

## The Bangladesh Cauldron

Bangladesh stands at a major crossroads after the July–August 2024 uprising. The unfolding situation has deepened internal fault lines and created a geostrategic challenge that could destabilize regional security dynamics.

The uprising amplified one of Bangladesh's enduring divides — the conflict between her **Bengali** and **Bangladeshi** identities. The former, rooted in the 1952 Language Movement, represents moderate Sufi Islamic values, pluralism, inclusivity, and the pro-Liberation War ideology that led to Bangladesh's creation. The latter, shaped during General Ershad's rule, reflects a more orthodox Islamic orientation and resonates with sections that once opposed the Liberation War. Despite 54 years of independence, this ideological conflict continues to split Bangladesh's society.

While the anti-quota protests were the initial trigger, the uprising became a broader outlet for public frustration against an increasingly authoritarian one-party regime. Groups aligned with the "*Bangladeshi identity*," reportedly with external support, exploited these conditions to engineer regime change. However, the initial optimism and hopes of masses for a "**Nutan Bangladesh**" soon gave way to the realization that one autocracy had simply replaced another, with even greater levels of disorder. The movement also legitimized **mobocracy**, where street power overrides legality. Progressive and liberal voices have been silenced through intimidation and persecution.

The forces promoting the "*Bangladeshi identity*" have now installed a weak interim government that lacks leadership, administrative capability, and legal legitimacy. These groups have infiltrated almost every state institution, including the security forces. Their cadres, particularly the *Islami Chhatra Shibir*, dominate street politics. An even greater concern is the re-emergence of terrorist outfits. Many of their members escaped during jail breaks or were later released with tacit Interim government's approval. They have since regrouped with active support from the **ISI** and other regional and global terrorist networks.

Law and order remain fragile. Coordination among the armed forces, law enforcement agencies, and intelligence services has weakened. The **Bangladesh Army** continues to play a central role in maintaining stability and preventing complete anarchy. The **Army Chief** has consolidated his position and now acts as a balancing force, restraining the interim government from making decisions with long-term regional consequences. However, the Army's ability to handle a large-scale security crisis is uncertain, especially if Islamist elements within its mid-level ranks turn sympathetic to radical forces.

The current situation provides fertile ground for **fundamentalist groups**. With a large pool of vulnerable populations - including the Rohingyas and unemployed youth,

and growing instability in neighboring regions such as Myanmar, Rakhine, Manipur, and parts of India's Northeast - global jihadist organizations find Bangladesh an attractive base. The region risks sliding into a conflict pattern resembling **Syria or Libya**, with grave consequences for South Asian stability.

For **India**, the challenges are more acute. It now faces two unstable fragile inimical states on its borders - **Pakistan** to the West and **Bangladesh** to the East. Pakistan's historic hostility, coupled with its growing intelligence and security engagement with the Bangladesh's Interim regime, carries serious geopolitical implications. The convergence of Pakistan and Bangladesh also fits well within China's broader strategic design for the region, potentially encircling India with instability.

Against this backdrop, the **Bangladesh elections scheduled for February 2026** are critical for regional stability. With the Awami League's participation uncertain, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party remains the main contender. The *Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI)*, whose deregistration was recently revoked, also plans to contest. Although it has a strong grassroots network, its fundamental ideology remains incompatible with democratic principles. The newly formed Nationalist Citizen Party (NCP), a student-led group established in February 2025, lacks leadership experience, political maturity, and national level organization.

The coming months will therefore be decisive. India has adopted a policy of **strategic patience**, a calibrated "**wait and watch**" approach. This involves limited diplomatic engagement, controlled supply of essential commodities, and selective use of leverage while awaiting political clarity within Bangladesh. Possibilities for a change in stance to a collaborative and constructive approach have now closed.

India must prepare for worst-case scenarios in which **fundamentalist forces** attempt to disrupt the election process, orchestrate an Islamist takeover, or provoke unrest along the border. Such contingencies demand detailed planning to prevent and mitigate undesirable outcomes. **Border management** must be reinforced through stronger deployment, enhanced intelligence gathering, and improved policing in vulnerable districts.

The growing **anti-India sentiment** within Bangladesh, along with a similar polarization at the grassroots level inside India's border regions, is deeply worrying. Bangladesh's geopolitical vulnerabilities are already being exploited by extremist and hostile intelligence agencies. Left unchecked, this could destabilize India's border states and erode local communal harmony.

Any **provocative incidents**, whether spontaneous or orchestrated, must therefore be managed with restraint and strategic maturity. Reactionary measures could be exploited by inimical actors to inflame tensions.

The unfolding situation in Bangladesh represents more than an internal political crisis; it is a **regional inflection point**. The direction Dhaka takes in the coming year, whether toward greater inclusivity and stability or deeper polarization and radicalization, will shape not only Bangladesh's future but also the security architecture of South Asia as a whole.

*This article reflects the views of the author and does not necessarily represent the official stance of any institution or government.*



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