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2026 General Elections in Bangladesh and Nepal: Post-Uprising Political Transitions and Internal and External Challenges

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In 2026, Bangladesh and Nepal held general elections during critical political periods. In Bangladesh, protests began in 2024 after a High Court ruling reinstated a quota system for government jobs, which had been abolished earlier by former prime minister Sheikh Hasina's government. The decision sparked widespread unrest that grew into a broader movement against her 16 years authoritarian rule, demanding democracy and end corruption. Following the government's removal by the people's uprising, an interim administration was established led by Muhammad Yunus until February 2026. The election held on 12 February 2026 marked the first since the 2024 uprising and expecting major political transitions, alongside a referendum on significant constitutional reforms.

Similarly, a people's uprising emerged in Nepal after the government banned social media in September 2025. However, the deeper causes included political instability, dysfunction of economy, and growing frustration among the Nepal youth. The movement challenged long-standing corrupt political dominance and reflected a strong public desire especially among youth for meaningful political change. After six months under an interim government, Nepal held a crucial election on 5 March 2026, with hopes of bringing younger leaders into the House of Representatives. Voters participated actively, aiming to reject traditional mainstream political parties and elect leaders who are willing to address the country's political and economic concerns.

Electoral Outcomes

Both countries, Bangladesh and Nepal challenged existing political monopolies through the people's uprisings. The long-term Bangladesh ruling party, the Awami League was banned by the Bangladesh interim government in May 2025 under the anti-terrorism Act. The ban will remain until end of the trail against the party and its leadership over the death of hundreds of protesters in the 2024 unrestⁱ. Therefore, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Tarique Rahman, emerged as the dominant force in 2026 election. The party secured 212 seats out of 297 with two thirds majority and forming a strong government. However, Bangladesh failed to bring street power into the ballot box in the election. There was no significant change

in the political party system as neither the BNP nor its leader is new to politics. Therefore, after the decisive election, the country's governing power went back to the same political elite group.

The Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh (JIB) entered the election with its eleven (11) party alliance, including the National Citizens Party (NCP), a political party formed by young protesters expecting young votes. The party and its alliance secured 77 seats onlyⁱⁱ becoming the opposition party for the first time in Bangladesh history. However, the party adhered to fundamental Islamic ideologies and refused to promote gender equality within the party which is one of the reasons that the party could not attract young votes. The Bangladesh people's uprising was not just led by male students; female leaders also played a key role. Still, in the election, these parties were not flexible enough to go through systematic changes and give more space to the women candidates.

In contrast, Nepal was able to bring substantial political changes through the crucial election. In Nepal, the nearly seven decades old party system went through a significant change by bringing a new political party into power. The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), founded in 2022, nominated former Kathmandu Mayor Balendra Shah as the prime minister candidate with new expectations. The RSP won a total of 182 seats out of the 275-seat in the Nepal National Assembly (NNA). This is the first time a political party in Nepal won a majority of seats in the NNA following the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015. Further it has brought to a generational shift electing young candidates to the House of Representativesⁱⁱⁱ. The old traditional political parties in Nepal recorded a historic defeat in their political journey. The Nepali Congress came in second with 38 seats, while the Communist Party of Nepal UML (CPN-UML) led by former prime minister Sharma K.P. Oli^{iv} was third with 25 seats.

Post-election Internal Challenges

Even though Bangladesh could not bring new political force into power, the elected party has to go through the significant political institutional transformations as they received the 68.1 % mandate for the referendum for the July Charter (Rajan, 2026a). The July Charter requires a constitutional assembly and a new constitution prioritizing democracy, equality and social justice. Further, the July Charter seeks to create new constitutional bodies, bicameral parliament, introduce a term limit for prime minister, give more power to the president and bring changes to the political parties.

Most importantly the new government has to address the aspirations of the youth. Tarique Rahman's election manifesto emphasizes providing jobs and uplifting the living standard of the people. It proposes to undertake initiatives to restart closed industries and diversify the export sector, to create nearly 1 million new jobs in the information and communication technology sector, and health sector reforms increasing gradually public spending on health to 5% of GDP^v. While addressing internal economic challenges, Bangladesh, as a remittance-driven economy, must be aware of external economic shocks. For instance, the ongoing conflict between Iran and the United States (US) has the potential to impact Bangladesh's economy. Nearly half of Bangladesh's more than \$30 billion in annual remittances comes from the

Middle East. Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait together accounted for 86 percent of Bangladeshi migrant workers who secured jobs abroad in fiscal year 2024-25^{vi}.

Nepal's political instability was one of the challenges it has been experiencing since the promulgation of its new constitution in 2015. After the election 2026, Balendra Shah led RSP received the people's mandate to implement people's aspirations and be able to smoothly govern without forming a coalition with other elected political parties. In the Nepal context the newly elected government should carefully address the main issues that caused the emergence of the people's unrest in 2025. According to Shah's election manifesto producing job opportunities for the youth in Nepal is key. Second, in its election manifesto, the RSP promised to maintain an average annual growth rate of seven percent for the next five years, aiming to increase the per capita income from around US\$1,447 (S\$1,857) to over US\$3,000 (S\$3,825) and raise Nepal's gross domestic product (GDP) to US\$100 billion (S\$128 billion). Nepal's current GDP is around US\$40-45 billion (S\$51-56 billion). Hence, to achieve the targeted GDP, Nepal needs a sustained annual growth rate of above 20 per cent. This is tough given the country's current economic situation and structural constraints (Rajan:2026b). Producing jobs for the youth is crucial to address their frustration. Nepal relies heavily on the migration of semi-skilled and unskilled labour to foreign countries due to limited domestic employment opportunities. The ongoing conflict between the US and Iran is likely to affect Nepal's gross domestic product (GDP) and labour force. The Middle East employs approximately 80 percent of Nepal's migrant labor. Remittance inflows, the average monthly inflow for 2025/26 is Rs 133-180 billion^{vii}.

Post-election Foreign Policy Challenges

Both new governments arise from anti-establishment discontent and have nationalist sentiments. The foreign policy challenges of both countries therefore focus on how to exercise strategic independence mainly in a region where India and China are dominating.

However, after India provided asylum for Bangladesh's ousted prime minister Hasina, the country's foreign relations deteriorated. Bangladesh's ties with India went through an unexpected challenging process after the Monsoon Revolution took place in 2024. Hasina and Modi governments had close bilateral relations, and their multidimensional cooperations have been continuing since 2014. For instance, in FY 2023-24, the total bilateral trade is reported to be USD 14.01 billion with India exporting USD 12.05 billion and Bangladesh exporting USD 1.97 billion of goods^{viii}. India has been a key trade partner and transit route for Bangladesh. Political instability and mutual suspicion have disrupted supply chains, reduced investment, and hindered regional connectivity projects.

Therefore, Bangladesh's new government, led by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman is entering a complex foreign policy phase. First, there is a clear policy on "Bangladesh-first" mainly emphasizing foreign relations to assist economic recovery and trade expansion. This reflects the country's urgent need to rebuild investor confidence and revive key sectors like garments after a period of political turbulence. The newly elected government has to carefully balance strategy among major powers. India is a crucial geographical and economic partner for

Bangladesh, yet tensions over political issues between both countries must be addressed first. Meanwhile, China continues to be an important infrastructure and defense partner for Bangladesh since inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project in 2016. At the same time, the United States offers trade opportunities and security cooperation, creating a triangular diplomatic balancing act.

Further, building relations with its regional partners are crucial for Bangladesh. Including a renewed opening toward Pakistan and stronger engagement with broader Asian platforms are critical for Bangladesh's economic recovery. Recent moves toward normalizing Bangladesh-Pakistan ties-such as easing visas and restoring connectivity-suggest a willingness to expand diplomatic space beyond traditional alignments. Additionally, Bangladesh continues to pursue closer integration with Southeast Asia, including ambitions to deepen ties with other regions.

Finally, the government faces many constraints. The Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the key external pressure the new government has to handle while responding to domestic political and economic tensions. These factors mean Dhaka's diplomacy must remain flexible and often cautious. In short, Bangladesh's new foreign policy strategy is resetting and seeking autonomy through balance, prioritizing economic gains, and navigating a crowded geopolitical environment in South and Southeast Asia.

Nepal's new government faces a complex set of foreign policy challenges as it seeks to balance national interests while responding to the rapidly changing regional and global environment. As a small, landlocked country located between two major powers, India and China, Nepal must carefully manage its diplomatic relationships while maintaining sovereignty and political stability. Historically, Nepal has had close economic, cultural, and political ties with India, but the former Nepal prime minister K.P. Sharma Oli's pro-China foreign policy strengthened cooperation with China through infrastructure projects and investment initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. This made Kathmandu-Delhi relations distant. Therefore, the new government must ensure that it safeguards Nepal's independence in foreign policy decision-making. Nepal cannot ignore its neighbor India as Nepal depends heavily on foreign trade, remittances, tourism, and development assistance. In that context strengthening economic partnerships with India is crucial for Nepal to uplift their economy. In that context Nepal's new government must navigate a balance diplomatic landscape. By maintaining healthy relations with neighboring powers, mainly with India and China promoting economic diplomacy, managing border issues peacefully, and engaging actively in global cooperation, Nepal can strengthen its foreign policy and protect its national interests in the years ahead.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2026 elections in Bangladesh and Nepal show two different outcomes of people's uprisings. While Bangladesh's election largely preserved existing political power, Nepal brought a significant shift by bringing a new party and new leadership into the rule making process. Despite these differences, both countries now face the challenge of addressing people's expectations. Ensuring political stability, corruption free governance, managing the economy and carefully balancing foreign policy are key concerns the new governments have

to deal with. Ultimately, change will depend not just on electoral results, but on how effectively these governments deliver meaningful reforms.

Endnotes

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- ⁱ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/11/bangladesh-bans-activities-of-awami-league-the-party-of-ousted-pm-hasina>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.bssnews.net/perlament-election-2026>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2026/03/09/young-representatives-of-a-young-country>
- ^{iv} <https://nepalvotes.live/>
- ^v <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/key-priorities-bnp-winner-bangladesh-election-2026-02-13/>
- ^{vi} <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/bangladeshs-remittance-inflows-may-slow-middle-east-conflict-intensifies-4136131>
- ^{vii} <https://english.nepalnews.com/s/analysis/nepal-on-the-edge-middle-east-war-threatens-a-remittance-dependent-nation/>
- ^{viii} <https://www.drishtias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-editorials/india-bangladesh-ties-under-strategic-recalibration>

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