

SADF Podcast S4E6 Edited Transcript

SADF Podcast

Bangladesh's Election, Democratic Exclusion and the Rise of Extremism

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This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity, grammar and readability while preserving the substance, arguments and character of the original conversation. The views, allegations and political assessments expressed by the speakers are their own.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Welcome to the South Asia Democratic Forum Podcast.

I am your host, Tapas Kanti Baul.

Today, we focus on a critical question for both South Asia and European Union foreign policy: **the fairness and inclusivity of Bangladesh's upcoming national election, and the role the European Union can—or should—play in safeguarding democratic norms.**

Bangladesh stands at a complex political, social and institutional crossroads. Recent analysis by the South Asia Democratic Forum, alongside commentary from international observers, has raised serious concerns about political participation, institutional independence and the broader environment for democratic expression.

To unpack these issues, I am joined by **Paulo Casaca, Founder and Executive Director of SADF.**

Paulo has written extensively on governance and democratic resilience in South Asia, including recent reflections arguing that Bangladesh is undergoing a trajectory of increasing centralisation and democratic decline.

In our conversation today, we will examine the conditions shaping the upcoming election, what “inclusivity” actually means in the present political context, and how the European Union should approach its engagement, including through election observation.

Our goal is to examine the situation with clarity and with respect for the complexity of events on the ground.

Paulo, welcome back to the podcast.

Paulo Casaca

Thank you. Thank you for the invitation.

Let me go directly to the central issue.

The January 2024 election was criticised because one of the major opposition parties, the BNP, decided to boycott it.

I think it was obvious that the objective of having a fully inclusive election had not been achieved. That was a serious weakness in the electoral process.

But now we have seen European Union statements describing the present electoral process as inclusive.

And here I see an extraordinary contradiction.

In 2024, the BNP had the possibility of participating and chose not to do so. Yet the election was criticised as insufficiently inclusive.

Today, the **Awami League has been prohibited from participating.**

That is not a voluntary boycott. It is exclusion.

So how can the present election simultaneously be described as inclusive?

To me, that is logically impossible.

This disregard for the meaning of basic political language is itself a very worrying indicator.

Paulo Casaca

I am also deeply concerned about what I see as an effort to strengthen **Jamaat-e-Islami.**

Jamaat is a major Islamist political organisation in South Asia and has a deeply controversial history in Bangladesh, including allegations concerning its role during the 1971 Liberation War.

In my assessment, its ideological worldview belongs to the broader current of political Islamism.

What I find especially striking is the similarity between the language now being used by several international actors.

I would challenge European Union diplomats in Dhaka to explain how their public position differs substantially from that of Beijing—or, for that matter, from the discourse of other major international actors.

China has at least followed a relatively consistent geopolitical strategy.

Beijing maintains close relationships with Pakistan and Iran and has long pursued alliances that it sees as useful to its wider strategic objectives.

There is obviously no ideological affinity between the Chinese Communist Party and political Islamism.

But alliances are often strategic rather than ideological.

What is much harder for me to understand is why Western diplomacy appears, in my view, to be moving in a similar direction.

Paulo Casaca

Another disturbing element has been the international response to political violence.

Over the last year and a half, Bangladesh has experienced serious allegations of murders, attacks on political activists, violations of human rights and pressure on journalists.

Yet international responses have often appeared selective.

There was, for instance, the assassination of a prominent student political figure associated with the broader Islamist political environment.

The European Union, the United States and the United Nations all reacted publicly.

There is nothing wrong with condemning an assassination.

The problem is what happened afterwards.

That killing was followed by an extremely charged political atmosphere in which India was rapidly blamed, Indian diplomatic interests were attacked, and major media organisations such as **The Daily Star** and **Prothom Alo** were targeted.

In my view, international actors failed to exercise sufficient caution in that environment.

Their statements were interpreted within a highly incendiary political context.

Later, even members of the victim's family reportedly offered a different interpretation of responsibility.

I am not claiming to know who committed the assassination.

My point is that international diplomacy should be extremely careful not to amplify an accusation before the facts have been properly established.

Paulo Casaca

That is particularly important when the same diplomatic actors then describe an electoral process as “inclusive” despite the formal exclusion of one of the country's largest political forces.

For me, that contradiction is very serious.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Let me provide some historical background for our listeners.

In the 2014 national election, the BNP chose not to participate.

In 2018, it did participate.

Then, in January 2024, it again decided to boycott the election.

There was no legal ban preventing the BNP from contesting that election.

Listeners may also remember that, during an earlier political crisis, then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attempted to engage Khaleda Zia in discussions aimed at creating conditions in which the major parties could compete.

Whatever one thinks about those episodes politically, the important distinction is between **boycotting an election voluntarily and being prohibited from participating**.

That is why Paulo is highlighting what he sees as a double standard in the use of the word “inclusive”.

Paulo Casaca

Yes, exactly.

And just to clarify, I am specifically comparing the current situation with the **2024 election**.

I am not making the same claim about the European Union’s position in 2018.

In 2024, the BNP had the legal possibility of participating and chose not to.

The election was then criticised as insufficiently inclusive.

Now the Awami League has been excluded from participation, while people associated with it face prosecution, intimidation and—in some cases—very serious violence.

Yet the process is being described as inclusive.

That is the contradiction.

Paulo Casaca

There is also a broader question of **freedom of expression**.

Look at what happened to *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*.

These are not publications historically associated with defending the Awami League.

Indeed, *The Daily Star* was often very critical of the Awami League and initially sympathetic to the political transition.

Yet even these organisations became targets.

When media institutions are physically attacked and journalists fear not only censorship but their own safety, we are no longer discussing normal democratic disagreement.

We are talking about the conditions necessary for public debate itself.

And without freedom of expression, how can we meaningfully speak about a free and fair election?

Paulo Casaca

I also believe there are serious questions about the role of international actors, particularly the United States.

Recent reporting and diplomatic conversations have created the impression, in my view, that foreign actors are actively attempting to influence the political composition of the next Bangladeshi government.

If outside powers are encouraging particular Islamist forces while weakening secular and democratic competitors, that would constitute a very serious form of interference.

And we should ask: why?

Why would Western governments strengthen movements whose ideological objectives are fundamentally hostile to liberal democracy?

That is something I find extremely difficult to understand.

Tapas Kanti Baul

We have previously discussed the growing economic influence of Gulf actors as well.

For example, a Qatari company has become an important supplier of liquefied gas to Bangladesh.

There have also been domestic allegations that shortages and energy pricing have been manipulated politically.

Those claims obviously require careful investigation, but they add another layer to the question of foreign influence.

Let me bring us back to your recent Substack article.

You described Bangladesh as a potential new venue for **totalitarianism**.

What indicators lead you to that conclusion?

Paulo Casaca

When we look historically at totalitarian processes—whether Stalinism, Nazism, fascism or revolutionary theocracy—there is often an enormous gap between what political movements promise and what they actually build.

Of course, those regimes did not normally announce at the beginning: “We intend to create a totalitarian state.”

But in many cases, elements of their ideological project were visible.

What is striking to me about Bangladesh is the scale of political concealment surrounding the transition.

During the student movement, there was almost no public presentation of the uprising as an Islamist or jihadist political project.

The language was about reform, democracy and popular grievances.

Yet today, some of the political forces that emerged from that movement are aligned with Jamaat-e-Islami.

That is a dramatic transformation.

Paulo Casaca

It reminds me, in a broad political sense, of George Orwell's *1984*.

Orwell describes institutions whose names mean precisely the opposite of what they actually do: the Ministry of Truth produces propaganda; the Ministry of Love is associated with repression.

The point is not that Bangladesh is literally Orwell's fictional state.

The point is the inversion of political language.

You promise democracy and produce exclusion.

You promise freedom of expression and then journalists are threatened.

You promise protection of minorities and minorities report growing insecurity.

You promise political pluralism and major political forces are prohibited.

That inversion is what concerns me.

Tapas Kanti Baul

I also see echoes of Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

There was a promise that the new political order would represent ordinary citizens and protect minorities.

Yet, in my assessment, Muhammad Yunus has increasingly exercised power in an authoritarian manner.

The metaphor I would draw is with Napoleon in *Animal Farm*: a revolutionary promise gradually becoming concentrated authority.

Paulo Casaca

Yes.

Animal Farm comes before *1984* in Orwell's political development, and *1984* perhaps brings the argument to its most complete form.

But let us return to Bangladesh.

This is obviously a tremendous drama for Bangladesh itself.

Yet I think it also has wider global significance.

My concern is that international institutions and political leaders are presenting narratives that do not correspond with what is happening on the ground.

And the public sphere is not sufficiently challenging those narratives.

Of course, social media contains misinformation and exaggeration.

That is true everywhere.

But the existence of false information cannot be used as an excuse to ignore documented political repression.

Paulo Casaca

In my assessment, Bangladesh is currently experiencing persecution of political opponents, pressure on journalists and intellectuals, and serious insecurity among minorities.

At the same time, the political environment increasingly favours Jamaat-e-Islami.

I also think the BNP has now begun to understand the danger.

A year or more ago, some within the BNP may have assumed that the new political order would ultimately benefit them.

But Islamist political actors do not necessarily need the BNP once the BNP has served its tactical purpose.

If that is correct, the BNP itself may eventually face the same methods of exclusion that have been used against the Awami League.

Tapas Kanti Baul

How, then, do you evaluate the performance of the present Election Commission?

Paulo Casaca

There are obviously technical questions that fall directly under the Election Commission, particularly concerning voting procedures, counting and scrutiny.

But many of the most important conditions for democratic elections extend far beyond the Commission.

Who is protecting freedom of expression?

Who is protecting political association?

Who prevents attacks on newspapers, opposition activists or civil society?

Those questions involve the police, the army, the judiciary and the broader state apparatus.

The Election Commission cannot create a free election by itself if the wider political environment is not free.

Paulo Casaca

When I saw the attacks on *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*, I initially thought that perhaps the authorities had effectively abandoned the idea of holding a meaningful election altogether.

Later, the process moved forward again.

My interpretation is that the authorities still want the appearance of electoral legitimacy.

But I am not convinced that they are prepared to accept the political uncertainty that genuine democratic competition requires.

Paulo Casaca

There is also the question of the referendum being held alongside the election.

As I understand it, voters are being asked to approve constitutional changes whose implications are not entirely clear.

That is highly problematic.

You cannot meaningfully elect representatives if the powers and constitutional framework under which they will govern are themselves being altered simultaneously in ways that voters may not fully understand.

Paulo Casaca

Historically, referendums imposed from above in environments without genuine political freedom have often been instruments of authoritarian consolidation.

There are many examples.

Hitler's Germany is the most obvious historical case, but similar mechanisms have been used in numerous dictatorships.

Portugal under the Estado Novo also used plebiscitary methods to legitimise an authoritarian constitutional structure.

The broader lesson is simple:

A referendum is not automatically democratic simply because people are asked to vote.

It depends on who wrote the proposal, whether the process is legitimate, whether opposing views can be expressed freely, and whether voters genuinely understand the choices before them.

Paulo Casaca

That is why I find it so troubling when European institutions celebrate a constitutional process produced by unelected or weakly accountable bodies.

The European Union is supposed to be grounded in democracy.

It should therefore apply the same democratic standards abroad that it claims to uphold internally.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Let me bring us to the final question.

From everything we have discussed, you are arguing that the conditions necessary for a genuinely free and fair parliamentary election are currently absent.

There are serious concerns about freedom of association, freedom of expression, minority protection and the rule of law.

You have also argued that parts of the judiciary have become instruments of political repression.

At the same time, the European Union's election observation engagement appears to be treating the process as inclusive.

So what role can think tanks such as the **South Asia Democratic Forum** play in informing European policymakers and challenging standards that we believe fall below what Europe itself should accept?

Paulo Casaca

I think we have to continue doing what we are already trying to do.

We must speak openly and base our arguments on facts and evidence.

That is not always easy.

Organisations that challenge powerful political narratives can face attempts to discredit them, silence them or interfere with their work.

But we have to continue.

Human dignity and democratic freedom are fundamental values.

We have to stand for them.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Paulo, thank you for sharing your perspective on Bangladesh's evolving political landscape and on the potential role of the European Union in supporting democratic norms.

As we have heard today, questions of electoral fairness, institutional independence, freedom of expression and political inclusivity are shaping both Bangladesh's domestic debate and the international response to it.

With the election approaching, policymakers, election observers and civil-society organisations will need to engage carefully and consistently—and to apply democratic principles without double standards.

At SADF, we will continue monitoring developments, contributing evidence-based analysis and facilitating informed discussion about democracy and governance in South Asia.

Thank you to our listeners for joining us.

If you found today's conversation useful, please follow our work at **SADF.online** and through our social-media channels.

Until next time, I am Tapas Kanti Baul.

Stay well, and thank you for listening.

Paulo Casaca

Bye-bye.