

## Executive Summary of the Panel Discussion

### ***“Bangladesh General Elections 2026: Future of Indo-Bangladesh Relations”***

27 February 2026

A distinguished panel comprising Ambassador Sanjay Bhattacharyya, IFS (Retd.); Dr. Smruti S. Pattanaik; Shri Dipankar Roy Choudhary; and Prof. Pritam Banerjee deliberated on the theme *“Bangladesh General Elections 2026: Future of Indo-Bangladesh Relations”* on 27 February 2026. The session was moderated by Manoj Kumar Lall, IPS (Retd.), with Prof. Arindam Mukherjee, Director of the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, present on the dais.

### **Cycles of Political Upheaval**

Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has undergone recurring cycles of political rupture and restoration. The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family in 1975—survived only by Sheikh Hasina, who was abroad—was followed by the 1981 assassination of Ziaur Rahman. The 1990s witnessed prolonged turbulence and confrontation; the 2001–2007 period was marked by organized syndicate corruption and crime, and Pakistan-backed Islamist militancy; the 21 August 2004 grenade attack targeted Sheikh Hasina; and the July 2024 student-led uprising once again unsettled the political order. These episodes reveal a pattern not of linear consolidation but of disruption followed by recalibration.

The July uprising, led by students and youth formations, exhibited features reminiscent of global protest movements and was reportedly encouraged and supported by external actors, including the United States, Pakistan, China, and Turkey. The appointment of Muhammad Yunus as Chief Adviser marked a decisive inflection point, accompanied by a recalibration of India policy and the lifting of restrictions on Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami. Yunus’s subsequent visit to China, along with reported engagements between Shafiqur Rahman and Chinese interlocutors, signalled a broader strategic reorientation during the transitional phase.

The rise and political rehabilitation of Islamist forces, particularly Jamaat, needs to be viewed within this wider geopolitical matrix. The United States' renewed engagement with Bangladesh is widely interpreted as part of its broader Indo-Pacific strategy to counterbalance Chinese influence in the Bay of Bengal and Myanmar. Pakistan's historical linkages with Islamist networks, Turkey's ideological outreach under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and China's pragmatic engagement with emerging actors collectively created an environment in which Jamaat found expanded diplomatic and political space. During the interim phase, Yunus's policy decisions, especially the removal of restrictions on Jamaat, effectively widened that space within Bangladesh's political arena. These external alignments and domestic recalibrations intersected in consequential ways, contributing to the restructuring of the country's political landscape.

### **Restructuring of Political Order**

The removal of Sheikh Hasina and the weakening of the Bangladesh Awami League, alongside the rise of Tarique Rahman and the resurgence of Jamaat under Shafiqur Rahman, have fundamentally restructured Bangladesh's political balance. For India, this represents not merely a change in leadership but the emergence of a transformed political ecosystem requiring careful reassessment.

Although student forces catalysed the uprising, they failed to translate mobilisation into sustained electoral dominance, underscoring the organisational resilience of established parties. Jamaat maintains linkages with transnational Islamist "brotherhood" networks and is reported to have connections with elements of the Pakistani establishment, most notably the ISI. Its strategic objective remains the implementation of Sharia, with electoral participation serving as a pathway to acquiring state power and institutionalising a theocratic order. Hizb-ut-Tahrir, by contrast, aims to penetrate key state institutions—government, the military, administration, police, intelligentsia, and civil society—in order to restructure governance from within and, through the apparatus of the state, ultimately recast society along its ideological vision.

At the same time, Islamic Andolan and several ulema-based organisations contest Jamaat's claim to Islamic leadership, rejecting Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi's

interpretive authority and asserting that Islamic governance should remain under scholarly rather than partisan direction. In a striking irony, the April 2017 decision of Sheikh Hasina's government to recognise the Dawra-e-Hadith qualification of Qawmi madrasas as equivalent to a Master's degree in Islamic Studies and Arabic enabled madrasa graduates to access public employment and higher education under formal equivalence.

Despite what was described as active support from segments of the interim dispensation and certain external actors, Jamaat did not secure power, suggesting that democratic and secular impulses continue to shape Bangladeshi society. Its electoral successes in districts bordering West Bengal appear linked more to welfare outreach and organisational infrastructure than to ideological ascendancy. The restoration of democracy following earlier phases of martial law, and again after the interim government, reflects an enduring societal resilience.

### **Tarique Rahman's Political Evolution**

During the administrations of Khaleda Zia (1991–1996; 2001–2006), Tarique Rahman was widely perceived as a principal centre of informal authority. Critics associated the period with patronage networks and syndicate politics. The 2004 Chittagong ten-truck arms seizure, allegedly linked to insurgent formations such as ULFA, intensified scrutiny of networks operating from Hawa Bhaban and reinforced perceptions of extra-institutional influence.

His exile in London after 2007 marked a structural turning point. Over nearly two decades, Tarique appears to have recalibrated his political persona, shifting from an informal power broker to a more measured and strategically positioned leader. His emphasis on institutionalism, moderated rhetoric, and broader national outreach reflects an effort to reposition himself as a statesman capable of steering Bangladesh through transition.

Engagement with reformist platforms such as the July Charter, and efforts to balance Islamist allies with student constituencies, suggest pragmatic recalibration rather than ideological transformation. Having not previously held constitutional office, his assumption of the prime ministership would represent his first direct

exercise of executive authority. The challenge lies in translating political evolution into governance capacity amid domestic fragmentation and shifting geopolitical currents.

### **Liberation Legacy and Democratic Continuity**

Interpreting Jamaat's resurgence and the relative weakening of the Awami League as evidence of a permanent erosion of the Liberation legacy would be premature. Acts such as vandalising statues of Mujib or Rabindranath Tagore, while symbolically provocative, do not necessarily reflect majority sentiment. Historical precedent demonstrates recovery: the Awami League revived in the late 1990s despite the near-elimination of the Mujib family in 1975.

Reports that many Awami supporters abstained or voted defensively amid apprehensions indicate that political space may yet reopen. Should leadership figures currently abroad return through due legal process, the party could reclaim electoral ground. Ensuring a safe and inclusive political environment may also serve the long-term interests of the BNP, since unchecked Islamist consolidation could marginalise mainstream actors across the spectrum. Stable democratic competition remains essential for both Bangladesh's internal equilibrium and India's strategic interests.

### **Economic Pressures and Strategic Interdependence**

The political crisis coincided with global trade volatility triggered by renewed tariff regimes under the Trump administration and unfolded at a particularly inopportune moment for Bangladesh. The situation was further complicated by Yunus's suspension of bilateral trade relations with India. Bangladesh's foreign exchange stability depends heavily on ready-made garment exports to Western markets and remittances from the Gulf and Europe. Reliance on Indian ports for logistics amplifies vulnerability to regional disruptions.

Although Bangladesh deferred its 2026 graduation from Least Developed Country status to preserve preferential access temporarily, eventual graduation remains inevitable. Competing alongside India, Cambodia, and Vietnam without

differential advantages will require structural diversification. Adjustments in U.S.–Bangladesh trade terms may further affect competitiveness.

India’s connectivity investments under the BIMSTEK framework—integrating multimodal transport corridors—were designed to reinforce regional supply chains and economic integration. Disruptions to this trajectory have imposed greater economic costs on Bangladesh. Diversifying beyond RMG exports and deepening manufacturing capacity—both essential to sustaining economic momentum—will necessitate stable regional partnerships, for which India remains well positioned. The restoration of bus links and visa services reflects mutual recognition of interdependence.

### **Water, Security, and Diplomatic Reset**

Water-sharing arrangements concerning the Ganga and Teesta continue to present complex challenges. India has indicated that future frameworks must reflect evolving realities rather than automatic renewal, underscoring the importance of sustained dialogue.

Security remains India’s principal red line. Any tolerance of terrorism, insurgency, or radicalisation emanating from Bangladeshi territory would undermine bilateral trust and necessitate enhanced vigilance. Preventing the resurgence of extremist networks and external intelligence penetration is therefore critical.

India’s early diplomatic outreach—including congratulatory communication from the Prime Minister, condolences conveyed by the External Affairs Minister, and parliamentary representation at the swearing-in ceremony—signals a deliberate effort to reset relations with the incumbent democratic government in Dhaka. Tarique Rahman’s conciliatory messaging, restoration of visa issuance, and stated commitment to constructive engagement reinforce cautious optimism.

### **Concluding Assessment**

Bangladesh’s transition from the political rupture of 2024 to a gradual return to normalcy, as reflected in the General Elections of 2026, suggests recalibration

across its polity, economy, diplomacy, and strategic outlook. Democratic resilience, economic diversification, calibrated management of Islamist pressures, and stable engagement with India will shape the coming phase. For India, the strategic imperative lies in maintaining firmness on security concerns while exercising diplomatic flexibility and sustaining economic partnership. For Bangladesh, the central task will be to translate political realignment into institutional consolidation without diluting the pluralist ethos that has resurfaced repeatedly in its history.

Taken together, the 2026 election outcome and the early gestures of the new government in Dhaka offer grounds for cautious optimism in bilateral relations. They suggest that the intervening phase may prove to be an episodic disruption rather than a lasting structural shift, provided that democratic norms and the secular legacy of the Liberation War continue to anchor Bangladesh's political trajectory.