

The cost of politics in **Bangladesh**

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List of acronyms

ACC	Anti-Corruption Commission
AL	Awami League
BCP	Bangladesh Communist Party
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
BNM	Bangladesh Nationalist Movement
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
CAKSU	Chittagong University Central Students' Union
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue
CAG	Comptroller and Auditor General
DI	Democracy International
ECB	Election Commission of Bangladesh
EWG	Election Working Group
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
IC	Information Commission
JAKSU	Jahangirnagar University Central Students' Union
JMB	Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh
JP	Jatiya Party
JSD	Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal
MP	Member of Parliament
NID	National Identification
RPO	Representation of the People Order
TIB	Transparency International Bangladesh
SHUJAN	Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik

Executive summary

In the wake of the July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh, an interim government has been established to stabilise the nation and address long-standing issues in governance, both political and financial. This government has put forth several reform agendas designed to fortify political, economic, and legal institutions that had been severely compromised between 2009 and 2024. A period which was marred by hyper-politicisation and an alarming concentration of power within the hands of kleptocratic actors linked to the Awami League government. This led to the marginalisation of significant opposition parties, the manipulation of electoral institutions, and the erosion of integrity-building agencies. By prioritising comprehensive reforms, the interim government aims to cultivate an environment that encourages equitable competition, fosters transparency, and ensures accountability among political actors. This approach is not merely about fixing present issues but is also about laying a strong foundation for a resilient, democratic framework in Bangladesh that can withstand future challenges.

This study contends that the escalating cost of politics, particularly around the candidate nomination process and election campaigns, impedes the effective functioning of political institutions and the overall democratic ecosystem. For the purposes of this research, the term "cost of politics" is employed as a framework to elucidate the interconnections among electoral nomination processes, campaign financing, and their implications for the electoral process and the quality of democratic governance at large. This approach emphasises the expenditures incurred by individuals seeking political office rather than focusing solely on those absorbed by political parties. Consequently, the study examines all costs incurred throughout the election cycle—from a candidate's initial decision to run for election to the conclusion of their elected term. This broader concept of the "cost of politics" encompasses both monetary expenditures and in-kind contributions and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the financial landscape upon which electoral politics is fought.

The key findings of this study emphasise the need to lower the financial barriers associated with political participation significantly. Reducing the cost of politics is crucial for fostering grassroots leadership and nurturing intra-party democracy. Empowering individuals based on their capabilities rather than the financial resource at their disposal has the potential to open up opportunities to a diverse set of leaders from various social strata, including marginalised groups such as women, youth, and those from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds. This inclusivity is vital for achieving a truly representative democracy.

Establishing clear and transparent legal and monitoring frameworks for the disclosure of candidates' wealth and the sources of their campaign financing will be a cornerstone for ensuring parties function as democratic entities. Such transparency will enhance public confidence in the electoral process, deter corruption, and promote ethical conduct among politicians. The study also highlights the importance of a robust institutional framework that supports national integrity institutions to be a part of the political transparency processes. These entities need to be reformed

to enforce practical and proactive monitoring mechanisms that ensure that the selection process is fair and equitable.

The recommendations put forth by this study seek to pave the way for inclusive participation of political aspirants by shifting from a wealth-dominated political spectrum to an ideology and value-oriented political spectrum. The prior government's focus on development initiatives, frequently compromising democratic principles, has allowed affluent groups to gain access to powers that they can wield to expend their political influence through the strategic use of incentives, privileges, and the accumulation of wealth and authority. In this context, the fundamental value of authentic grassroots representation is frequently sidelined, leading to a political landscape heavily skewed towards elite interests that rarely reflect the voices and needs of the wider population. In response to this, the report suggests actionable recommendations and strategies for fostering inclusive and participatory electoral processes, which are vital for cultivating a more robust and meaningful democracy for all Bangladeshis.

Introduction

The fairness of parliamentary elections in Bangladesh has been a critical concern since the country gained independence in 1971. But the issue has become especially pronounced over the course of the last three general elections held in 2014, 2018, and 2024 which have been marred by widespread allegations of rigging and malpractice, primarily attributed to the former ruling party, the Awami League (AL). The AL has been accused of using a political strategy that relied heavily on a combination of power, financial resources, and patronage networks for electoral success.¹ However, this approach has led to significant questions about the legitimacy of the electoral outcomes and has severely eroded public trust in the democratic process.

A lack of political accountability backed by a culture of impunity, widespread corruption, and failure to engage in genuine communication between the ruling party and the public continues to undermine the democratic framework. The resulting distortions in the political ecosystem led to the 2024 student uprising, which was supported by the wider public.² The uprising has shaken the very foundation of the current political culture, with the student catalysts demanding political reform and a thorough overhaul of the political parties.

In Bangladeshi politics, the interplay between money and power is not a new phenomenon. However, the situation has worsened in recent years - particularly during the past four AL-led governments from 2009 to 2024 - where the influence of financial resources in politics has increased dramatically. This situation calls for urgent attention, as the intersection of money and political power threatens the very fabric of democracy in the country. The rising financial requirements have created barriers for potential candidates, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds, stifling diverse political representation. These financial dynamics are exacerbated, and even shaped, by a growing trend of election-related violence and a pervasive lack of transparency in campaign financing. In the broader South Asian context, the influx of money into

the political sphere often detracts from meaningful policy discourse and undermines the accountability and transparency expected of elected officials.³

This reality raises serious concerns about the future of democratic representation and the inclusivity of political dialogue in Bangladesh. By systematically investigating the myriad costs that arise from participation in political processes, the report explores how these financial burdens affect the functioning of democratic governance. It also explores the direct monetary expenses and broader economic implications that could sway political decisions, hinder democratic leadership growth, and impair public trust. In this pursuit, the study seeks to identify practical and effective solutions to mitigate the adverse impacts of money in politics.

Methodology

The comprehensive methodology established by Westminster Foundation for Democracy to understand the “cost of politics” has been applied to this study on Bangladesh. The approach seeks to understand and highlight the interconnections between electoral nomination processes and campaign expenditure, highlighting their impacts on the electoral process and the quality of democratic governance at large. It is different from more conventional campaign finance analysis in that it emphasises the expenditures, and their drivers, incurred by individuals seeking political office, rather than focusing solely on those incurred by political parties. It encompasses both monetary expenditures and in-kind contributions, offering a comprehensive understanding of the financial landscape of electoral politics.

The data gathered for this study is primarily qualitative combining thorough desk research with qualitative interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs). Secondary data has been sourced from a myriad of government publications, reports generated by prominent international organisations, and academic literature that delves into the political economy of Bangladesh. This is supplemented by 25 in-depth key informant interviews (KIIs) with both former and current Members of Parliament (MPs), election officials tasked with overseeing electoral processes, political analysts knowledgeable about the political landscape, journalists who report on these dynamics, engaged student leaders, and representatives from civil society organisations (CSOs). The two FGDs held with members of the student wings from major political parties; discussions that were instrumental in capturing their perspectives on political reforms and their visions of what ongoing political transformations in Bangladesh should look like. The first-hand accounts gathered during these interviews and discussions provided invaluable insights into the lived realities of political candidates, particularly shedding light on the financial obstacles they face throughout the electoral journey.

Whilst the study concentrates on elections held between 2008 and 2024 elections, a key limitation of this study is the lack of input from the immediate past ruling party, the AL. Following the political upheaval that marked the end of their fifteen-year reign all senior leaders of the AL, including MPs, student activists, and party affiliates, have become almost absent from the political landscape and

proved very difficult to access for the purpose of being interviewed for this study. Additionally, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) faced political and legal challenges that hindered its participation in the elections of 2014, 2018, and 2024, and which led to a widespread boycott. Meanwhile, the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) was legally barred from contesting in these elections. To address this, the study incorporated a wide spectrum of perspectives, including from those who did not necessarily participate in the recent elections, but who could nonetheless offer valuable insights.

The Bangladeshi political ecosystem

Bangladesh's political landscape has long been characterised by patronage-based practices, where individuals' positions, financial resources, local influence, and loyalty to political parties play crucial roles. As a result, the country's development as a parliamentary democracy has faced significant political and electoral challenges since independence in 1971. The early years were plagued by political assassinations and military interventions that disrupted the democratic process. This included the assassination of the country's founding leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975 an action that led to a prolonged period of military rule (1975-1991). During this period, military rulers significantly influenced politics, suppressed political opposition, and manipulated electoral processes to maintain their grip on power.⁴ Even after the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991 direct and indirect military involvement has remained a significant factor in Bangladeshi politics.

Two major parties have dominated the political landscape in Bangladesh since 1991 - the AL and BNP.⁵ The AL is ideologically centre-left and played a key role in the country's independence movement, while the BNP is more of a centre-right party. Both have relied on extensive patronage networks to secure their electoral victories.⁶ In 1991, the BNP won a majority, and its leader, Khaleda Zia, became the first female prime minister in Bangladesh. However, this period of democratic governance was not without challenges. The rise of Islamic parties such as JI and the emergence of Islamist groups like JMB and Harkat-UI-Jihad significantly shifted the political landscape. JI's coalition with the AL and BNP in different electoral periods was a notable turning point, as religious ideologies began to exert a more pronounced influence in politics.

The introduction of a caretaker government system in 1996 was to ensure free and fair elections by having a neutral, non-partisan interim government oversee the electoral process. The rationale behind this was the widespread perception that an elected party government could not conduct elections impartially.⁷ Elections in June 1996, 2001, and 2007-2008, held under caretaker governments, were widely regarded as free and fair.⁸ However, the AL-led government's 2011 abolition of this system has led to increased tensions and allegations of electoral manipulation, particularly from opposition parties in subsequent polls.⁹ The general elections of 2014 and 2018 were marred by significant allegations, including widespread fraud, voter suppression tactics, and an overall lack of transparency in the electoral process. In 2018, the BNP largely chose to boycott the elections, paving the way for an uncontested victory for the ruling AL. The AL secured an

overwhelming 288 out of 300 parliamentary seats, underscoring their dominance in the political landscape.

In the 2024 elections, a similar troubling situation emerged. Once again, the BNP opted not to participate, resulting in another substantial win for the Awami League, which captured 224 seats. A noteworthy number of independent candidates—many of whom were former AL members and are often labeled as "dummy candidates"—added to this complexity by securing an additional 62 seats. The 2018 and 2024 elections also established a unique precedent, with the Jatiya Party (JP) assuming the role of the opposition with the backing of the ruling party, AL. The absence of the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) in these elections, combined with the left-leaning parties and the fragmented interests of the far-right political factions, allowed the JP to negotiate with the ruling party to take on the role of the opposition.

Both the 2018 and 2024 elections witnessed a discernible trend of increasing participation from businessmen in politics, signalling a shift in the political landscape where economic interests may heavily influence governance and policymaking. This continued intertwining of politics and business raises essential questions about the future of democracy in Bangladesh and the representation of ordinary citizens in the political arena. However, since 2018 student-led social and political movements have also begun to reshape traditional party politics in Bangladesh. The 'Quota Reform' and 'Road Safety' movements of 2018 mobilised students from diverse backgrounds, highlighting their potential as a powerful political force. In 2024, another student-led movement, 'Students Against Discrimination', successfully campaigned against reintroducing a quota system for government jobs, that contributed significantly to the ending of the AL's 16-year rule during protests between June and August 2024 that were not deterred by violent by state security agencies to suppress them. As a result, student movements are now recognised as significant stakeholders in Bangladeshi politics and potential changemakers in the country's political culture.

Student leaders are preparing to establish a new political party aimed at sustaining their reform initiatives and tackling urgent systemic issues, such as corruption and economic inequality. Their goal is to foster a political environment that aligns with the aspirations of the younger generation while resonating with the broader public, thus paving the way for a more democratic and equitable future. The students recognise that it is of critical interest to the state to transcend the prevailing political duopoly to embrace a more inclusive approach to governance. To action the progressive vision of the students, the Jatiya Nagorik Committee (JNC) was formed. It seeks to draw inspiration from the spirit of the student-led anti-discrimination movement to promote national reconstruction a task that the interim government's chief advisor, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus, is also tasked with, as Bangladesh seeks to carve out a path that will enable it to hold free, fair, and inclusive elections.

Money in politics

Politics in Bangladesh is characterised by substantial financial expenditures. The rising costs of electioneering have created barriers for many aspiring politicians, especially those from marginalised communities, including women and youth. Political parties often require candidates to make significant financial contributions to secure nominations, resulting in a political arena dominated by wealthier individuals or those with access to substantial financial resources.¹⁰ That is even before the campaign costs for rallies, voter outreach and media advertising are factored in. The rising costs of election campaigns, coupled with the ongoing financial demands to maintain political support, have led to many elected representatives feeling more accountable to their financial backers than to their constituents. This has eroded public trust in the political system and raised questions about the integrity of the electoral process.¹¹

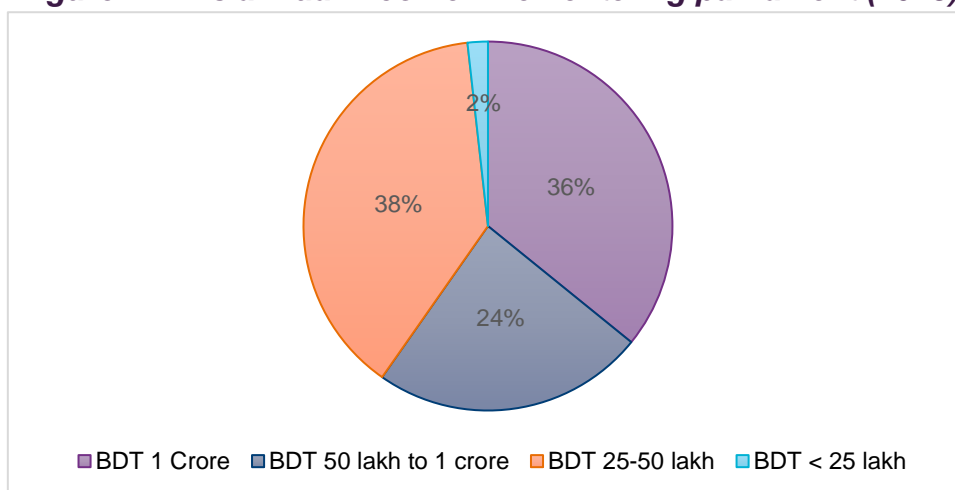
The increasing presence of businessmen in the parliament, combined with the overwhelming control of the AL, has raised concerns about the erosion of democratic principles. Candidates' wealth and economic power have become significant factors in determining political success, often overshadowing political experience and public service. Political analysts and civil society organisations, such as Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (SHUJAN) and Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), have voiced concerns about the marginalisation of traditional politicians and the growing disconnect between parliament and the general public that this has fostered.¹² The mingling of business interests with politics is viewed as harmful to the democratic process, resulting in a parliament that primarily serves the interests of the wealthy.

The rising influence of wealth

A 2018 SHUJAN study¹³ revealed that nearly 82% of lawmakers possessed assets worth more than BDT 1 crore.¹⁴ Among these, 32% owned assets exceeding BDT 5 crore. To put this into perspective, only 0.06% of Bangladesh's total population had a net worth of over BDT 1 crore in 2016, highlighting a significant wealth disparity between the general population and their elected representatives. Income data further emphasises this disparity. According to the same report, in 2018, 27% of MPs earned more than BDT 1 crore annually, 18% earned between BDT 50 lakh and BDT 1 crore, and 29% earned between BDT 25-50 lakh. A small fraction, just 1.34%, reported incomes below BDT 25 lakh; the same percentage did not submit their wealth statements.¹⁵

This trend intensified ahead of the 2024 polls. A remarkable 92.8% of the AL candidates were millionaires, with an average annual income of BDT 21.4 million. The average value of their assets exceeded BDT 285 million.¹⁶ TIB also reported that at least 18 candidates had financial holdings exceeding BDT 1 billion, with 10 of these candidates representing the ruling AL.¹⁷

Figure 1: MPs annual income when entering parliament (2018)



Source: Adapted from *The Daily Star* reporting by authors

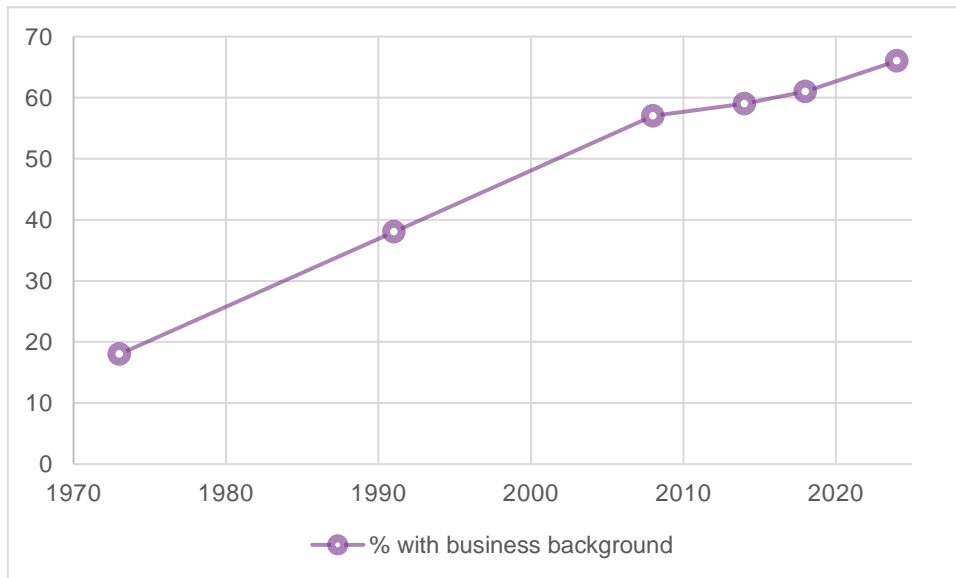
The dominance of business in politics

Since independence, the professional backgrounds of MPs have undergone a notable transformation. As of the 2018 parliament, 61% of MPs identified as businessmen¹⁸, highlighting a significant shift from previous decades.¹⁹ Lawyers constituted the biggest share of the inaugural parliament in 1973, with 31% of members coming from that profession, while those involved in business accounted for only 18%.²⁰ By 1991, this had jumped to 38%, surpassing the 15% of MPs who were legal professionals, and by 2008, it had reached 57%. This shift raises interesting questions about the evolving landscape of political representation and the growing influence of the business sector within and on governmental structures. In 2024, 66% of elected MPs were businessmen, a trend that is consistent across political parties as 64.15% of the AL's 265 candidates, 66.3% of the JP's 262 candidates, and 69.75% of the 433 independent candidates were businesspersons.²¹ The growing number of businessmen entering politics is driven more by their economic power than political experience or wisdom and leads to a situation where business interests heavily influence political decisions.²²

Examples of this are plentiful. Mohammad Shahid Islam, known as Kazi Papul, was elected as a MP for the Lakshmipur-2 constituency in 2018. Papul had made a name for himself as a prominent businessman in the labour export sector before his entry into politics. His wealth largely stems from his role in facilitating labour migration, a booming industry that has sparked both economic opportunities and ethical concerns. Therefore, Papul's leap into the political arena raised eyebrows, particularly because he entered without prior experience in governance or public service. This lack of political background led to heightened scrutiny regarding the extent to which his substantial business interests might shape his legislative priorities, especially concerning labour migration and employment policies.²³ Similarly, Gazi Golam Dastagir, a prominent figure in Bangladesh's garment industry, has served multiple terms as an MP from Narayanganj-1 and even held the textile and jute minister portfolio in the AL government allowing him to shape policies that impact his business sector directly. This has raised questions about whether his decisions made on trade policies and

regulations for the garment industry are swayed by personal business interests rather than the broader public good.

Figure 2: Percentage of MPs with business background (1973-2024)



Source: Adapted from *The Daily Star* reporting by authors

Weak monitoring and compliance

The Election Commission of Bangladesh (ECB) requires all candidates and political parties to submit detailed reports of their election-related expenses. According to Section 44-Ga of the Representation of the People Order (RPO), candidates must submit their expenditure reports within 30 days of the election results being published in the official gazette, and political parties are required to submit their reports within 90 days. Failure to comply with these requirements can lead to penalties, including fines, imprisonment, and even revocation of party registration but they rarely do. In 2018, only 40% of MPs submitted their mandatory financial disclosures, as reported by the Election Working Group.²⁴ Even for those who report, it is essential to note that the financial disclosure process is often manipulated, and transparency is hindered, mainly due to hidden streams of informal funding from businesses and interest groups.²⁵ This means that expenditure reports submitted to the ECB are often inaccurate and do not reflect the actual costs incurred.

The ECB lacks a robust mechanism to verify these reports' authenticity, allowing money to exert an unchecked influence over Bangladesh's political landscape. The ECB has also been criticised for failing to make expenditure reports public. Research conducted by TIB in 2021 indicated that the ECB has taken minimal action against candidates who violate spending limits, with less than 10% of violators penalised in 2018. The research recorded over 500 cases of campaign finance violations in 2018, including illegal donations and underreporting of expenditures. Despite these violations, only two candidates were disqualified from running for office.²⁶

Expenditure limits

Individual expenses

- Each candidate can spend up to BDT 25 lakh on electioneering, including all expenses related to their campaign efforts.

Party expenses

- Political parties that field over 200 candidates in an election can spend up to BDT 4.5 crore on their election campaigns.
- Political parties that field 101-200 candidates in an election can spend up to BDT 3 crore on their election campaigns.
- Political parties that field 51-100 candidates in an election can spend up to BDT 1.5 crore on their election campaigns.
- Political parties that field less than 50 candidates in an election can spend up to BDT 75 lakh on their election campaigns.

The cost of politics in Bangladesh

Based on the affidavits submitted to the ECB, and noting their shortcomings, the financial cost of running a parliamentary election campaign in Bangladesh has grown significantly since 2008. In that election, candidates reported an average expense of BDT 834,536. This figure more than doubled by 2014, rising to BDT 1,906,526, indicating a sharp increase in election-related spending. However, in 2018, the average expenditure decreased slightly to BDT 1,403,110, suggesting some stabilisation. By the time of the 2024 elections, average expenses had risen again, with candidates reporting an average of BDT 1,627,311.

These figures highlight the growing financial burden of participating in elections in Bangladesh²⁷ even if they can vary significantly from party to party and candidate to candidate. For example, a candidate running in urban areas like Dhaka or Chittagong will likely face costs different from those contesting in rural regions such as Kurigram or Sunamganj. The expenses can also depend on the level of competition, including how much rival candidates spend on their campaigns. But these reported outlays only include the official election period. An estimated BDT of 5-10 crore is required prior to the formal campaign, to cover the period from three to five years before the election, with additional expenses incurred for those elected to office in the aftermath of polls.

Getting selected

Candidates often begin their campaign expenditure well before they receive official nominations. These early investments focus on building relationships with local influencers and mobilising grassroots support, and can start two or three years before elections. This means that even before obtaining a party nomination, candidates can incur significant expenses. They often spend money on community events, make donations to local institutions, and work to build public support through informal patron-client networks. This pre-nomination spending can account for one-third of total campaign expenditure. A common perception in Bangladesh is that those unable to spend money cannot be credible candidates for MP. Consequently, prospective candidates often feel compelled to distribute funds or demonstrate their capacity to (financially) meet constituency needs.

In Bangladesh, wealth has become a key determinant in the political nomination process, particularly within the AL and JP. During nomination interviews, candidates – typically businessmen, former bureaucrats, or retired military officials - are frequently asked the crucial question: "Are you financially capable of supporting your campaign in the upcoming election in your constituency?" Candidates must demonstrate they can manage the substantial costs of election activities, including campaign expenses, outreach in their constituencies, and mobilising supporters to be considered. This presents a significant barrier to less-resourced aspirants who might lack the necessary funds despite their dedication and local popularity.

The costs associated with securing a nomination include both official fees and unofficial payments. For instance, the AL requires security deposits ranging from BDT 30,000-50,000, while independent candidates typically pay a lower amount of around BDT 25,000 to the party fund. The price for nomination forms also varies by party. In the 2024 parliamentary election, the AL charged the highest fee at BDT 50,000 per form, followed by the JP at BDT 30,000. Other parties, such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Movement (BNM), Trinamool BNP, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, and Bangladesh Tarikat Federation, offered forms at prices ranging from BDT 1,000-6,000.²⁸

But the costs at this stage go beyond just paying official party fees. Many politicians interviewed for this research indicated that candidates often spend between BDT 20-50 million to gain the favour of influential party leaders, particularly within the AL and JP. In some cases, additional payments were allegedly made directly to members of the prime minister's family to secure nominations. The total amount spent also varies based on factors such as the candidate's standing within the party, their popularity in their constituency, and the geographic characteristics of that area.

Moreover, candidates frequently make unofficial payments to influential figures, including military and police chiefs, bureaucrats, and prominent journalists. These individuals, who may charge between BDT 5-10 million each, can advocate for a candidate or facilitate introductions to high-ranking officials. Constituencies, particularly those rich in natural resources, housing large economic projects, or serving as commercial hubs - such as major cities or strategically significant areas like ports and Export Processing Zones - have a notably higher nomination costs. As one interviewee articulated:

The unofficial cost for nomination varies based on the location of the constitution. For instance, a constituency involved in the sand business, like those in riverine areas, or regions with development projects such as Pabna, tends to be more expensive than others. Additionally, constituencies in Dhaka or Sylhet, which are known for their significant natural stone business, typically require higher payments.

The campaign and voting period

The campaign phase is often the most capital-intensive part of the election process, with candidates spending between BDT 30-50 million—or even more—depending on the constituency and level of competition. These expenditures cover various campaign essentials, such as promotional materials, salaries for campaign workers, and logistics for organising rallies. Additionally, candidates budget for securing support from local influencers and voter groups. This practice can significantly influence the election's outcome by shaping public opinion and encouraging voter turnout and increasingly takes place online. The role of social media in Bangladeshi elections has rapidly expanded, with platforms like Facebook and YouTube becoming essential tools for political outreach. Many experts highlighted the increasing importance of social media in campaign budgets, explaining that digital spending has become a significant component of modern electoral campaigns. As one respondent noted;

Through a video or a Facebook post, I can reach thousands of people at once. If I tried to do the same in person, it would take me months, hundreds of meetings, and thousands of dollars

According to interviews conducted for this study, an estimated BDT 10,000 per day is spent at each centre – each constituency comprises 120-130 of these - organising rallies, meetings, and refreshments. Campaign workers are typically hired for around 10 to 12 days, with payments ranging from BDT 4,000-5,000 per day for this salaried role during the campaign. In constituencies with 50 wards, employing one worker in each ward at a minimum of BDT 2,000 per day results in a cumulative daily expenditure of BDT 100,000 on salaries alone. It is estimated that candidates spend between BDT 500,000-1 million daily on party worker expenses over a 15-day campaign. The financial burden of election campaigns intensifies further in the days leading up to voting. At this point, the average daily expense per polling centre reaches approximately BDT 200,000 as candidates seek to secure voter engagement and presence.

According to one of our interviewees, who was an MP candidate, election day itself also entails substantial financial commitments, with a minimum of BDT 5 million being spent on average per candidate. In high-profile constituencies, such as those in Dhaka or South Bengal, the costs per voting centre can escalate dramatically, ranging from BDT 50,000 to as high as BDT 300,000, meaning that overall expenditure on election day can range from BDT 10-200 million in certain constituencies. Candidates also mobilise at least 10,000 paid workers for election day tasks who

are each compensated with a minimum of BDT 500. In addition, and to ensure coverage and oversight across all centres, each candidate requires around 800 voting agents spread across the six or so polling booths in each voting centre, with additional agents often on standby to respond to any election-related violence.

Given the money involved, the integrity of election management institutions can be compromised. In Bangladesh, political parties with significant financial resources often attempt to influence election officials through bribery or coercion to achieve favourable outcomes. Presiding officers frequently face pressure to alter results, suppress opposition votes, or ignore violations. Additionally, the police and the Ansar forces, a paramilitary group, may be employed to intimidate voters or manipulate vote counts to rig elections.²⁹

An additional layer of electoral spending focuses on direct voter engagement. As election day approaches, candidates often engage in a tradition locally called "moon night," where they distribute cash and goods to voters the night before the elections with amounts given varying significantly across constituencies. In bustling urban areas, the sums provided to voters are notably higher. Here, individuals can receive anywhere from BDT 1,000 to as much as BDT 5,000, which can provide a considerable incentive. On the other hand, in the more rural regions, while the payments also start at a minimum of BDT 1,000, the maximum amounts tend to be lower. These financial incentives play a crucial role in the electoral landscape, shaping both voter behaviour and candidate strategies as they seek to secure a favourable outcome on election day:

The night before the election is referred to as "Moon Night," which coincides with the night before the Eid festival. During this time, candidates offer cash to voters through their local campaign managers. Many people are so loyal to the money that they accept it and vote for the candidates who provide it.

Post-election

The need for "speed money" has emerged as a typical post-election expense in Bangladesh. The bureaucratic processes associated with elections can be notoriously slow and inefficient. Key elements such as the publication of election results, the preparation of voter lists, and the approval of candidate nominations often face significant delays. These inefficiencies can hinder the electoral process and create uncertainty among voters and candidates alike. Some politicians resort to bribing officials to navigate these challenges and expedite these critical tasks by paying substantial sums - sometimes between BDT 400,000-500,000 - to expedite administrative processes, such as the official publication of election results or necessary documentation. By offering financial incentives, they aim to ensure the timely announcement of election results, accurate documentation of voter lists, and swift resolution of any disputes related to the election process. Some view this practice as a necessary step to circumvent the bureaucratic red tape that can stifle progress and create bottlenecks.

However, the growing reliance on these payments highlights a significant issue within the electoral framework. Without these bribes, officials may either deliberately delay processes or fall victim to systemic inefficiencies that extend the electoral timeline. As a result, the integrity and transparency of the electoral process come into question, raising concerns about the fairness of elections in the country. Ultimately, this dependence on bribery undermines public trust in the electoral system and perpetuates a cycle of corruption that can be detrimental to the democratic process in Bangladesh.

After being confirmed as the winner, elected MPs in Bangladesh encounter various ongoing financial obligations. These post-election costs include funding community projects, maintaining local offices, and regularly contributing to party funds. Many MPs find themselves in a continuous cycle of financial pressure to meet the needs of their constituencies, often through supporting local rallies, hosting events, and fulfilling promises made during their campaigns. To manage these commitments, MPs may depend on financial contributions from private entities or local businesses or seek to channel government resources, which can sometimes lead to questionable financial practices.

Sources of funds

Candidates in Bangladesh's elections typically rely on formal and informal funding sources. The formal sources include contributions from political parties and personal savings. In contrast, informal sources include donations from businesses, vested interest groups, and sometimes illicit contributions from foreign actors and criminal syndicates.³⁰ This illegal funding typically originates from tax evasion, extortion, and organised crime syndicates, which provide financial backing to candidates in exchange for political influence once elected.

In recent electoral cycles, political parties, particularly incumbents, have faced increased scrutiny concerning their financial backing from business entities. Interviews conducted for this research indicate that major private sector firms have contributed substantial sums, ranging from BDT 2-10 billion, to support campaign activities for numerous AL candidates for example. This financial assistance is often strategically distributed, sometimes targeting opponents or rival groups within the same political party. Prior to the 2014 election, these financial donations were primarily sought through requests to businesses. However, during the 2018 and 2024 elections, there was a significant shift observed; contributions were more often imposed upon companies, rather than being donated voluntarily, indicating a more coercive fundraising environment.

Businesses typically prefer to fund candidates in areas where they possess considerable assets or conduct operations. A clear example of this is the S. Alam Group, which has been noted for its financial support of political candidates in Chattogram, a region where the company has significant business interests. This trend not only highlights the complex relationship between politics and finance but also raises questions about the implications of such financial dynamics on democratic processes and governance. According to one KII respondent:

In recent elections, a prevailing belief in our journalist community is that the AL has received substantial donations from major business groups in Bangladesh in the lead-up to the polls. These transactions are reportedly orchestrated through corrupt senior officials within the intelligence services who are loyal to the party. These officials also manage the allocation of these funds to various politicians for their expenditures.

Increasingly, donations come from business groups who view participating in the elections as an investment that can make a return if the candidate is elected. Candidates are allowed to receive these donations, but the RPO imposes strict limits on contributions. However, reports from the ECB in 2019 indicate that many candidates do not report accurately, or at all, these contributions.³¹ According to another KII participant:

Thirty to forty years ago, many politicians were unable to run for election due to their financial situations. Some even had to sell their land to finance their campaigns. However, nowadays, if you can manage to secure a nomination, you don't have to worry about funding; it will come to you naturally

Political parties in Bangladesh generally provide limited financial support to individual candidates. According to a 2020 study political parties mainly offer "in-kind" assistance, such as volunteers, transportation, and access to party platforms.³² Only 15% of candidates receive substantial financial support from their parties with access to such support higher for wealthier candidates who receive preferential treatment due to their ability to self-fund or contribute to party expenses. In fact, some parties enforce internal contributions, requiring members to donate a portion of their income to fund the party. For example, in JI, members contribute up to 5% of their income.

As a result, candidates must rely heavily on personal funds or private sponsors to cover most of their campaign expenses. It has been estimated that over 60% of candidates in Bangladesh rely on their personal assets to pay for campaign costs before turning to private sponsors.³³ Incumbent MPs frequently use funds intended for public projects to finance their campaigns, sometimes diverting as much as 40% of allocated funds to personal accounts.³⁴ MPs also frequently sell land, small businesses, or tax-free cars acquired during their parliamentary terms to fund their election campaigns highlighting the financial disadvantage that new entrants need to overcome.

In the 2024 election, 32.6% of candidates said they borrowed money to cover election expenses, a slight decrease from 32.7% in 2018. Among those who borrowed, 48.9% (down from 56.6% in 2018) obtained funds from relatives, while 11.1% (decreasing from 12.4% in 2018) borrowed or received voluntary donations from individuals outside their family. Additionally, 39.8% (down from 52.2% in 2018) of candidates in the 2024 election received voluntary donations to support their campaigns. Just 6.6% (a significant drop from 26.4% in 2018) of candidates borrowed funds from organisations or party members as donations for their election expenses.³⁵

Keys for successful resource mobilisation

- **Communicate effectively with party leadership.** The level of a candidate's communication with central party leadership plays a pivotal role in their overall success and viability within the political landscape. This relationship is important for establishing trust and support and ensuring that the candidate's vision aligns seamlessly with the party's core values and strategic goals. Additionally, the candidate's ability to demonstrate loyalty and wealth within their party and among their constituency is sometimes critical. The perceived likelihood of the candidate winning the election is a significant factor that impacts their funding prospects.
- **Win over financial sponsors.** The capability of a candidate to effectively engage potential financial sponsors is a critical aspect of fundraising. This process requires strong negotiation skills and a deep understanding of their needs and expectations. Sponsors' confidence in a candidate's ability to deliver on their interests plays a significant role in determining the extent of financial backing they are willing to provide. Overall, the combination of negotiation prowess, credible promises to serve interests, and relationship management ultimately influences the level of financial backing candidates receive.
- **Mobilise local support.** It is important to gain the support of local leaders and effectively mobilise grassroots party workers. Building strong relationships with prominent figures within the community can help garner influence and demonstrate support to powerful national elites. This engagement creates a foundation for a robust ground game that is essential in reaching potential supporters.

The challenge facing inclusive representation

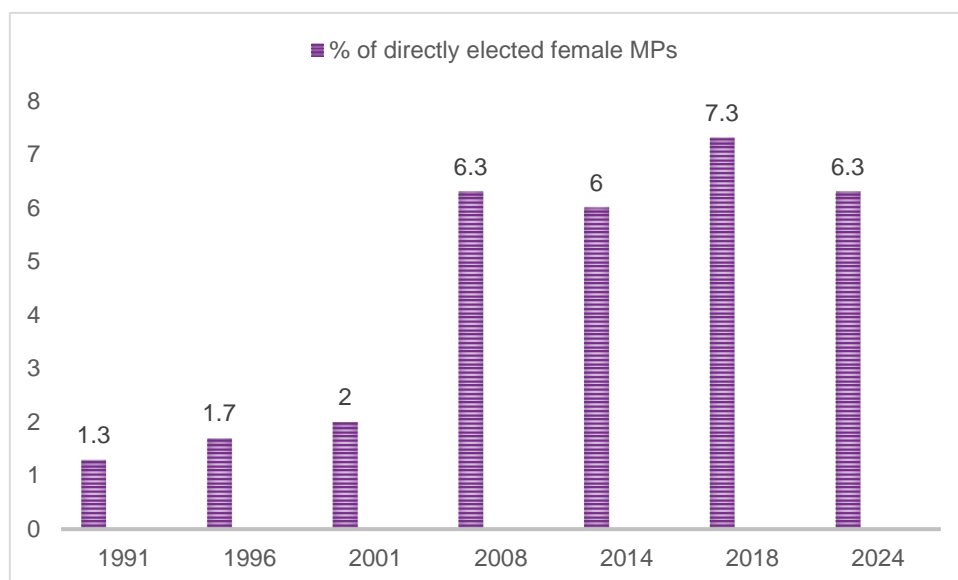
The political culture of Bangladesh makes it very difficult to accommodate women, youth, and other marginalised groups. One of our interviewees highlighted the "ageist and sexist" culture, mentioning that "the psyche of the people in Bangladesh is such that if you are not a man and you do not have white hair, you are unable to represent the people". In addition to the prevalence of these attitudes, the excessive cost of politics is the main reason why women, youths, and other marginalised groups have not been adequately represented in the political system.

The ECB mandates that all political parties ensure at least 33% representation of women in their committees. This directive aims to foster gender parity within party leadership structures. However, as of early 2024, major political parties, including the AL and the BNP, have not fully met this

requirement.³⁶ The *Jatiya Sangsad* (national parliament) also reserves 50 seats exclusively for women, distributed proportionally based on the number of general seats each party holds. This system, extended in 2018 to remain in place for another 25 years, is designed to ensure women's representation in parliament.³⁷ But whilst these measures have increased the numerical presence of women in political spheres, challenges persist. The reserved seats, though ensuring representation, have been critiqued for not necessarily translating into substantial political influence or decision-making power for women MPs,³⁸ nor has it improved women's representation more broadly.

Before its dissolution due to a mass uprising in August 2024, the 12th parliament had 19 directly elected female members (excluding reserved seats). In comparison, the 11th parliament had 22 directly elected female members, while the 10th and 9th parliaments had 18 and 19 female members, respectively.³⁹ Of the 300 directly elected seats, only one representative was aged 21-30, and 15 members, three of whom were women, were aged 31-40.

Figure 3: Percentage of directly elected female MPs (1991-2024)



Source: Adapted from Prothom Alo report by authors

The high cost of politics and lack of networks to access the campaign finance required remain formidable barriers for women and youth candidates in Bangladesh, impacting their ability to participate meaningfully in the political arena.⁴⁰ Even in efforts to secure a reserved seat female candidates often find themselves in a challenging position where they typically must depend on family wealth that can provide the necessary financial backing to navigate the political landscape. Alternatively, they may seek funding or support directly from the political party, but this requires a strong alignment with the party's interests. Additionally, being a close associate or having strong connections with high-ranking party officials can significantly enhance their chances. Candidates that do not have these resources or connections struggle to gain the visibility and support needed to successfully compete for a seat. According to one former MP:

Political parties often prioritise financially capable candidates, which disadvantages women and young aspirants who generally have limited financial resources. This disparity is especially evident in resource allocation, where women and youth receive significantly less support than their male, financially established counterparts.

Additionally, female candidates encounter significant societal and political bias. Obtaining a nomination is nearly impossible without a strong family background, preventing many women from entering the electoral race. Those who do manage to secure a nomination or win an election often face character assassination through gendered stereotypes. One female interviewee noted that:

When a male politician achieves a position within the party, is nominated, or wins an election, people often accuse him of using financial influence. In contrast, when female candidates succeed, people tend to question their integrity, suggesting that they rely on personal favours to attain their success.

For youth candidates, financial challenges are intensified by a lack of support within party structures and limited public acceptance of young political figures. One interviewee emphasised three main obstacles for youth in politics: limited financial resources, low acceptance within political hierarchies, and the politicisation of educational institutions. A reality highlighted by youth participants in a FGD held for this research who contended that:

youth with political aspirations struggle to gather the financial resources required for campaigns, which deters many from even entering the race.

However, there are still some candidates who have been able to overcome these obstacles. For instance, Azizul Islam, the youngest MP in the 12th parliament, was only 28 years old when he arrived in parliament in an auto-rickshaw, underscoring his modest means. Despite contesting against two formidable rivals in 2024 - Shahin Chakladar, the controversial general secretary of the Jessore district AL, and HM Amir Hossain, an independent candidate with an established political background as vice-president of the Upazila AL and former two-term Upazila chairman – he was able to emerge victorious due to an effective grassroots campaign and growing discontent with the incumbent AL candidates performance.⁴¹ Aziz's experience in student politics and his role as a district council member were also used to foster connections with rural constituents. He managed to cultivate a significant following across various demographics, eager for change. Following the dissolution of parliament in August 2024 and the students' role in that process, the possibility of more Aziz emerging in Bangladeshi politics is enhanced.

The ripple effects of the costs of politics

The socio-economic implications of the cost of politics in Bangladesh are profound and multifaceted, significantly shaping both the political framework and the everyday experiences of its citizens. The overwhelming financial demands associated with political campaigns result in a distortion of the democratic process. These demands have strong associations with corruption, the pervasive influence of organised crime, and broader economic instability. Candidates who possess significant financial resources, frequently backed by powerful business conglomerates and dubious funding mechanisms, tend to prioritise their economic agendas over the genuine needs of the public they represent. This tendency not only undermines the fundamental principles of democracy but also perpetuates patronage and inequality. Consequently, those with considerable means gain an unfair advantage that allows them to secure power and influence while sidelining voices from less affluent backgrounds. This contributes to diminishing public trust in the way politics works. This disillusionment not only threatens the foundations of democratic governance but also hampers efforts toward social justice and economic equity, ultimately creating a cycle of disenfranchisement that affects the nation's overall progress and development.

Exacerbating inequalities

The financial demands of politics significantly obstruct inclusivity in electoral participation. This challenge is primarily due to the pervasive reliance on wealth and privileged resources, which often manifest as strong connections with established party hierarchies and considerable influence over local institutions. Such dynamics create formidable barriers for underprivileged and marginalised segments of society who aspire to engage in the political process. The groups most adversely affected by the influence of wealth in politics comprise women, students, and community leaders. These individuals face unique challenges due to a lack of wealth in asserting their voices and gaining representation, regardless of their political beliefs, religious affiliations, or ethnic backgrounds. Their underrepresentation highlights a systemic issue where financial power overshadows merit and contributions from diverse community members.

Whilst political discourse frequently highlights the importance of inclusivity through various party representations, it often falls short of acknowledging the vital role of grassroots leadership. Organic leaders who emerge from local communities frequently find themselves sidelined in favour of candidates backed by significant financial resources. This situation intensifies the challenge of fostering an equitable political environment with the escalating costs associated with political engagement create a discouraging atmosphere for individuals who seek to advance fair leadership within the political arena. This not only reinforces existing inequalities but also hinders progress toward establishing a truly inclusive political process, ultimately undermining the principles of democracy and representation.

Threatens democratic integrity

Informal financing distorts the democratic process by giving wealthy candidates a competitive edge. Those who have access to informal funds are more likely to win elections, which can lead to corruption and diminished public trust in the political system.⁴² The excessive influence of this type of money in elections poses two major threats. First, it undermines the electoral process by limiting opportunities for capable candidates to seek and win political office and establishes the dominance of certain groups in parliament. Political parties select candidates based on whether they believe those individuals have the requisite resources. As one interviewee noted:

When nominations are made, two factors are considered: financial resources and political influence.

Second, it denies the public the advantages of representative democracy as these dominant groups tend to focus on pursuing their interests rather than public ones. MPs view their electoral spending as an investment and prioritise personal financial gain over their legislative responsibilities. Consequently, many politicians feel pressured to "recover" the money spent during their campaigns once elected. This creates a cycle of corruption, where public resources are diverted for private gain.⁴³

Political patronage networks are deeply entrenched in Bangladesh's political economy. Research from the Centre for Policy Dialogue found that over 80% of major government contracts are awarded to firms connected to officials in the ruling party.⁴⁴ A 2018 report by the World Bank revealed that corruption in government contracts, exacerbated by the need to "recoup" campaign expenditures, costs Bangladesh approximately 2% of its GDP each year.⁴⁵ Data that highlights the significant long-term consequences for public service delivery, infrastructure projects, and social services of the political economy of electoral politics.

Enables oligarchy and kleptocracy to thrive

Large business conglomerates routinely contribute millions to support political parties and their candidates, driven by the anticipation of receiving favourable policies, government contracts, and other advantages in return. As business-friendly policies take precedence over policies that would benefit the general public, the cycle of financial influence strengthens, leading to a political system where business interests disproportionately impact decision-making, often to the detriment of the needs and welfare of the broader population. This cycle was described as a form of "captive democracy" by one interviewee who explained that instead of representing the broader public, elected officials become "captive" to the interests of financiers, prioritising private profits over public welfare:

Our political landscape has a consistent presence of a specific class that includes businessmen, bureaucrats, and military-civilian officials. These individuals often seek positions to advance their financial or personal interest groups and intend to run in elections. In this competitive environment, political parties consider various factors, usually leading them to incorporate retired individuals from the business, bureaucratic, or military sectors into their ranks. When evaluating these individuals, parties typically focus on two main aspects: some include them for their financial support, while others do so to enhance their power concerning various interest groups

This reciprocal arrangement has contributed to a noticeable shift toward oligarchy within the nation's economy, where a small number of wealthy individuals and corporations exert disproportionate influence over political decisions and economic opportunities. Moreover, this situation has fostered an environment conducive to kleptocracy, characterised by collusion among politicians, bureaucrats, law enforcement agencies, financial institutions, and the judiciary. Within this nexus, corrupt practices thrive as officials exploit their positions for personal gain. This systemic corruption not only undermines democratic processes but also stifles economic progress and exacerbates social inequalities, entrenching powerful interests at the expense of the broader population. The interplay between business groups and political entities in Bangladesh therefore raises serious concerns about governance, accountability, and the ethical foundations of the country's socio-economic landscape.

Business groups in Bangladesh have effectively established an unofficial quota system within the parliament, ensuring that multiple sectors, such as the ready-made garment industry and the leather sector, are represented. This arrangement has generated a significant shift in the political landscape, where industry representation presence—or absence—can directly influence governmental stability. For instance, a powerful businessman seeking nomination from the ruling party might employ coercive tactics, pressuring his workforce to initiate strikes or stage road blockades over seemingly minor issues that could typically be addressed through constructive dialogue. These actions are not merely expressions of labour discontent; they are strategic manoeuvres aimed at leveraging pressure on the government to meet its demands, often linked to securing a favourable position within the political party. Such tactics are increasingly common in Bangladesh, where strikes organised by garment and transportation workers frequently disrupt urban life. These protests often inflict significant hardships on everyday citizens, despite the fact that they may not stem from authentic labour grievances.

In addition to these strategies, business groups have begun to invest strategically in political campaigns, funding candidates based on the economic potential of specific constituencies. They prioritise regions rich in development projects, natural resources like gas fields, and burgeoning land markets, all of which appeal significantly to political investors looking to maximise returns. Competition within the same sector intensifies as businesses vie for their representatives to secure office positions, escalating financial competition. Consequently, campaign expenditure soars as businesses ramp up their contributions to their preferred candidates. This intricate dynamic not only

reinforces the influence of business interests in the political arena but also sidelines the broader public's needs and concerns as the focus increasingly shifts toward satisfying the demands of influential business players A respondent explained how:

Funding from business holders acts as an investment, allowing them to benefit when their candidates are elected. Typically, these investors provide funds to candidates from both parties, which can sometimes involve legal or illegal business dealings.

Increased presence of criminality and violence

Bangladesh's significant political costs have contributed to the ingraining of a criminal influence network that has shaped the country's political and economic landscape. In border regions where drug trafficking and smuggling are common, criminal organisations invest significantly in local campaigns. By supporting candidates, these groups ensure that elected officials will not expose, and even protect, their illegal operations. The case of MP Abdur Rahman Bodi from Cox's Bazar, who was involved in the yaba drug trade - a narcotics substance which is a mix of methamphetamine and caffeine - highlights the severe impact of such criminal-political alliances. According to intelligence sources, the former MP claims a significant portion of his income comes from smuggling yaba from Myanmar, an accusation supported by a Department of Narcotics Control report that names explicitly him as a patron of the yaba trade in Ukhia-Teknaf, the primary entry point for the drug from Myanmar.⁴⁶ This case offers just one example of the way in which politicians can become indebted, or even enmeshed, into criminal groups to maintain the status quo, actions that entrench corruption and allow criminal activities within the political system.

Electoral violence also remains a significant challenge in Bangladesh. A report by International Crisis Group documented that the 2014 elections saw over 500 deaths linked to election-related violence. The economic cost of this violence was estimated to exceed BDT 100 billion, arising from trade interruptions, setbacks in various industries, and decreased voter turnout.⁴⁷ Such realities also impose additional financial burdens on candidates. These are linked to increased security expenses, business disruptions, and long-term economic repercussions on affected communities. One interviewee, a candidate in the 2014 elections, mentioned that campaign-related tensions disrupted local economic activity in his constituency, leading to financial setbacks that continue to impact the community. As a result of these previous disruptions, violence, and intimidation have been employed to influence voter behaviour or suppress opposition in subsequent votes. Candidates often feel compelled to allocate resources for security or, in some cases, to hire local "muscle power" to maintain control areas as a result.

Deepens development inequalities

Finally, the high cost of politics in Bangladesh significantly affects livelihoods, particularly in rural areas where political affiliations often determine access to resources and opportunities.⁴⁸ Candidates who are heavily funded by investors tend to delegate their power to these backers once they assume office. This patronage system benefits the investors and loyalists of elected MPs at the expense of the broader population. Social safety net programs, such as housing schemes and vulnerable group feeding cards, are frequently distributed in exchange for money. Furthermore, official positions and development projects are often awarded to those who can pay off decision-makers rather than qualified individuals. This practice results in substandard infrastructure, including poorly constructed roads and bridges, and as corruption permeates government services, basic amenities become inaccessible without paying bribes.

Recommendations and approaches for reform

To foster a more equitable, inclusive, and democratic political environment in Bangladesh it is imperative to focus on strengthening and reforming the existing legal frameworks that govern political processes. This includes revisiting laws governing political party operations, election procedures, and campaign financing to ensure they promote fairness and inclusivity. Enhancing transparency and accountability in the nomination processes is also crucial and can be achieved by clearly defining the criteria and procedures for nominations and ensuring that these are accessible and well-communicated to the public. Furthermore, a commitment to inclusiveness requires active measures to engage individuals from diverse backgrounds, including women, youth, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities. Their participation is vital for representing the interests and concerns of various segments of society in the political discourse. Providing targeted support for marginalised groups, such as training programmes and resources to help them navigate the political landscape, can empower their voices and encourage their active involvement in governance.

To address these challenges effectively, a comprehensive approach involving all sectors of society and collaboration between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders is essential. This means that national integrity organisations, ECB, local administration, law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, community-led organisations, CSOs, media, academia, and most importantly, the political parties all have roles to play. The recommendations and their implementation strategies outlined below aim to promote fairness and inclusivity, effectively reduce corruption in the electoral processes and empower a broader array of voices in the political landscape of Bangladesh. By implementing these measures, stakeholders can work together to create a more representative and just political system that reflects the diversity and needs of the population.

Strengthen enforcement of updated legal frameworks

Implementing robust campaign finance laws is crucial to addressing the financial imbalances in Bangladeshi politics. Political resistance has remained a significant barrier as many legislators who benefited from the existing system have resisted meaningful reforms. Nonetheless, as part of the current transition, there is a need to reform and enhance transparency in campaign funding to level the playing field. The ECB should be equipped to effectively monitor campaign finances, enforce realistic limits, and periodically review them to reflect campaign costs. A thorough investigation of candidates' income sources and campaign expenditures is also essential. It should go beyond mere affidavits, with submissions to be checked and verified by the ECB or a dedicated body.

- **Revise the RPO regulations for electoral spending.** The cost of politics is steadily increasing, so revising the rules and regulations concerning spending caps necessitates significant adjustments that align with these realistic expenses. Such revisions should be regularly updated and subject to review by the ECB based on realistic cost adjustments.
- **Introduce public financial support for marginalised groups.** Allocating public funding for campaign expenses for aspirants from marginalised groups could provide critical resources for candidates who might otherwise face insurmountable financial barriers. Allocating funds to cover costs such as advertising, event organisation, and voter outreach, can help ensure a more level playing field. This financial support would not only alleviate the burdens faced by aspiring candidates but also serve as a strong signal of commitment to diversity and inclusivity.
- **Introduce a Disclosure Act.** A robust legal framework is essential for enhancing transparency in party funding and electoral financing. Future parliaments must take proactive steps to address this critical issue. In this regard, the interim government and the political party manifestos should be encouraged to support an environment conducive to introducing a Disclosure Act.⁴⁹ The proposed act would require all the actors involved in political expenditure to reveal their financial contributors publicly. By ensuring that donors are identified, the act seeks to promote greater accountability and public trust in the political process, ultimately fostering a more transparent electoral environment.
- **Require real-time reporting.** Mandatory real-time reporting of contributions and expenditures, verified by an independent agency, can foster transparency and deter misuse of funds. This can be facilitated through digital platforms and CSO networks. To dissuade misconduct, the enforcement of strict penalties for campaign finance infractions, including disqualification and criminal prosecution, should accompany these efforts.
- **Improve coordination between leading integrity institutions.** To strengthen legal frameworks and promote a coordinated approach in deterring financial misconduct, kleptocracy, and the illicit use of wealth in electoral processes, fostering collaboration among key institutions is essential.⁵⁰ This includes the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Information Commission of Bangladesh, the Comptroller and Auditor General, and the ECB. Each of these agencies plays a crucial role in enhancing public oversight and preventing the flow of illicit funds within society. Establishing a task force composed of these integrity institutions could serve as an oversight body that monitors political parties' candidate selection processes.

- **Conduct legal background checks on all political aspirants.** Implement a robust system for disclosing candidates' legal histories, ensuring voters are fully informed about pending or resolved cases against them. This could be supported by an independent review process to verify the legitimacy of legal cases, reducing the prevalence of politically motivated charges.
- **Enhance the implementation of whistleblower protection.** The implementation of the Public Interest Information Disclosure (Provide Protection) Act, commonly known as the Whistleblower Protection Act, is limited in Bangladesh. There is a significant need for comprehensive measures aimed at raising awareness of the act among key stakeholders, including politicians, journalists, CSOs, lawyers, and the general public. Promoting understanding and advocacy for this legislation is essential to enhance its effectiveness and ensure that whistleblowers can act whilst knowing that they will receive adequate legal protection.

Enhance transparency and accountability

The nomination process for political parties has been heavily influenced by wealth and nepotism, which erodes public trust in the system. To restore faith in democratic processes, it is crucial to undertake reforms that promote transparency and facilitate selections based on merit rather than privilege. One approach to achieving this could be to organise public debates among aspiring candidates. These debates would serve as a vital platform for candidates to articulate their policies, engage in constructive dialogue, and hold each other accountable. Such interactions would deepen citizens' understanding of the candidates' positions and encourage a more informed and active electorate. In Bangladesh's current political climate, initiatives led by youth, in particular, could prove to be highly effective.

- **Run accountability and transparency campaigns.** Public awareness campaigns focused on the accountability of political nominees and transparency in the nomination process can help inform citizens about their rights and the significance of intra-party democracy. These initiatives should not only be limited to the pre-election period but could also be integrated as a responsibility for local government, public representatives, CSOs, and media.
- **Organise regular public dialogues.** Organising public dialogues, with the support of the youth and students, that facilitate direct conversations between community members and political aspirants on fair and transparent candidacy, would foster a sense of consensus and collaboration about the way forward when it comes to political reform and also the development trajectory more generally.
- **Host leadership workshops:** Student and community youth leaders have stressed the importance of initiating political leadership workshops not only for political parties but also for community-based youth to form networks against kleptocracy, build capacity for political oversight, and strengthen party-public interfaces. These workshops can equip aspiring leaders with the necessary tools for ethical governance and public policy formulation, which could inspire a new generation of politically engaged individuals. Collectively, these can enhance civic engagement and cultivate a more transparent and accountable political landscape.

Utilise digital tools

Digital campaigns are generally more cost-effective than traditional advertising methods. However, they have also become tools for spreading intentional rumours and misinformation, which can harm individual reputations. A 2021 report highlighted that social media played a significant role in disseminating misinformation during the 2018 elections.⁵¹ During that election cycle, political parties reportedly allocated approximately BDT 1 billion to social media advertisements, which were intended to discredit their opponents through misleading narratives.⁵² Instead of engaging in these damaging practices, candidates should be encouraged and trained to use social media for outreach purposes. This approach would facilitate more effective and widespread communication with voters. Additionally, equipping voters with training to navigate and critically assess information on digital platforms can help combat misinformation and empower informed decision-making.

- **Introduce digital tracking tools.** Interactive tools should be established for political parties and candidates to disclose their financial backgrounds and political performance, as well as to enable citizens to track the implementation of their commitments. This initiative will greatly enhance interaction between them and the public, aligning with the government's policies on the right to information and proactive disclosure. Furthermore, it can assist candidates in complying with laws that prohibit false declarations, misleading claims, and the promotion of hate speech or vilification of other candidates or parties.
- **Improve awareness of, and responses to, right to information requests.** The Right to Information Act 2009 is a powerful tool that has remained underused. Bangladesh's Information Commission can be supported to do more to support timely access to information related to electoral politics, and the associated costs, that are in the public interest.

Strengthen intra-party democracy

Establishing democratic practices within political parties is essential for reducing the influence of vested interests that distort the political landscape. However, in Bangladesh, the principle of intra-party democracy, which is crucial for participatory decision-making, accountability, and equitable representation is notably weak. Political power is concentrated in the hands of a select few individuals or influential families, perpetuating a culture rooted in patriarchal politics. This centralisation of authority hinders the opportunity for a broader range of voices to engage in the policymaking process, reinforcing rigid hierarchical structures that limits democratic participation and excludes marginalised groups. The recent student uprising and its aspirations have created an opportunity for political leaders and young and mid-level politicians to advocate for a clear and transparent pathway for shifting these political norms. Intra-party dialogues on leadership and inter-party confidence-building dialogues on political growth are the key ways to strengthen the demand side of intra-party democracy in Bangladesh.

- **Support parties to conduct more democratic internal election processes.** Implementing a process where leaders are elected democratically—from the union to the central level—will reduce nomination-related financial exchanges and foster greater transparency.

- **Facilitate intra-party and inter-party dialogues.** While intra-party democracy is still in its nuanced stage among the two major political parties, technical support by the international community and civil society can continue to build momentum for transparent leadership pathways that are already underway and supported by CSOs and even the interim government.
- **Support community-based leadership networks.** Establish networks of youth and civil society actors at the community level that can be mobilised to engage extensively with leadership processes and nominations at the grassroots level. The 2024 uprising has created an exceptional opportunity to engage youth as a powerful pressure group, with their networks having the potential, if effectively harnessed, to play a crucial role in establishing fair and transparent leadership structures.
- **Introduce a cooling-off period for political aspirants.** Establish mandatory cooling-off periods for those transitioning from roles in business, the military, or bureaucratic sectors into political positions. Such measures would create a buffer period during which these individuals could divest their interests and sever ties with their previous affiliations, thus reducing undue influence they might exert based on their prior experiences and connections.

Promote political awareness and voter education

In Bangladesh, the influence of money in elections has significantly impacted voter behaviour, often overshadowing the principles of transparency and integrity. The widespread use of financial incentives during campaigns—such as vote-buying and excessive spending on rallies and advertisements—undermines the democratic process. Many voters, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, may feel pressured to prioritise short-term financial gains over the long-term benefits of good governance. To counter this trend, it is essential to enhance voters' understanding of the value of transparency and integrity in politics and governance. Public awareness campaigns should target urban and rural communities, emphasising the importance of informed voting and holding elected officials to account for their promises in driving meaningful change. These initiatives should highlight the negative consequences of money-driven politics, which includes corruption, lack of accountability, exclusion and diminished public welfare.

- **Encourage youth and student political engagement.** Mobilise the youth and student communities, who have historically driven significant political movements in Bangladesh, to act as ambassadors for clean elections, by getting them to engage with their peers and families to foster awareness.
- **Run educational outreach campaigns.** Develop programmes through community centres, schools, and grassroots organisations to educate voters about their rights, the electoral process, the importance of choosing candidates based on merit and integrity rather than monetary incentives and how to effectively hold elected officials accountable when in office.
- **Support mass media engagement campaigns.** Use television, radio, and social media platforms to share compelling narratives and visuals about how informed voting can lead to

better leadership and improved governance. This can include success stories from countries or communities that have resisted money politics.

- **Collaborate with respected and influential religious and community leaders.** Engaging them to spread messages about the negative ethical implications of vote-buying can help instill a sense of responsibility among voters.

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