TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL BANGLADESH

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# Institutional Governance of Political Parties in Bangladesh

## Executive Summary

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## Institutional Governance of Political Parties in Bangladesh

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## Background and Rationale

A political party is an organised group of individuals united by a common ideology, policy orientation, or political program, seeking to attain state power to implement those policies and programs. Political parties play a central role in consolidating representative democracy and ensuring its effective execution. Citizens participate in political activities and connect with the state through political parties. During the anti-colonial movement against the British, various political parties emerged and introduced the political party-based governance system in the subcontinent. In the Pakistan period, political parties played a significant role in mobilising struggles for independence, such as language rights, autonomy, and democracy, and eventually contributed to the liberation war. Since independence, various military and authoritarian regimes have repeatedly disrupted the development of political parties and the exercise of political rights and democratic practices by amending constitutional and legal provisions, banning different political parties, forming parties under government patronage, and politicising state institutions and the electoral system.

After the July Mass Uprising in 2024, the internal governance of political parties emerged as one of the key issues in discussions on state reform. In this context, the reports of the Electoral System Reform Commission and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Reform Commission proposed a range of legal and institutional reforms concerning political parties. All political parties subsequently agreed with these reforms in the July National Charter.

In a representative democracy, political parties play a central role in promoting transparency, accountability, justice, and corruption prevention, thereby contributing to overall good governance. From this perspective, fostering internal democracy and ensuring the integrity of political parties are imperative. Although various studies and media reports have highlighted concerns about political violence, deficits in internal democracy, lack of transparency, and weak accountability among political parties in Bangladesh, systematic research specifically examining the institutional governance of political parties remains limited.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) regularly conducts research and advocacy on issues such as, inter alia, good governance, democratic processes, effective functioning of parliament, free and fair elections, transparency in political financing, and governance and integrity in electoral manifestos. As part of TIB's ongoing efforts, this research initiative was undertaken to identify key challenges to the institutional governance of political parties in Bangladesh, recognising the importance of political parties in establishing and strengthening democracy, and ensuring good governance and an accountable state.

Presently, 59 political parties are registered with the Election Commission of Bangladesh. Since the introduction of the political party registration framework in 2008, a total of 63 parties have been registered, while the registrations of three parties were annulled. The registration of one party has been suspended by the Election Commission. However, the exact number of unregistered political parties remains unknown due to the lack of reliable and comprehensive information. In 2025, a total of 143 political parties applied for registration, out of which 139 failed to meet the registration requirements. In addition, several regionally concentrated political parties that are in operation have their activities primarily confined to two or three districts. Since 2008, the number of political parties that have participated in

the national elections has ranged from 12 to 50. However, only 20 of the participating political parties have secured representation in Parliament. In terms of ideological orientation, political parties in Bangladesh can broadly be classified into three categories: nationalist or centrist, socialist, and religion-oriented parties.

## Objectives of the study

The overall objective of this study is to examine the challenges of institutional governance in political parties in Bangladesh.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Review the legal and regulatory framework regarding political parties and assess compliance.
2. Assess the state of internal democracy of political parties.
3. Assess transparency and accountability in the financial management and other operational activities of political parties.
4. Analyse the nature, patterns, and underlying causes of irregularities and corruption in party activities.
5. Develop policy recommendations based on the study findings.

## Scope of the Study

The study examines 29 registered political parties and 3 unregistered political parties operating in Bangladesh as of 30 June 2025. The research covers a range of key institutional and organisational dimensions of political parties. These include political party registration processes; internal party affairs, particularly decision-making mechanisms; leadership selection procedures; the formation of committees at different levels; candidate nomination processes; patterns of electoral participation; accountability mechanisms; financial management practices; integrity and ethical standards; and the external challenges faced by political parties in executing their activities. The study was conducted from April 2023 to March 2026, during which all activities, including data collection, analysis, and report preparation, were completed.

## Research Methods, Data Source and Implementation

Considering the subject matter, objectives, and nature of the study, this research employed qualitative research methods. However, quantitative data were also utilised and analysed where necessary to complement the qualitative findings and strengthen the analysis with empirical support.

### Analytical Framework

This study applied an analytical framework to analyse institutional governance of political parties. The framework examined the various activities and operations of political parties through the lens of six specific indicators of good governance. Both primary and secondary data were collected and analysed in light of the various components of this analytical framework. The following table provides the indicators used in the study and the corresponding dimensions of political party activities that were assessed under each indicator.

***Table 1: Governance Indicators and Areas of Assessment***

| Indicators of governance | Specific subject matter of observations |
|---|---|
| Legal framework and compliance | Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh; law and relevant rules; and constitution of political parties |
| Internal democracy | Formation of committees; leadership elections; candidate nomination processes; decision-making process |
| Participation and inclusion | Women's representation in party committees at all levels, nomination of women candidates in elections, participation in party decision-making and grassroots involvement, participation of marginalised people |
| Transparency | Disclosure of income and expenditure; financial reports, party policies, constitutions, party activities, and committee-related information |
| Accountability | Central and local party councils, party disciplinary mechanisms, accountability mechanisms, auditing and submission of financial reports |
| Irregularities and corruption | Measures to prevent irregularities and corruption; committee formation; nomination processes; financial management; and party registration activities |

## Sampling Method

This study employed purposive sampling to select 42 political parties. The sample included both registered and unregistered parties, new and old parties, and parties representing diverse ideological orientations, including nationalism, centrism, socialism, and religious ideologies. The primary considerations in selecting the political parties included their representation in the National Parliament since 2008; their active participation in various political movements and struggles, including the July Mass Uprising of 2024; and their participation in state reform initiatives following the July Mass Uprising, which involved both registered and unregistered political parties.

Although all 42 selected political parties were contacted multiple times to collect data, information could be obtained from only 32 parties within the designated timeframe, depending on their willingness to participate and the availability of respondents. Data were collected primarily through direct interviews with party leaders and activists responsible for party affairs at the central level. In some cases, information was also collected and verified through interviews with leaders and activists at the grassroots level.

It is important to note that the data collection process encountered several challenges, particularly when many political parties and relevant stakeholders delayed providing information, offered limited cooperation, or provided only partial information.

Although 10 political parties were contacted multiple times for data collection, they did not respond positively nor did they express their inability to participate in interviews. Nevertheless, the information collected from 32 political parties, along with relevant experts

and researchers, was considered sufficiently representative for achieving the objectives of the research. In addition, gaps in the data were filled by using secondary sources.

### Source of Data and Collection

For this study, data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. After initial data collection, the study carefully verified and cross-checked the validity and reliability of information from these sources.

Primary Data: Primary data were collected through direct interviews with key informants. The respondents included political party leaders and activists, designated representatives of political parties at the central level, officials of the Election Commission, political analysts, academics, and researchers.

To collect information from the political parties included in the study, a checklist and a semi-structured interview format were used to gather information on respondents' personal experiences, observations, perspectives, and opinions, along with predefined questions to better understand the issues.

Secondary Data: Secondary data were collected from a variety of relevant and credible sources. These included party constitutions and policy documents obtained from the official websites or offices of the respective political parties; reports and data published on national and international websites; previously published research reports and academic documents; relevant books, journal articles, and research papers; and reports published in national and international newspapers.

***Table 2: Types of Data, Data Collection Methods, and Sources***

| Type of data | Data collection method | Sources of data |
|---|---|---|
| **Primary data** | Key informant interviews | Political leaders and activists; designated or nominated central-level party representatives; Election Commission officials; political analysts; teachers; and researchers |
| **Secondary data** | Review and collection of documentary evidence | Information published on the official websites and documents of the relevant political parties; reports published in the media; research papers; books; and other relevant publications |

## Study Findings

Institutional governance of political parties refers to the organisational arrangements and practices through which parties conduct their activities in accordance with state laws and regulations, party constitutions, codes of discipline, and organisational rules. It encompasses the management of party affairs through democratic processes, including competitive and participatory leadership selection, inclusive decision-making, accountability of party leaders and office-bearers, and the provision of explanations for organisational decisions. It also involves ensuring transparency in party operations and promoting the participation and inclusion of women, minorities, and marginalised groups within party structures and activities.

This study assesses the institutional governance of political parties through several key dimensions of good governance, namely the legal framework, internal democratic practices, participation and inclusion, transparency, accountability, and the prevention of irregularities and corruption. The examination of these dimensions forms the basis for the assessment of the extent to which principles of good governance are reflected in the organisational structures and functioning of political parties.

### Legal Framework Governing the Formation and Operation of Political Parties

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, under Article 38, guarantees every citizen the right to form associations or unions, subject to reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of morality or public order. This constitutional guarantee of freedom of association provides the fundamental legal basis for citizens to establish and participate in political parties.

To regulate the formation and activities of political parties, the Political Parties Ordinance, 1978 was enacted. The Ordinance imposed several restrictions on the formation of political parties. These included prohibiting the establishment of political parties that threaten the sovereignty, integrity, or security of Bangladesh; political parties supported by foreign entities; secret political organisations; and parties maintaining armed or paramilitary structures. The Ordinance also introduced requirements relating to the banking and financial management of party funds.

The Ordinance further provided that if the government considered a political party to violate these provisions, it could refer the matter to the High Court Division. After hearing the concerned individuals or parties, the High Court Division would make a final determination. However, if deemed necessary in the public interest, the government could, through a gazette notification, temporarily suspend the activities of the concerned political party until the High Court Division reached a decision. If the High Court Division determined that a party had violated the relevant provisions, the party would be deemed dissolved, and all of its assets and funds would be forfeited by the government.

The Ordinance, however, did not address several important aspects of political party governance, including political party registration, internal democratic practices, candidate nomination processes, women's representation, transparency in political financing, and accountability mechanisms.

***Table 3: Legal and Regulatory Framework for Formation and Activities of Political Parties***

1. **Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh**
2. **Representation of the People Order, 1972 (RPO)**
3. **Political Parties Ordinance, 1978**
4. **Political Party Registration Rules, 2008**

Subsequently, to strengthen legal discipline and accountability in the electoral process, establish clear criteria for political party registration, assess the organizational capacity and effectiveness of political parties, promote internal democracy, institutionalise leadership selection and candidate nomination processes, increase women's participation in party structures, exclude political parties whose activities are contrary to the Constitution and the fundamental principles of the state, and provide the Election Commission with a legal basis for registration, verification, monitoring, and, where necessary, deregistration, the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972 was amended and the Political Party Registration Rules, 2008 were introduced.

Despite these reforms, the study identifies several legal limitations and practical challenges in the RPO, 1972 and the Political Party Registration Rules, 2008.

### Legal Challenges in Political Party Registration

In Bangladesh, registration of political parties as a mandatory requirement for participation in national elections was first introduced in 2008 through significant amendments to the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972. Following these amendments, Sections 90B to 90C were incorporated into the RPO, and specific provisions were introduced regarding the requirements for political party registration as well as matters that must be included in party constitutions.

To qualify for registration, a political party must demonstrate either a minimum level of electoral performance or a prescribed organisational structure. In terms of electoral performance, a party must have secured at least one parliamentary seat with its electoral symbol or secured five per cent of the total votes cast in the constituencies in which its candidates took part in any elections since independence. Alternatively, parties may qualify through organisational criteria, which require the maintenance of a functional central office and a central committee, organisational presence in at least one-third of the country's administrative districts, active committees in at least 100 upazilas or metropolitan police station areas, and a documented membership base of at least 200 registered voters in each organisational unit.

However, the study finds that these legal provisions contain important limitations and practical challenges. The first condition for electoral performance is effectively applicable only to parties that participated in elections before the introduction of the registration system in 2008. As a result, political parties that have already achieved electoral success are not required to maintain or continually demonstrate compliance with the same organisational conditions. This creates an uneven regulatory environment between established and emerging parties. Additionally, meeting the condition of extensive

organisational requirements requires substantial financial resources, increasing the risk that new political parties may become dependent on wealthy individuals, business interests, or influential patronage networks to sustain their operations and satisfy registration conditions.

Another practical challenge is that political retaliation and partisan hostility create barriers to establishing local party offices and expanding organisational activities into new geographic areas.

### Financial Challenges in Political Party Registration

One of the major challenges to political party registration in Bangladesh is the substantial financial burden of meeting the registration requirements. The legal provisions requiring parties to establish offices in at least one-third of the administrative districts and demonstrate geographic coverage create significant financial barriers to entry for newly formed political parties. Based on the findings of this study, a conservative estimate suggests that a newly formed political party requires between BDT 3.3 million and BDT 7.6 million to meet the administrative requirements for registration.

For newly established political parties, raising such a substantial amount of money is extremely difficult, potentially increasing their dependence on wealthy individuals and business interests and exposing them to multidimensional conflicts of interest. Financial resources, muscle power, and political connections may influence and facilitate the formation and registration of political parties in certain cases. One notable case involved a business group whose owner had reportedly been accused of embezzlement and duly convicted. The group formed a political party within two to three months and established the organisational structures required to meet the party registration criteria. Although the Election Commission initially decided to grant it registration following widespread controversy, protests, and objections from various sections of society, it did not grant it registration.

### International Practices in Political Party Registration Requirements

Political party registration and legal recognition are governed by different legal frameworks and requirements across different countries. A review of global experiences and comparative international practices shows that most democratic countries emphasise basic administrative requirements, organisational transparency, and adherence to democratic principles when registering political parties.

Comparative analysis indicates that registration requirements around the world are generally designed to provide an institutional framework for party politics. While registration criteria vary across jurisdictions, most countries focus on ensuring that political parties possess a formal constitution, a central governing body, a clearly defined organisational structure, and minimum standards of internal accountability and transparency.

The study finds that registration requirements in Bangladesh are comparatively more complex and costly than those found in neighbouring countries. In most countries reviewed, the existence of a party constitution, a central committee, and a central office constitutes the core eligibility criteria for registration. By contrast, the Bangladeshi registration framework

places significant emphasis on maintaining an extensive organisational structure across the country or demonstrating prior electoral success in national elections.

***Table 4: Registration Criteria for Political Parties in Different Countries***

| Country | Requirements for registration |
|---|---|
| India | A political party must submit its party constitution, establish a central committee, maintain at least 100 members and a central office, and apply to the Election Commission within 30 days of its formation. |
| Sri Lanka | Registration requires the submission of the party constitution, proclamation and manifesto; a list of central committee members including at least one woman member; audited financial statements; and evidence of sustained political activities. |
| Nepal | Political parties must not use a name, symbol, or flag that promotes social division; maintain a democratic constitution and regulations, hold regular committee elections, establish a central committee and office, maintain records of sources of funds, and submit the signatures of at least 10,000 voters to qualify for participation in elections. |
| United Kingdom | Political parties must have a party constitution, a central committee, and a central office to secure registration. |

As a result, political party registration system in Bangladesh imposes relatively higher organisational and financial burdens on political parties, particularly new entrants. While these requirements are intended to encourage institutional development and organisational capacity, they may also create barriers to entry and limit opportunities for emerging political actors. Comparative evidence suggests that a more balanced registration framework could strengthen political pluralism while still ensuring minimum organisational standards and regulatory compliance.

### Legal Limitations in the Registration of Political Parties

According to Article 90E (2) of the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, if an application for political party registration is rejected, the Election Commission must notify the concerned party in writing within 15 days. However, the provision does not explicitly require the Commission to disclose the reasons for the rejection; it potentially limits transparency and undermines public confidence in the registration process.

### Irregularities and Political Influence in the Political Party Registration Process

Allegations of political influence and government interference have periodically emerged in relation to the registration of political parties in Bangladesh. Several interviewees reported that certain parties had obtained registration through government intervention, allegedly facilitated by state intelligence agencies. Conversely, several parties that fulfilled the prescribed requirements reportedly faced prolonged delays, administrative obstacles, or outright rejection and ultimately had to seek judicial remedies to secure registration.

Interviewees referred to allegations of unofficial financial transactions during field-level inspections to verify local party offices, organisational structures, and other registration requirements; however, concrete institutional evidence of such practices remains difficult to establish. One Election Commission official observed, *"In some cases, registration-related*

*financial transactions have occurred; however, it is not certain whether these amounted merely to 'snacks/refreshments' or constituted 'registration trading'."*

Overall, although political party registration is a crucial democratic and institutional process, its implementation has been accompanied by allegations of irregularities, limited transparency, informal financial transactions, and political influence.

The study also highlights concerns regarding Article 90H(1)(b) of the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, which authorises the Election Commission to suspend the registration of a political party if the government suspends that party's political activities. This provision creates an opportunity for executive influence over the Election Commission's autonomy in determining the registration status of political parties. Moreover, the provision risks being used deliberately against opposition parties, potentially restricting their political activities and hindering their participation in national elections.

### Legal Challenges in the Financial Management of Political Parties

The Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, contains provisions that regulate political party financing. Under Article 90F (1)(a), a political party may receive donations of up to BDT 5 million from an individual, company, or organisation in a calendar year. Donations exceeding BDT 50,000 must be made through banking channels and disclosed in the tax returns of the individuals or entities making the contributions. The law also prohibits registered political parties from receiving donations, grants, gifts, assets, or services from foreign states, foreign donor agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or foreign citizens [Article 90F (2)].

However, the existing legal framework does not require political parties to publicly disclose the sources of their donations or subject these contributions to independent verification by the Election Commission. It also does not explicitly prohibit donations from companies or institutions with contractual or business relationships with the government. Furthermore, the law does not establish a mechanism for verifying the ultimate origin and beneficial ownership of donations.

These legal limitations create several practical challenges. The absence of mandatory disclosure and verification requirements increases the risk of conflicts of interest, particularly when parties are in power, receive contributions from entities with business interests or contractual relationships with the state. Moreover, the lack of requirements to disclose and verify beneficial ownership of donors creates scope for individuals or entities to channel multiple contributions under different names, potentially circumventing the prescribed donation limits. Similarly, the absence of effective mechanisms to verify the origin of contributions creates opportunities for political parties to receive funds indirectly from foreign sources, despite the legal prohibition on such financing.

### Legal Limitations in Ensuring Transparency and Accountability in Political Finance

Under the Political Party Registration Rules, 2008, political parties must submit a bank account number, the bank's name, and the latest account balance with their registration application. Registered political parties must submit a copy of their audited financial statements for the previous calendar year to the Election Commission by 31 July each year.

Although the legal framework requires political parties to maintain a bank account for registration purposes, it does not mandate that all financial transactions across different levels of the party's organisational structure be conducted through banking channels. The legal framework also lacks specific provisions regulating political party donations and financial transactions conducted through Mobile Financial Services (MFS).

In addition, political parties are not required to maintain and consolidate financial accounts from all organisational levels into a single, comprehensive financial statement. Although parties are required to submit audited financial statements to the Election Commission, the legal framework does not require the Election Commission to independently verify or publicly disclose these financial reports.

In practice, financial transactions are generally made through bank accounts at the central level, while transactions at lower organisational levels are often carried out in cash or through informal channels. Consequently, financial reports typically do not capture the accounts of all tiers of the party organisation. Although audited financial statements are submitted to the Election Commission, they are not subject to independent verification. Moreover, neither the Election Commission nor political parties make these financial reports publicly accessible.

### Compliance with National Laws and Regulations

A political party must possess a written constitution containing clearly defined provisions to fulfil the registration requirements defined in Article 90C(1)(a) of the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, and Rule 6 of the Political Party Registration Rules, 2008.

Among the 32 political parties included in the study, party constitutions were obtained from 28 parties. Despite repeated attempts to contact the remaining four parties, their constitutions could not be collected. The parties whose constitutions were not obtained are Bangladesh Muslim League, *Islami Oikya Jote*, Amar Bangladesh Party (AB Party), and Jatiya Nagorik Party (NCP).

The review found that the constitutions of seven political parties contain provisions that are inconsistent with various provisions and the spirit of the Constitution of Bangladesh, including the principle that all power belongs to the people, and the principles of nationalism, secularism and freedom of religion, and non-discrimination on grounds of religion.

***Table 5: Political Parties with Constitutional Inconsistencies in Their Party Constitutions***

| Serial No. | Party Name |
|---|---|
| 1 | Jatiya Party |
| 2 | Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami |
| 3 | Jamiate Ulama-e-Islam Bangladesh |
| 4 | Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis |
| 5 | Khelafat Majlis |
| 6 | Bangladesh Muslim League - BML |
| 7 | Bangladesh Labour Party |

The Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, prohibits a political party from establishing or maintaining any affiliated or associate organisation composed of students, teachers, employees or workers of financial, commercial, industrial, or other professional institutions and organisations [Article 90B (1)(b)(iii)]. This provision is largely absent in many party constitutions, and almost all major political parties operate student and professional organisations under the designation of affiliated, associate, or fraternal bodies. In many cases, student wings of such parties use the central office premises of the parent political party as their official contact address.

The RPO, 1972 also prohibits political parties from establishing or operating offices, branches, or committees outside the territorial boundaries of Bangladesh [Article 90C(1)(e)]. Nevertheless, the constitutions of two major political parties, the Bangladesh Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), contain provisions referring to the organisation and operation of party activities abroad in accordance with party ideals, objectives, policies, and principles.

Although the constitutions of most political parties do not explicitly provide for the operation of overseas organisations, the study found evidence of foreign branches and party activities conducted abroad by at least six political parties. These include the Jatiya Party, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, Jaker Party, Islami Oikya Jote, Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish, and the National Citizen Party (NCP).

## Internal Democracy

### Leadership Election, Candidate Nomination, and Competition

The constitutions of all political parties reviewed provide for the election of the party president or chairperson through the party's central or national council. In practice, however, although party leaders are generally elected at national council sessions, elections are conducted through voice votes rather than by secret ballot.

The study further finds that, in most political parties, there is no practice of having multiple candidates contest for the position of party president. Only two parties, the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and the Amar Bangladesh Party (AB Party), have provisions for more than one candidate competing for the party's top leadership position.

The absence of secret-ballot elections contributes to the concentration of authority in the hands of a single individual within the party and limits the scope for the expression of differing views and opinions by party members.

The constitutions of most political parties do not specify how many times or for how long an individual may serve as the party's top leader. The only exception is the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), whose constitution includes such provisions. As a result, many parties function under the leadership of their founders or members of the founders' families for extended periods. The study also found that party constitutions generally do not specify minimum organisational experience requirements for candidates seeking top leadership positions. In the absence of clearly defined experience criteria, factors such as family background, wealth, and personal influence often become more important than organisational experience in leadership selection. Overall, the constitutions of political

parties provide limited guidance about leadership tenure and organisational qualifications for party leadership positions.

The process of selecting top leadership positions in Bangladesh's political parties is often characterised by a divergence between constitutional provisions and actual practice. One of the key factors contributing to the limited application of democratic leadership selection processes is the prevalence of family-based leadership succession and the concentration of influence and authority in the hands of individual leaders. From a governance perspective, the democratic selection of party leadership constitutes a fundamental pillar of internal party democracy.

### Family-Centred Leadership Selection

The study found that the absence of internal democratic practices in leadership selection is reflected in the fact that, among the political parties included in the research, leadership in ten parties has been transferred within the same family. Such succession has occurred from parent to child, sibling to sibling, and spouse to spouse. The most common form of family-centred leadership succession is the transfer of leadership from a parent to a child.

***Table 6: Leadership Selection and Succession Based on Family Ties of Political Parties***

- Bangladesh Awami League (currently inactive)
- Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)
- Jatiya Party
- Jaker Party
- Bangladesh Muslim League
- National People's Party (NPP)
- Bangladesh National Awami Party (Bangladesh NAP)
- Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish
- Jatiya Ganatantrik Party (Jagpa)
- Bangladesh Justice Party

### Tenure of Party Leaders in Different Political Parties

In many political parties, leadership continuity is heavily dependent on the personal popularity and influence of the incumbent leader. A common perception among party members is that replacing a long-serving leader could weaken the party politically or even lead to internal fragmentation.

The study found that, among the 32 political parties reviewed, the leaders of 20 parties have served in their positions for less than 10 years, the leaders of 5 parties have served for 10 to 20 years, and the leaders of 7 parties have remained in office for more than 20 years. Overall, 12 party leaders have held their positions for ten years or longer. Notably, the leaders of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Bangladesh Awami League have served as party chiefs for approximately 41 years and 45 years, respectively. However, the BNP has recently experienced a change in party leadership.

### Formation of Central and Local Committees of Political Parties

The constitutions of three political parties do not specify the tenure of their central committees, while the constitution of one party, Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish, does not clearly describe the process for forming its committee. The parties whose constitutions do

not mention the tenure of the central committee are Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish, Khelafat Majlish, and the State Reform Movement.

At the local level, the constitutions of two parties, Nagorik Oikya and the State Reform Movement, do not specify the tenure of local committees. In the case of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), the formation of local committees is governed by guidelines determined by the central committee. In addition, it is observed that the same individuals often continue to lead local committees for extended periods.

### Decision-Making Processes of Political Parties

Although party constitutions generally outline formal structures for internal decision-making, including national councils, central executive committees, and subcommittees, the decision-making processes of most political parties remain largely influenced by individuals. While all party constitutions designate the national council or convention as the highest decision-making forum, the study found that council meetings are irregular in 16 political parties. In many cases, these forums primarily serve to endorse decisions that have already been made.

At the grassroots level, district, upazila, and ward committees are mainly responsible for implementing central decisions, conducting election campaigns, and carrying out organisational activities. However, their opportunities to contribute to policy formulation or strategic decision-making remain limited.

### Candidate Nomination Process for Election

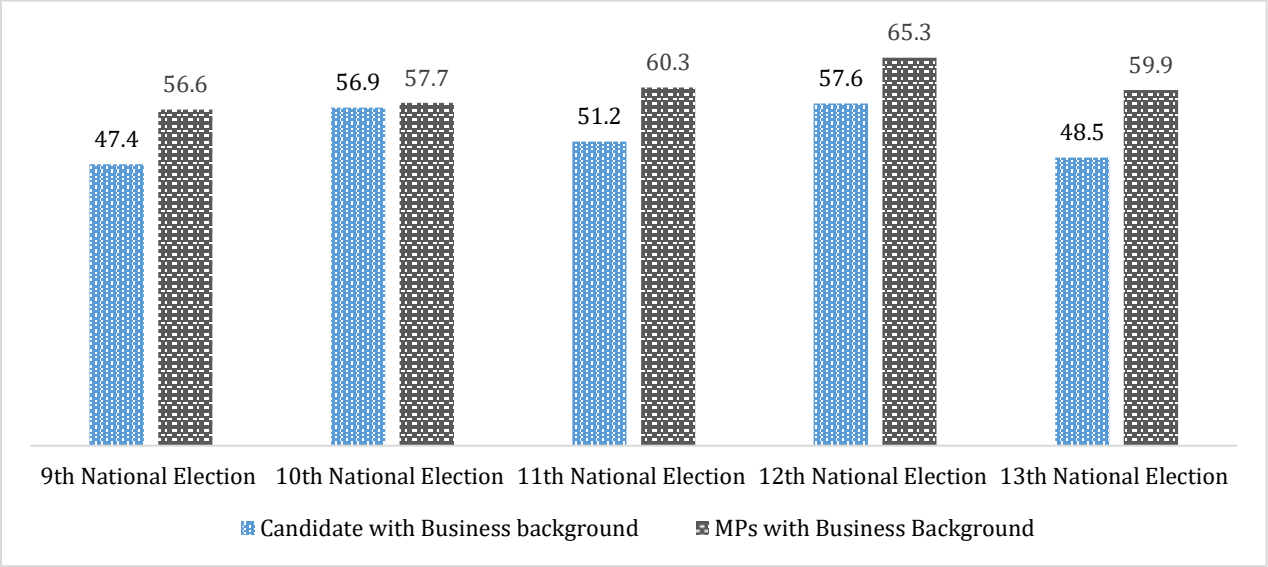
According to the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, when selecting candidates for elections, the central nomination board is expected to consider the panel of nominees proposed by local committees from the relevant electoral constituency. However, in practice, the nomination board in most political parties selects candidates for election, based on interviews and deliberations, ignoring the legal mandate. In this process, the views and preferences of the party leader generally receive the greatest weight.

Most of the parties' constitutions do not clearly specify the qualifications and disqualifications of an aspiring candidate. Although some parties refer to criteria such as competence, popularity, integrity, and loyalty to the party, these requirements are often not clearly defined. The study found that, in selecting candidates, political parties generally place greater emphasis on a candidate's popularity within the constituency and demonstrated loyalty to the party leadership. In larger and more influential parties, financial resources and political influence are also considered as important factors in the nomination process. It is noteworthy that the RPO, 1972 previously required an individual to be an active member of a political party for at least three years to receive the party's nomination as a candidate. However, this provision was repealed in 2013, and no such requirement currently exists.

The study finds that influential political parties often prioritise a candidate's financial capacity and business background during the nomination process. Allegations of nomination trading have been raised against three major political parties (BNP, Awami League and Jatiya Party) in connection with the selection of electoral candidates. A notable trend that is observed is the increasing proportion of businesspersons among both electoral candidates and elected Members of Parliament over the last five parliamentary elections. The share of

businessperson candidates and elected businessperson MPs in the last five parliamentary elections was as follows.

***Figure 1: Percentage of Candidates and MPS with Business Background in the Last Five National Parliamentary Elections***




The findings indicate that businesspersons have consistently constituted a significant proportion of both electoral candidates and elected representatives in recent parliamentary elections.

## Participation and Inclusion

### Inclusion of Women in Central Committees

The Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972 requires political parties to ensure that at least 33 per cent of committee positions at all levels are occupied by women, with the target to be achieved gradually by 2030. The study found, however, that in most political parties, the inclusion of women in committees at different levels remains largely symbolic. Four political parties have not incorporated the 33 per cent target into their constitutions. The Jamaat-e-Islami and Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish have no women serving on the central committee.

In the case of Khelafat Majlish, the committee list includes the names of all male members, while only two women are mentioned from among 37 female members. The remaining members are listed collectively as “35 female members.” In Jaker Party, one female member was counted five times because she was named in five different positions of the central committee. Six parties did not disclose sufficient information to determine the level of women's representation in their central committees.

### Nomination of Women Candidates in Elections

Women are represented in the National Parliament through both direct elections and reserved seats. However, most political parties remain reluctant to nominate women as candidates in direct elections. Political parties commonly attribute this to a shortage of qualified female candidates and the comparatively lower participation of women in active

politics. However, the constitutions of two political parties, the Jatiya Party and the Bangladesh Labour Party, include provisions to nominate 5 per cent and 10 per cent women candidates respectively. In practice, these constitutional provisions have not been implemented during candidate nomination.

Across the most recent parliamentary election and the preceding four national parliamentary elections, the proportion of women nominated as candidates in direct elections remained below 5 per cent. The figures for women candidates in the last five parliamentary elections are as follows.

***Table 7: Rate of Nomination of Female Candidates in the Last Five National Parliamentary Elections***

| Parliamentary Election | Year | Total Candidates | Women Candidates (Direct) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9th Parliament | 2008 | 1,567 | 59 | 3.76% |
| 10th Parliament | 2014 | 548 | 19 | 3.47% |
| 11th Parliament | 2018 | 1,861 | 68 | 3.67% |
| 12th Parliament | 2024 | 1,896 | 94 | 4.96% |
| 13th Parliament | 2026 | 2,028 | 83 | 4.09% |

### Nomination of Women Candidates in Elections

Although political parties committed to nominating at least 5 per cent women candidates in the 13th National Parliamentary Election, the study found that women's participation in candidate nomination remained limited among the parties reviewed. Among the parties that participated in the election, 13 political parties did not nominate a single woman candidate. In addition, 12 parties nominated women candidates at a rate below 3.1 per cent. By contrast, women constituted 7.9 per cent of all independent candidates in the election.

Women's representation through the nomination process for reserved seats in the National Parliament is also largely determined by factors such as loyalty to party leadership, personal influence, and family connections rather than women activists' contributions to the party, merit, or political experience. As a result, women's representation in Parliament continues to remain largely symbolic.

## Accountability Mechanisms

### Organisation of National Conferences (Council/Party Congress/Majlish Shura)

National conferences serve as the highest forum for policy formulation within political parties and are intended to ensure the accountability of both the central committee and party leadership.

Although the constitutions of all political parties require the regular organisation of national conferences, the study found that 16 political parties do not hold these conferences regularly. Among them, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has not organised a national conference for more than ten years. Of the political parties reviewed, 12 parties hold national conferences regularly, 16 parties do so irregularly, and for 8 parties, sufficient information on the organisation of national conferences was not available.

The findings indicate that while national conferences are formally recognised as the highest decision-making and accountability forum within political parties, their regular convening varies considerably across parties.

### Internal Party Discipline Mechanism

The constitutions of political parties generally do not specify the kinds of violations by party leaders and activists that merit disciplinary action, corresponding sanctions, procedures for receiving complaints, access to information, decision-making processes, or appeal mechanisms. As a result, the enforcement of disciplinary measures often lacks clarity and consistency.

None of the political parties reviewed has a separate code of conduct for party leaders and activists. In addition, there is no formal mechanism through which concerned citizens can lodge complaints against party members.

The absence of clear codes of conduct and weak internal accountability mechanisms has contributed to situations in which leaders and activists of ruling parties and parties closely associated with power become involved in various criminal and unethical activities, including violence, murder, extortion, land grabbing, corruption, gambling, drug trafficking, and sexual harassment. In many cases, individuals accused of or involved in such activities are not subjected to disciplinary action; instead, some are rewarded with important party positions and responsibilities.

According to data from the Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 4,280 incidents of political violence were recorded between January 2013 and August 2026, resulting in injuries to 46,351 political activists and the deaths of 786 political activists. Most incidents of political violence were associated with the Bangladesh Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), although in some cases connections were also identified with Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, the Jatiya Party, and the National Citizen Party (NCP).

## Information Disclosure

Among the 32 political parties included in the study, 24 parties maintain official websites, although only 16 of those websites were found to be active. The study identified significant shortcomings in the proactive disclosure of information through these websites.

The types of information most commonly published on party websites include contact addresses and phone numbers; these were available on 15 websites, and lists of central committee members were available on 13 websites. Party constitutions were published by 9 parties, while electoral manifestos were available on 7 websites. Information relating to local committees was published by only 3 parties, and data on party membership was available on the website of just one party. None of the active party websites published audited financial reports, election expenditure statements, codes of conduct, or mechanisms for submitting complaints. The findings indicate that although some basic organisational information is publicly available, the disclosure of governance, accountability, and transparency-related information remains very limited on political party websites.

## Financial Management

### Party Financial Policies and Operational Guidelines

The study found that none of the political parties reviewed has a separate financial policy or financial management guideline.

Although party constitutions have provisions on income and expenditure, membership fees, conditions for accepting donations, nomination form fees, record-keeping, financial transactions, expenditure, auditing, and financial accountability, these provisions are generally not detailed and remain insufficiently specified.

The study also found that political parties do not prepare annual budgets regularly. Instead, party income and expenditure are largely activity-based, particularly linked to party meetings, rallies, and other organisational events. Consequently, party finances are often dependent on temporary donations and contributions received for specific activities.

### Main Sources of Party Income and Expenditure

Political parties generate income from a variety of sources. These include membership fees, collected on a monthly or annual basis, as well as donations received from party leaders and activists, elected public representatives, supporters, businesspersons, industrial establishments, and well-wishers.

Additional sources of income include nomination fees collected from aspiring candidates, fundraising activities conducted both online and offline, proceeds from the sale of party publications, and income earned from party-owned assets. Such assets may include party buildings, offices, bank deposits, trusts, foundations, or business enterprises, from which parties may receive interest, profits, or rental income.

Political party expenditures are incurred across several areas. One-time expenses associated with party registration include office establishment, printing party documents, and registration fees. Recurring administrative expenditures include office rent, utilities, accommodation, salaries and allowances, stationery, publicity, and financial auditing.

Political parties also spend resources on meetings, conferences, and political programmes, including national or local council sessions, conferences, meetings, rallies, observance of national days, campaign activities, and organisational visits. Election-related expenditures include candidate campaign expenses, participation of party leaders in various public events, public meetings, processions, and campaign activities.

In addition, parties provide support and assistance to party activists, including legal assistance, medical treatment, and emergency support when necessary.

### Record Keeping and Submission of Financial Reports

The annual audited income and expenditure statements submitted by political parties are generally not disclosed publicly by either the parties or the Election Commission.

Based on the 2025 income and expenditure statements of eight political parties that were available through various public sources, the reported annual income of political parties ranged from BDT 18.2 million to BDT 236.8 million, while reported annual expenditures ranged from BDT 18.7 million to BDT 239.1 million.

These reported figures appear relatively low compared to the actual scale of political party activities. At the same time, reliable information regarding the parties' actual income and expenditure remains largely unavailable.

### Irregularities in Annual Accounts and Audit Reporting

Although political parties are legally required to have all income and expenditure audited by independent auditors, the study found that many parties prepare and submit audit reports to the Election Commission primarily as a compliance exercise, rather than as part of a comprehensive and verifiable financial accountability process.

### Estimated Annual Expenditure of Political Parties

Based on an analysis of office management costs and programme-related expenditures, the study estimated the annual operating costs of a political party under different organisational scenarios.

A political party maintaining the minimum organisational structure required for registration, consisting of committees in 22 districts and 101 upazilas, is estimated to incur annual expenditures of approximately BDT 140 million to BDT 250 million.

For a political party having organisational structures across all districts/metropolitan areas, upazilas, and municipalities/unions, the estimated annual expenditure rises to approximately BDT 3.02 billion to BDT 3.93 billion.

Where party activities extend to the ward level in addition to district/metropolitan, upazila, and municipality/union levels, the estimated annual expenditure increases further to approximately BDT 15.32 billion to BDT 21.88 billion.

These estimates are based on regular annual operating costs, including office management and routine organisational activities, and do not include election-related expenditures. The calculations are based on 2025 cost estimates.

### Estimated Income of Political Parties

Due to inadequate record-keeping practices and the confidential nature of party finances, it is difficult to estimate the actual income of political parties from sources other than membership fees.

Based on an analysis of membership fee structures and membership levels, the study estimated the minimum annual income that a political party could generate solely from membership fees under different organisational arrangements.

A political party maintaining the minimum organisational structure required for registration, consisting of committees in 22 districts and 101 upazilas, could generate an estimated minimum annual income of approximately BDT 2.6 million from membership fees alone.

A political party with organisational structures extending to all districts/metropolitan areas, upazilas, and municipalities/unions could generate an estimated minimum annual income of approximately BDT 380 million from membership fees.

Where party organisations extend to the ward level in addition to district/metropolitan, upazila, and municipality/union levels, the estimated minimum annual income from membership fees could reach approximately BDT 1.16 billion.

These estimates are based solely on membership fee contributions and are calculated according to the number of members and membership fee rates specified for party committees at different organisational levels.

### Fundraising Practices of Political Parties

The study found that most political parties raise substantial funds to cover their expenditures through informal means, often based on specific programmes or organisational needs. These sources and transactions are generally not reflected in the parties' official financial reports.

At the local level, the costs of maintaining party offices and conducting party activities are largely covered by contributions made by individual leaders and activists. In some cases, particularly where party leaders or activists hold power or are likely to gain power in the future, funds are collected from businesspersons, industrialists, and other influential individuals through various means.

In larger political parties, business professionals and other affluent individuals often make significant donations or contributions in the expectation of securing important party positions, electoral nominations, or future opportunities and benefits. Some political parties also engage in fundraising activities on a comparatively limited scale.

The substantial financial demands of political parties create risks of political corruption and the politicisation of criminal activities. At the same time, dependence on individual financiers contributes to the development of patron-client relationships within party organisations.

## Irregularities and Corruption: Criminalisation of Politics & Politicistion of Crimes

Among the political parties studied, 18 party's constitutions do not specify minimum standards of integrity or ethical conduct as qualifications for party membership. In addition, there is no restriction on individuals involved in criminal activities from obtaining party membership or holding important party positions.

The study found that the financial demands for managing party activities, meeting organisational expenses, expanding political influence, and controlling electoral processes often make political parties dependent on wealthy and influential individuals. As a result, individuals who accumulate wealth through illegal means and possess significant financial resources seek to enter politics to secure protection and enhance their social status through political power. The study observed that influential political parties have, in many cases, attracted individuals accused of involvement in extortion, human trafficking, smuggling, arms and drug trafficking, prostitution-related activities, and other criminal offences.

Data from the last five parliamentary elections also indicate that between 18 per cent and 32 per cent of electoral candidates faced one or more criminal cases alleging involvement in various offences. Although candidates nominated by political parties in power or those with significant influence may violate the electoral code of conduct and various state laws and regulations, the constitutions of these parties contain no clear provisions or effective

mechanisms to ensure accountability for such violations. These may include concealing information or providing false or incomplete information in election affidavits regarding candidates' wealth, loans, business interests, or foreign citizenship.

Party constitutions also generally lack clear provisions about the planning and monitoring of campaign expenditures, the sources of campaign funds, financial oversight, and the submission of financial reports by nominated candidates. During the 12th National Parliamentary Election, candidates spent on average 169.5 per cent more than the legally prescribed expenditure limit, yet political parties rarely questioned such expenditures.

Interview respondents highlighted the scale of election spending. One party leader stated that, in some constituencies, up to BDT 2.5 million may be spent in a single day during an election campaign. Another leader remarked that BDT 100,000 is considered the minimum amount required in the electoral field, while a district-level political leader reported that the campaign expenditure of a candidate from a major political party exceeded BDT 500 million in the 12th National Parliamentary Election.

The study also found substantial growth in the wealth of some elected representatives. Among 67 Members of Parliament in the 11th National Parliament, the personal assets of the members and the assets of 44 family members increased by more than 50 per cent over five years. In the most extreme cases, the assets of one Member of Parliament and that member's family increased by 5,470 per cent and 3,842 per cent, respectively. Despite allegations that some party leaders and activists accumulated wealth through criminal activities and corrupt practices, political parties generally did not take visible disciplinary action. In some cases, individuals accused of such activities were instead rewarded with important positions and responsibilities within the party.

## Overall Observations

Political parties in Bangladesh demonstrate significant deficiencies across the key dimensions of institutional governance, including transparency, accountability, democratic practices, participation and inclusion, and the prevention of irregularities and corruption. Although Bangladesh has legal and regulatory provisions governing political party registration and participation in national elections, the existing legal framework lacks adequate safeguards to ensure internal democracy, transparency in political financing, and accountability within political parties. Moreover, the framework is not fully aligned with international good practices.

These institutional weaknesses are further reflected in political parties' compliance with existing legal and regulatory requirements. Political parties have a tendency to disregard relevant state laws and regulations, including the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and provisions of their own party constitutions. Even where compliance is observed, it is largely symbolic rather than substantive. This gap between formal requirements and actual practices is also evident in the regulatory framework governing party registration. Certain provisions of this framework are inconsistent with international good practices and reflect an overly control-oriented regulatory approach. At the same time, the absence of effective transparency and accountability mechanisms creates conditions for money-dependent competitive clientelism from the outset of party formation. Consequently,

political parties become dependent on the patronage of wealthy individuals, including businesspeople, to establish and sustain their organisational activities.

Such dependence is reinforced by the substantial financial resources required to operate and sustain political parties within the existing political culture. However, these resources are largely managed through informal processes and personalised expenditure arrangements. This limits financial transparency and contributes to a considerable discrepancy between the income and expenditure figures officially reported by political parties and their actual financial activities. The predominance of individual-dependent financing and informal funding sources further reinforces individual- and family-centred leadership structures within party organisations.

The influence of illicit money, business interests, and criminal networks represents another dimension of these financial and institutional governance challenges. Such influence is particularly evident among political parties that hold power or remain close to it. It contributes to the criminalisation of politics and, in many cases, these practices are transforming political participation and party positions into power-centred business models.

Despite existing legal obligations and political parties' stated commitments, little substantive progress has been made in ensuring women's inclusion in party structures and activities. Political parties are reluctant to promote women's participation, and women's representation in some cases remains nominal or symbolic rather than meaningful. More broadly, the lack of democratic practices, grassroots-level participation, and meaningful inclusion of women has contributed to the persistence of centralised and individual-centred leadership, dynastic succession, authoritarianism, elitism, oligarchic structures, and patriarchal organisational cultures within political parties.

The absence of effective preventive mechanisms against the abuse of power, irregularities, and corruption—beyond ad hoc measures adopted in the name of organisational interests—combined with weak accountability arrangements, also contributes to the misuse of money and muscle power, political corruption, and political violence increasingly commonplace, particularly within larger political parties.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the governance challenges facing political parties in Bangladesh are interconnected and rooted in weaknesses in their institutional structures, regulatory arrangements, financial practices, and internal democratic processes. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive internal reforms to strengthen transparency, accountability, democratic practices, and meaningful participation and inclusion. The primary responsibility for initiating and implementing these reforms rests with the political parties themselves.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to ensure good governance in the institutional functioning of political parties in Bangladesh.

1. Amend the Representation of the People Order (RPO), 1972, and the Political Party Registration Rules, 2008, to ensure transparency and accountability in the activities of political parties. The amendments should include the following provisions:

- Simplify the conditions for political party registration in line with international good practices and introduce a periodic review and renewal process within a clearly defined timeframe.
- Prohibit individuals who are disqualified from being elected as Members of Parliament under the RPO, 1972, from becoming members of the general or executive committees of registered political parties.
- Require the central nomination board to finalise parliamentary election nominations from a panel of candidates prepared through secret ballots by local party members in the respective constituencies.
- Make a minimum of three years of party membership a mandatory qualification for receiving a party nomination in national parliamentary elections.
- Require all political parties to publicly disclose their financial reports.
- Introduce and enforce standardised and up-to-date accounting systems for political parties.
- Require all financial transactions exceeding a specified threshold at every level of party organisations to be conducted through bank accounts.
- Require political parties to consolidate all income and expenditure accounts from local and central levels into a single comprehensive financial statement.
- Empower the Election Commission to verify the annual audited financial statements submitted by political parties.
- Require political parties to maintain websites containing regularly updated information.

2. Bring political parties within the scope of the Right to Information Act, 2009.
3. Ensure transparency in the Election Commission's procedures and activities relating to the registration of political parties.
4. Strengthen the Election Commission's capacity to verify the financial accounts of political parties and oversee their organisational activities and introduce effective measures to address violations of legal requirements.
5. Establish a list of registered chartered accountancy firms under the supervision of the Election Commission and require political parties to have their financial transactions audited by firms included in this list.
6. Require political parties to formulate and implement codes of conduct, financial policies, gender policies, and integrity policies to regulate their organisational activities.
7. Require political parties to convene their councils regularly at predetermined intervals, as stipulated in their constitutions, and ensure that leadership at every organisational level is elected through secret ballots.
8. Establish a clear limit on the length of time an individual may hold the position of party chief or other senior leadership positions.

9. Ensure the inclusion of women and marginalised communities in party leadership structures and electoral nominations.
10. Establish clear eligibility and disqualification criteria for leadership elections and candidate nominations within political parties.
11. Take exemplary disciplinary action against party leaders and activists involved in breaches of party discipline and various criminal activities.
12. Introduce preventive screening mechanisms to prevent the infiltration of criminal elements into political parties.