

Institutional Gravity and the Limits of Crisis Leadership in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The political transition in Bangladesh between 2024 and 2026 provides an important case for examining the limits of crisis leadership within deeply embedded political systems. This editorial argues that the trajectory of the transition cannot be adequately understood through the actions or perceived shortcomings of individual leaders alone. Instead, it reflects the enduring influence of institutional embeddedness and party dominance within Bangladesh's political structure. Drawing on the theoretical framework of democratic legitimacy—particularly the distinction between input, throughput, and output legitimacy—the analysis explores why the interim administration led by Muhammad Yunus struggled to consolidate durable authority despite initial public trust. While the transitional leadership entered office with moral credibility among segments of the protest movement, it lacked an electoral mandate and encountered structural constraints that made establishing procedural and performance legitimacy difficult. The editorial further examines the role of Bangladesh's deeply embedded party system, including the Awami League, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and the re-emergence of Islamist political actors such as Jamaat-e-Islami, to demonstrate how political institutions retain resilience even during periods of upheaval. The fate of the July Charter of 2025 illustrates the broader gap between civic aspiration and institutional capacity. Comparative references to recent political crises in Pakistan and Sri Lanka suggest that such patterns are characteristic of transitional politics in South Asia more broadly. Ultimately, the transition reveals the gravitational pull of entrenched political structures: despite widespread public disillusionment with party politics, democratic legitimacy in Bangladesh continues to flow primarily through its institutionalised party system.

Keywords: Bangladesh Politics; Institutional Embeddedness; Democratic Legitimacy; Political Parties; Transitional Governance; South Asian Political Transitions; Civil Society Movements

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Introduction

Political crises often produce moments of heightened expectation. When institutions appear to falter, and public trust in established political actors' declines, societies frequently search for figures who seem capable of transcending ordinary politics. Such individuals are often invested with symbolic authority as mediators between a dissatisfied public and a discredited political order. Yet the historical record suggests that individuals' ability to reshape political systems during moments of crisis is limited by the deeper structures in which they operate.

The political transition that unfolded in Bangladesh between 2024 and 2026 offers an instructive illustration of this dynamic. While the transition initially appeared to hinge on the leadership of Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, the eventual trajectory of events reveals a deeper story about the resilience of institutional structures and the enduring dominance of political parties within the country's democratic system.

Therefore, understanding this transition requires situating it within broader theoretical debates about institutional resilience and democratic legitimacy. Political authority in democratic systems is sustained not only through electoral mandates but also through procedural trust and governing performance (Scharpf, 1999; Schmidt, 2013). During moments of crisis, however, these foundations can become unstable, creating space for transitional arrangements aimed at restoring equilibrium (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986).

The Bangladesh case demonstrates both the possibilities and the limitations of such arrangements.

Institutional Embeddedness and Party Dominance

Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh's political development has been shaped by cycles of authoritarian rule, military intervention, and democratic restoration (Riaz, 2016; see also, Das

et al., 2022; Jahan, 2002; 2005; Maniruzzaman, 1990; 2003). Despite these disruptions, electoral politics gradually consolidated around two dominant parties: the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Over the decades, these parties became deeply embedded within society. Their influence extended beyond electoral competition to include student politics, labour organisations, professional associations, and local governance networks (Ahmed, 2004; Das et al., 2022; Jahan, 2002, 2005; Lewis, 2011; Maniruzzaman, 1990, 2003). Political affiliation frequently intersected with social identity and access to economic opportunity.

Political parties in Bangladesh operate not only as electoral machines but also as key social infrastructures that organise political participation and mediate access to resources. Institutional theory suggests that such arrangements, once established, tend to reinforce themselves over time. As they become embedded within social and political networks, these institutions develop strong path-dependent dynamics that make them resistant to change, even when they face widespread criticism (North, 1990; Pierson, 2000). These may be described as "**sticky institutions.**"

Citizens may criticise them, demand reform, or even protest against them, yet they remain the principal vehicles through which political representation is organised.

Bangladesh's political ecosystem is also shaped by Islamist currents, most notably Jamaat-e-Islami. While often analysed primarily in ideological terms, Islamist politics in Bangladesh draws from networks of religious institutions and social conservatism that resonate with sections of society during periods of uncertainty (Riaz, 2016; Riaz & Fair, 2010).

The political opening created by the 2024 uprising revealed the persistence of these currents. Having faced repression under the previous government, Islamist actors re-entered

the political field more visibly during the transition (Bhattacharyya, 2026; 2026a).

The result was not the emergence of a new political order but the reconfiguration of existing forces within the same institutional landscape.

Governing the Transitional Moment

When the interim administration assumed office in August 2024, its mandate was limited: stabilise the political environment and organise credible elections.

Yet public expectations quickly expanded beyond this narrow objective. Many participants in the protest movement hoped that the crisis would produce deeper institutional reform.

By late 2024, the administration faced mounting pressures. Student groups demanded structural reforms before elections, while established political parties insisted that restoring electoral legitimacy should take priority.

Such tensions are common in transitional politics. Interim authorities frequently attempt to balance stabilisation with reform while lacking the institutional foundations necessary for sustained governance (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

The Advisers' Paradox

The interim administration was structured around a council of advisers drawn largely from academia and civil society.

This arrangement was intended to signal neutrality by avoiding established party politicians. Yet it also revealed a structural paradox.

The advisers were themselves products of the same society that had produced the political elites they were meant to replace. They shared the same political culture, institutional constraints, and administrative limitations.

Replacing individuals does not automatically transform political systems (North, 1990).

The interim administration, therefore, represented not a radical departure from the existing political ecosystem but another configuration within it.

The Three Legitimacy Deficits

Democratic authority rests on three foundations: **input legitimacy**, **throughput legitimacy**, and **output legitimacy** (Beetham, 1991; Scharpf, 1999; Schmidt, 2013).

Input legitimacy derives from elections. The interim administration lacked this foundation because it was appointed rather than elected.

Throughput legitimacy depends on transparent and fair governance procedures. While Yunus initially enjoyed credibility due to his reputation for neutrality, political controversies gradually eroded this perception.

Output legitimacy depends on governing performance. Transitional administrations face particular difficulty establishing this form of legitimacy because they inherit fragile institutions and divided political environments.

Without electoral legitimacy, the administration needed to compensate through procedural fairness and effective governance. Yet the crisis environment made both objectives difficult to achieve.

The 2025 July Charter and the Limits of Civic Aspiration

The **July Charter of 2025**¹ illustrates the gap between civic aspiration and institutional capacity. Emerging from the protest movement, the charter articulated 84 proposals—ranging from the recognition of Bangla as a national language and the identification of Bangladeshi citizens as Bangalees, to reforms in constitutional amendment procedures and the fundamental principles of state policy. Among its key recommendations was the explicit incorporation of “equality, human dignity, social justice, and religious freedom and harmony” as core constitutional principles to strengthen democratic reform and institutional

¹ July National Charter 2025 (2025, 17 October). *National Consensus Commission*. Block 1, MP Hostel, National Parliament, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka.

<https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Bangladesh%20July%20National%20Charter%202025%20%28English%20translation%29.pdf>

accountability. Although the July 2025 Charter referendum secured majority approval in the February 2026 elections, the document remains largely aspirational. With the new Bangladesh National Party (BNP) pledging to endorse and implement its provisions (Jonko, 2026; Sarkar, 2026; Shamim, 2026), it remains to be seen whether the charter will overcome a familiar challenge in transitional politics: the persistent gap between revolutionary ambition and institutional capacity (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986).

Comparative Lessons from South Asia

Bangladesh's experience is not unique within the region. Similar tensions between civic mobilisation and institutional resilience have been visible in other South Asian political crises.

Pakistan's periodic reliance on caretaker governments illustrates how transitional arrangements often struggle to generate durable legitimacy in the absence of strong institutional consensus (see Levitsky & Way, 2010). Likewise, Sri Lanka's and Nepal's political crises in 2022 and 2025, respectively, demonstrated how mass protest movements can destabilise entrenched political systems without necessarily replacing the institutional structures that sustain them (Bhattacharyya, 2026; 2026a; Guzman, 2026; Kandel, 2026; Uyangoda, 2018).

These comparisons highlight a broader pattern: transitional leadership may facilitate political stabilisation, but long-term political authority continues to flow through entrenched institutional channels.

Conclusion: Institutional Gravity

Bangladesh's political transition ultimately demonstrates the enduring power of institutions.

Societies often search for individuals capable of transcending political conflict. Yet durable political change rarely emerges from individual leadership alone.

The transition between 2024 and 2026, therefore, illustrates less a story of personal

success or failure than a demonstration of institutional resilience.

Yunus entered office without **input legitimacy** and left without fully securing **throughput or output legitimacy**. In the end, moral authority could not overcome procedural controversy, weakened state capacity, and the enduring pull of Bangladesh's deeply embedded party system.

That system — contentious yet resilient — continues to shape the country's democratic trajectory.

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Ethical Approval and Conflict of Interest

This is an editorial and does not require ethical approval. However, the editorial was prepared in accordance with the principles of the Helsinki Protocols. The author firmly declares that there are no conflicts of interest—financial or personal—associated with this editorial. Nevertheless, this commentary emerges from the author's multifaceted identity — a clinician-researcher rooted in biomedical inquiry, a littérateur, and a social figure actively engaged in grassroots efforts across Assam, his home state in particular and the Asia-Pacific in general. His insights are shaped by this hybrid vantage point, positioning him as a perceptive witness to Assam's and wider Asia-Pacific's evolving socio-cultural dynamics and digital public sphere. Dr

Sarma's reflections draw upon his rigorous scientific training and sustained field-level involvement. Yet, the editorial on India's neighbouring country, Bangladesh, is consciously framed not as a formal contribution to social science scholarship, but as the considered perspective of an engaged global citizen.

Informed Consent

Does not arise.

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