

Life Against Deathworlds: Bangladesh's July Charter 2025 and the Reconfiguration of Power

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Abstract

The July–August 2024 mass uprising in Bangladesh marked a definitive rupture in the nation's political trajectory, culminating in the collapse of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's fifteen-year tenure. In the aftermath, the interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus initiated a profound restructuring of the state. Throughout 2025, this transition materialised through three interconnected processes: the dismantling of the previous regime's 'necropolitical' apparatus of state-sponsored violence; the drafting of the July National Charter 2025 to overhaul the constitution; and the preparation for a historic joint general election and constitutional referendum. This perspective outlines how Bangladesh has navigated the transition from an authoritarian system characterised by severe human rights abuses to a nascent, reform-bound democracy, analysing the legal, electoral, and human dimensions of this ongoing transformation.

Keywords: Bangladesh's July Charter 2025; Election; Necropolitics; Bangladesh

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Introduction: The Rupture of 2024 and the Mandate for 2025

The political landscape of Bangladesh was fundamentally rewritten in the summer of 2024. What began as a student-led movement against a controversial public sector quota system rapidly evolved into a mass uprising—dubbed the "July Revolution." The violent suppression of these protests, which resulted in over 1,400 deaths, shattered the legitimacy of the ruling Awami League (AL) and forced Sheikh Hasina to flee the country on 05 August 2024 (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

The subsequent installation of an interim government under Muhammad Yunus was tasked with an unprecedented mandate: not merely to hold new elections, but to fundamentally repair the social contract. The year 2025 became defined by a struggle to institutionalise the demands of the youth and political opposition. This effort necessitated a simultaneous dismantling of the state's architecture of violent repression, the negotiation of a new constitutional framework known as the July Charter 2025 (July National Charter 2025, 2025) and the orchestration of an electoral process designed to prevent the resurgence of autocratic rule (International Crisis Group, 2025).

The Baseline: Necropolitics in Pre-Transition Bangladesh

To understand the magnitude of the reforms undertaken in 2025, it is necessary to examine the prior state of affairs through the lens of necropolitics. Coined by Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe, necropolitics refers to the use of social and political power to dictate how some people may live and how some must die—essentially, the state's power to subjugate populations to the status of the 'living dead' (Mbembe, 2003; see also Biswas & Bhattacharyya, 2025). Achille Mbembe expands on Michel Foucault's concept of biopower (Foucault, 1975; 1978)—the power to "make live and let die"—by arguing that it does not fully capture the extreme forms of

violence that define colonialism, slavery, occupation, and contemporary warfare. According to Mbembe, modern sovereignty is not only about managing life; it is fundamentally about the power to dictate death. This shift from the governance of life to the governance of death is what he terms necropolitics. The key concepts underpinning necropolitics are:

Sovereignty as the Power of Death

For Mbembe, the ultimate expression of sovereignty is not the ability to create laws or regulate populations, but the authority to decide who may live and who must die. This includes the power to expose certain groups to death, abandonment, or conditions that make survival nearly impossible.

The State of Exception

Necropolitics operates through spaces where normal legal protections are suspended. These zones—such as occupied territories, borderlands, refugee camps, or militarised regions—become legal voids where violence can be exercised without accountability. People living in these spaces exist outside the usual guarantees of citizenship and rights.

Death-Worlds

Mbembe describes "death-worlds" as social and political environments in which large populations are subjected to conditions so harsh, precarious, or dehumanising that they exist in a state of the "living dead." These are spaces where life is systematically diminished, controlled, or rendered disposable.

In the 21st century, necropolitics has shifted from the battlefield to the bureaucratic desk (Biswas & Bhattacharyya, 2025). It is no longer only about a ruler deciding who will be executed; it is about administrative systems determining which populations are 'too costly' to protect or 'too risky' to admit. Death is managed not through overt violence, but through policy decisions, resource allocation, and the quiet calculus of expendability.

It remains well documented that Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan following a series of necropolitical events, including the genocide during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War that killed about three million people (Ahmed, 2022; Das et al., 2022; Das & Hoque, 2024). However, even after independence, Bangladesh witnessed a necropolitical landscape under the previous administrations that were characterised by structural violence, lack of accountability, and the systemic categorisation of political dissidents as disposable lives (Das et al., 2022; Jahan, 2002; 2005; Mannan, 2021; Maniruzzaman, 1990; 2003).

The architecture of state violence of Bangladeshi necropolitics, primarily by the Hasina administration, included specialised law enforcement units, such as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and the Detective Branch (DB), alongside violently mobilised partisan factions. The United Nations Human Rights Office (2025) released a comprehensive report documenting that the former government systematically engaged in serious human rights violations (Bhattacharyya, 2026, 2026a). Key elements of this necropolitical system included:

- **Ayna Ghor (The House of Mirrors):** A network of secret, extrajudicial detention centres operated by state intelligence agencies. Victims of enforced disappearances were held in these facilities for years, stripped of their legal existence, and isolated from the outside world.
- **Extrajudicial Killings:** The normalisation of ‘crossfire’ incidents—a euphemism for the arbitrary execution of political opponents and marginalised individuals without trial.
- **The Weaponisation of the Judiciary:** The use of mass, fabricated litigation to paralyse the political opposition, effectively ending their ability to participate in the biopolitical life of the state.

The climax of this necropolitical governance occurred during the July 2024 protests. As the UN report highlighted, the state deployed a

‘shoot-to-kill’ policy against unarmed students and children, utilising metal pellets and live ammunition to violently repress anti-government dissent (OHCHR, 2025; United Nations Human Rights, 2025). The state’s willingness to slaughter its youth demonstrated the ultimate expression of necropolitical sovereignty: the absolute right to kill to maintain power.

The Improvement of the Necropolitical Situation in 2025

Following the regime change, the Yunus-led interim administration prioritised the dismantling of this death-centric governance model. The improvement of the necropolitical situation in 2025 was marked by both institutional accountability and the physical liberation of state victims.

Dismantling the Machinery of Death

One of the most symbolically potent actions of the interim government was the exposure and closure of the ‘Ayna Ghor’ facilities. Political prisoners, dissidents, and Indigenous rights activists who had been disappeared for over a decade were returned to their families. This act effectively reversed their necropolitical status, restoring their legal and physical personhood. Furthermore, Bangladesh acceded to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, legally binding the state to prevent future atrocities.

The Pursuit of Accountability

The year 2025 saw unprecedented legal action against the architects of the previous regime’s violence. The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in Bangladesh, originally established to prosecute 1971 war crimes, was repurposed to address the July 2024 massacres. In November 2025, the tribunal delivered a landmark verdict, sentencing Sheikh Hasina (in absentia) and former Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal to death for crimes against humanity (Chatham House, 2025). While the application of the death penalty remains a controversial biopolitical tool itself, the trials signalled a definitive end to the era of absolute impunity.

Lingering Challenges and Retaliatory Violence

Despite profound structural improvements, the transition away from necropolitics has been fraught with challenges. Human Rights Watch (2025) noted that while state-sponsored enforced disappearances largely ceased, a vacuum of security allowed for episodic mob justice and retaliatory violence against perceived Awami League loyalists and minority communities.

The interim government struggled with ‘revenge politics.’ Between August 2024 and September 2025, police lodged cases against nearly 100,000 individuals, many of them unnamed Awami League supporters, leading to concerns of arbitrary detention mirroring the tactics of the past (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The improvement of the necropolitical situation, therefore, remains fragile; while the *state* has ceased systematic extrajudicial killings, the societal trauma and partisan polarisation continue to threaten the physical security of citizens.

Institutionalising the Revolution: The July National Charter 2025

To ensure that the necropolitical authoritarianism of the past could not be resurrected by a future elected government, the interim administration and civic leaders sought to rewrite the rules of governance. This, as already mentioned above, culminated in the **July National Charter 2025** (Bengali: জুলাই জাতীয় সনদ ২০২৫).

The Drafting Process and Consensus Building

Drafted by the National Consensus Commission (NCC) based on the recommendations of six distinct reform commissions, the Charter aimed to consolidate over 80 proposals for constitutional, judicial, and electoral reform. Throughout mid-2025, gruelling negotiations took place between the interim government and 30 political parties.

Despite ideological differences—most notably 11 notes of dissent from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) regarding the limitation of future parliamentary powers—the Charter

was formally signed on 17 October 2025, at the South Plaza of the Jatiya Sangsad by 26 political parties (ConstitutionNet, 2025).

Key Constitutional Reforms

The July Charter represents a paradigm shift in Bangladeshi political philosophy, moving away from centralised executive dominance toward a system of checks and balances. Its foundational reforms include:

- **Curtailing Executive Dominance:** The Charter imposes a strict 10-year term limit on the Prime Minister. Furthermore, it requires the approval of the cabinet and opposition leaders to declare a state of emergency, stripping the Prime Minister of the unilateral power historically used to suspend civil liberties.
- **Bicameral Legislature:** To prevent the "dictatorship of the majority," the Charter proposes a 100-seat Upper House (Senate) elected through proportional representation, distinct from the 300-seat first-past-the-post Lower House.
- **Judicial Independence:** The Chief Justice is to be appointed strictly from the Appellate Division, and a new Supreme Judicial Council will control the appointment of lower court judges, insulating the judiciary from executive coercion.
- **Redefining National Identity:** The Charter shifts away from ethno-linguistic nationalism. ‘Bangladeshi’ replaces ‘Bengali’ as the official nationality, and all mother languages spoken in the country are recognised alongside Bengali. The definition of secularism is recalibrated to ensure the “coexistence and due dignity of all communities,” with the aim of protecting Indigenous and minority rights.
- **Fundamental Rights:** Crucially, reflecting the tactics used to suppress the 2024 uprising, the Charter enshrines the right to uninterrupted internet service and the protection of personal data as fundamental, enforceable rights.

The Electoral Transition: The 2025 Preparation and 2026 Referendum

The success of the July Charter depended entirely on democratic ratification. Throughout 2025, the primary political friction centred on the timeline for elections. Traditional parties, eager to capitalise on the Awami League's absence, demanded immediate polls, while Yunus's administration insisted that structural reforms had to precede any election to prevent a relapse into autocratic governance.

The 2025 Political Landscape

The environment leading up to the elections was characterised by a massive realignment of political forces:

- **The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP):** Under the leadership of Tarique Rahman, who returned from exile, the BNP positioned itself as the dominant traditional force, forming the "Bangladesh National Alliance" (Future Center, 2026).
- **Jamaat-e-Islami:** Previously banned and heavily prosecuted, the Islamist party rebranded itself as a moderate democratic actor, advocating for proportional representation.
- **The Gen-Z Vanguard:** The youth leaders of the 2024 uprising formally entered the political arena, establishing forces like the National Citizen Party, demanding a 'Second Republic' free from dynastic politics.
- **The Awami League Ban:** Banned under anti-terrorism laws for its role in the July massacres, the AL was barred from

participating, leaving a massive vacuum in the electoral map.

The Joint Election and Constitutional Referendum

The compromise reached in late 2025 was the "July National Charter Implementation Order, 2025," which mandated that the next general election be held concurrently with a national constitutional referendum. This historic dual vote was scheduled for 12 February 2026 and executed successfully.

During the period in which the July 2025 Charter was being drafted to overhaul the constitution, Hindus and other ethnic minorities continued to face systemic persecution, creating a pervasive climate of fear. The recent high-profile lynching in Mymensingh and the murder of a 28-year-old Hindu man at the Champara Tea Garden in Moulvibazar—both occurring on the eve of the February 2026 election—further reinforce the pattern of lethal violence directed at minority communities (Biswas, 2026; Nath, 2026).

While the interim government led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus acknowledged 645 incidents of violence against minority groups in 2025, data from the Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities (HRCBM) reveal an even more alarming reality. Between 6 June 2025 and 5 January 2026, HRCBM documented the killing of 116 individuals belonging to minority communities (Figure 1) (News18.com, 2026; HRCBM, 2026; Sharma, 2026). These figures underscore the intensifying necropolitics shaping Bangladesh's contemporary sociopolitical landscape.

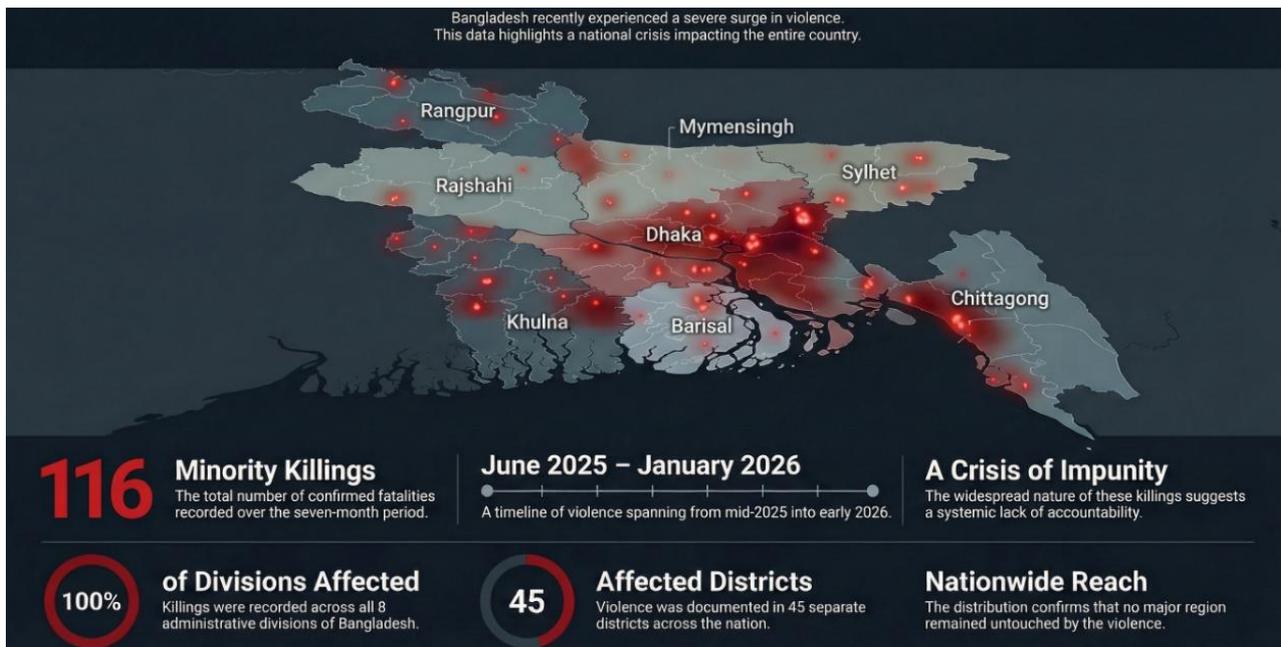


Figure 1: Bangladesh Minority Killings (June 2025-January 2026)

Sources: HRCBM, 2026

The map has been generated using NotebookLM

Nevertheless, the referendum asked voters a single binary question: whether they approved of implementing the July Charter's reforms. This design drew criticism from some political scientists who argued that condensing 80 complex constitutional changes into a "Yes/No" vote bypassed nuanced debate (Ahmed & Haque, 2026). However, the interim government argued it was the only way to secure a binding public mandate that future parliaments could not ignore.

Electoral Innovations and Outcomes

The electoral process itself introduced groundbreaking biopolitical and civic inclusions. For the first time in Bangladesh's history, the diaspora was permitted to vote by postal ballot, and a "no vote" (None of the Above) option was reintroduced in single-candidate constituencies.

The referendum yielded a decisive mandate for reform. The "Yes" vote passed with **68.26%** approval on a 60% voter turnout (Jonko, 2026). Concurrently, the BNP secured a landslide, two-thirds majority in the Jatiya Sangsad. Consequently, the newly elected parliament was legally and politically bound by the referendum to act as a Constitutional Reform Council, tasked

with enacting the Charter within 180 working days (International IDEA, 2026).

Evaluating the Transformation: Progress and Precariousness

The intersection of the July Charter, the electoral transition, and the dismantling of state necropolitics highlights a nation in a profound yet precarious recovery.

On one hand, the structural achievements are historic. The state has formally surrendered its necropolitical tools. The constitutional mandate generated by the 2025 Charter and the early 2026 referendum establishes a legal framework designed explicitly to dilute centralised power. The institutionalisation of proportional representation in the Upper House and the decentralisation of institutional appointments represent the most significant democratic advancements in South Asia in decades.

On the other hand, the reality of political power poses ongoing risks. The BNP's sweeping supermajority in the Lower House presents a familiar dilemma for Bangladesh: a single party possessing the numerical strength to potentially override checks and balances. While Tarique Rahman has publicly committed to the Charter, the BNP's earlier notes of dissent—particularly

regarding the Upper House's powers to block constitutional amendments—suggest that legislative battles lie ahead.

Furthermore, the eradication of necropolitics requires more than legal decrees; it requires cultural and economic stability. The interim government's success in securing a record \$550 million in foreign direct investment from European entities in late 2025 briefly stabilised the economy, but inflation and youth unemployment remain critical threats (International Crisis Group, 2025). If the newly elected government fails to deliver biopolitical security—jobs, healthcare, and economic dignity—public disillusionment could easily spark a return to the streets, testing the new government's commitment to non-violent policing.

Conclusion

The period from the fall of Sheikh Hasina in 2024 through the rigorous reforms of 2025 represents a watershed era in the history of Bangladesh. By confronting its necropolitical past, the nation took deliberate steps to strip the state of its arbitrary power over life and death. The July National Charter 2025 served as the blueprint for this new social contract, prioritising human dignity, institutional independence, and pluralism over dynastic supremacy.

The culmination of these efforts in the historic joint election and referendum proved that the demands of the Gen-Z protesters could be successfully channelled from street barricades into ballot boxes. While the path ahead is laden with the challenges of partisan friction and economic recovery, Bangladesh has firmly closed the door on a dark chapter of authoritarianism, seeking to build a system in which the state exists to protect its citizens' lives rather than threaten them.

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Ethical Approval

This perspective is a part of my ongoing self-funded study on the necropolitics of Bangladesh. However, in the wake of the 2026 Bangladesh elections, I conceived the idea of writing this perspective, which was submitted to the journal on 06 March 2026. The study is based on secondary literature and data and does not require ethical approval as it involves no direct human participants or animals. However, the manuscript has been prepared in accordance with the guidelines and protocols of Academic Writing.

Conflict of Interest

I hereby confirm that I have no conflict of interest to declare.

Informed Consent

Does not require.

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Data Availability Statement

All the data employed in this study are available in the study and through the references cited in the text and reference list.

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