANUARY 6, 2024)</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Section I: State Institutions</i>	8
<i>Section II: Physical Violence</i>	11
<i>Section III: Violence Against Women and Other Marginalized Groups</i>	13
<i>Section IV: Information Environment and Violence</i>	16
<i>Section V: Social Media Monitoring</i>	18
<b>ELECTION DAY (JANUARY 7, 2024)</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>POST-ELECTION PERIOD (JANUARY 8 - FEBRUARY 1, 2024)</b>	<b>21</b>
<i>State Institutions</i>	21
<i>Physical Violence</i>	22
<i>Violence Against Women and Other Marginalized Groups</i>	22
<b>DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>23</b>
<i>State Institutions</i>	23
<i>Physical Violence</i>	23
<i>Violence Against Women and Other Marginalized Groups</i>	24
<i>Information Environment and Violence</i>	24
<b>ABOUT NDI AND IRI</b>	<b>25</b>

## METHODOLOGY AND MISSION OVERVIEW

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) deploy observers and technical teams to monitor electoral processes around the world and issue recommendations for more inclusive, transparent, accountable, and peaceful elections. These missions are held in accordance with local laws and the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation (Declaration of Principles),<sup>1</sup> which establishes the basis for credible international election observation and is endorsed by 56 intergovernmental and international organizations.

Ahead of the Bangladesh parliamentary election, IRI and NDI held a pre-election assessment mission (PEAM) from October 8 to 11, 2023, composed of Bonnie Glick (IRI Co-Chair), former Deputy USAID Administrator; Karl F. Inderfurth (NDI Co-Chair), former Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs; Maria Chin Abdullah, former member of the House of Representatives, Malaysia; Jamil Jaffer, former Associate Counsel to the President of the United States; Johanna Kao, IRI Senior Director, Asia-Pacific Division; and Manpreet Singh Anand, NDI Regional Director, Asia-Pacific.

The PEAM's purpose was to provide an independent and impartial assessment of preparations of the Bangladesh Election Commission (EC), political contestants, civil society, and other stakeholders ahead of the elections and to demonstrate the international community's commitment to credible elections and democratic norms. The PEAM met with the EC; the prime minister, several cabinet ministers, and other government officials; party leaders from across the political spectrum; civil society representatives, including citizen election observer group leaders; current and former women members of parliament; representatives of organizations engaging with youth, persons with disabilities and religious minorities; media representatives; members of the legal community; and representatives of the international and diplomatic communities. At the conclusion of the mission, the PEAM offered

five actionable recommendations for election stakeholders in Bangladesh to follow as a roadmap towards a peaceful, transparent, and inclusive election, which included calls to 1) moderate political rhetoric; 2) protect freedom of expression; 3) commit to nonviolence; 4) promote electoral participation; and 5) create a participatory environment.<sup>2</sup>

Based on the PEAM's findings and ongoing analysis, NDI and IRI deployed a follow-on technical assessment mission (TAM) to monitor different aspects of election-related violence. The decision to structure the TAM in this manner was in response to the persistent and systemic nature of political and election violence in the Bangladesh context. IRI and NDI define election violence as any act of violence, including physical attack, intimidation, harassment, abuse of authority, disinformation, and hate speech occurring online or in the physical world at any point during an election cycle. Election violence is further understood as incidences that can affect the willingness and ability of eligible citizens to participate in elections as voters, candidates, and observers.

The TAM methodology was designed to address concerns about election violence raised by stakeholders during the PEAM, political developments, and the security environment in Bangladesh ahead of and following the PEAM. The goal of the TAM was to evaluate the drivers and implications of election violence during Bangladesh's 12<sup>th</sup> parliamentary election cycle and provide constructive recommendations to reduce election violence during future elections. As part of the TAM, four long-term analysts (LTAs), led by an LTA coordinator, deployed to Bangladesh between December 20 and February 1 to analyze different thematic areas relating to election violence in the pre-election period (December 1, 2023–January 6, 2024), election day (January 7, 2024), and post-election context (January 8–February 1, 2024).<sup>3</sup>

1 <https://www.ndi.org/dop>

2 The full PEAM statement is available here: <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Clean%20PEAM%20Statement.pdf>

3 For the purposes of this assessment, the pre-election period spanned from December 1, 2023, when candidates from all participating partners were confirmed, to January 6, 2024, the eve of the election. The post-election observation period began on January 8, 2024, the day after the election, and ended on February 1, 2024, which marked the end of the TAM's mandate. Events and developments that occurred outside this period factored into the LTAs analysis, but were not part of the period in which they were actively monitoring violence.

The thematic areas included:

- **State institutions** - Focused on the key state actors overseeing and involved in election security, including the EC, Ministry of Home Affairs, police, and other security units.
- **Physical violence** - Focused on violence committed by non-state actors, including political parties, their supporters, and citizens.
- **Violence against women and other marginalized groups** - Focused on violence committed by state or non-state actors targeting women, youth, religious and ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ people,<sup>4</sup> and persons with disabilities.
- **Information environment and violence** - Focused on violence targeting journalists and media outlets by state and non-state actors as well as threats, intimidation, and other forms of violence online.

The LTAs were joined by technical and country experts from NDI and IRI around election day, and both LTAs and NDI/IRI staff received accreditation from the EC. This mission was conducted in accordance with Bangladeshi law and with reference to international standards for credible elections.

Similar to the PEAM, the TAM engaged with a range of stakeholders (also referred to as 'interlocutors' in the report), including election officials; government officials; security actors; political party leaders from across the political spectrum; journalists; civil society organizations (CSOs), including those focusing on youth, women, persons with disabilities, religious minorities; and other international observer missions. The TAM supplemented interviews with desk research from a range of sources. To assess issues of election violence on social media, the TAM used the social media monitoring tools CrowdTangle and Newswhip to track specific inflammatory terms on Facebook (see the Social Media Monitoring subsection for more details). On election day, the TAM visited a limited number of polling stations in Dhaka Division to monitor proceedings as they pertained to the TAM's focus areas. Following election day, the TAM continued to consult stakeholders and observe post-election developments. The mission adhered to Do No Harm principles in implementing the assessment and structured the interviews

to mitigate negative impacts on participants to the extent possible. However, the TAM faced notable challenges in conducting its work, including government surveillance throughout the assessment, which is inconsistent with the principles for either international or citizen observation. Certain stakeholders reported fear of criticizing the government during interviews and concerns over repercussions that might occur due to their interactions with the TAM. While stakeholders did provide critical assessments of all political sides during interviews, the sensitivities surrounding the election might have impacted their ability to speak frankly.

IRI and NDI are grateful for the welcome and cooperation received from Bangladeshi voters, election officials, candidates, political party leaders and members, government officials, and media and civil society representatives.



Photo by Mariam Tabatadze

<sup>4</sup> LGBTQI+ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning. The 'plus' sign refers to the many other self-identifications under the umbrella of 'sexuality' and/or 'gender.'

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholder feedback indicates that the 2024 election period, including the campaign period, election day and immediate aftermath, had less physical and online violence compared to previous election cycles. This was due primarily to the absence of nationwide partisan competition and the state's increased focus on election security. Nevertheless, the quality of the January election was undermined by incidents of state, ruling party, and opposition violence, as well as a pre-election environment characterized by zero-sum politics, violence among political actors, contracting civic space, and worsening freedoms of expression and association.

During the election period, the Bangladesh government took several actions to promote security, including increasing the budget for election security, deploying a larger number of security personnel for a longer period of time, and forming ad hoc coordination units to oversee the security response. Still, many stakeholders made credible accusations that state security services and other government institutions at times unevenly enforced election rules to favor the ruling Awami League (AL). The scale of the government's efforts to arrest opposition members and restrict or disrupt opposition political activities was not satisfactorily justified and generated a widespread perception of politicized law enforcement during the election period.

Election violence by non-state actors took two primary forms. The first was between competing candidates and supporters. Campaign-driven election violence correlated with the competitiveness of a constituency and was typically between AL-backed candidates and AL-affiliated independent candidates, although former Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) candidates were also targeted. Incidents of this violence reportedly entailed clashes between groups of supporters, attacks on campaign processions, destruction or arson of campaign offices, verbal threats, and vandalism or arson of property. The second form of non-state election

violence was driven by the opposition's boycott effort. While the opposition consistently called for nonviolence, its strategy of rallies, blockades, and strikes to prevent the election descended at times into violence, including incidents of arson, physical assault, vandalism, intimidation, and the death of a police officer.<sup>5</sup>

Marginalized groups, specifically women and Hindus, also experienced electoral violence. Available reporting and stakeholder feedback indicate that election violence targeting women was lower than in past elections, but serious challenges remained. The TAM found that Bangladesh's legal framework fails to fully address gender-based violence, especially in the context of elections. This reflects the limited awareness of the problem among key political and government stakeholders and constrains their ability to respond. In this election cycle, female candidates told the TAM that they were subject to insults and threats in public and online, particularly from male opponents and their followers, and said that state officials did not respond to their complaints. Stakeholders also noted that women voters and voters from other vulnerable groups faced economic pressure to vote, which included threats of eviction or loss of state welfare. Bangladesh's Hindu minority also faced significant election violence. While available reporting and stakeholder feedback indicate that election violence targeting religious minorities was lower than in past elections, Hindus specifically still faced notable intimidation and violence during the campaign.

Lastly, the information environment saw diverging trends. Prominent newspapers and social media platforms included some space for critical statements and reporting on the ruling party and state institutions. However, stakeholders also noted that fear of government retaliation led to self-censorship in the media. Interlocutors often cited the 2018 Digital Security Act and its replacement, the Cyber Security Act, passed in 2023, in driving self-censorship, despite the government's assurances of reform. Journalists also faced election violence from the ruling party and opposition during campaign events and protests.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-opposition-protest-turns-violent-amid-calls-pm-resign-2023-10-28/>



In the online information environment, the TAM found that violent rhetoric on social media persisted during the election. The TAM conducted a limited social media analysis of offensive political terms on Facebook during the immediate pre-and-post election period. The TAM found that offensive discourse came from both political sides, but the AL and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina were more often the targets of offensive rhetoric, while the BNP was more often the perpetrator. The generalizability of the findings was limited by the small set of offensive terms and posts analyzed, but the TAM research indicates that both sides contributed to Bangladesh's caustic social media environment during the election.

Overall, the 2024 electoral process saw lower levels of violence than previous elections (see main sections below) because of enhanced election security and a lack of partisan competition, but important gaps and challenges remain. To support and strengthen democratic institutions in Bangladesh ahead of future elections, the TAM has put forward 28 recommendations to combat election violence, which are detailed at the conclusion of this report and are grounded in the following core principles:

- All actors – including political parties, government institutions, civil society, and citizens – should play an active role in reforming the rules, practices, and norms of electoral politics toward nonviolence.
- The independence and oversight of Bangladesh's elections can be improved with new mechanisms, including establishing a code of conduct for security personnel and updating legal frameworks to provide prompt and independent adjudication and review of election violence-related cases.
- The government should improve its enforcement of existing laws, such as the Representation of the People Order and the Cyber Security Act, which grants it the ability to deter violence against voters while ensuring that civil liberties and fundamental freedoms, including in the online space, are protected.
- Civil society should have a role in easing community tensions and advising the government on violence mitigation efforts.
- Political leaders should inculcate a culture of nonviolence in their parties and hold members accountable for election violence, especially against minorities and women.



## POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Bangladesh has a long history of political violence, which spikes during election years. Both the 2014 and 2018 elections were marked by political and electoral violence, with estimates of approximately 500 and 100 deaths, respectively, in the year prior to election day.<sup>6</sup> Bangladesh has also experienced intense spasms of post-election violence as the goal of fighting shifts from influencing election outcomes to retaliating against opponents after election day.

On January 7, 2024, Bangladesh held its twelfth parliamentary elections. Bangladesh's 300 members of parliament (MPs) are elected to five-year terms in single-member constituencies. The parties select an additional 50 reserved seats for women based on their share of parliamentary seats. According to the EC, a total of 1,971 candidates – including 437 independents and 1,534 from 28 registered parties – contested the elections. With the BNP and other opposition parties boycotting, the primary political contest shifted to the AL and a group of independent candidates, many of whom were AL members, leaders, or former elected officials. In addition, despite the BNP's boycott, over 100 of its members reportedly contested<sup>7</sup> with other parties, including the AL, or as independent candidates.<sup>8</sup> The EC informed the TAM that independent candidates contested in 238 of the 300 constituencies.

Bangladesh's contemporary era of democratic politics, which began with parliamentary elections in 1991, has been marked by walkouts, boycotts, street movements, and political violence. Since the AL returned to power in December 2008, Bangladesh's political environment has grown more contentious and dysfunctional. Following a Supreme Court ruling in 2011, the AL-led parliament revoked the country's caretaker government system, which had mandated a nonpartisan election administration three months before election day. Since then, the BNP has demanded its return, refusing to participate in some national and local elections while alleging various impediments to its political activities. Outside of

the political space, CSOs, journalists, and ordinary citizens often accuse the government of harassment, intimidation, and obstructions designed to limit dissent. International actors have grown increasingly concerned about Bangladesh's restrictive political and civic space. In an effort to promote democratic reforms, the United States sanctioned Bangladesh's security forces, announced a visa restriction policy, and called for free and fair elections.

The 2024 parliamentary elections in Bangladesh were governed by the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh and the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, which was most recently amended in 2023, along with other relevant legislation and rules.<sup>9</sup> Various forms of electoral violence are prohibited in the RPO, the Code of Conduct for Political Parties and Candidates, and the Penal Code of 1860. While not specific to elections, other legislation addresses violence that occurs during the election process, including the Prevention of Suppression Against Women and Children Act of 2000 and the Cyber Security Act of 2023. In addition, the Code of Criminal Procedure provides for the investigation and judicial proceedings of criminal cases. While Bangladesh has ratified or signed most of the international instruments related to elections, many have been acceded to with reservations.<sup>10</sup> During its assessment, the TAM looked to both international and domestic instruments that set standards and expectations among actors during the election process. These standards provided a framework to assess the context and nature of electoral violence across the TAM's four thematic issue areas.

In the year before election day, political tensions mounted. At least 12 months before the election, the BNP announced its intent to boycott the elections unless Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and a neutral election administration was restored. Throughout 2023, the opposition held large anti-government rallies that, at times, drew hundreds of thousands of citizens. Simultaneously, the opposition was under intense political and legal pressure, with reportedly millions of its members facing often

<sup>6</sup> <https://odhikar.org/statistics/statistics-on-political-violence/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/332826/over-100-deprived-bnp-leaders-hope-to-win-polls>

<sup>8</sup> For example, the former Vice-Chairman of BNP, who was detained in connection with the events of October 28, joined the AL upon release from jail and contested for MP with their support in Jhalakathi-1.

<sup>9</sup> Such as, but not limited to, the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioner Appointment Act, 2022; the Electoral Officials (Special Provision Act), 1992; and the Voters List Act, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, United Nations Convention against Corruption, and United Nations Convention against Torture.



ambiguous court cases and other efforts to obstruct its activities. On October 28, 2023, a large opposition rally resulted in a chaotic street battle between the police and ruling party supporters on one side, and opposition activists on the other. One police officer was killed and other officers beaten, but police were also seen abusing unarmed protestors.<sup>11</sup> Following this violence, the government reportedly arrested over 20,000 opposition leaders, members, and supporters, which the opposition argued was a deliberate effort to disrupt its boycott movement.<sup>12</sup> The opposition's ultimate boycott reduced the level of electoral competition, which further declined as some participating candidates withdrew as election day neared.

With an apparently ascendant political opposition facing off against a powerful and entrenched incumbent party, fears grew of escalating election violence.<sup>13</sup> Four types of election violence are key in Bangladesh, distinguished by the perpetrator, victims, and arena of violence.

**State Institutions** – State security actors, namely the police, military, and other specialized law enforcement, are often perpetrators of violence during elections. State security forces have the right to use lethal and nonlethal force to prevent or respond to criminal acts, which can serve a key function in reducing election violence. However, state security actors can also contribute to election violence by using unjustified force, refusing to protect political opponents of the ruling party, or by targeting opposition figures for arrest without clear justification. For example, prior to the 2024 campaign period, police were accused of unlawful use of force against protestors,<sup>14</sup> not protecting AL opponents,<sup>15</sup> and conspiring to manufacture evidence against opposition politicians.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Bangladesh's

police and judiciary play primary roles in enforcing the country's digital security laws (Digital Security Act, 2018–2023; Cyber Security Act, 2023–Present) and other laws, which some contend have been abused to target critics of the government.

**Physical Violence** – Non-state actors, specifically political party members and supporters, have historically been key perpetrators of election violence in Bangladesh. Political parties often clash with each other. Parties also have internal factional disputes over party nominations, control over patron-client networks, and other issues. Prior to the 2024 campaign, inter- and intra-party violence increased. The AL's student wing, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), was a key actor in political and election violence, accused of violence against BNP supporters<sup>17</sup> and campus dissidents,<sup>18</sup> factional infighting,<sup>19</sup> and violence against journalists.<sup>20</sup> In other instances, AL members were killed<sup>21</sup> during inter-party clashes with the BNP. In the violence on October 28, one BNP supporter died, but opposition supporters were also credibly implicated in beating one police officer to death, badly injuring many other officers, and committing numerous acts of vandalism. The Committee to Protect Journalists condemned AL and BNP supporters for attacking over two dozen journalists.<sup>22</sup> After October 28, the BNP called a campaign of strikes and blockades to disrupt the elections, during which numerous acts of violence occurred. The opposition denies it orchestrated this violence – contending instead a government-led conspiracy – but credible evidence implicates BNP supporters in many instances.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/11/ahead-election-bangladeshs-political-turmoil-spills-streets>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/bangladesh-election-hasina-bnp-awami-league-zia-fccecfc8b85e1303b454986e854339c>

<sup>13</sup> <https://anfrel.org/statement-anfrel-voices-profound-concern-over-2024-bangladeshi-polls-calls-for-genuine-democratic-elections>; <https://acleddata.com/2024/01/04/the-violent-politics-of-bangladeshs-2024-elections/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/08/bangladesh-unlawful-use-of-force-against-protesters-must-end-immediately/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/85ikywmw8l>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/bangladeshi-police-accused-of-conspiring-against-opposition-candidates/7184308.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/politics/police-obstruct-bnps-procession-dhaka-protesting-load-shedding-646222>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/student-politics-violence-03102023143714.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/305366/12-hurt-in-clash-between-2-cu-chhatra-league>

<sup>20</sup> <https://cpj.org/2023/10/bangladeshi-student-journalist-mosharraf-shah-attacked-on-university-campus/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.daily-sun.com/post/715165/BCL-man-killed-in-ALBNP-clash-in-Mirsharai->

<sup>22</sup> <https://cpj.org/2023/11/at-least-27-bangladeshi-journalists-attacked-harassed-while-covering-political-rallies/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/329400/bnp-men-accused-of-killing-lalmonirhat-sramik>; <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/torching-bus-july-29-6-bnp-men-arrested-338934>

### Violence Against Women and Other Marginalized Groups

– Traditionally marginalized groups in Bangladesh, specifically women, persons with disabilities, and religious minorities, are vulnerable to political intimidation and violence during elections. Women candidates, party members, and supporters often face gendered political attacks, sexual harassment, and sexual violence.<sup>24</sup> The Hindu religious minority, which constitutes approximately 10 percent of the population, has historically been subject to election violence. For example, after the 2001 parliamentary elections, supporters of the victorious BNP government attacked Hindu communities for their perceived support for the AL. This anti-minority political sentiment is situated in a broader social dynamic of hostility toward non-Muslims. Over the last decade, outbreaks of anti-minority violence have targeted Buddhist<sup>25</sup> and Hindu communities,<sup>26</sup> including most recently a series of attacks during the Durga Puja Hindu festival in 2021.<sup>27</sup> Social animosity toward religious minorities, while not widespread in Bangladesh, lowers the political cost of scapegoating and attacking minorities.

**The Information Environment and Violence** – Internet penetration and social media use have rapidly expanded in Bangladesh. In early 2023, Bangladesh had over 66 million internet users and 44 million social media users, nearly all of whom used Facebook.<sup>28</sup> Many of these users access the internet on their phones, which outnumber people in the country.<sup>29</sup> With more Bangladeshis joining social media, political parties are increasingly using Facebook groups to make appeals and mobilize voters.<sup>30</sup> But in the absence of strong regulations,<sup>31</sup> social media platforms have become vectors for hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation, particularly in

the political space. Women active in politics face threats, harassment, bullying, and hacking online.<sup>32</sup> Individuals from ethnic and religious minority groups are particularly vulnerable.<sup>33</sup> In the 2024 campaign, politically motivated misinformation and disinformation was common.<sup>34</sup> One investigation found hundreds of pro-government editorials written under apparently fake names.<sup>35</sup> Outside of politics, Facebook has been a common tool for citizens trying to foment violence against religious minorities.<sup>36</sup>



Photo by Mariam Tabatadze

24 <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/azrcfkbm6b>; <https://www.newagebd.net/article/197685/political-violence-keeps-women-off-politics>

25 <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Bangladesh,-25-thousand-Muslims-set-fire-to-22-Buddhist-temples-25959.html>

26 <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-violence-spreads-after-modi-visit-attacks-hindu-temples-train-2021-03-28/>

27 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/21/bangladesh-deadly-attacks-hindu-festival>

28 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-bangladesh#:~:text=The%20state%20of%20digital%20in%20Bangladesh%20in%202023&text=There%20were%2066.94%20million%20internet,percent%20of%20the%20total%20population>

29 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-bangladesh#:~:text=The%20state%20of%20digital%20in%20Bangladesh%20in%202023&text=There%20were%2066.94%20million%20internet,percent%20of%20the%20total%20population>

30 [https://infolabtecglobalinstitute.com/how-facebook-has-become-a-political-battleground-in-bangladesh/?\\_gl=1\\*120lccr\\*\\_ga\\*MjAyOTMwNzMiNS4xNzA1MDgzNDM1\\*\\_ga\\_6P81R21QBS\\*MTcwODAxNzM5MS40LjAuMTcwODAxNzM5MS4wLjAuMA](https://infolabtecglobalinstitute.com/how-facebook-has-become-a-political-battleground-in-bangladesh/?_gl=1*120lccr*_ga*MjAyOTMwNzMiNS4xNzA1MDgzNDM1*_ga_6P81R21QBS*MTcwODAxNzM5MS40LjAuMTcwODAxNzM5MS4wLjAuMA)

31 <https://digitallyright.org/meta-falls-short-in-detecting-political-ads-before-bangladesh-elections/>

32 <https://www.ifes.org/publications/assessment-online-violence-against-politically-and-civically-engaged-women-bangladesh>

33 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/313992/countering-hate-speech-bangladeshis-from>

34 <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/misinformation-and-disinformation-threat-democracy-bangladesh-3540106>

35 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/7/fake-experts-praising-bangladesh-govt-in-media-before-elections-afp-probe>

36 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/04/facebook-tech-moderation-violence-bangladesh-religion/>



## PRE-ELECTION PERIOD (DECEMBER 1, 2023-JANUARY 6, 2024)

### Section I: State Institutions

Amid rising violence and tension during the campaign period, the EC took several steps to preserve election security. The EC has the primary authority for election security, supported by the police, military, and paramilitary auxiliary forces as necessary.<sup>37</sup> The EC told the TAM that its election security strategy was informed by a risk analysis conducted by the Public Security Division of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) in November-December 2023, which was presented to the EC and other relevant election stakeholders at the end of December. The security strategy reportedly focused on election-related violence and pre-existing political tensions arising from the opposition's boycott of the election.

According to public sources, the budget for law and order during the elections stood at approximately Tk 12,256,200,000 (approximately USD \$111,685,260), a 189 percent increase compared to the past elections.<sup>38</sup> The increase corresponded with the higher number of election security personnel, totaling approximately 800,000 people and including the police, the Village Defense Party, and Bangladesh Ansar, among others.<sup>39</sup> It was also noted that security forces were deployed over a 13-day period (December 29, 2023 – January 10, 2024) as compared to 10 days during previous elections. During meetings with the TAM, the EC noted that these heightened measures were needed to prevent anticipated incidents of violence because of the election boycott. However, other stakeholders alleged that the increased security presence in the immediate pre-election period was designed to instill fear among opposition activists and voters, and limit protest activities.

Further, the EC's perceived partisanship among opposition members and activists impacted the credibility of its security efforts. During the preparatory stages of the election, the EC engaged with a range of key stakeholders in order to communicate its election activities. These engagements were said to have included civil society, political parties, media, and the electorate; however, many prominent CSOs told the TAM that they had not been consulted, which increased their skepticism of the EC's election actions. In addition, some stakeholders said that election security updates in the media often came from the MoHA rather than the EC, which further diminished the EC's perceived authority over the process.

Per its mandate, the MoHA took a leading role in assisting the EC with organizing election security. The MoHA established the Law and Order Coordination Cell (LOCC), which functioned from December 18, 2023, to January 10, 2024, to oversee law enforcement across the country and to manage security responses.<sup>40</sup> In the lead-up to the election, the EC and the MoHA engaged in coordination efforts, including meetings, joint training sessions for police on electoral security, and establishing the Law and Order Monitoring Cell.<sup>41</sup> Despite these measures, unclear mandates led to coordination challenges between MoHA and the EC. For example, some government interlocutors expressed concern about duplicative election complaint portals created by MoHA and EC for reporting violations of the election Code of Conduct.<sup>42</sup>

Law enforcement units' perceived partisanship also undermined election security efforts. Ahead of the election, the EC took measures to bolster police neutrality. To address the potential bias created by police with personal connections to local political officials, the EC recommended in December the transfer and withdrawal of 1,318 long-serving law enforcement personnel prior to the campaign period, including officers-in-charge (OCs) who had

37 Article 126 of the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh and article 44E of the Representation of the People Order, 1972 (RPO) mandate the EC with this authority. Article 126 of the Constitution and articles 4 and 5 of the RPO mandate executive authorities to support the EC in its election-related functions.

38 <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/politics/bangladesh-2023-elections-glance-770898>, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/330905/election-fortifications-ec-mulls-massive-security>

39 According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Briefing Note on the 12th Parliamentary Elections, 2024: Bangladesh Police – 174,767, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) – 5,560, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) – 44,185, Bangladesh Ansar – 44,212, Village Defence Party (VDP) – 520,000, Bangladesh Coast Guard (BCG) – 2,520, Bangladesh Army – 38,154, Navy – 2,827.

40 The MoHA's Law and Order Coordination Cell was composed of 12 representatives of six law enforcement agencies.

41 The Law and Order Monitoring Cell (LOMC) was composed of representatives of the MoHA, police, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Coast Guard, Ansar, Village Defense Party (VDP), Army, Navy, and Air Force to collect and verify information and coordinate with law enforcement agencies from January 6 to January 9.

42 The MoHA's LOCC complaints reception portal and the EC's "Smart Election Management BD" online application had overlapping mandates.

been posted to police stations for over six months and Upazila Nirbahi officers (UNOs) who had been stationed in a post for over one year.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the EC reported to the TAM that it recommended the redeployment of 12 senior police personnel because of over 200 complaints alleging misconduct, such as distributing money and threatening citizens in order to influence their vote.<sup>44</sup> Despite these withdrawals and transfers, numerous stakeholders expressed a lack of confidence in police neutrality and these redeployments' effectiveness in promoting accountability. Some MP candidates told the TAM they were concerned that reporting police violations could potentially result in future threats. However, several stakeholders expressed higher levels of confidence in the army's impartiality, it was deployed to supplement police during the election.<sup>45</sup>

Beyond the potential challenge of systemic police bias, some political interlocutors alleged specific incidents of partisan policing. Some interlocutors alleged that security forces, specifically the police, tended to respond only to violent incidents during the campaign that did not implicate the ruling party or government officials.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, stakeholders reported instances where members of the Ansar, a paramilitary auxiliary force, campaigned for candidates aligned with the AL. Nevertheless, some TAM stakeholders reported satisfaction with police conduct during the campaign.

The EC and police took actions to limit campaigning, which raised concerns about freedom of association and speech. Amid rising political violence and opposition calls to cancel the election before the official campaign period, the EC issued a security circular prohibiting political programs intended to obstruct or discourage voting during the official campaign and polling period of December 18, 2023 to January 7, 2024. The government argued this order was needed to prevent illegal obstruction of the election, but stakeholders feared that

the government sought to impede the political activities of the BNP and other opposition parties boycotting the election. In addition, security authorities occasionally disbanded anti-election leafleting demonstrations, blockades, and other opposition activities. Police informed the TAM that the opposition's boycott activities were permitted if conducted peacefully and within the law; however, they argued that the opposition's street obstructions and calls for citizens not to pay taxes and utility bills were illegal and justifiably restricted. The news media reported incidents in several locations where police allegedly forcefully dispersed BNP supporters, causing numerous injuries.<sup>47</sup>

As political violence escalated, the police and judiciary engaged in an aggressive campaign of arrest, detention, and legal charges against opposition figures. In response to ongoing election violence and calls to block the election through strikes and blockades, the Bangladesh government argued that it had a duty and a right to preserve law and order for participating candidates and citizens. However, the scale of the arrests and the legal rationale behind many cases were not compellingly justified. Political party and civil society interlocutors raised concerns about a deliberate campaign to neutralize the opposition through arrest, indefinite detention, or numerous charges against prominent party members following the events of October 28, 2023. According to a BNP senior official, between October 28, 2023, and January 21, 2024, at least 27,507 BNP leaders and activists were arrested in 1,182 cases nationwide, of whom 1,294 were convicted and sentenced to imprisonment.<sup>48</sup> Both political interlocutors and civil society stakeholders highlighted the use of legislation such as the Special Powers Act (1974),<sup>49</sup> which allows the government to detain individuals for expressing views deemed detrimental or harmful to the state, without charging them with any specific crimes. They also alleged that police filed numerous cases without specifying suspects and later used these cases to detain and

43 The 1,330 affected security personnel included: 24 assistant superintendents of police (ASPs), 206 Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs), 359 officers-in-charge (OCs) of police stations, 81 inspectors of police, 67 sub inspectors (SI) of police, 57 assistant sub inspectors (ASI) of police, and 524 constables.

44 Four divisional commissioners (DCs), two metropolitan police commissioners (MPCs), and six superintendents of police (SPs)

45 According to the Public Security Division of the MoHA, the army would support civilian authorities, acting as "mobile teams" and "striking forces" during the election period. As per the EC, the army was deployed from December 29, 2023 through January 10, 2024.

46 As of the end of December, the National Police reported that 215 people were arrested and 184 lawsuits were filed related to "attack, clash, sabotage and vandalism" since the campaign period began on December 18.

47 <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/politics/non-cooperation-movement-police-foil-bnp-procession-barishal-15-injured-768834>

48 <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/cant-stay-home-cops-hunt-us-all-the-time-3527571>

49 3. (1) The Government may, if satisfied with respect to any person that with a view to preventing him from doing any prejudicial act it is necessary so to do, make an order - (a) directing that such person be detained.



file charges against members of the opposition, including the BNP and other dissidents. In addition, some stakeholders alleged that potential opposition candidates were intentionally handed sentences exceeding two years, as a means to disqualify them from running in these elections.<sup>50</sup>

The investigation of two arson attacks on trains became highly politicized. Government officials quickly accused the BNP of responsibility for the December 19, 2023, and January 5, 2024, train attacks, which killed eight people combined,<sup>51</sup> despite little evidence at that point. The BNP denied these accusations and accused the government of orchestrating political violence to discredit its boycott campaign, which was echoed by several stakeholders. To date, no charges have been brought in either incident.

## Complaints

Complaints regarding violations of the RPO, the Code of Conduct, and election-related offenses listed in the Penal Code, including acts of violence, are currently addressed through several mechanisms, including enquiry committees and ad hoc courts. Some of these mechanisms have some inherent challenges related to adjudicators' independence, ambiguous timelines that might not provide timely recourse, and a lack of transparency regarding complaint resolution.

On November 23, 2023, the EC appointed 300 electoral enquiry committees (EECs) to carry out inquiries regarding pre-election irregularities or RPO offenses.<sup>52</sup> According to the law, the EC renders decisions based on EEC recommendations, such as issuing warnings, fines, recommendations for disciplinary proceedings, or referring criminal cases to the courts. However, the law does not establish time limits for EEC inquiries, EC decisions, police investigations of criminal cases, or for courts to

hear and rule on criminal cases.<sup>53</sup> For this election cycle, the EC informed the TAM that it had rendered decisions on 534 cases submitted by the EECs by the official release of results, including 111 to be filed as criminal cases, 280 warnings issued, 21 recommendations for various government offices to initiate procedures against staff who engaged in misconduct, and 122 with no action.<sup>54</sup> However, the lack of clear and expedited deadlines for key phases of this process, particularly for cases referred for criminal proceedings, undermines the possibility of timely remedy or an effective means of deterrence. In addition, the EC informed the TAM that copies of decisions regarding complaints may be obtained by the public upon request, but the commission does not automatically make complaints and subsequent decisions publicly available. This reduces the transparency and, potentially, trust in this process.

Complementing the work of EECs, 754 executive magistrates, as part of mobile courts, heard minor offenses.<sup>55</sup> Of the 1,051 cases heard during this cycle, magistrates issued fines ranging from TK 10,000 to 50,000 (approximately \$90 to \$500) for 784 cases, while 267 people were sentenced to imprisonment for a maximum of two years through on-the-spot sentencing. While the mobile courts offer a timely remedy, executive magistrates are appointed by the Ministry of Public Affairs, which potentially undermines judicial independence and the right to a fair trial and could result in the uneven application of the law.

For serious electoral offenses, the EC appointed 653 judicial magistrates who were empowered by the RPO to hear cases through summary, on-the-spot trials around election day.<sup>56</sup> From January 5 to 10, individuals lodged 64 complaints with the judicial magistrates, 60 of which resulted in fines and sentences not exceeding seven years, while four resulted in acquittals.

50 According to article 66(2)(d) of the Constitution of Bangladesh, a person may be disqualified for election to parliament if they have been "on conviction for a criminal offence involving moral turpitude, sentenced to an imprisonment for a term of not less than two years, unless a period of five years has elapsed since his release."

51 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/335985/no-headway-in-tejgaon-train-fire-probe-in-17-days>

52 Article 91A of the RPO empowers the EC to create electoral enquiry committees (EECs), composed of judicial officers to carry out inquiries regarding pre-poll irregularities or RPO offenses, either ex-officio or based on citizens' complaints.

53 The law only contains a provision requiring EECs to submit their recommendations to the EC within three days of the end of their inquiries.

54 According to the EC, the 300 EECs considered 757 notices of violations, of which 534 were reported to the EC upon completion of their inquiries. According to the EC, the remaining 223 were found to be without merit. Decisions of the EECs may not be appealed.

55 The Mobile Court Act of 2009 provides for on-the-spot sentencing based on confessions for violations witnessed by executive magistrates for minor offenses of the Code of Conduct or Section 171 of the Penal Code.

56 The EC appointed 653 judicial magistrates on December 14, 2023, in line with article 89A of the RPO, to conduct summary on-the-spot trials in line with the Code of Criminal Procedure.

Police also received complaints, investigated criminal cases of electoral violence throughout the election period, and assisted the EC with enforcing the Code of Conduct. According to the EC, the police regularly shared updates with the EC on complaints received or investigations completed. According to the police, most cases of electoral violence are filed under the Penal Code and investigated under the Code of Criminal Procedure. However, the latter does not prescribe a timeframe by which investigations must be completed, which could result in delays and lack of timely recourse.

Most political interlocutors<sup>57</sup> expressed a lack of confidence in these mechanisms' ability to address complaints in a timely and effective manner. Several political interlocutors reported that the EECs and police were not responsive to their complaints, while others reported a limited presence of both judicial and executive magistrates on the ground. Moreover, most interlocutors expressed a lack of confidence in judicial independence and other state institutions' capacity to impartially address matters brought before them.

## Section II: Physical Violence

Despite a historical precedent for electoral violence, reporting and stakeholder feedback indicate that the 2024 elections were less physical violent than previous electoral periods, with fewer documented deaths.<sup>58</sup> Two key factors likely contributed to this. First, the opposition boycott reduced true competition during the election campaign, which primarily included the AL, its allies, and mostly AL-backed independents. However, some politicians informed the TAM that their withdrawal was due to threats and fear of retribution from the ruling party. Second, the Bangladesh government made

a concerted effort to improve election security with increased funding and personnel. Media sources quoting an internal police document<sup>59</sup> noted that 287 incidents of election violence were recorded between December 18 and 30, 2023, leaving nearly 350 people, including 41 police officers, injured.<sup>60</sup> In addition, the Center for Governance Studies recorded 333 violent incidents in 131 constituencies during the campaign period.<sup>61</sup>

Incidents of violence overwhelmingly involved candidates, activists, and supporters of AL nominees and their rival AL-affiliated independent candidates, but former BNP candidates were also targeted. Electoral violence was not localized to a specific region of the country; rather, it was reported primarily in constituencies where competition for the seat was closely contested between two candidates. Incidents of violence reported included, but were not limited to, clashes between groups of supporters, attacks on campaign processions, pressure on certain candidates to withdraw, destruction or arson of campaign offices, verbal threats, and vandalism or arson of property.<sup>62</sup> In one instance, a local AL leader called for party members to hurt BNP supporters engaging in boycott activities before handing them over to the police.<sup>63</sup> In another constituency, a former BNP member running as an independent was assaulted and his business vandalized, which he told the media and the TAM was directed by the BNP's senior leaders.<sup>64</sup> Numerous individuals, including campaign workers, activists and supporters, suffered injuries from clashes between rival camps.<sup>65</sup> In addition, election-related violence resulted in several deaths, but different sources provided conflicting totals.<sup>66</sup>

57 Throughout the report, 'political interlocutors' is used to refer to members of political parties and candidates, some of whom were independent

58 There is no single, reliable source for numbers on pre-election violence or deaths. A TAM analysis of media reports found that the highest reported number of pre-election deaths was 21, which is lower than the 2018 and 2014 elections. <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/us-uk-slam-not-free-bangladesh-election-01082024162659.html>.

59 As of the time of writing, the National Police did not respond to the TAM's request for official statistics on the number of violent incidents which occurred during the campaign period.

60 "Use of crude bombs in polls violence continues," New Age Bangladesh, January 1, 2024.

61 <https://cgsbd.substack.com/p/75e7650c-1d5d-487b-a4ff-094ad4f3d1e1>

62 For example see <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/national-election-2024/news/barishal-2-40-hurt-18-bikes-torched-supporters-al-independent-clash-3509526> and <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/fire-guts-camps-al-independent-candidates-3508476>.

63 <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/national-election-2024/news/break-their-arms-legs-handing-over-cops-3509481>

64 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/court/333758/former-bnp-mp-ziul-haque-attempt-to-kill-me-to>

65 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/335037/5-injured-as-faridpur-3-independent-candidate%E2%80%99s>

66 For example, on January 17, New Age Bangladesh reported that six people died as a result of clashes between political camps, See Another dies in AL factional clash, New Age Bangladesh, January 17, 2024. According to Transparency International Bangladesh, three people died during the campaign period. See 12th National Parliament Election Process Tracking, Transparency International Bangladesh, January 17, 2024.



During the campaign period, parties and their supporters on both sides targeted citizens with threats and intimidation to coerce them to vote or boycott the election. Political and other TAM interlocutors reported that mostly AL-backed candidates and their supporters in highly contested constituencies pressured citizens to vote through verbal abuse and threats, including shutting down their businesses or denying government benefits, which would significantly impact the large number of Bangladeshis who receive subsidies and government aid.<sup>67</sup> The BCL allegedly conducted intense advocacy and pressure campaigns, which some saw as intimidating, with the support of law enforcement.<sup>68</sup> There were reports of party officials confiscating welfare payment cards, which they would return once a voter cast their ballot as directed, and of threats to manipulate an individual's welfare payments depending on whether they voted. The Department of Social Services informed the TAM that although it could not revoke welfare payments and subsidies, local political leaders could exploit the prospect of losing program benefits to intimidate voters.<sup>69</sup>

The BNP's election boycott and campaign of strikes and blockades also reportedly resulted in violence against citizens and created a broader environment of instability and insecurity that likely deterred participation. The BNP consistently called for nonviolent resistance to prevent the election, but Bangladesh has a long history of violent hartals (general strikes) and the BNP's boycott produced widespread concerns of political violence. TAM interlocutors and media reporting alleged that the BNP engaged in misinformation activities and went door-to-door attempting to pressure people not to participate in the election.<sup>70</sup> In the first two weeks of November, 100 incidents of arson, including on 64 buses, occurred during the BNP's blockade

campaign.<sup>71</sup> Just before the election, at least 14 polling centers were set on fire.<sup>72</sup> BNP supporters were arrested on claims that they were involved in incidents of arson and vandalism; however, the BNP adamantly denied involvement.<sup>73</sup>

Violent rhetoric also marked the campaign period. In the lead-up to election day, AL and government officials made several public statements calling the BNP a "terrorist organization"<sup>74</sup> and vowed to throw alleged opposition arsonists into the fires they set.<sup>75</sup> The BNP regularly called the AL and Prime Minister Hasina "fascist"<sup>76</sup> and "monstrous" and argued the ruling party should be removed "at any cost."<sup>77</sup>

Parties, candidates, and civil society made some attempts to promote a peaceful campaign environment. The prime minister and the ruling party publicly urged peaceful elections.<sup>78</sup> Several candidates reported to the TAM that they issued directives to their members to promote peace and discouraged confrontations during the campaign period. However, the TAM could not confirm the existence of internal party codes of conduct or mechanisms for enforcing these rules, and instances of violence often did not draw public condemnation from the parties. Civil society engaged in some activities geared toward violence mitigation and peace-building during the electoral period, including peace messaging, interreligious dialogues, and youth nonviolence training. However, civil society and non-governmental organizations reported that lack of funding and political sensitivities during the election limited their nonviolence activities.

67 Approximately 11.6 million people receive monthly allowances reserved for persons with disabilities, destitute husbands, widows, and others.

68 The BCL informed the TAM of plans to station around 20 representatives near polling centers, "to prevent violence and if necessary to stop it."

69 The heads of upazilas, the lowest level of civil administration, play a key role in deciding who should be included in the list of beneficiaries. Additionally, over 10 million families (around 50 million people) hold Trade Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) cards, which are used to purchase food items at a discounted price.

70 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/336088/bogra-6-awami-league-alleges-voter-intimidation>

71 <https://www.newagebd.net/article/217444/fresh-48hrs-blockade-called-by-opposition-from-today>

72 <https://thenewsmill.com/2024/01/nearly-14-polling-centres-two-schools-torched-in-bangladesh-ahead-of-general-elections/>

73 <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/torching-bus-july-29-6-bnp-men-arrested-3389346>

74 <https://www.barrons.com/news/bangladesh-pm-says-opposition-party-a-terrorist-organisation-504f86e1>

75 <https://en.somoynews.tv/news/2023-11-03/arsonists-should-be-burned-in-the-fire-pm>

76 <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/fascist-controlled-media-suppressing-truth-mirza-fakhrul-682278>

77 <https://www.observerbd.com/news.php?id=436566>

78 Hasina urges candidates to ensure an election free of disorder, [bdnews24.com](https://bdnews24.com), January 3, 2024

## Section III: Violence Against Women and Other Marginalized Groups

### Violence Against Women

Violence against women in elections (VAW-E) poses a substantial obstacle to women's involvement in Bangladesh's political and electoral processes, impacting both electoral integrity and the overall fairness of the political landscape. Due to Bangladesh's history of political violence, women often express apprehension that they will become targets of attacks and, therefore, choose to avoid actively engaging in politics. In general, violence against women (VAW) is mainly attributed to the male-dominated character of politics, a culture of impunity, discriminatory social norms influenced by religious laws, and financial dependence.<sup>79</sup>

Data show some progress on women's participation and gender-based violence during the 2024 elections. According to preliminary data from the EC, 98 of 1,971 registered candidates were women, constituting approximately five percent of the total number of candidates,<sup>80</sup> an increase from 3.65 percent in 2018. While there has been a slight increase in the total number of candidates running, the small number of women running and winning reflects the challenging environment women face when participating in politics.

The police reported to the TAM that there were 15,224 cases of VAW in 2023, which is a decrease from previous years, according to police data. However, this dataset does not distinguish election-related VAW from other types of VAW, so the trendlines

for VAW-E are unknown. The latest official public statistics on VAW are from 2015.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the absence of firm data, interlocutors believed that the incidents of VAW-E targeting candidates, party leaders, and activists were lower in this election as compared to previous ones. However, with the apparent goal of disrupting their campaigns, women candidates were reportedly subject to insults and threats in public spaces predominantly by male supporters of AL or independent candidates. Consequently, some women candidates requested protection.<sup>82</sup> Some women candidates told the TAM that neither the police nor the EC took action to address officially filed complaints, but the EC denied receiving any complaints from women candidates. Many women candidates and party leaders also reported receiving gender-based insults and intimidating comments on social media.<sup>83</sup> In addition, numerous reports indicate that parties strategically deployed women members or supporters in the front line during the rallies and campaign activities – putting them in greater danger – assuming that law enforcement authorities would be less inclined to use force against them. The major political parties, including AL and BNP, appear to lack internal or external policies aimed at preventing and mitigating VAW-E.

Women voters were also subject to violence. Civil society groups stated that AL or AL-affiliated individuals threatened low-income women living in slums with eviction if they did not line up at polling centers on election day. Interlocutors also claimed that candidates threatened women in remote areas of the country, including widows, if they did not vote. They were threatened with the loss of their monthly social allowances if they abstained from voting.<sup>84</sup> The TAM could not independently verify these claims.

79 Article 28 of the Constitution states that "women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life. However, this only guarantees equal rights for women and men in public life, leaving out protections in personal life. Bangladesh is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, the government submitted formal "reservations" to essential articles of the CEDAW, which impede the realization of positive legal and social impacts on women's rights.

80 AL nominated 23 women candidates and the Jatiya Party nine; 30 women ran as independent candidates.

81 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2016, Ministry of Planning, Statistics and Informatics Division; Report on Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey 2015.

82 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/334262/doly-shaontoni-receives-threats-to-withdraw> and <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/national-election-2024/news/quit-politics-concentrate-acting-career-al-leader-tells-mahiya-mahi-3501116>

83 The National Police Cyber Crime Division informed the TAM that 33,525 cybercrime cases were reported by women in 2023 and in most cases, actions were taken. Those included cases of phishing, impersonation, hacking, bullying, and online harassment. The Cyber Crimes Division helps police officers investigate cases. According to police, cybercrime against women did not increase during the elections. However, they did not provide election-specific data.

84 Approximately 2.5 million widows receive a monthly allowance from the Ministry of Social Welfare.

Neither police nor other interlocutors reported sexual violence cases related to the 2024 elections. However, past unresolved incidents of rape related to the 2018 elections or linked to AL members have drawn accusations of politicized sexual violence.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, interlocutors noted that sexual violence is likely underreported in Bangladesh because of a lack of trust in law enforcement as well as shortcomings in the legal system.<sup>86</sup> Sexual assault investigations are often slow, particularly those involving politically connected individuals, despite explicit legal timelines.

Some mechanisms to address election violence against women do exist. According to the police, Women and Children Support Desks are present at each of the 662 police stations in the country, and Women Support and Investigation Divisions are in eight administrative divisions. The police confirmed that all new staff members receive awareness-raising training on VAW each year. However, the desks and divisions do not have a dedicated strategy to proactively address instances of VAW, specifically during the election period or on election day. Instead, they treat all forms of violence, including VAW, uniformly. Moreover, some complain about law enforcement officers' lack of sensitivity in dealing with gender-sensitive cases.

Some civil society groups focused on VAW-E during the 2024 elections. The organization Bangladesh Mahila Parishad requested the police and EC improve violence prevention measures during elections. Some organizations, like Naripikkho or Amrai Pari Paribarik Nirjaton Protirodh Jot (We Can Bangladesh), in collaboration with grassroots-level organizations and human rights activists, organized

awareness-raising activities to prevent VAW in the upcoming elections from November to December.<sup>87</sup> However, many women's rights organizations in Bangladesh believed that the absence of traditional partisan competition would reduce the prevalence of VAW-E and therefore did not prioritize this issue.

## Religious and Ethnic Minorities

Religious minorities are approximately 10 percent of the population of Bangladesh. As of 2022, the Hindu population was 7.9 percent, Buddhists 0.6 percent, and Christians 0.30 percent.<sup>88</sup> According to the majority of interlocutors, pre-election violence targeting religious and ethnic minorities was comparatively lower than during previous elections; nevertheless, psychological, physical, verbal, and economic violence remained. Although the Constitution emphasizes the secular nature of its founding, many interlocutors expressed concerns about the decrease of secularism in society.<sup>89</sup>

During the 2024 election period, Hindus were concerned about targeted violence because of past election-related and non-political anti-Hindu violence, such as the severe attack during Durga Puja celebrations in October 2021.<sup>90</sup> Many note that rather than being rooted in religious differences, electoral and political violence is strategically employed to settle local land disputes or to punish Hindus for their association with the AL. To mitigate potential violence during the election period, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council (BHBCUC) called on all political parties not to nominate any candidates who are not minority friendly and asked for the deployment of the army for at least three weeks before elections.<sup>91</sup> BHBCUC established 64 monitoring cells documenting violence during

85 See the case of Noakhali <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/noakhali-woman-gang-rape-not-linked-voting-national-human-rights-commission-1687024> and <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/court/166085/eighth-accused-confesses-in-noakhali-gang-rape>.

See the news on the recent Tangail case (<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/331476/rape-case-against-awami-league-leader-mysterious>), and Lalmonirhad case (<https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/ell2med0zh>).

86 The country's primary legislation addressing sexual violence, the Prevention of Suppression Against Women and Children Act of 2000, stipulates the death penalty or life imprisonment for rape. The act deviates from international practice by punishing the filing of a false case or complaint, does not include provisions about domestic violence, and the Domestic Violence Act does not criminalize domestic violence itself.

87 Activities included discussions, workshops, demonstrations and distributions of leaflets in different districts.

88 See the "Population and Housing Census", 2022, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. [https://sid.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/sid.portal.gov.bd/publications/01ad1ffe\\_cfef\\_4811\\_af97\\_594b6c64d7c3/PHC\\_Preliminary\\_Report\\_\(English\)\\_August\\_2022.pdf](https://sid.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/sid.portal.gov.bd/publications/01ad1ffe_cfef_4811_af97_594b6c64d7c3/PHC_Preliminary_Report_(English)_August_2022.pdf)

89 Article 2A of the Constitution stipulates that Bangladesh's state religion is Islam, but the state shall ensure equal status and equal rights in the practice of the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religions.

90 In October 2021, Durga Puja celebrations in Cumilla were marred by rumors of Quran desecration at Nanuar Dighir Par, leading to atrocities against Hindus. <https://organiser.org/2024/01/03/214169/world/hindus-in-bangladesh-voting-for-survival-amidst-limited-choice/>. See more information <https://eastasiaforum.org/2021/12/04/minority-rights-at-stake-in-bangladesh/>. According to the media and others, the trials for the majority of cases related to Cumilla clashes have not yet begun. <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/4wa2khuhuq>

91 BHBCUC publicly urged their communities not to vote for candidates who were involved in anti-minority activities. See also <https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/interview/a0xn0kj249>



elections in all constituencies.<sup>92</sup> Despite previous incidents, the main political parties did not take any notable measures to mitigate potential violence against minority communities during the election period. According to the Special Superintendent of Bangladesh Police, proactive measures were implemented to prevent communal violence before the elections, and increased precautions, such as involving local authorities, were taken in areas vulnerable to violence based on past incidents.

During the pre-election period, Hindu minorities were subject to various forms of violence from different parties and candidates. In October, AL supporters and youth wing members attacked a Hindu procession in Cumilla.<sup>93</sup> Like other marginalized groups, Hindu voters were reportedly subject to general intimidation and threats, including taking away peoples' social allowance cards, closing shops, and damaging Hindu-owned property to pressure them to vote or support certain candidates.<sup>94</sup> BNP supporters were also reported to have threatened Hindu minorities to influence them not to vote.<sup>95</sup> According to interlocutors, some candidates made hateful speeches about Hindu candidates or the community during public campaigns.<sup>96</sup> In total, there were 15 Hindu candidates in the elections, including 13 nominated by the AL. On January 5, Cheranghata Usaishen Buddhist Monastery was set on fire, for which police arrested a BNP activist.<sup>97</sup> Before election day, the BHBCUC and Bangladesh Mahila Parishad submitted letters to the EC calling for it to take security measures to eliminate communal violence.<sup>98</sup> Interlocutors noted incidents on social

media in which some Muslims targeted Hindus with hate speech and disinformation.

## Youth

Bangladesh's tense and violent political environment often deters youth participation. Many young people are wary of expressing their political opinions online due to concerns about security risks and potential legal actions stemming from digital security laws. This contributes to declining political engagement.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, the link between politics and money and corruption further disillusioned youth. The EC informed the TAM that 15,449,207 new voters were registered for the 2024 elections.<sup>100</sup> Many young people believe that their vote does not matter, and focus group data shows nonpartisan youth often reject formal political activities.<sup>101</sup>

During the 2024 elections, young people were both victims and perpetrators of various forms of violence. The AL's student wing, BCL, was a common perpetrator of violence targeting youth and other citizens (see Section III: Physical Violence). Opposition and AL-supporting students and youth were routinely injured during clashes.<sup>102</sup>

## Additional Inclusion Issues

Persons with disabilities are not traditionally targets of election violence, but they remain vulnerable because of a general lack of accommodations and protections. According to the Disability Detection Survey, the number of people with disabilities in Bangladesh is approximately 2.4 million, as of January 2022. Despite the state's commitment to ensuring

92 In addition, a hotline was set up for "any communal accident" related to the 2024 general elections. <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=672611038365531&set=a.418735847086386>.

93 For more information, see the <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/unity-council-demo-bcl-jubo-league-men-swoop-protesters-3442371> and <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/9snd2s5ziv>.

94 For example, some shops owned by Hindus were allegedly closed in Moulvibazar and in Saidpur of Nilphamari district because the owners did not support the AL-nominated candidates. Reportedly, there were attacks on Hindu-owned property in Sunamganj and physical attacks in Jhenaidah.

95 For further information, see <https://www.prothomalo.com/opinion/column/e3kd0hw0qr>.

96 Allegedly, this happened in Barishal, Cumilla and Sunamganj districts; later on, a candidate in Sunamganj apologized for a provocative speech. <https://www.kalibela.com/politics/54454> and <https://bangla.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/election/national-election-2024/news-547191?fbclid=IwAR3EJJaY-1SMGMleA-PTGU B2Enao3VYQBHFwKnTUSS71kCqr2tdLdm6bGDQ>

97 On January 9, 2024, the Buddhist Federation issued a press release, expressing great concern for the attack and the broader threat to the Buddhist community. At the time of writing this report, the police reported to the TAM that the case was under investigation.

98 See the letter published by BHBCUC <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=674125678214067&set=pcb.674125928214042>.

99 The survey conducted in October 2023 by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs ("Youth perspective in the current national context") showed that, on average, 35.2 percent of young respondents were not interested in politics and 43.1 percent of respondents stated that they don't feel comfortable expressing their opinions freely (<https://bdplatform4sdgs.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Presentation.pdf>). The survey conducted by BYCL in October, 71.5 percent of youth don't feel safe expressing their opinion on public platforms (<https://bycl.org/assets/files/Youth-MattersSurveyFindings.pdf>).

100 Surveys suggest that first-time voters, although aware of the election process, don't want to participate. The reason is the lack of real political competition.

101 <https://www.iri.org/resources/bangladeshi-universities-and-the-failure-of-student-politics-new-research-by-cisr/>

102 On October 10, Chhatra League attacked Democratic Student Alliance leaders and activists distributing leaflets at Chittagong University. See more <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/4d6ns5qjb5>.

accessibility, roads and public transportation rarely incorporate wheelchair access, creating challenges for individuals to access essential services or live independently.<sup>103</sup> Many TAM interlocutors expressed concerns about the challenges of accessing polling stations and election-related information. Some noted that in the majority of cases, polling procedures and processes do not include provisions for accessibility for persons with disabilities, which undermines the secrecy of their vote. The EC and the Social Service Department (SDS) informed the TAM that there is no coordination between the two institutions; consequently, the EC does not factor in information about people with disabilities while designing polling centers. According to the SDS, approximately 3.3 million people receive a monthly disability allowance from the state, which makes them vulnerable to electoral coercion given widespread rumors of parties threatening to link government benefits and voting (see Section III: Physical Violence).<sup>104</sup>

LGBTQI+ are marginalized from all sectors of Bangladeshi society, including politics, which makes them less frequent targets of election violence than other minority groups. The LGBTQI+ community often faces stigma, leading to discrimination, social exclusion, and hostility. Hijras are the most public and least marginalized sexual and gender minority in Bangladesh.<sup>105</sup> According to the EC, more than 800 hijras were registered on the voter list for the 2024 elections. Only one candidate registered as third gender for the 2024 elections; this candidate was allegedly subject to intimidation and insults online and offline during the campaign in Rangpur-3 constituency.<sup>106</sup>

## Section IV: Information Environment and Violence

### Traditional Media

The media environment during the election included self-censorship and hostile government monitoring but also provided some space for critical reporting. Throughout the election period, major daily newspapers published criticism of the ruling party, government institutions, and the electoral process. For example, articles called the election a “farce” and a “facade,” wrote that democracy in Bangladesh was “declining” and on its “deathbed,” and questioned election administrators’ competence while predicting rigging.<sup>107</sup> Simultaneously, the perception of overzealous monitoring by state institutions of daily reporting and social media posts created fear among some media outlets and journalists. Interlocutors noted that the police crackdown following the violence on October 28 created a highly politicized and securitized information space, which had a chilling effect on reporting. Interlocutors also argued that media outlets were reluctant to report on ruling party violence. Moreover, media ownership also likely plays a role in skewing coverage. At least 19 media owners contested the election,<sup>108</sup> of which 11 were elected to parliament, nine with the AL and two independents. Media interlocutors<sup>109</sup> argued further that media coverage might be skewed because their owners often have diverse business interests that rely on government accommodation to operate, often resulting in biased coverage or self-censorship.

103 Bangladesh is a party to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-9-accessibility.html>

104 Article 15(d) of the Constitution guarantees the right to social security for persons with disabilities.

105 In 2013, the government legally recognized Hijras, who are a subculture of transgender women and intersex people in Bangladesh, under the category of third gender. Subsequently, in 2018, the Voter List Act 2009 was amended to include a third gender category in the voter registration form.

106 <https://www.bangladeshlivenews.com/en/bangladesh/details/jatiya-party-workers-supporters-attack-third-gender-candidates>.

107 <https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/4uhjl6duj3>; <https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/op-ed/mr13dx982w>; <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/the-al-cannot-validate-farce-election-intimidation-3511751>; <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/the-street-view/news/the-facade-competitive-election-3495901>; <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/disengaged-voters-declining-democracy-1864405>; <https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/op-ed/mr13dx982w>; <https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/4uhjl6duj3>; <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/democracy-its-deathbed-again-3461081>; <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/the-guilt-comes-voting-farcical-election-3513391>; <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/strategically-speaking/news/who-killed-democracy-bangladesh-3242516>

108 <https://www.risingbd.com/national/news/536297>

109 Throughout the report, “media interlocutors” refer to journalists and others working in the media sector.

Digital security laws likely limited criticism of the government. Some argued that the Digital Security Act was used to pursue frivolous litigation against journalists and media outlets. CSOs reported to the TAM that, in 2023, rather than the purported victims, private individuals affiliated with the AL filed dozens of libel and defamation against media outlets. This degree of separation from the case allowed AL officials and allies to plausibly deny involvement in the legal actions while benefiting from it. The police told the TAM that they brought no cases or complaints under the Digital Security Act's successor law, the Cyber Security Act, during the observation period. However, concerns remain about how the law will be implemented. Physical violence against journalists during the election period was relatively rare. However, threats and intimidation from the ruling party and opposition often fed self-censorship that likely led to underreporting of violence against journalists. Reports by some media outlets, CSOs, and the Committee to Protect Journalists<sup>110</sup> identified at least 18 violent incidents against media workers on election day alone. The majority of reported incidents refer to AL supporters or affiliates assaulting journalists, forcing them to delete footage, and taking away their notes. It is alleged that some of those incidents took place in plain view of police officers, who took no action to protect the journalists.

## Social Media

Social media platforms are widely popular in Bangladesh and have become a forum for hate speech and disinformation from all sides. Social media platforms are particularly hostile to women and minorities in politics, but some observers argued that the lack of partisan competition during this election reduced this dynamic. Online antagonism often arose between AL candidates and AL-affiliated independents. Many observers told the TAM that online violence, including, but not limited to, harassment, hate speech, character assassinations and fake stories, is more common in rural areas, where people have personal grievances in addition to differing political allegiances.<sup>111</sup> Many noted that women were disproportionately affected by hate speech—even if less common during this election cycle—with female candidates facing attacks on their moral character. One observer noted that male

candidates also faced online attacks regarding their ethical or moral character, including accusations of corruption, adultery, and homosexuality.

Political disinformation appeared to rise during the election cycle. Media interlocutors argued that the AL had the most sophisticated and likely largest disinformation operation, but the BNP and Jamaat-i-Islami also engaged in these activities. There is no publicly available data to disaggregate and compare disinformation across political parties.

Opposition parties claimed that the government targeted their online operations. BNP party members alleged to the TAM that the government hacked several of their social media accounts to spread hardline Islamist content and tar the party as extremist. The BNP further argued that AL-backed troll farms targeted its social media content and reported its posts to Meta and Google to limit engagement. It also claimed Meta removed opposition content at the government's request. The TAM could not independently confirm any of these claims. BNP social media activists said they feared government reprisal for their posts.

## Social Media Oversight Mechanisms

Systematic and nonpartisan social media monitoring in Bangladesh appears limited. The EC does not monitor social media for defamation or false information, nor does the police, which only investigates complaints that are forwarded to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC). The BTRC serves as the focal point between government agencies and social media platforms and has the technical capabilities to shut off or reduce the speed of internet services in the country. However, the police claimed to have received no complaints of defamation or disinformation; hence, nothing has been forwarded to the BTRC. Despite the absence of systematic data or official complaints, the police noted an increase in derogatory statements between candidates, but argued that these were within the boundaries of protected speech. The police also expressed concern that online religious hate speech could cause communal violence but stated that social media platforms are quick to respond to complaints filed on the topic.

<sup>110</sup> <https://cpj.org/2024/01/at-least-18-bangladeshi-journalists-attacked-harassed-during-election-coverage/>

<sup>111</sup> The RPO, as well as the Code of Conduct, both include provisions prohibiting the use of defamation and false information.



The National Telecommunications Monitoring Centre (NTMC), a national-level intelligence agency, also conducts social media monitoring, which critics allege focuses on posts critical of the government. The NTMC reported to the TAM that it reviewed 35,897 Facebook posts by election day, of which 776 were found to be fake and reported to the BTRC. Of these 776 reported links, Meta removed 36 as a breach of community standards. Meta’s refusal to remove a significant number of posts referred by BTRC suggests politicized social media monitoring.

### Section V: Social Media Monitoring

As an integral part of its assessment of the information environment, the TAM conducted a narrow analysis of election discourse. From January 1-14, 2024, encompassing one week before and one after election day, the TAM used the social media monitoring tools CrowdTangle and Newswhip to track the use of 14 offensive terms identified as politically charged and commonly used against the AL and BNP.

The analysis identified 1,335 uses of these terms, of which 387 were deemed relevant to the 2024 Bangladesh parliamentary elections. A Bangla-speaking analyst manually coded the topic, target, and perpetrator of each post. The findings of this analysis provide insight into the social media environment in the weeks surrounding the election, but are only suggestive of broader trends.

Despite allegedly lower levels of online violence, compared with previous electoral periods, and high levels of self-censorship, the TAM found examples of offensive discourse between the main political actors on Facebook. The AL was often accused of being vote thieves, while the majority of online insults against the BNP labeled it “agents of Pakistan.”

#### Number of Offensive Posts

Election day saw the highest number of relevant posts, with a notable decrease in offensive discourse after results were announced. Photos and videos accounted for slightly over a third of the relevant content, with the remaining third comprised of status posts and links to external content. Both AL and BNP-related pages relied heavily on visual content to insult each other, with BNP supporters posting more photos and videos specifically made for Facebook, while AL supporters posted a higher

number of live videos on the platform. Though the BNP generated more posts, the AL’s content drew five times more total engagement.

#### Election-related offensive discourse on Facebook over time

Number of posts between January 1-14, 2024

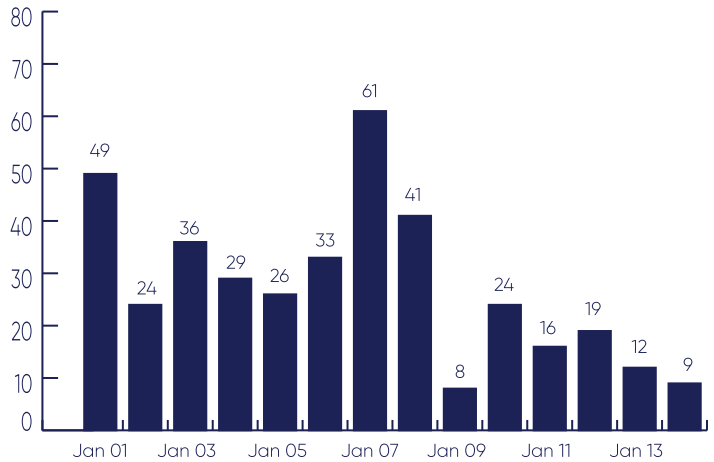
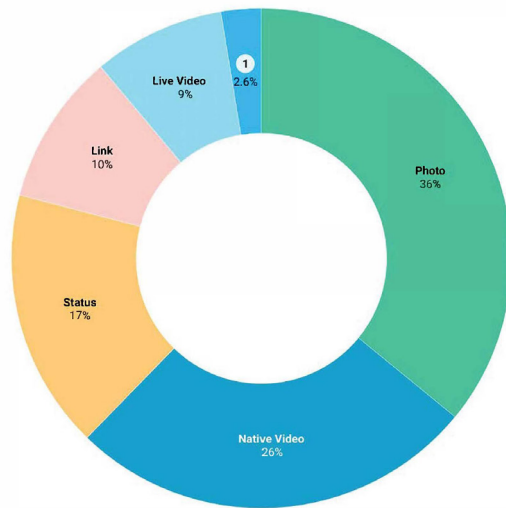


Chart: NDI/IRI Technical Assessment Mission Bangladesh 2024 • Source: TAM Social Media Monitoring • Created by Datawrapper

#### Type of post containing offensive content on Facebook

January 1-14, 2024



1 YouTube Link

Chart: NDI/IRI Technical Assessment Mission Bangladesh 2024 • Source: TAM Social Media Monitoring • Created by Datawrapper

### Targets and Perpetrators of Offensive Posts

The majority of analyzed offensive posts targeted the ruling AL and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. BNP affiliates and supporters were the biggest perpetrators of offensive content. Over a third of the offensive posts identified came from Facebook accounts that could not be linked to affiliates of either of the main political actors.

#### Target of offensive discourse on Facebook

January 1-14, 2024

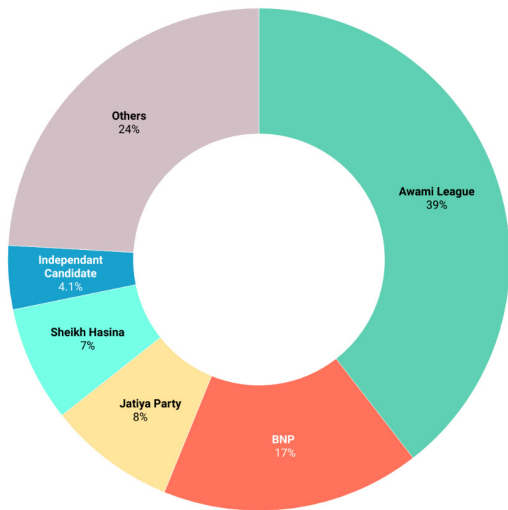


Chart: NDI/IRI Technical Assessment Mission Bangladesh 2024 • Source: TAM Social Media Monitoring • Created by Datawrapper

#### Perpetrators of offensive discourse on Facebook

January 1-14, 2024



Chart: NDI/IRI Technical Assessment Mission Bangladesh 2024 • Source: TAM Social Media Monitoring • Created by Datawrapper

### Themes of Offensive Posts

The dominant themes of posts targeting the AL and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina were accusations of vote theft, staging fake elections, being agents of India, and being traitors. The vast majority of offensive posts targeting the BNP accused its members of being agents of Pakistan and traitors.

#### Offensive language used against the BNP

January 1-14, 2024

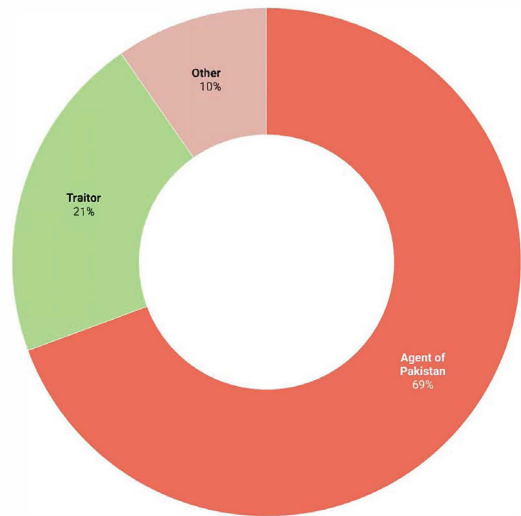


Chart: NDI/IRI Technical Assessment Mission Bangladesh 2024 • Source: TAM Social Media Monitoring • Created by Datawrapper

#### Offensive language used against the Awami League and Sheikh Hasina

January 1-14, 2024

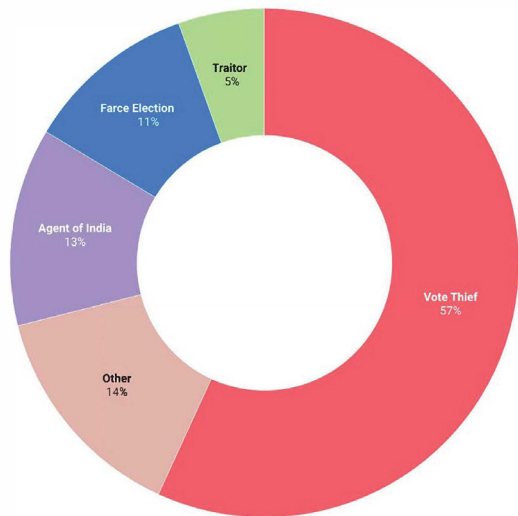


Chart: NDI/IRI Technical Assessment Mission Bangladesh 2024 • Source: TAM Social Media Monitoring • Created by Datawrapper

## ELECTION DAY (JANUARY 7, 2024)

Overall, election day saw few incidents of physical violence. News reports and stakeholder feedback indicates that security forces were deployed across the country and provided sufficient and professional security in most places, but incidents of improper or partisan behavior also occurred. A TAM analysis of data upload and download speeds near polling stations in Dhaka Division found no evidence of deliberate data slowdowns during election day, and none were reported in the media.

The government made a significant effort to provide sufficient security to polling centers on election day. According to the EC, approximately 800,000 law enforcement personnel were deployed nationwide on election day; they were stationed at polling centers and as part of mobile patrols in constituencies.<sup>112</sup> Between 15 and 20 security personnel were purportedly stationed at each polling center, including the police, Ansar, Village Defence Party (VDP), and Mohalladars (community leaders). The EC implemented special security measures, including deploying additional security personnel to areas identified as at higher risk of violence because of their geographical remoteness, challenging terrain, or a history of election-related volatility. In addition, the MoHA's Law and Order Coordination Cell (LOCC) created a specialized election-day team of representatives from all law enforcement agencies, opened two additional time periods at the MoHA to address election-related issues, and had a team dedicated to monitoring the media.<sup>113</sup>

Election day had few reported incidents of violence. While the TAM was not able to obtain official statistics from the police on the number of violent incidents, MoHA reported that the LOCC dashboard received and addressed 172 complaints that largely pertained to violations of the Code of Conduct by various political party supporters.<sup>114</sup> In addition, the Center for Governance Studies recorded 230 violent incidents in 83 constituencies, as well as

139 non-violent incidents, which included, but were not limited to, voter coercion and intimidation on election day.<sup>115</sup> There were conflicting reports of how many deaths resulted from election day violence; however, several media sources reported that two people died.<sup>116</sup>

Confrontations between supporters of different candidates and attempts to impact voting through violence were common types of election day violence. According to both politicians and media reports, clashes between supporters of opposing candidates, particularly between those of the AL and independent candidates, occurred in several constituencies. In some cases, supporters of one candidate reportedly prevented supporters of opposing candidates from entering polling stations or forced the polling agents of one candidate to leave a polling station. Other incidents of violence included, but were not limited to, interference in the polling process, coerced voting, expulsion of journalists, and, in several districts, the detonation of crude bombs. Party supporters, voters, and members of law enforcement were injured in these incidents. Election day violence resulted in arrests and suspension of polling in a few cases.

An additional type of election-day violence targeted voters directly. TAM interlocutors reported that voters were subject to both physical and verbal forms of violence, particularly in highly contested constituencies where supporters of an AL nominee and an independent candidate vied for control of polling centers. Several political observers alleged that members of the BCL and the Jubo League, the AL's youth wing, were involved in intimidating voters in support of AL nominees; that their polling agents and supporters witnessed instances of young children standing in line to vote at various polling centers with tacit approval from law enforcement; and that their supporters were obstructed from voting due to intentionally established roadblocks in some locations. Numerous political and civil society stakeholders reported to the TAM that people were forced to stand in lines outside of polling centers to provide a false image of a high turnout for both

112 According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Briefing Note on the 12th Parliamentary Elections, 2024: Bangladesh Police - 174,767, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) - 5,560, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) - 44,185, Bangladesh Ansar - 44,212, Village Defence Party (VDP) - 520,000, Bangladesh Coast Guard (BCG) - 2,520, Bangladesh Army - 38,154, Navy - 2,827

113 Update from the MoHA, Public Security Division, January 9, 2024

114 Update from the MoHA, Public Security Division, January 9, 2024

115 <https://cgsbd.substack.com/p/75e7650c-1d5d-487b-a4ff-094ad4f3d1e1>

116 Post polls violence death toll reaches four, New Age Bangladesh, January 18, 2024



the media and election observers. However, the TAM was unable to independently verify these allegations or the extent to which they occurred across the country.

The state's response to election day violence was occasionally insufficient. Stakeholders alleged to the TAM that, in some cases, police and polling staff displayed a passive response toward threats to, and intimidation of, voters, intervening selectively to address only cases considered glaring and uncontroversial. Moreover, several TAM interlocutors alleged that the Ansar and police showed favoritism toward the locally dominant candidate. Several political interlocutors informed the TAM that Ansar and the police refused to prevent voter intimidation and election fraud in some locations, because they were outside their primary mandate of election security. However, the EC took measures on election security in several locations. For example, the EC canceled the candidacy of an AL candidate in Chittagong-16 when he threatened and intimidated law enforcement at a polling center. The commission reportedly rescheduled voting in a polling center in Mymensingh-3 due to irregularities, including the theft of a ballot box.<sup>117</sup> The EC also withdrew polling staff from some of the centers where irregularities occurred.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, many noted that the standard practice of having separate lines for women and men entering polling booths contributed to a less intimidating environment for women.

## POST-ELECTION PERIOD (JANUARY 8 - FEBRUARY 1, 2024)<sup>119</sup>

### State Institutions

State institutions took actions to preserve post-election security. In line with its legal mandate, the MoHA issued a circular prohibiting processions and victory events for 48 hours after the close of polling.<sup>120</sup> The EC released the election results in an official gazette on January 9, and newly elected MPs were sworn in on January 10, 2024. At this point, about two weeks earlier than required by law, the EC relinquished its security authorities back to the established security departments and dissolved coordination mechanisms with law enforcement.<sup>121</sup> Some political stakeholders reported to the TAM that police were passive in responding to some incidents of election-related violence that transpired following the announcement of results.

After election day, the space available for opposition activities partially reopened. The opposition distributed leaflets expressing gratitude for the public's election boycott; these public gatherings reportedly faced less interference from the police as compared to the pre-election period. In addition, some BNP leaders and supporters were granted bail by the courts in the weeks following election day. Some attributed this opening to the ruling party's renewed sense of confidence following the election, but cautioned that there is uncertainty regarding how the new set of MPs and ministers will respond to the opposition in the future. Moreover, TAM sources alleged that intimidation and harassment of government opponents continues.

117 Polling was rescheduled for January 13, 2024. Overview of original incident: <https://bdnews24.com/election/6ns1sf1cb>

118 According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Briefing Note on the 12th Parliamentary Elections Held on 7th January 2024: the EC took immediate actions whenever irregularities were reported during the voting. It canceled the candidacy of the AL candidate for the Chittagong-16 constituency because of violations of the electoral code of conduct on election day. A few election officials (Presiding Officers/Assistant Presiding Officers) were withdrawn under specific allegations of misconduct against them, and legal actions were taken.

119 As previously described, the formal observation period for the TAM ended on February 1, 2024. However, post-election processes remain ongoing.

120 In line with article 78 of the PRO, the MoHA issued a circular on December 22, 2023, against calling, holding, or attending any public meeting and organizing or participating in any procession within 48 hours before the commencement of polling and 48 hours after the close of polling in any constituency.

121 The law allows the EC's mandate to continue until fifteen days after election results are declared.

## Physical Violence

The most common post-election violence was between rival campaign supporters. The majority of those involved in these incidents, as perpetrators and victims, were members of the AL, as most independents were affiliated with the ruling party.<sup>122</sup> Political and media observers noted various types of violence, including physical altercations, such as beatings and stabbings; crude bombs thrown at election victory processions; vandalism and looting of homes, businesses, or other property; and verbal threats.<sup>123</sup> Some incidents reportedly resulted in injuries and some people allegedly fled their homes due to fear of attack.<sup>124</sup> In addition, according to media reports, at least four AL and independent-candidate supporters died due to violence in Noakhali, Madaripur, Netrokona, and Jhenaidah.<sup>125</sup>

The parties also took steps to prevent post-election violence. On January 7, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina instructed AL members, activists, and supporters to refrain from engaging in victory celebrations and to avoid confrontations.<sup>126</sup> Additionally, AL leadership was reported to express concern about post-election violence and retaliation within the party, which prompted the prime minister to call for the cessation of post-election attacks and for a focus on the future.<sup>127</sup> The BNP continued to call for nonviolent civil disobedience to protest the election results.

## Violence Against Women and Other Marginalized Groups

Compared to previous elections, post-election violence targeting minorities was reportedly lower. However, supporters of winning and losing candidates reportedly targeted Hindus in several locations in retaliation for their presumed voting behavior. For example, in Debidwar, the winning candidate's supporters attacked Hindus.<sup>128</sup> In Kushtia, the losing candidate's supporters targeted Hindu homes,<sup>129</sup> prompting some families to leave their homes temporarily. The news media reported physical violence and attacks on houses or businesses in Mongla Upazila, Bagerhat, causing widespread fear and house abandonment.<sup>130</sup> On January 9, a 35-year-old Hindu, who was a supporter of the AL-nominated candidate, was killed in Jhenaidah. People in his community believe his death was revenge for his stance in the election.<sup>131</sup> Human rights activists noted that this election was part of a trend toward politically marginalizing minority groups. They stated that minorities felt as if they were in danger whether they voted or not, and highlighted the ruling party's responsibility to rectify this situation.<sup>132</sup>

122 <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/945uajihz>

123 [Post-poll violence: 2 UP Chairman assaulted in Rajshahi](#), The Daily Star, January 9, 2024; [Post-polls violence: Barisal city AL vice president attacked](#), The Daily Star, January 9, 2024; [10 injured in post-polls violence in Savar, 4 held](#), The Dhaka Tribune, January 11, 2024; [Post-polls violence: 10 injured, 50 houses vandalised in Jhenaidah-2](#), The Daily Star, January 8, 2024; [Post-polls violence death toll reaches four](#), New Age Bangladesh, January 12, 2024; [Post-polls violence: Five injured, houses vandalized in Pabna](#), The Daily Star, January 8, 2024; [Post-polls violence: AL candidate's house vandalised in Jamalpur-4](#), The Daily Star, January 8, 2024; [Another dies in AL factional clash](#), New Age Bangladesh, January 17, 2024; [7 houses, establishments of AL supporters vandalised in Natore](#), New Age Bangladesh, January 8, 2024; [10 injured in bomb attack on victory procession of winning candidate Tahmina Begum](#), Prothom Alo, January 8, 2024

124 For example: <https://www.newagebd.net/article/222773/2000-activists-flee-home-over-100-beaten-alleges-latif>

125 <https://www.newagebd.net/article/222612/post-polls-violence-death-toll-reaches-four>; <https://www.newagebd.net/article/222972/another-dies-in-al-factional-clash>

126 <https://www.thedailystar.net/election-2024/news/news/no-victory-processions-3513726>

127 <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/945uajihz>

128 <https://www.kalbela.com/country-news/57194>

129 In addition, see <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/58088yk9b6?fbclid=IwAR3PLJZxT958J9zzTPleuIQAXHBfziBxX7ZOH58D1GQ6cv2gcxYr6bljBDY>

130 See more info here: <https://protidinerbangladesh.com/country/82518>

131 <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/election-violence-minorities-and-erasure-data-3538696>

132 On February 2, 2024, the roundtable titled "Election-Centric Violence, Security of Minority Communities, and Accountability of Relevant Authorities" was organized by the National Citizen Coordination Cell to Implement the Vested Property Return Act, at the National Press Club. For more information, see <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/frn0j6w9t>, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/its-ingrained-our-political-culture-speakers-3534986> and <https://samakal.com/bangladesh/article/221055/>

## DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

While the 2024 electoral process saw less violence than the previous elections, significant gaps and challenges remained. In the spirit of international cooperation and supporting and strengthening democratic institutions in Bangladesh, the TAM puts forward the following recommendations to mitigate and combat violence in future elections. These recommendations are organized by the four thematic issue areas assessed by the mission.

### State Institutions

1. Parliament, the EC, and other relevant governmental actors should amend the legal framework to explicitly incorporate impartiality and neutrality requirements for election officers, including law enforcement, involved in election administration.
2. The EC should establish a dedicated code of conduct for security personnel assigned to election duty and provide greater training and oversight to ensure nonpartisan provision of election security.
3. The MoHA, the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, and other relevant governmental agencies should create and empower an independent oversight mechanism to efficiently monitor the work of the police and systematically address complaints related to the conduct and behavior of police personnel, particularly during election periods.
4. The EC should review existing collaboration mechanisms with the security sector and MoHA in order to provide clear rules of engagement during elections that increase transparency, cohesion, and standardization.
5. The government should enhance safeguards for the independence and political neutrality of the EC and empower it to regularly convene accountability mechanisms with political parties, CSOs, media, and other relevant organizations.
6. The legislature and relevant government actors should update the legal framework to ensure the prompt, unbiased, and independent investigation and adjudication of cases related to election violence, and facilitate a prompt and credible judicial review of pending cases against political activists, civil society leaders, and media representatives.
7. The EC and relevant security actors should include a wider range of civil society stakeholders and citizens in evaluating election violence risk and designing mitigation strategies. Engage CSOs and citizens in violence prevention efforts to foster community-driven violence prevention and response.
8. The EC and other relevant governmental actors should ensure that their decision to restrict normally standard election activities, such as rallies or leafleting, have a clear justification in the law. They must balance the need to preserve security with the right of citizens and political parties to engage in legitimate election activities, including boycotts.
9. Security actors and the judiciary should ensure that arrests, particularly those of political opponents, during an election period have a clear legal justification and are grounded in direct evidence. After arrest, political opponents should receive fair, transparent, and timely trials to adjudicate their cases.
10. The EC and other relevant governmental stakeholders should work together to define clear timelines for the adjudication of election violence complaints and take greater steps to prevent the politicization of magistrate selection.
11. The government should put mechanisms in place to avoid the discretionary use and weaponization of social programs and investigate and prosecute attempts to coerce voters – especially vulnerable groups like women, minorities and persons with disabilities – through the threat of loss of government assistance.

### Physical Violence

1. The EC and other relevant governmental actors should enforce existing laws to deter violence against voters and investigate and prosecute individuals implicated in intimidation, threats, and other forms of violence against voters.
2. Security actors, the judiciary, and other relevant non-state actors should facilitate an independent and thorough investigation into election violence incidents, hold individuals responsible for acts of violence accountable through



legal proceedings, promote reconciliation and dialogue among political factions and encourage political leaders to condemn and discourage post-election violence.

3. Political parties should publicly condemn acts of violence, including those against marginalized communities, and hold their supporters accountable.
4. Parties should develop or refine codes of conduct regarding election violence to include sections on moderating rhetoric and preventing violence against women, Hindus, and other marginalized groups, publish them and enforce this code among their members.
5. CSOs, with international funding and assistance, should conduct nationwide violence mitigation activities before and during election periods.

### **Violence Against Women and Other Marginalized Groups**

1. Security actors and the judiciary should conduct timely and thorough investigations of all cases of violence reported against women and other marginalized groups and promptly address them.
2. The government should introduce and strengthen legal codes to ensure the protection of women's rights in order to create a more inclusive, safe, and enabling environment for their political participation.
3. The government, CSOs, and other relevant non-state actors should undertake a nationwide campaign to raise awareness of VAW, including VAW-E.
4. The EC and other relevant government actors should ensure that election legislation addresses VAW, including prioritizing quick dispute-resolution mechanisms for such cases.
5. The EC should ensure that the infrastructure and equipment at polling centers are accessible to people with disabilities in order to create a more inclusive and enabling electoral environment.
6. Political parties should proactively introduce and implement strategies to mitigate and prevent violence against marginalized groups, particularly women and religious minorities. Such strategies should include the development and promotion of enforceable inclusion policies, public awareness campaigns, and educational initiatives to foster tolerance.

### **Information Environment and Violence**

1. The EC should undertake systematic monitoring of election-related harmful speech and violent rhetoric, including threats of violence against women and other marginalized groups online, in traditional and social media outlets and sanction perpetrators in a uniform manner for violations of election laws and codes of conduct.
2. Security actors should cease surveillance and intimidation of journalists and media outlets and protect space for critical reporting.
3. The government should review the Cyber Security Act to ensure that it is in line with international standards, implement the law in a manner that addresses online harms and preserves freedom of speech, and iteratively seek and respond to feedback from civil society, citizens, and other stakeholders on the law's implementation and amendment.
4. CSOs should engage in nonpartisan systematic social media monitoring during and after election cycles to document the prevalence of online harms, their perpetrators and victims, and advise government officials on policy solutions.
5. Political parties should develop a social media code of conduct that mandates positive forms of online political engagement and stipulates best practices for online behavior, and holds members accountable.
6. Social media companies should expand their internal capacity to monitor and regulate online behavior in Bangladesh, prioritizing localized expertise across language and political context.

## ABOUT NDI AND IRI

*A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, the International Republican Institute (IRI) advances freedom and democracy worldwide by helping political parties to become more responsive, strengthening transparent and accountable governance, and working to increase the role of marginalized groups in the political process – including women and youth. Since 1983, IRI has monitored over 200 elections in 60 countries through international observation missions and assessments. More information is available at [www.iri.org](http://www.iri.org).*

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