Bangladesh 2009–2024: The Return to Authoritarianism Under the Awami League and its Implications for Political Sustainability

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Abstract
This paper investigates the authoritarian shift in Bangladesh under the Awami League's uninterrupted rule from 2009 to 2024 and its implications for long-term political sustainability. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of authoritarianism and empirical evidence, the study argues that the ruling regime has systematically dismantled democratic institutions, captured the judiciary and election commission, and silenced dissent through legal and extralegal means. The centralization of power around Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, combined with dynastic politics, extremely biased civil society, and a highly politicized civil-military bureaucracy, has undermined electoral credibility and public trust. As opposition voices are suppressed and governance becomes increasingly personalized, the political system shows signs of fragility, despite outward claims of stability. The study concludes that without meaningful institutional reform, civic engagement, and international pressure, Bangladesh's current trajectory may lead to deeper democratic erosion, hindering the country's capacity for inclusive, accountable, and sustainable political governance.
Keywords: Authoritarianism, Awami League, Democracy, Political Sustainability, Bangladesh, Global South

Introduction: Democracy at a Crossroads
Background and Rationale
Democracy in Bangladesh has long been characterized by fragility, cyclical turbulence, and sharp polarization. Since its independence in 1971, the nation has oscillated between military rule, authoritarian regimes, and brief democratic openings. A significant democratic revival occurred in the early 1990s with the introduction of the non-party caretaker government system, which ensured a fair playing field for electoral governance. However, since 2009, with the uninterrupted rule of the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), the country has experienced a systematic erosion of democratic practices, culminating in what many scholars and

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observers now term an authoritarian or hybrid regime (Freedom House, 2023; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). Authoritarianism refers to a political system that centralizes power in the hands of a few, often eliminating institutional checks and balances and suppressing dissent (Linz, 2000). In Bangladesh, these characteristics have become increasingly visible since 2009. Key state institutions such as the judiciary, election commission, and security forces have increasingly become partisan tools of the ruling Awami League. Additionally, draconian laws like the Digital Security Act (2018) and ICT Act amendments have seriously curtailed freedom of press and civil liberties. Public confidence in electoral processes has sharply declined, especially following the controversial general elections of 2014 and 2018, which were marred by boycotts, rigging, and violence (Riaz, 2016).

Political Science lexicon has been replete with scholarly contribution related to authoritarianism. In addition to the classical reference of authoritarianism (Linz, 1964; Linz, 2000; Levitsky & Way, 2002; Shirer, 1960; Fromm, 1941; Svolik, 2012; Applebaum, 2020; Snyder, 2017) a number of studies were commissioned over the last one decade where mostly conversed and critically analyzed different aspects of authoritarian regime around the world including Bangladesh as case (Mostofa & Subedi, 2020; Jackman, 2020; Mostofa, 2024; Sheikh & Ahmed, 2019; Hossain, 2020; Kukreja, 2008; Riaz 2024; Zaman, 2022; Hossain, 2024; Miaji & Islam, 2023; Blair, 2020). While extant literature highly focuses on the religious, political, historical and socio-cultural dimension of authoritarianism in Bangladesh, these study lacks comprehensive and systematic analysis on entire regime of Awami League led government (2009-2004), and the pathways to sustainable political governance and democratic recovery from the impairment it causes to political system. It is essential to thoroughly study Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian regime to unearth its mechanisms, extent, and features which might be useful to recommend how the damaged democratic and political institutions can be restored. Thus, firstly, this study thoroughly investigates Awami authoritarian regime from 2009-2024; and secondly, it offers some suggestions in order to install political sustainability and democratic resilience.

Highlighting quota reform movement 2018 and safe road upheaval as case examples, Jackman (2020) shows that how a social movement might be threat to an authoritarian regime. He argues that student movements have a major role in shaping Bangladesh's political history. Such movement may generate two types of threat to an authoritarian regime: they may intensify ingroup fighting between interest groups who support ruling party to sustain in power; secondly, these movement might pave the way for opposition to capital critical situation and thus might create a crisis undermining legitimacy of the ruling party. Although Jackman's study shows how a social movement might be potential threat for authoritarian regime, his research does not provide a detailed picture of how a democratically elected government turns bluntly an authoritarian regime. Jackman's research thus lacks comprehensive examination of the renewed rise of authoritarianism in Bangladesh. Unlike Jackman, Mostofa and Subedi (2020) shed lights on mechanism of how BAL government creeps into authoritarianism in a limited detail: they examined the changing nature of political regime in Bangladesh under Awami League leadership and argued that the form of government which emerged under Sheikh Hasina is competitive authoritarianism. However, their study did not suggest what is the impact of such transformation in political landscape of Bangladesh; how it can impact the political sustainability of the country. Likewise, in another article, Mostofa (2024) demonstrates complex interplay between authoritarianism and

religion explaining the mechanism of how Islam as a religion is exploited to gain legitimacy and continuation of regime. Similarly, Sheikh and Ahmed (2019) highlight military authoritarianism and Islam comparing Bangladesh and Pakistan case. They argued that military authoritarianism in both countries used Islam as a survival tool to access legitimacy which indicates how religious sentiment of majority people can serve authoritarian ruler to prolong in power. Other studies concentrate on historical analysis of authoritarianism connecting pre- and post-independence major political events (Hossain, 2020). According to Hossain, creeping of authoritarianism in Bangladesh politics is the consequential of imposition of ultra-secularism in constitution and politics which marginalizes the voice of majority Muslim. He further continues to claim that conflict and division among people for political identity over secularism and Muslim nationalism pave the way for authoritarianism. His work, hence, elaborates the historical perspective ignoring the recent developments specially the period when renewed authoritarianism emerged under the BAL government (2009-2024). Additionally, few studies emphasize on how and why the culture of clientelism leads to one-party dominant authoritarianism in Bangladesh (Miaji & Islam, 2023). This study also unlocks how this culture results in a society where free and fair election turns elusion. However, Hossian's (2024) work is interesting in a sense that while other studies focus on the political and democratic institution in studying the authoritarian regime, his research investigates cultural dimension using congruence theory. He maintains that it is the culture not the political institutions where common people and political elites are accustomed to authoritarian values and practices leading democratic decline. So, Hossain examines the reasons behind the democratic backslide in a politically unstable country like Bangladesh. Another study examines the digital mechanism of authoritarianism and how authoritarianism is being implemented through technical, legal, and extralegal means (Zaman, 2022). Zaman's study concentrates on digital mechanism like the digital security act (DSA) and ICT amendment act, but her study lacks the evidence of how topnotch civil-military bureaucrats, partisan media and civil society, pseudo-opposition, and highly politicized judiciary contributes to the rise of Hasina led authoritarianism. Kukreja and Singh also explore the historical trajectory of democracy and authoritarianism; but their study lacked the latest evidences particularly after 2009 which is a beginning milestone of renewed authoritarian regime in Bangladesh.

Thus, the study objectives I determined in the research not only explores throughout recent past developments, it also deserves novelty to leverage the scholarly efforts to look at the interface between authoritarianism and political sustainability to unveil the cost of authoritarianism to democracy in Bangladesh. The rationale for this study emerges from a growing concern about the country's political sustainability as political landscape needs to be in a position from where freedom of choice, free movement, protection of human rights and inclusiveness are the demand of time across levels. While economic indicators may reflect growth, democracy cannot be reduced to GDP figures. The weakening of institutional trust, suppression of dissent, media control, and personalized governance signal a return to authoritarianism that threatens the long-term stability of the polity. Political sustainability implies not just regime survival, but the maintenance of inclusive, accountable governance structures capable of managing diversity, dissent, and change (Diamond, 2019).

Recent past events —including the use of law enforcement for political suppression, increased attacks on opposition, monopolization of media narratives, and the weakening of

civil society—further underscore the urgency of re-examining Bangladesh's political trajectory. These trends raise profound questions about the viability of democracy in the country and the role of domestic and international actors in either supporting or challenging authoritarian entrenchment. Thus, this research seeks to bridge the gap in existing literature by focusing not merely on authoritarian traits, but also their implications for political sustainability. It aims to provide a structured understanding of the mechanisms through which political institutions are being dismantled, and what this means for the future of governance in Bangladesh.

Research Questions
The study is guided by the following core questions:
1. How has the Awami League-led government (2009–2024) undermined democratic institutions and processes in Bangladesh?
2. What are the key indicators of authoritarian governance visible in this period?
3. How do these authoritarian practices affect the political sustainability of Bangladesh?
4. What roles have civil-military bureaucracy, civil society, media, and international actors played in this democratic backsliding?
5. What pathways exist for restoring democratic integrity and ensuring sustainable political governance in Bangladesh?
   These questions are designed to explore both the empirical dynamics of authoritarian consolidation, on the one hand, and the broader theoretical implications for democratic resilience and political sustainability in the Global South, on the other.

Methodology and Scope
The study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in political science and comparative authoritarianism studies. It relies on document analysis, secondary data, and critical discourse analysis to explore the processes and consequences of democratic backsliding in Bangladesh. The data sources include:
- Reports from international watchdogs (e.g., Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Bertelsmann Stiftung)
- Scholarly literature on authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, and democratic transitions (Linz, 2000; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Diamond, 2019)
- Newspaper archives, investigative journalism, and official government documents
- Public speeches and policies from ruling and opposition parties

Critical discourse analysis is used to assess the narratives surrounding governance, elections, and civil liberties both in pro-government and critical media. Furthermore, historical institutionalism is applied to trace the evolution of democratic and authoritarian practices from the 1990s to the present, identifying key turning points such as the abolition of the caretaker government system and the passage of repressive laws.

The scope of the study spans from 2009 to 2024, encompassing three consecutive terms of the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina. While the focus is national, comparative insights are occasionally drawn from other countries with similar regimes (e.g., Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela) to contextualize Bangladesh's authoritarian drift within a broader global trend of democratic decline. The study intentionally does not engage in quantitative electoral data analysis; it rather concentrates on qualitative indicators of democratic health such as rule of

law, freedom of expression, judicial independence, electoral integrity, and civil society vibrancy. The aim is to map the structural, ideological, and institutional components of authoritarian resurgence and its consequences for long-term political sustainability. By doing so, this research aspires to contribute to the broader scholarly and policy-oriented debate on how democracies erode and what mechanisms can be employed to reverse such trends in the Global South, with specific reference to the Bangladeshi context.

Theoretical Framework: Authoritarianism and Political Sustainability
In contemporary political science, the tension between democratic values and authoritarian practices has become increasingly significant, particularly in hybrid regimes where electoral processes persist but are systematically manipulated and engineered. Bangladesh represents an ideal example of this democratic decline, where authoritarian tendencies have gained strength within a framework that outwardly maintains democratic rituals. This section outlines key theoretical concepts surrounding authoritarianism and examines their implications for political sustainability.

Defining Authoritarianism in Political Science
Authoritarianism is traditionally defined as a system of governance in which political power is concentrated in the hands of a single leader or a small elite that is not constitutionally accountable to the broader population (Linz, 2000). Unlike totalitarian regimes, which attempt to control every aspect of public and private life, authoritarian regimes may allow some degree of individual autonomy, but they suppress political pluralism and constrain opposition participation. Juan Linz's classic definition frames authoritarianism as a regime characterized by "limited political pluralism, political legitimacy based on emotion and fear, minimal political mobilization, and ill-defined but predictable limits on executive power" (Linz, 2000). Authoritarianism by nature and in essence, therefore, stands in contrast to liberal democracy, which is rooted in constitutional checks and balances, competitive multiparty elections, freedom of expression, and respect for civil liberties (Diamond, 2019). Authoritarian regimes may take multiple forms: military juntas, party-based systems, monarchies, or personalist regimes. In recent decades, however, a more nuanced form has emerged—**electoral authoritarianism**—where democratic institutions exist in form but not in substance (Schedler, 2006). These regimes manipulate elections, repress opposition, and control the media while maintaining the façade of democratic legitimacy.

Key Indicators of Democratic Decline
Democratic decline—or "backsliding"—is a process whereby political and democratic institutions are gradually eroded, often under the guise of legality and public order (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This erosion does not necessarily occur through military coups or overt suspension of constitutions but through legal and institutional manipulation.
Key indicators of democratic decline include:

1. **Constitutional Manipulation**: Changes to the constitution that centralize power in the executive or remove accountability mechanisms (e.g., abolishing term limits, waning judicial independence).
2. **Erosion of Electoral Integrity**: Lack of a level playing field, including manipulation of electoral mechanism such as laws, harassment of opposition candidates, and interference by security forces during elections (Norris, 2014).

3. **Media Suppression**: Imposing direct or indirect control over mainstream and social media platforms, criminalizing dissent, and enacting repressive laws like digital security acts.
4. **Judicial Capture**: Curtailing the independence of the judiciary through partisan appointments, intimidation, or so-called institutional reforms (Helmke, 2005).
5. **Civil Society Co-optation**: Undermining NGOs, think tanks, and trade unions which are critical to the government, while promoting pro-regime organizations to gain support.
6. **Use of State Violence**: Employing law enforcement agencies to silence dissent, often through arbitrary arrest, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances (Diamond, 2019; Bermeo, 2016).

In Bangladesh, most of these symptoms are vividly apparent: from the constitutional abolition of the caretaker government system to the use of the Digital Security Act against journalists, academics, and activists (Riaz, 2016; Ahmed, 2022). These developments indicate a systematic move away from competitive pluralism toward controlled authoritarianism. In Bangladesh, political leadership is increasingly hereditary, consolidating power within a tightly knit circle of elite families, particularly that of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Parliamentary seats and key positions within the Awami League are predominantly occupied by relatives of current or former leaders. This dynastic continuity is especially evident in regions such as Barishal and Bagerhat, for instance, Sheikh Helal Uddin and his son Sheikh Tonmoy of Bagerhat, both close relatives of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, simultaneously hold seats in Parliament. This phenomenon reflects a broader national trend, as substantiated by a detailed analysis of parliamentary composition in which many Members of Parliament are sons, daughters, or in-laws of former political leaders (Poriborton.com, 2022; Manab Zamin, 2022). The political landscape has become increasingly inaccessible to outsiders lacking political lineage, wealth, or high-ranking civil-military bureaucratic ties. Political nominations often go to candidates with dynastic credentials, significant financial resources, and top-ranked civil-military position, - a trend indicative of the growing commercialization of politics (Transparency International Bangladesh [TIB], 2021). In effect, elective offices have become commodities, sold to the highest bidder or handed down through family lines, undermining meritocracy and further deepening elite capture. This system fosters a patronage network where elected officials prioritize the interests of their family, loyalists, and local elites over those of the electorate. As a result, public resources are frequently diverted to serve narrow political ends rather than inclusive development (Riaz, 2020).

Furthermore, the pervasive culture of political vengeance and antagonism exacerbate this crisis, where transitions of power are characterized not by peaceful handovers but by retaliation, killing, violent clash, and muscle power. Since independence, Bangladesh has witnessed the assassinations of two presidents and frequent eruptions of political violence. The ruling party often uses state machinery to clear legal charges against its own leaders and activists while filing fresh cases against opposition figures. This cyclical persecution entrenches distrust and polarizes society (Jahan, 2014). Meanwhile, civil society and media, once considered potential bulwarks against authoritarian drift, have largely been co-opted. The AL regime has licensed numerous media outlets loyal to the party and shut down those critical of its actions. Consequently, Bangladeshi media operates more like a propaganda tool of government than an independent fourth estate, suppressing dissent and shaping favorable narratives for the regime (Freedom House, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022). Journalists and critics who resist this narrative are harassed, arrested, or silenced. Even prominent civil

society organizations, such as the Bangladesh chapter of Transparency International, have been accused of toning down their critiques in favor of government alignment, leading to the marginalization of dissenting voices in public discourse (TIB, 2021).

This culture of unaccountable power is undergirded by a feudal psychology of governance, where state authority is viewed as private inheritance rather than public responsibility. Politicians and bureaucrats alike act as feudal lords, distributing state benefits to loyalists and ruling with a sense of entitlement. The avarice for power is so extreme that opponents are not merely defeated politically but are often subject to physical assault, repression, or elimination from the public sphere (Riaz, 2016). In such a system, democratic principles are reduced to symbolic rituals while actual governance is dictated by personal loyalty, wealth, and lineage. These structural, cultural, and ideological underpinnings—dynastic politics, commercialized elections, politicized civil society, and a feudalistic mindset—collectively constitute the backbone of authoritarian consolidation in Bangladesh and severely threaten the sustainability of democratic governance.

Link between Authoritarian Governance and Political Fragility
Political sustainability refers to a regime's ability to maintain legitimacy, institutional functionality, and adaptability in the face of societal pressures over time (Grindle, 2004). While authoritarian regimes may offer short-term stability, their long-term political sustainability is often precarious. This fragility may arise from several sources:

Legitimacy Deficit
Authoritarian regimes struggle to sustain legitimacy, especially when economic performance declines or corruption scandals increase. Since legitimacy is not derived from genuine electoral consent, leaders must rely on fear, propaganda, and patronage to maintain control over state and society (Linz, 2000). In Bangladesh, the lack of free, fair, and credible elections and the suppression of dissent have led to growing public cynicism, especially among youth (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Institutional Hollowing
Authoritarian governments frequently undermine the political institutions—judiciary, election commissions, anti-corruption bodies—that would ensure political accountability. This "hollowing out" weakens institutional efficiency and resilience, making it difficult for the system to respond to crises effectively (Helmke & Levitsky, 2006). In Bangladesh, the executive's influence over the judiciary, election commission, media, and the centralization of power around the Prime Minister has severely devalued the effectiveness of check and balance mechanism in the government (Riaz, 2016).

Suppression of Dissent and Unrest
Repression may initially suppress opposition, but over time it can create a pressure cooker scenario. When avenues for peaceful dissent are blocked, citizens may resort to protest, violence, or disengagement and alienation from political life altogether. The cumulative effect is a brittle political system vulnerable to sudden breakdowns (Bermeo, 2016).

Lack of Succession Planning
In many authoritarian regimes, leadership transition becomes a flashpoint for instability. With power centered around a single leader, the absence of transparent and smooth succession mechanisms can lead to infighting, elite fragmentation, or power vacuums. In case of Bangladesh, dynastic politics raises concerns about the future of the Awami League in post-Hasina period, given the excessive concentration of power within her family members and distant relatives (Ahmed, 2022).

International Repercussions
Authoritarian practices often strain diplomatic relationships, especially with Western democracies and development partners that prioritize good governance and human rights. Bangladesh has already faced criticism and sanctions for extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearance, and repression of civil society, particularly from the United States (Freedom House, 2021).

The theoretical framework presented here situates Bangladesh's current political trajectory within the broader discourse on authoritarianism and political sustainability. While the ruling party maintains a veneer of electoral legitimacy, deeper analysis reveals a systematic undermining of democratic institutions and processes. Authoritarian consolidation may offer temporary political dominance, but it erodes the foundations of long-term sustainability, such as civic trust, legitimacy, institutional resilience, transparency, and effectiveness. Without meaningful reform, Bangladesh risks further democratic decay and potential political instability.

Historical Context: Democratic Fluctuation and Regime Transitions in Bangladesh
Post-Independence Political Experiments (1972–1990)
Following its independence from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh embarked on a bold political experiment aimed at establishing a parliamentary democracy based on the principles of nationalism, socialism, secularism, and democracy, often referred to as the "four state principles" (Riaz, 2016). The 1972 Constitution was a landmark document, reflecting the aspirations of a war-torn nation seeking participatory governance, human rights, and economic justice (Chowdhury, 2008). However, the initial democratic promise began to disappear quickly. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding leader and Prime Minister, faced challenges related to governance, food shortages, inflation, smuggling, and corruption. The political turmoil led him to abandon multi-party democracy in favor of a one-party presidential system in 1975. Through the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, the government introduced **Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL)**, outlawing all other political parties and consolidating all executive, legislative, and judicial power in the hands of the president (Jahan, 2000). This was effectively the country's first experiment with authoritarian rule. In addition, press freedom was seriously curtailed; except four all of the newspapers were banned, and those allowed to publish were brought under tight state control. All political government institutions including civil service, judiciary, and military were forced to pledge loyalty to the new party system. Political dissenters were jailed, silenced, killed, disappeared, or co-opted into the BAKSAL framework (Khan, 2001). The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in a military coup on August 15, 1975, marked the abrupt end of this authoritarian experiment, but the years that followed did not see a return to democracy.

Between 1975 and 1990, Bangladesh was ruled by a series of military and quasi-military regimes. General Ziaur Rahman came to power in 1977 through a referendum. Although Zia lifted the ban on media and political parties, and held parliamentary elections in 1979, his regime remained authoritarian in structure. Power was centralized, political opponents were persecuted, and the media was tightly regulated (Riaz, 2005), but far liberal, democratic, and transparent than Mujib's regime. Zia's assassination in 1981 led to further instability, culminating in another military coup by General H.M. Ershad in 1982. Ershad imposed martial law, dismissed parliament, and ruled by decree. He attempted to legitimize his rule through carefully managed elections and referenda, but these were widely seen as rigged. During his rule, large-scale corruption, suppression of civil liberties, and politicization of the judiciary became deeply institutionalized (Ahmed, 2004). It was not until a mass movement in 1990, led by a coalition of civil society, students, and opposition parties, that Ershad was forced to resign, marking the beginning of a new democratic era.

The period from 1972 to 1990 thus witnessed multiple regime transitions, from parliamentary democracy to one-party autocracy, and then to military authoritarianism. These cycles of regime change set a precedent for executive dominance, weak institutional checks and balances, and a political culture of confrontation rather than cooperation (Jahan, 2014).

Electoral Governance and the Caretaker System (1991–2006)
The restoration of democracy in 1991 marked a significant turning point in Bangladesh's political development. For the first time since 1973, elections were held under relatively fair conditions and level playing field. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) won the majority and formed a government under the leadership of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Importantly, this period marked the revival of parliamentary democracy, replacing the presidential system introduced under the earlier military regimes. However, the Magura-2 by-elections of 1994 revealed a critical issue: neutrality of the incumbent government come under suspicion and question over subtle election manipulation to make the result in favor of ruling party candidate. The bitter political rivalry between the BNP and the Awami League (AL) further exacerbated the problem centering the 1996 general elections held in February followed by huge political turmoil. In response to mounting political pressure, violent street protests, and mass boycotts, the concept of a **non-party caretaker government (CTG)** was introduced in 1996 through the 13th Amendment to the Constitution (Kabir, 2001). This innovative model was designed to ensure a level playing field for all political actors by appointing a neutral administration to oversee elections.

The CTG model proved successful in gaining public and political confidence. Between 1991 and 2006, three general elections were held under caretaker governments, all of which were deemed largely free, fair, and participatory by domestic and international observers (International Crisis Group, 2008). The CTG appointed retired Chief Justices as Chief Advisors (equivalent to Prime Ministers) and selected neutral civil administrators to manage electoral affairs. These governments served for a limited period, typically three months, until elections were concluded and a new political government assumed office. This arrangement significantly diminished electoral violence and manipulation, at least temporarily. However, the inherent flaws of the political system—polarization, personality cults, and weak institutions—remained unresolved. Both major parties, BNP and AL, engaged in tit-for-tat

politics, street agitations, and constant allegations of rigging whenever elections did not go in their favor (Rahman, 2012).

The 2006 electoral impasse further revealed the fragility of the CTG model. Disputes over the appointment of the Chief Advisor and allegations of partisan civil service appointments under the BNP government created a political deadlock. Through a constitutional amendment, a clear move was made by the then BNP-Jamat coalition government to extend the serving age of retirement for judges from 65 to 67 making incumbent justice K M Hasan eligible, undoubtedly questionable, to be the next chief advisor of the caretaker government resulting in political instability. The situation spiraled into chaos, prompting the military to intervene and establish a **military-backed caretaker government** in January 2007, headed by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed (Riaz, 2013). Though initially welcomed, this government overstayed its constitutional limit and initiated sweeping anti-corruption drives, arresting hundreds of political leaders. While some of its reforms were applauded, its legitimacy began to erode due to a lack of accountability and transparency.

Ultimately, elections were held in December 2008 under this quasi-military regime, which brought the BAL to power with a landslide victory. Although, initially the election was deemed as free and fair but later on Pranab Mukherjee's opinion in his book "The Coalition Years" sparked serious dispute and tarnished the election's credibility. Mukharjee, the then Indian External Affairs Minister in Manmohan Singh second cabinet (2009-2014), confessed that he guided Bangladeshi Army Chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed over election during their meeting on 26th February 2008 in Delhi. Mr. Mukharjee maintains that he took responsibility to ensure the security of General Moeen upon Hasina's return to power which clearly indicates that it was decided to bring Hasina back to power much earlier of the election (held in December 2009). It also unveils that the 2008 general election was subtly engineered and the very result of the poll was decided before by then military backed government and Indian efforts. Mr. Mukharjee writes:

"in February 2008, Bangladesh Army Chief Moeen Ahmed came to India on a six-day visit. He called on me too. During the informal interaction, I impressed upon him the importance of releasing political prisoners. He was apprehensive about his dismissal by Sheikh Hasina after her release. But I took personal responsibility and assured the General of his survival after Hasina's return to power. I also sought an appointment with the US President GeorgeW. Bush to request his intervention in the matter and ensure the release of both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina. With my intervention through the then National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan, I ensured the release of all political prisoners and the nation's return to stability. Several years later, I also facilitated General Moeen's treatment in the US when he was suffering from cancer (Mukharjee, 2017)."

This clear manipulation and maneuvering of election combined by the military-backed CTG and external elements damage the confidence of people on caretaker government system. While this ended the CTG's tenure, it also laid the groundwork for subsequent regime manipulation.

Collapse of Electoral Neutrality and Rise of Authoritarianism (2008–2024)
The return of the Awami League in power in 2009 marked a pivotal shift in Bangladesh's political landscape. Under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, the BAL government began consolidating power in ways that undermined democratic norms and electoral neutrality. The first major step was the **abolition of the caretaker government system** through the 15th Amendment in the constitution in 2011. The move was justified on the grounds of a Supreme Court verdict declaring the CTG unconstitutional, but the political motivation behind this move was widely questioned (Ahmed, 2018). Consequently, the absence of a neutral electoral body dramatically reduced public confidence on the rules of game for impartial elections leading the BNP and other opposition parties to boycott the 2014 general election, resulting in more than half of the parliamentary seats being uncontested. The voter turnout was abysmally low, and allegations of vote rigging, ballot stuffing, and intimidation were widespread (Freedom House, 2015). Consequently, the election was widely viewed as a sham, allowing the AL to retain power without a meaningful mandate. The **2018 election** further confirmed the deterioration of electoral integrity. Although opposition parties participated, the entire process was marred by state-sponsored violence, media censorship, and the use of law enforcement apparatus to intimidate voters and opposition candidates (International Republican Institute, 2019). Numerous reports documented **pre-election ballot stuffing**, a crackdown on independent observers, and the removal of opposition polling agents. The result was a landslide victory for the AL, which won 288 out of 300 seats—an outcome widely considered implausible in a competitive democracy (Riaz, 2020). Additionally, margin of the voter turnout between the winner and loser candidates was such a high that the election result could hardly be credible.

Believable During this period, the **Digital Security Act (2018)** emerged as a key instrument of authoritarian control. Under the pretext of cyber regulation and anti-extremism, the Act criminalized dissent voice, enabling security forces to arrest journalists, students, and civil society actors for vague offenses like "hurting religious sentiments", "tarnishing state's image" "defaming" liberation war and important political figures including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina and senior leaders, or "spreading rumors" (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The political opposition was systematically weakened through legal persecution, imprisonment of key leaders like Khaleda Zia, and the deregistration of parties like Jamaat-e-Islami (Riaz, 2020). Additionally, the independence of the **Election Commission**, judiciary, and law enforcement agencies came under serious question. Critics argue that these institutions have become extensions of the executive branch or wing of incumbent Awami League lacking the neutrality needed to safeguard democratic procedures (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2021).

As of 2024, Bangladesh exhibits many characteristics of an **electoral authoritarian regime**—regular elections are held, but the competition is rigged, the media is muzzled, and civil liberties are curtailed. The centralization of power around Sheikh Hasina, the dominance of her family members and relatives in politics, and the weakening of institutional checks and balances have all contributed to a **crisis of political sustainability**. The regime's reliance on repression and patronage instead of legitimacy and public trust suggests a fragile political future despite the appearance of stability (Diamond, 2019).

Institutional Breakdown and Consolidation of Authoritarian Rule

Since 2009, Bangladesh has undergone a marked erosion of institutional norms and practices, facilitating a consolidation of authoritarian governance under the Awami League (AL). The ruling party has strategically transformed constitutional, judicial, and electoral institutions to entrench power and eliminate avenues for democratic accountability. This institutional breakdown is neither abrupt nor accidental; it is a deliberate process of legal manipulation, partisan restructuring, and bureaucratic co-optation designed to maintain regime stability while undermining democratic substance (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

A key turning point was the **15th Amendment to the Constitution** in 2011, which abolished the non-party caretaker government system. Initially introduced in 1996 to ensure free and fair elections, the caretaker model was widely supported across political parties. However, the AL, after assuming power with a parliamentary majority in 2009, unilaterally scrapped the system. Though the Supreme Court had previously questioned the constitutionality of the caretaker system, the Court also advised the next two elections to be held under it for public trust—advice that was ignored (Ahmed, 2018). By abolishing this model, the AL institutionalized partisan control over the electoral process, ensuring it could remain in power without legitimate and genuine contest. Equally, the **16th Amendment**, passed in 2014, further exemplifies this breakdown. It proposed to empower Parliament to impeach Supreme Court judges. While framed as a return to democratic oversight, critics pointed out its potential for executive overreach, given the dominance of the ruling party in Parliament. When the Supreme Court overturned the amendment, citing threats to judicial independence, Chief Justice S.K. Sinha faced intense political pressure and was eventually forced to resign and flee the country (Riaz, 2020). His memoir later detailed surveillance, intimidation, and manipulation by state intelligence services, signaling how legal institutions were increasingly brought under political control (Sinha, 2018).

Relatedly, the **Election Commission** (EC), once envisioned as a neutral body safeguarding democratic processes, has also been captured through partisan appointments of high officials and procedural biasness. The ruling government handpicks commissioners through a "search committee," whose recommendations are often predetermined. This has led to the appointment of commissioners aligned with the regime, undermining public trust in the electoral process (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2021). Furthermore, **media regulation and digital surveillance** have emerged as powerful tools of institutional control. The **Digital Security Act (DSA) of 2018** is a 'draconian' law that criminalizes online speech deemed offensive or anti-state. Its vague and broad language has enabled arbitrary arrests of journalists, students, and political activists. According to Human Rights Watch (2022), dozens of people have been detained under the DSA for criticizing the government, including through social media. The climate of fear has extended to self-censorship in mainstream media, many of which are owned by pro-government business groups or operate under strict informal guidelines from intelligence agencies. The AL regime has also co-opted the civil-military bureaucracy and law enforcement agencies. Public sector promotions, postings, and benefits are now often tied to political loyalty. Elite units like the **Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)** have been accused of enforced disappearances, custodial deaths, and extrajudicial killings—many targeting opposition activists (Freedom House, 2021). In 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned RAB officials, citing serious human rights abuses.

This institutional dismantling is not merely an assault on democratic values—it reflects a deliberate strategy of **authoritarian consolidation through legalism**. Unlike classical military dictatorships, the current regime operates under the guise of constitutionalism, holding elections and passing legislation while controlling all levers of power. Most of the major political and democratic institutions, such as election commission, judiciary, legislature, civil-military bureaucracy, are internally ruined through breaking their established conventions, norms, and practices; however, their physical structure and outlook seems fairly okay (Bangla Tribune, 2025). The implications of such institutional collapse for political sustainability are profound. When institutions lose autonomy and legitimacy, democratic resilience weakens, public cynicism rises, and pathways for peaceful dissent vanish. The consolidation of power in the hands of the executive thus not only undermines current governance but also sows the seeds for future instability.

In conclusion, the institutional breakdown in Bangladesh illustrates how authoritarianism is cultivated within formal democratic frameworks. By neutralizing electoral mechanisms, capturing the judiciary, co-opting the bureaucracy, and silencing independent media, the ruling regime has created a state apparatus geared toward perpetuating power, not public accountability. Without structural reform and renewed institutional independence, the prospects for genuine democracy remain bleak.

Crisis of Political Representation and the Pseudo-Parliamentary System
At the heart of democratic governance lies political representation: the ability of citizens to choose their leaders through competitive elections and hold them accountable through representative institutions. In Bangladesh, however, this fundamental democratic principle has been deteriorated into a system of **pseudo-parliamentarism**, where elections are held and opposition is existed but representation is hollow, genuine opposition is suppressed, and Parliament serves as little more than a ceremonial body rubber-stamping executive decisions. This crisis has been steadily building since the controversial **2014 general election**, which was boycotted by major opposition parties, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). As a result, 153 out of 300 parliamentary seats were uncontested, and voter turnout was exceptionally low. The AL formed government without any meaningful competition, triggering both domestic and international criticism (International Republican Institute, 2019). The absence of opposition voices in Parliament led to an erosion of democratic checks, transforming it into a one-party chamber. The **2018 election**, although more inclusive in appearance, was equally problematic. Reports of ballot stuffing, obstruction of polling agents, and voter intimidation were widespread. The most unprecedented occurring was that a large portion of ballot was sealed at night before the polling day where ruling party activists, civil-military bureaucrats, and law enforcement agency members were directly involved (DW, 2018). International observers noted that the election lacked credibility, transparency, and genuine competition (Riaz, 2020). The AL won 288 out of 300 seats—an implausible figure in any functioning democracy. This supermajority enabled the ruling party to dominate all legislative processes and appointments, effectively nullifying parliamentary opposition.

The structure of Bangladesh's Parliament has further contributed to this democratic deficit. Members of Parliament (MPs) are often selected based on loyalty to party leadership rather than merit or public demand. As they are not loyal or accountable to people, this top-down approach undermines the accountability of MPs to their constituents and transforms

Parliament into an echo chamber of the executive. Parliamentary debates are rare and lack substantive opposition, reducing the legislature's oversight function to a formality (Ahmed, 2022). Surprisingly, although the Jatiya Party was the official opposition party in both 10th and 11th parliament, they were also part of Hasina's third term government (2019-2024); from the party there were three ministers and the party chief H M Ershad himself sworn in as especial envoy to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, a rank equivalent to a ministerial position (The Daily Star, 2019; Karim, 2014). It was an unprecedented and abnormal government model where a party simultaneously perform as opposition in the parliament and becomes the part of government. This model raises question over the opposition's credibility and efficiency; as they were in government and privileged, they could not effectively play their due role. Thus, this opposition which was only in paper and official but far from de-facto role, can be termed as pseudo-opposition. In addition, the ruling party's dominance is also reflected in its **control over party nominations**, both at the national and local levels. Internal party democracy is virtually absent; nominations are centralized under the Prime Minister's office, where personal loyalty is often more valued than competence or public service. This has created a political culture of opportunism and patronage: dissent is punished while conformity is rewarded with key position in party structure or nomination ticket for election. Several AL members have been expelled or sidelined for even mild criticism of party leadership, reinforcing a climate of fear within the party establishment.

Furthermore, the **BNP**, a major political force, has been severely weakened through legal and extralegal means. Its leader, Khaleda Zia, remains in legal limbo, having been jailed on corruption charges widely seen as politically motivated (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Other senior leaders face multiple lawsuits, and grassroots activists are often targeted by security forces. The space for political opposition has narrowed to such an extent that the current system resembles a dominant-party regime more than a competitive multiparty democracy (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Civil society and student organizations, traditionally strong voices of political accountability in Bangladesh, have also been co-opted. The ruling party's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, wields significant influence in universities and colleges, often suppressing opposition groups and interfering in student union elections. This limits the emergence of new leadership and undermines youth engagement in democratic processes (International Crisis Group, 2018). The net effect is a crisis of political representation. Voter apathy is rising, particularly among youth who perceive politics as corrupt, violent, and closed to new entrants. Trust in electoral processes and political institutions has declined, as evidenced by reduced political participation and growing disenchantment with the status quo (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2021). The lack of credible alternatives creates a feedback loop of authoritarian resilience: opposition is too weak to challenge the regime, and the regime uses this weakness to justify further repression.

In sum, the current parliamentary system in Bangladesh functions more as a tool for legitimizing executive decisions than as a space for debate and accountability. Elections occur without real choice, parliament exists without real power, and opposition survives without real influence. This pseudo-democracy may offer stability in the short term, but it undermines the long-term viability of democratic governance and public trust. Without structural reforms to restore genuine representation, the system will not be functional.

Leadership Centralization and Dynastic Control

The increasing centralization of power and leadership within the ruling Awami League (AL) under Sheikh Hasina has created a governance structure that revolves around personal authority rather than proper institutional channel. While formal democratic structure is bypassed, power is highly personalized, and decision-making is concentrated in the hands of a single individual. This centralization not only undermines intra-party democracy but also disrupts the balance of power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

Since assuming leadership of the AL in 1981 and becoming Prime Minister in 1996 and again in 2009, Sheikh Hasina has solidified her grip on both the party and the state apparatus. Intra-party elections are symbolic at best, and most senior posts are filled by close or distant relatives of Hasina and loyalists without democratic contestation. Decisions related to nominations, promotions within the party, and policy directions all require the tacit or explicit approval of the Prime Minister (Ahmed, 2018). Even the student and youth wings of the AL, such as the Bangladesh Chhatra League and Jubo League, operate under tight supervision, serving as instruments of political control and surveillance rather than platforms for emerging leadership (Riaz, 2020). Apart from the strict control on party establishment, Hasina exalts unquestionable influence on each and every governmental decision: beyond her ministry and jurisdiction every other ministry and wing was directly intervened and supervised by Hasina. Although, ministers are legally her colleagues but they would have acted like her obedient employee. Minister or wing head in the government could not take decision or perform their usual duty independently without her nod. It was widely perceived that they had to negotiate with or take oral permission from Hasina first then decisions come out in paper from the respective ministry or department. From the very policy planning to project implementation, from big deal to trivial issue, bigger picture to minute details, everything had to go under her direct consent (Anam, 2024).

This unmatched centralization is further compounded by dynastic control. The ruling party, under Sheikh Hasina, has increasingly transformed into a familial institution, with significant influence exerted by members of her immediate family. Sajeeb Wazed Joy, her son, serves as her Information and Communication Technology (ICT) advisor, while other relatives occupy parliamentary or influential political positions. The presence of multiple family members in strategic posts has reduced public confidence in the meritocratic nature of the political system and fostered widespread perceptions of nepotism (Jahan, 2015). The trend of dynastic leadership is not unique to Bangladesh but is particularly detrimental in its context due to the weakness of institutions and the lack of strong political alternatives. A 2021 study found that over 30% of Bangladeshi Members of Parliament (MPs) were either relatives of former politicians or inherited their positions through political lineage (Transparency International Bangladesh [TIB], 2021). This enfeebles political meritocracy and discourages new entrants, particularly women, youth, and those from marginalized communities.

The long-term implications of this dynastic control are significant. As leadership becomes increasingly personalized and hereditary, the capacity for the political system to regenerate itself through democratic competition diminishes. Questions of succession loom large: there is no publicly vetted or democratically chosen successor to Sheikh Hasina, raising fears of political instability or elite fragmentation in the event of her sudden exit from power. The ruling party has not institutionalized a transparent or inclusive mechanism for leadership

transition, thereby exacerbating uncertainty over future political continuity (International Crisis Group, 2018). In addition, dynastic politics concentrates power within a small circle of elites, limiting the diversity of ideas and policy innovation. It promotes a culture of entitlement rather than accountability and leads to widespread political clientelism. The result is a stagnant political landscape where loyalty to the leader is rewarded over competence, and dissent is punished rather than debated. Such a climate not only corrodes internal party democracy but also weakens the responsiveness of the state to citizen demands.

Ultimately, the centralization of leadership and dynastic succession model in Bangladesh has transformed what should be a competitive political environment into a personalized power structure. This form of rule, while ensuring short-term regime stability, damages the foundations of long-term democratic governance and exposes the system to severe risks in the face of leadership transitions or growing public dissatisfaction.

Underlying Drivers of Democratic Decay
Democratic relapsing in Bangladesh cannot be fully understood without exploring the deeper structural and cultural drivers that have enabled it. Beyond institutional capture and electoral manipulation, the country's political decay is fueled by long-standing issues such as political vengeance, elite control over civil society and media, and an entrenched culture of authoritarian governance justified by feudalistic logic.

One of the most pervasive features of Bangladeshi politics is the **culture of vengeance** that marks interactions between major parties. The political rivalry between the AL and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is not just adversarial—it is often violently antagonistic. Each party, when in power, uses state machinery to suppress the other. This cyclical politics of revenge enervates democratic norms and institutional trust. The arrest of opposition leaders, mass lawsuits against activists, and politicized trials serve not only to eliminate opponents but also to intimidate future challengers (Riaz, 2016). The imprisonment of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami's participation in elections exemplify how legal tools are used to marginalize opposition and shrink political space (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Secondly, the elite capture of civil society has also played a crucial role in eroding democratic accountability. While Bangladesh has a vibrant civil society history, especially in the post-1990 era, much of it has been co-opted under the Awami League regime. Civil society organizations that are critical of government actions face threats, funding restrictions, or deregistration. Meanwhile, government-aligned NGOs flourish, acting more as echo chambers than watchdogs. Intellectuals, academics, and policy analysts increasingly align with the ruling party, either voluntarily or under coercion, further narrowing the space for public debate and dissent (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2021). Thirdly, the role of **propaganda media** in shaping political narratives is equally significant. Most of the mainstream television and print outlets are owned by business figures aligned with AL or are directly pressurized by intelligence agencies. Editorial freedom is rare, and journalists are routinely harassed or detained under vague laws such as the Digital Security Act. Investigative journalism has all but disappeared from mainstream media, replaced by state-sanctioned narratives promoting national development and portraying dissent as anti-state activity (Freedom House, 2022). Social media platforms, once considered safe spaces for dissent, are now heavily monitored, and users face legal repercussions for

critical posts. This media environment distorts public perception and reinforces authoritarian rule under the guise of national security and development. Fourthly, at the core of this decay is a deeper cultural and psychological condition: the **lust for power rooted in a feudal mindset**. Political leaders, once elected, often view public office not as a service but as ownership. This mentality manifests in the personalization of public resources, the militarization of civil spaces, and the creation of patron-client networks that reward loyalty over performance. Politicians act as "lords" over their constituencies, distributing favors to supporters and punishing dissenters. This logic also permeates bureaucracy and law enforcement, where promotions and postings are dictated by political allegiance rather than competence (Jahan, 2014). Finally, the feudal culture also perpetuates impunity. When state actors engage in corruption, human rights abuses, or electoral misconduct, they are rarely held accountable. This impunity signals to citizens that the rule of law is selective and politically motivated, further eroding public trust in governance resulting in a citizens become disengaged, and democratic participation declines, feeding a vicious cycle of authoritarian entrenchment.

In essence, Bangladesh's democratic decay is not just institutional or procedural—it is cultural, ideological, psychological, and deeply systemic. The normalization of vengeance, elite dominance over public discourse, and the feudal view of power have collectively created an ecosystem where democracy struggles to survive. Addressing these drivers requires not only institutional reforms but also a fundamental shift in political culture—toward tolerance, transparency, and genuine pluralism.

Implications for Political Sustainability in Bangladesh

The attrition of democratic institutions in Bangladesh has far-reaching implications for the country's political sustainability. While the regime under the Awami League has projected an image of spurious stability through infrastructural development, economic growth narratives, and control over dissent, this facade masks a deeper fragility. Political sustainability involves not just the continuation of governance, but the long-term legitimacy, adaptability, and inclusiveness of the political system (Diamond, 2019). When governance is detached from accountability, legitimacy begins to decay, generating risks that are not immediately visible but that can erupt into crisis under pressure. A political system that lacks **accountability mechanisms**—such as a free press, independent judiciary, functioning parliament, and non-partisan civil society—can maintain order only through coercion or patronage. In Bangladesh, these institutions have been systematically politicized or weakened. The judiciary, once a guardian of constitutional rights, now largely follows the executive line decaying public confidence on it. Parliament functions as a rubber stamp for decisions made by the executive branch, and opposition parties operate under constant threat of legal persecution (Riaz, 2020). In such a context, governance loses responsiveness to citizen needs, and the likelihood of peaceful grievance resolution declines. Over time, this creates a ticking time bomb—public frustration accumulates while peaceful outlets for expression are choked, increasing the risk of sudden unrest.

Another key implication for political sustainability lies in the **legitimacy crisis** of core institutions. As electoral credibility erodes due to vote rigging, the authority of the Election Commission is viewed with wide skepticism. Youth, who make up a significant portion of the population, are increasingly disconnected from formal politics, either out of despair and

disillusionment or fear. A growing body of research shows that when young citizens lose faith in electoral systems and political institutions, they either turn to political apathy or radical alternatives (Norris, 2011). In Bangladesh, youth-led protests have occasionally erupted, notably the Shahbagh movement in 2013 and the student protest for road safety in 2018, both of which were met with state suppression. These incidents reveal a disconnect between ruling elites and younger generations, whose aspirations for justice, dignity, and representation remain unmet. The erosion of institutional legitimacy undermines state capacity by displacing merit-based appointments with politically motivated recruitment, thereby diminishing bureaucratic effectiveness, fostering systemic corruption, and compromising the quality of public service delivery. These trends further alienate citizens and reduce the regime's performance legitimacy, which is often used to justify authoritarian rule in developmentalist states (Levitsky & Way, 2010). A government which neither properly represents nor delivers services effectively cannot sustain public trust indefinitely.

In the absence of strong internal democratic pressures, **international actors** become important stakeholders in promoting or discouraging authoritarian consolidation. Western democracies, multilateral institutions, and human rights organizations have consistently raised concerns about Bangladesh's democratic backsliding. The U.S. Treasury's sanctions on officials from the Rapid Action Battalion in 2021 for human rights abuses marked a significant shift in international engagement (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021). However, geopolitics often complicates sustained pressure, as Bangladesh remains strategically important to India, China, and regional stability. Finally, **civic mobilization** remains one of the last potential forces capable of challenging authoritarian drift. Despite facing repression, Bangladesh has a longstanding history of vibrant grassroots activism and civil society organizations which continue to resist authoritarian overreach. If these actors can rebuild alliances across class, gender, and generation lines, a bottom-up push for democratic reform is still possible. However, this will require not only courage and coordination but also international solidarity and institutional protection.

In summary, the current political trajectory of Bangladesh poses serious risks for political sustainability. The concentration of power, collapse of accountability structures, youth disengagement, and the weakening of legitimacy in key institutions contribute to a fragile governmental system. While authoritarian control may maintain order in the short term, its inability to generate inclusive governance and legitimacy or accommodate dissent renders it vulnerable to long-term instability.

Conclusion: Is Democratic Recovery Possible?
The question of whether democratic recovery is possible in Bangladesh is complex, and it depends on a range of structural, institutional, and cultural factors. While the current political landscape is marked by entrenched authoritarianism, institutional decay, and shrinking civic space, history suggests that no authoritarian regime is immune to change. The path to democratic renewal, however, requires not just regime change but it entails a set of administrative and political endeavors ranging from comprehensive reforms, fundamental reimagining of political culture, accountability structures to citizen engagement.

Democracy in Bangladesh has always been fragile. Since independence, the country has oscillated between civilian authoritarianism, military rule, and brief democratic openings. The

1991 transition to parliamentary democracy created hope, particularly with the implementation of the caretaker government system. But this system, too, was co-opted, and its eventual removal in 2011 signaled the beginning of democratic regression under a new form of elected authoritarianism (Riaz, 2016). What makes the current phase distinct is the combination of legal authoritarianism, dynastic consolidation, and public disengagement. These complex conditions present significant barriers to recovery. However, democratic renewal is not impossible. It begins with **restoring electoral credibility**; without free and fair elections, there can be no meaningful representation or legitimacy. This requires a truly independent Election Commission, transparent voter rolls, and the reintroduction of some form of neutral oversight during elections. Reforming electoral infrastructure must also be accompanied by the **revival of opposition politics, free and open mass media, and strong civil society**. The weakening of parties like the BNP and the suppression of others, including Islamic parties, has created a vacuum that allows the ruling party to dominate unchecked. A pluralistic democracy demands that opposition parties are not only allowed to exist but are able to operate without fear of repression.

Another crucial step is **judicial reform**. The courts must be re-empowered to function as independent guardians of the constitution and custodian to peoples' right. This includes depoliticizing judicial appointments, protecting judges from executive pressure, and ensuring that the legal system is not used as a weapon against dissent. Legal frameworks like the Digital Security Act must be repealed or significantly amended to safeguard free expression. But only legal and electoral reforms, while necessary, are not sufficient. A deeper transformation must occur at the level of **political culture**. Bangladesh's politics is marred by antagonism, personality cults, and winner-takes-all attitudes. These tendencies must be replaced by a culture of **democratic tolerance, compromise, and civic dialogue**. The leadership of all political parties must commit to peaceful contestation and mutual respect. Only then can institutions begin to function as platforms for democratic bargaining rather than as tools of domination. The role of **civil society** will also be crucial in any democratic recovery. Despite shrinking space, Bangladesh still has a resilient civil society sector, with NGOs, journalists, youth activists, and professional associations continuing to resist autocratic overreach. These actors must be protected and supported, both domestically and internationally. International donors and development partners should not only focus on economic indicators but also include **democratic governance and human rights** as key metrics for engagement. The **youth population**, which constitutes over 50% of the country's demographic, is another vital force. Although Bangladeshi young generation seems alienated from politics but they can be catalyst, as they have been historically, for democratic revival. Efforts must be made to include young people in democratic processes through education, participatory governance, and leadership training. If empowered, youth can serve as the vanguard of democratic reform.

Yet one cannot overlook the structural challenges. Bangladesh's economy is deeply intertwined with political patronage, and large segments of the business elite benefit from the status quo. Similarly, the civil and military bureaucracies have become complicit with the authoritarian consolidation. Thus, politico-economic reforms and democratic recovery must also involve dismantling the networks of political economy that sustain authoritarianism. International actors have a role to play as well. While geopolitical interests may limit the scope of foreign intervention, sustained diplomatic pressure, targeted sanctions against

human rights violators, and support for independent media and civil society can help level the playing field. Global human rights organizations, think tanks, and academic networks must continue documenting and exposing abuses, thereby creating a climate in which domestic demands for reform gain legitimacy.

In conclusion, although democratic recovery in Bangladesh is a herculean task but not impossible. In post authoritarian regime, a nation is moving forward with collective vision and wisdom in mind to revive democratic values particularly through comprehensive reforms from constitution to election commission, local government to judiciary, a paradigm shift is apparent. In order to consolidate paradigm shift in transition towards democratic journey, political will is must, and presence of political consensus despite different ideologies speaks about the fruitful transition of democracy in Bangladesh. However, it will require a multi-pronged approach involving legal reforms, institutional rebuilding, political renewal, and cultural change. With a mobilized citizenry, committed civil society, and genuine political leadership, Bangladesh can still reclaim its democratic promise. Undoubtedly, the journey will be long and fraught, but it remains one worth pursuing—not just for the present generation, but for the democratic future of the nation.

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