

A Comparative Analysis of Electoral Integrity Under Non-party Caretaker and Party-Line Governments During Poll in Bangladesh

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Received: 08 February 2025

Accepted: 07 April 2025

Published : 01 June 2025

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the electoral integrity in the two primary election systems in Bangladesh. The country has experienced both non-party caretaker governments and party-line governments during national elections. Each system has faced its own controversies. The study highlights significant differences in electoral integrity under caretaker and party-line governments in Bangladesh. Elections under caretaker governments (1991-2008) were generally free, fair, and credible, with higher voter turnout and lower violence. In contrast, party-line elections (2014-2024) faced allegations of fraud, administrative bias, and violence, leading to lower public trust. Data shows electoral violence was lower under caretaker governments (45.4 deaths per election) than under party-line governments (53.7 deaths per election). Voter turnout peaked at 87.13% in 2008 under a caretaker government, while party-line elections saw lower and fluctuating participation, with only 40.04% turnout in 2014. This research examines the consequences of both caretaker and party-line governments, focusing on their electoral integrity. It also analyzes the impact of these systems on the election process, voter turnout, and the challenges and violence encountered during election periods.

Keywords: *Party-line Government, Caretaker Government, National Election*

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Introduction

The integrity of electoral processes is an important for ensuring democratic governance in a country. Integrity in election process ensures that elections are fair, transparent, and reflect the will of the people. In Bangladesh, the debate over the most effective system to administer national elections has been a contentious issue, marked by significant shifts between non-party caretaker governments and party-line governments. Each system presents unique strengths and challenges, influencing public trust and the overall democratic process.

From 1996 to 2008, four national elections were held under the caretaker government system in Bangladesh. This system was introduced as a means to ensure impartiality in the election process. This system involves a neutral interim government that oversees the elections, aiming to eliminate biases that may arise if the ruling party were to conduct the elections. Proponents argue that caretaker governments have been essential in maintaining electoral integrity, reducing opportunities for electoral fraud, and ensuring a level playing field for all political parties.

Conversely, since 2014, Bangladesh has reverted to conducting elections under party-line governments, where the incumbent ruling party oversees the election process. Critics of this system contend that it can lead to conflicts of interest, with the ruling party potentially leveraging state resources and institutions to influence electoral outcomes. However, supporters argue that this system aligns more closely with standard democratic practices worldwide and can function effectively with robust electoral laws and vigilant civil society and media oversight.

However, following the mass uprising against the AL government in July 2024, the caretaker government is being reinstated. On December 17, 2024, after a High Court bench verdict, the non-party caretaker government system is once again being restored in the Constitution of Bangladesh.

This comparative study aims to scrutinize the electoral integrity under both systems by examining key metrics such as voter turnout, incidences of electoral violence, and the overall public confidence in the electoral process. Through this analysis, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these different governmental frameworks impact the conduct and perception of elections in Bangladesh.

1.2 Methodology of the Study

This study primarily draws on reports from both local and international English and Bangla newspapers and media. Additionally, secondary data and information have been sourced from published books, journals, articles, and relevant internet resources. To support the research, a comprehensive review of theoretical literature pertaining to the caretaker government of Bangladesh was conducted. A qualitative approach was applied for data analysis.

1.3 Electoral Integrity

A comparative analysis of electoral integrity in Bangladesh under non-party caretaker and party-line governments reveals mixed results. (Ahmed, 2010) and both highlight the challenges and limitations of the non-party caretaker system, with the former arguing that it reinforced old party politics and the latter suggesting the need for reform. However, Mollah in a research article presents a more positive view, noting that 4 out of 10 national elections conducted by non-party caretaker governments were free, fair, and credible (Mollah, 2016). Zafarullah underscores the importance of non-political caretaker administrations in managing the transition to democracy and ensuring a fair electoral process. These findings suggest that while the non-party caretaker system has its flaws, it has also played a significant role in promoting electoral integrity in Bangladesh (Zafarullah & Akhter, 2000).

The concept of 'electoral integrity' encompasses the standards and global norms that ensure the proper conduct of elections. These standards are set by the UN General Assembly and regional entities such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the African Union (AU), as well as by UN member states. These universally applicable standards are designed to be followed by all countries. Major electoral integrity is comprehensive electoral law, inclusive voter registration, non-partisan role of election commission and others related election management body, equal opportunity for all candidates, willingly participation of voters etc.

1.4 Historical Background of Election System in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has conducted 12 national parliamentary elections after it independent. Of these, eight were overseen by party-led governments, including periods marked by military governance. Additionally, four elections were administered under caretaker governments. The inaugural election in Bangladeshi history took place on March 7, 1973 (Jahan, 1974). During that time, some opposition parties alleged vote rigging, censorship, and accusations of terrorism

during the election. (Ahmad, 2024) The 15 parties participated in the election, and out of the 300 seats, Bangladesh Awami League secured victory in 293 seats. Additionally, Jatiya Party, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JASAD), and five independent candidates begged a seat each. Following this election, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, formed the government (Bangladesh Election Commission, 2013). However, after the two years, the most horrific massacre in history took place in Bangladesh on August 15, 1975. A rebel military group assassinated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with 26 members of his family. This event marked a significant political crisis in Bangladesh. The country fell into military rule, which persisted until 1991. During this time, Bangladesh experienced political instability and authoritarian governance. The period from 1975 to 1991 was characterized by autocracy, with the government being controlled by the military.

The political landscape during this time was tumultuous and those who got the chance used the power and seized the state control. After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975, Khondaker Mostaq Ahmed assumed the presidency on the same day. However, he couldn't stay in power for a long time, just 81 days later a coup took place under the leadership of Chief of Army Staff Khaled Mosharraf and removed him from power on November 3 (Chowdhury, 2014). Subsequently, through more than one coup General Ziaur Rahman emerged as the central figure of power on November 7. He took over the responsibility of the Chief Martial Law Administrator On November 19, 1976. Later, tactfully removed from power President Abu Sayem, on April 21, 1977, Ziaur Rahman assumed the position of the President of Bangladesh (Hamid, 2023). After a succession of power shifts without elections, Ziaur Rahman organized an election on May 30, 1977. Primarily, to gauge public trust in his occupy of the presidency, he conducted a Confidence Referendum, which is known as „Yes-No“ vote. Voters were asked if they had confidence in President Ziaur Rahman and were supportive of his policies and initiatives. The result of this election showed overwhelming support, with 98.9% responding „Yes“, and a total voter turnout of 88.1%. Although vast segments of the population did not participate in this election, nevertheless the results of many centers showed that people had voted 100%. The main objective of this election result was to legitimize the assumption of power in a planned manner, ensuring a prolonged stay in the seized authority. However, during this time, later Zia held a general election for the presidency on June 3, 1978. (Khan, 2021) This election also created controversy, such as vote rigging, violence, and central interference occurred. The New York Times journalist William Borders reported extensive ballot fraud and the expulsion of opposition agents from polling centers in his report published on June 4, 1978. In this report he also mentions that during this

election, “40 workers of the Ganotantrik Jote (National Unity Front) were killed. Armed terrorists attacked and expelled over 200 polling agents and election observers from more than 200 centers” (New York Times, 1978). After the election of 1973, the second national parliament election was held on February 18, 1979. At that time Ziaur Rahman was in power, organized this election while martial law was in force and conducted under the Shadow of the military. Only two years after this election, Ziaur Rahman was assassinated by a military uprising in Chittagong on May 30, 1981. After his incident, Vice President Abdus Sattar took over as interim president (The New York Times, 1981).

The presidential election took place on November 15 of that year, resulting in a victory for Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) candidate Justice Abdus Sattar. However, shortly after, internal conflicts and disunity within the ruling BNP government intensified. On March 24, 1982, Sattar was ousted in a military coup, leading to the re-imposition of martial law in the country. Army chief Hussain Muhammad Ershad declared himself the Chief Martial Law Administrator. During this period, the cabinet was dissolved, and both Parliament and the Constitution were suspended. On March 27, Supreme Court Justice Abul Fazal Mohammad Ahsanuddin Chowdhury was appointed President, but he resigned due to health reasons on December 11, 1983. Subsequently, Ershad assumed the presidency. On March 1, 1985, he banned all political activities, and numerous local opposition leaders were arrested under martial law. In March, similar to Ziaur Rahman, Ershad organized elections, in which the Election Commission reported a 94% 'Yes' vote from the electorate (Hyman, 1983).

After the controversial election, Ershad arranged the third National Parliament election on May 7, 1986. But, under the leadership of Khaleda Zia and the BNP-led 7-party alliance, this election was boycotted. On the other hand, Bangladesh Awami League took part in the election while Jatiya Party secured 153 seats. Although, General Ershad formed his new political organization "Jatiya Party", just few months before the election (Islam, 1987).

Moudud Ahmed, who was the Vice President of Ershad government, he mentions in his book „Ongoing History 1983-1990 (In Bengal),“ that the election was conducted amid widespread clash and censorship. Due to the controversial election, this parliament did not last long; it was dissolved just 17 months later. This happened because the majority of the opposition parties did not recognize the government under his leadership as a legitimate one. They were leading protests, advocating for his resignation. Towards the end of 1987, the protests intensified. Many parliament members, including those from the Awami League and other opposition parties, resigned from their seats. In such a situation, on November 27, Ershad declared a state of emergency, and the parliament was dissolved on December 7 (Ahmed, 2014).

In such a situation, political instability prevailed across the country. Within this context, another announcement was made about holding parliamentary elections on March 3, 1988. It was evident from the circumstances that Ershad had planned this election to weaken the ongoing protests. But opposition parties called on the people to boycott this election as a form of protest. A nationwide strike was declared on March 2 and 3. On the other hand, the government declared a ban on all types of anti-election-related activities and arrested many leaders and activists of the opposition parties. In such an „unfavorable“ situation, the fourth national parliamentary election took place (Rahman, 1989). Due to the boycott by the Awami League, BNP, Jamat-e-Islami and other opposition parties, there was no interest among the people in this election. In the controversial election, the Jatiya Party won 251 seats. And they retained power through the questionable election. Meanwhile, the opposition parties continued their protest. As a result of unified movement, Military ruler Ershad was forced to leave power on December 6, 1990.

After the Ershad regime, the protesting parties agreed on a formula to establish an interim or caretaker government for conducting national parliament elections within a three-month period. This formula, though not explicitly included in the constitution, was accepted by consensus for the 1991 election. As a result, Chief Justice Mohammed Shahabuddin Ahmed was appointed as the head of this interim government. On December 6th, Ershad officially handed over power to Justice Mohammed Shahabuddin Ahmed (Pant, 2017). Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed assumed the role of Chief of the caretaker government, marking the end of the historic mass movement and leading to the first elections under such a government in Bangladesh. On December 25, Justice Abdur Rauf was appointed Chief Election Commissioner.

2.1 Elections under Caretaker Government

The Caretaker Government System in Bangladesh has its origins in the country's efforts to ensure free, fair and credible elections and to maintain political stability and administration during the transition periods between two elected governments. This government system was first introduced in Bangladesh with the consent of all parties through the 12th Constitutional amendment in 1991 (Khanom, 2017). The primary role of the caretaker government is to ensure a level playing field for all political parties during elections. And conduct transparent elections with ensuring a smooth hand over of regime. The non-partisan caretaker government was composed of non-partisan technocrats and experts who are tasked with overseeing the electoral process. After a prolonged movement, the Caretaker Government Act was passed in the National Parliament through the thirteenth amendment in 1996. Under the caretaker government, four

elections were held: 1991, 1996, 2001, and 2008. In Bangladeshi political history, only these four elections were considered participatory, free, fair and credible in the locally and internationally (Rahman, 2009).

In 2011, through 15th amendment to the constitution, the former caretaker government system was abolished replaced by the sitting government to conduct elections. This decision was made amidst controversy and opposition, with critics arguing that it undermined the principle of democracy by concentrating power in the hands of the ruling party during elections

In 1991, a model of free elections was established in the country with the introduction of the caretaker government system. Under this model, the 5th National Parliament election was held on February 27, 1991. Seventy-five political parties and alliances, with a total of 2,363 candidates, participated. Notable participants included the eight-party alliance led by the Awami League, the seven-party alliance led by the BNP, and the leftist five-party alliance. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, head of the caretaker government, instructed District Commissioners (DC) and Superintendents of Police (SP) to fulfill their duties impartially during the election. This election was a new experience for the people of Bangladesh, who were able to vote without hindrance. The process was peaceful, with no clashes or conflicts, creating a festive atmosphere across the country (Daily Ittefaq, 1991). The election results showed that out of 300 seats, the BNP won 140, the Awami League secured 88, the Jatiya Party gained 35, the Jamaat-e-Islami obtained 18, and both the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League and the Communist Party won 5 seats each. In this election, there were a total of 62,181,743 registered voters, but only 34,477,803 votes were cast, resulting in a voter turnout of 55.45 percent. According to the constitution, a minimum of 151 seats is required to form a government. Since no party achieved an absolute majority, the BNP formed a coalition government with the support of Jamaat-e-Islami. On April 5, 1991, under the leadership of Khaleda Zia, the BNP established the government, making Khaleda Zia the first female Prime Minister in the history of the country (Baxter & Raman, 1991).

2.2 Constitutional Inclusion of Caretaker Government in 1996

In the political history of Bangladesh, the election model established in 1991 did not endure due to subsequent electoral issues. The post-election period under the BNP government saw significant irregularities in elections, notably in the Magura and Mirpur by-elections of 1994, which involved vote rigging and fake votes (Daily Ittefaq, 1994). Subsequently, opposition parties such as the Awami League, Jatiya Party, and Jamaat-e-Islami demanded the establishment of a permanent caretaker government within the constitution and initiated widespread movements on this issue. Continuing their protests, the Awami

League and Jamaat-e-Islami held a joint press conference on June 27, 1994, where they outlined a possible framework for a caretaker government in Parliament (Daily Sangbad, 1994). However, without accepting the resignation letters, Speaker Sheikh Abdur Razzak declared them absent (Thakor, 1985). The BNP government rejected this demand, leading to the mass resignation of opposition MPs in December 1994. Despite attempts at mediation, including efforts by Commonwealth envoy Sir Ninian Stephen and US Ambassador David N. Merrill, no resolution was reached, resulting in a controversial one-sided election on February 15, 1996, which saw low voter turnout and significant violence (Daily Ittefaq, 1996). In this controversial election, the BNP won 289 out of the 300 seats. There was no formal opposition in that parliament, (Shafiq, 1996) following the election Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina said, "Voter turnout is so low that it proves that the people had rejected this election." She further stated that the BNP government has lost its legitimacy and will not stay in power for long. Additionally, she raised 9 point demands and demanded re-election under the caretaker government within 90 days (Daily Sangbad, 1996). Following the election, intense opposition movements and international pressure led to the BNP government agreeing to establish a caretaker government. This culminated in the 7th National Parliament election on June 12, 1996 (The New York Times, 1996), conducted under caretaker Chief Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman. Despite violence, the election was deemed free and fair by international observers. The Awami League won with the support of the Jatiya Party, marking their return to power after 21 years. The BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami did not accept the results, but international observers validated the election's integrity (Bangladesh Election Commission, n.d.)

2.3 Election under Caretaker Government in 2001

Awami League assumed power and governed for five years following the election in 1996. After completing the term as per the constitution, the party transferred power to the non-partisan caretaker government. At that time, the former Chief Justice Latifur Rahman assumed the position of Chief Adviser. During the swearing-in ceremony of the Chief Adviser, departing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina remarked, "I am delighted to hand over the responsibility to a constitutionally appointed caretaker government for the first time in Bangladesh, ending a five-year term as an elected government." (Daily Sangbad, 2001) Within a few hours of taking the oath as Chief Adviser, Latifur Rahman made significant changes in the administration. Following his directives, 13 secretaries, including the Chief Secretary of the Prime Minister's Office, were simultaneously removed. This move sparked widespread discussions and debates at that time. Although BNP viewed the matter positively, Awami League did not support it. Meanwhile, after the caretaker government assumed power, terrorism and

violence continued to increase in different parts of the country. More than 300 murders took place across the country, of which 45 were killed in political riots (Begum, 2013). revision of voter list, reform of election law and the retrieval of illegal weapons across the country before the elections. In light of these demands, the caretaker government initiated a special campaign through the police. The entire country was divided into 68 sectors for this operation (Rahman, 2002). Despite the challenging circumstances prevailing in the country since the formation of the caretaker government for the 8th National Parliament election, but the situation on the Election Day was peaceful on 1 October, 2001. Voters enthusiastically exercised their voting rights amid an atmosphere of inspiration. The day after the election, Bangladesh's Newspaper reported that "The country turned yet another leaf in its march forward on the path of democracy yesterday, with high voter turnout and widespread enthusiasm making a by and large peaceful 8th parliament election"(Bangladesh Observer,2001). In addition, all local and international newspapers reported that the election was peaceful. As well as foreign observer's monitors from the United Nations and the European Union stated that the election was free and fair (The New York Times, 2001). Although, on the day of the election, five people lost their lives, and 500 individuals were injured. Due to this reason, voting has been suspended in 16 seats across 130 polling centers. In addition, during the campaign period of the election about 150 individuals were killed in political violence. Despite these unfortunate incidents on Election Day, they did not significantly impact the overall election arrangements. Analyzing voter participation, this election shattered all past records, with the highest voter turnout ever recorded at 73.59 percent. In the election results, BNP secured victory with 193 seats to form the government. Additionally, Awami League won 62 seats, Jamaat-e-Islami 17 seats, Islamic National Unity Front 14 seats, Bangladesh National Party 4 seats, Islamic Unity Front 2 seats, Krishi Shramik Janata League 1 seat, Jatyia Party (Monju) 1 seat, and independent candidates won 6 seats. In post-election violence at least 3 people have been killed and 100 injured (Reuters. 2001). Furthermore, during that time, BNP demanded Reforms in administration, Reorganization of Election Commission,

2.4 Electoral Crisis and 2008 Election

After the 2001 election under the caretaker government, the Four-Party Alliance led by Khaleda Zia came to power in Bangladesh. A political crisis emerged with the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment on May 16, 2004, which controversially increased the retirement age of Supreme Court justices from 65 to 67 years. This amendment made the immediate past Chief Justice, KM Hasan, eligible to become the chief adviser to the next caretaker government, a move

opposed by the Awami League, who alleged that he was biased towards the BNP. The Awami League led a 14-party alliance in protest, and efforts to resolve the crisis through meetings between party general secretaries failed. As the caretaker government's term ended, political agitation escalated into violence and unrest in October 2006. To prevent KM Hasan from becoming the head of the caretaker government, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina called for a nationwide blockade (The Associated Press, 2006). The protests were sparked by opposition to the appointment of former Chief Justice KM Hasan as the head of the interim government, as he had previously been associated with the BNP. Reports indicate that the clashes resulted in over 25 deaths and left "thousands" injured. In response to the escalating unrest, Later, Hasan declined the nomination on October 29, 2006, prompting President Iajuddin Ahmed to assume the position of the head of the caretaker government (Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2007). The Awami League also raised concerns about the impartiality of President Iajuddin Ahmed, claiming voter list manipulation and issues with the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner Justice M.A. Aziz. The caretaker government set the election date for January 22, 2007, but the Awami League-led grand alliance withdrew from the election, leading to a potential one-sided election (The New York Time, 2007). In such circumstances, Awami League continuously announced strikes and blockades. However, during that time, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its allies started campaigning for the 2007 election. But due to ongoing conflicts and clashes across the country, on January 11, 2007, a state of emergency was declared, and the military was deployed in the country. Under pressure from them, Iajuddin Ahmed, the head of the caretaker government, resigned from the position of Chief Adviser to the Caretaker Government (Daily Star, 2007). As a result, on January 12, Fakhruddin Ahmed took over as the new Chief Adviser to the Caretaker Government. Through this transition, a „military-backed“ caretaker government was formed. The events during that time are famously known in Bangladesh's politics as „One-Eleven“. Eventually, the caretaker government initiated the process for new elections, updating the voter list and issuing biometric national identity cards. The 9th National Parliament Election was held on December 29, 2008, with 38 political parties participating and a voter turnout of 86.29 percent. The Awami League-led Grand Alliance won a landslide victory, securing more than two-thirds of the seats, with the Awami League winning 230 seats and the BNP only 30 seats (Hossain, 2013). The election was widely regarded as fair and participatory by domestic and international observers. Sheikh Hasina expressed satisfaction with the outcome, while Khaleda Zia denounced it as rigged. Despite the BNP's claims, the election is considered one of the most participatory and competitive in Bangladesh's history, with significant voter turnout and low election-day violence.

2.5 Caretaker Government Abolished and Introduction of Party Line Government

The military-backed caretaker government was the last of its kind in Bangladesh, abolished by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina when she came to power. Initially introduced in 1991, the caretaker government system was almost abolished by the BNP in 1996 but persisted due to intense opposition protests. After the 2008 elections, the Awami League annulled the 13th Amendment through a Supreme Court verdict on May 10, 2011, which declared the amendment inconsistent with the Constitution. However, the court allowed the next two elections to be held under the caretaker government for continuity and peace. The caretaker government was incorporated into the constitution through the Thirteenth Amendment after strong protests and the political crisis in 1996. Following elections were held under this system in 2001, 2004, and 2008. The validity of this system was challenged but upheld by the High Court in 2004. However, after the political crisis in 2006, the effectiveness of the caretaker government was questioned, leading to its eventual abolition. A special parliamentary committee was formed in 2010 to amend the constitution. Under the new Chief Justice, Khairul Haque, the hearing for the abolition of the caretaker government system was expedited, resulting in a verdict on May 10, 2011, declaring it unconstitutional but permitting its use for the next two elections. Despite opposition, the Awami League moved to abolish the system, leading to the Fifteenth Amendment in June 2011, which formally ended the caretaker government system. The amendment stipulated that future national elections would be held under a party government (bdnews24, 2012).

2.6 Revival of Caretaker Government Again

The High Court on December 17, 2024, has ruled to revive the caretaker government system, making it automatically part of the constitution, the ruling also reinstates other provisions, such as the referendum system. The decision follows the High Court's annulment of certain sections of the 15th Amendment, which had abolished the caretaker system. Earlier, October 19, 2024, The High Court issues a rule questioning the legality of the 15th Amendment. However, a review against the Appellate Division's verdict on the 13th Amendment is still unresolved, meaning the system cannot yet be fully reinstated. Nonetheless, the ruling removes a major legal obstacle to its restoration (Daily star, 2024).

3.1 Election under Party-Line Government

Following the abolition of the caretaker government by the Awami League, the first national election under the ruling party was held on January 5, 2014. This election was boycotted by the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and their

alliance, leading to Awami League and its allies winning 153 of the 300 seats unopposed. The Jatiya Party (Ershad), although the opposition party in parliament, also secured cabinet seats, resulting in a parliament without a true opposition. (BBC News, 2014). The opposition's protests were ignored, and another election was held on December 30, 2018. Despite promises of a fair election, reports indicated ballot box stuffing by Awami League activists, leading to what became known as the “nighttime vote.” Opposition candidates faced arrests and violence, and many withdrew their candidacies. The election saw the Awami League and its allies win 288 seats, while the BNP and its allies secured only seven, amidst widespread violence and allegations of vote rigging (Daily Samakal, 2014). In the 2024 election, the opposition boycotted once again. The Awami League used “dummy candidates” from within their party to create the appearance of contested elections. The Jatiya Party (Ershad) participated under an agreement with the government but only won 11 out of the 26 seats allocated to them. Allegations of rigging and administrative interference persisted, and voter turnout was reported to be abnormally low, with the Election Commission claiming a turnout of 41.8%, which was met with controversy (Aljazeera, 2018).

3.2 Compare Between Caretaker and Party Line Government Election:

The events surrounding elections under the caretaker government highlight the persistent political conflict between the Awami League and BNP, necessitating a caretaker system for fair elections. From 1991 to 2008, five parliamentary elections were held, with results largely accepted both nationally and internationally, except the controversial Sixth Parliament election in 1996. However, post-caretaker government elections have been highly controversial, with both parties attempting to abolish the caretaker system when in power, leading to undemocratic practices and electoral manipulation. Fair elections under party rule are hindered by partisanship, violence, and administrative manipulation, suggesting the need for a strong election commission supportive institutional framework to ensure electoral integrity

Electoral violence and death under caretaker government

Election	NumberofDeath	Number of Injured
5thParliamentaryElection-1991	4	225
6thParliamentaryElection-1996	66	3458
7thParliamentaryElection-1996	26	746
8thParliamentaryElection-2001	126	5149
9thParliamentaryElection-2008	5	331

Source: Compiled by the author from various news paper

Electoral violence and death under party line government

Election	Numberof Death	Number of Injured
10 th Parliamentary Election-2014	117	5335
11 th Parliamentary Election-2018	29	5300
12 th Parliamentary Election-2024	15	2200

Source: Compiled by the author from various news paper

The data on electoral violence under caretaker and party line governments reveals notable differences in the number of deaths and injuries. On average, elections held under party line governments have seen higher casualties, with an average of 53.7 deaths and 4278.3 injuries, compared to 45.4 deaths and 1781.8 injuries under caretaker governments. The highest violence under a caretaker government was recorded during the 8th Parliamentary Election in 2001, with 126 deaths and 5149 injuries. In contrast, the 10th Parliamentary Election in 2014 under the party line government saw 117 deaths and 5335 injuries. However, recent trends indicate a reduction in violence in the 11th and 12th elections under party line governance, suggesting possible improvements in electoral management or changes in political dynamics. Overall, while caretaker governments have generally experienced lower levels of electoral violence, the decline in violence in the latest elections under party line governments is a positive development.

Voter turnout under caretaker government

Election	Total Voters	TotalVote	% of voter turn out	Total candi dates
5 th Parliamentary Election-1991	6,21,81,743	3,44,77,803	55.45	2,778
6 th Parliamentary Election-1996	5,67,02,412	1,17,76,481	26.5	1,450
7 th Parliamentary Election-1996	5,67,16,953	4,28,80,576	74.96	572
8 th Parliamentary Election-2001	7,49,46,364	5,61,85,707	75.59	1,939
9 th Parliamentary Election-2008	8,10,87,003 (1 st Voter list with Photo)	7,06,48,485	87.13	1,567

Source: Newspaper

Voter turnout under party line government

Election	TotalVoters	TotalVote	% of votertznout	Total candidates
10 th Parliamentary Election-2014	91,19,65,167 (Uncontested in153 seats)	1,73,92,887	40.04	----
11 th Parliamentary Election-2018	10,41,90,480	8,35,32,911	80.20	1865
12 th Parliamentary Election-2024	11,95,01,585	4,99,55,445	41.8	1970

Bangladesh show significant variations. Under caretaker governments, voter turnout percentages were consistently high: 55.45% in 1991, 74.96% and 26.5% in the two 1996 elections, 75.59% in 2001, and a peak of 87.13% in 2008. In contrast, elections under party-line governments exhibited more fluctuation: 40.04% in 2014, a high of 80.20% in 2018, and a drop to 41.8% in 2024. The 2014 election had a notably low turnout, potentially influenced by 153 seats being uncontested. Given the consistently higher voter turnout percentages under caretaker governments and the variability under party-line governments, the caretaker system appears more effective in ensuring higher voter participation,

4. Policy Implication

To make the election full free and fair and strengthen electoral integrity, several policy measures must be addressed. First, the Election Commission must be independent and non-partisan to ensure fair elections, On the other hand, a strong monitoring system would be developed in order to monitor campaign financing, and administrative neutrality. Political parties must engage in meaningful dialogue to establish a sustainable election framework, preventing frequent changes based on the interests of the ruling party. A National Consensus Commission could be formed to oversee electoral reforms and mediate disputes between political parties. Security forces must remain neutral in order to reducing electoral violence. Legal measures against electoral fraud should be strengthened, along with transparent vote-counting processes. Additionally, restoring the referendum system ensures direct public engagement in major constitutional decisions, enhancing trust in the electoral process.

Finally, legal and constitutional reforms are essential to maintaining electoral stability. The High Court's ruling on the 15th Amendment highlights the need for constitutional clarity regarding the caretaker system's role. Future amendments should undergo public consultations and expert reviews rather than being driven by party politics. Establishing a clear legal framework for elections, ensuring accountability for electoral misconduct, and promoting political inclusivity are necessary steps toward restoring electoral credibility and democratic governance in Bangladesh.

5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of electoral integrity in Bangladesh under non-party caretaker and party-line governments reveals significant disparities in the fairness and impartiality of elections. Under the non-party caretaker government system, elections generally enjoyed higher levels of credibility and acceptance both domestically and internationally. This system, first implemented in the 1991 elections, was specifically designed to oversee free and fair elections by removing partisan influence. The elections conducted under caretaker governments, particularly in 1996, 2001, and 2008, were largely perceived as transparent and competitive, leading to peaceful transfers of power and greater political stability. In contrast, elections held under party-line governments, particularly those led by the Awami League after the abolition of the caretaker system in 2011, have faced substantial criticism and controversy. The 2014 and 2018 elections, held without the caretaker system, were marred by allegations of electoral malpractice, including ballot box stuffing, voter intimidation, and administrative bias. The boycotting of these elections by major opposition parties such as the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami further undermined their legitimacy and led to parliament compositions that lacked true opposition, effectively eliminating the checks and balances crucial for democratic governance. The 2024 election continued this trend, with opposition boycotts and allegations of electoral manipulation. Despite efforts to create an illusion of contested elections through the use of "dummy candidates," the integrity of the electoral process remained in question. Reports of low voter turnout and accusations of widespread rigging highlighted ongoing challenges to establishing a fair electoral environment under party-line governments. In conclusion, the transition from non-party caretaker governments to party-line governments in Bangladesh has had a detrimental impact on electoral integrity. The caretaker government system, despite its flaws, provided a mechanism for more impartial elections and greater political inclusiveness. The current party-line approach, however, has led to repeated instances of electoral malpractice and political unrest, suggesting a need for significant reforms to restore confidence in Bangladesh's electoral process.

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