



# **ALLIANCE FOR FAIR ELECTION AND DEMOCRACY**

## **PRE-ELECTION STATEMENT**

**9 FEBRUARY 2026**

### **Citizen election observers are monitoring as Bangladesh heads to polls in a highly competitive environment**

AFED is a national platform of 30 reputable civil society organizations established in July 2025, working to promote transparency, accountability, and public confidence in Bangladesh's electoral process through non-partisan and evidence-based citizen engagement. Our methodology combines long-term observation with short term observation on Election Day, which makes our findings and assessments rigorous and aims to contribute to post-election reforms through recommendations.

AFED has deployed 175 Long-Term Observers across the country since 28 December 2025. On Election Day, an additional 1,800 observers are deployed proportionally across geographical areas and 800 mobile observers will join our efforts to assess the voting and counting process, including the counting of postal ballots. AFED election observation is independent and impartial, and conducted by trained observers that follow a strict Code of Conduct. Our statements and recommendations are based on documented evidence from the field. AFED's election observation activities are supported by the European Union and the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD).

## **Context**

This election is the first to take place following the events of 5 August 2024, which resulted in a transitional period with an interim government led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus. The period since has included a reform process, resulting in the adoption of the July Charter, aimed at strengthening democratic governance, and in preparations for fresh elections taking place in parallel. In this context, the election and the referendum on 12 February 2026 represent an important moment for advancing democratic participation and public trust in the electoral process.

## Key findings

The following key findings are based on AFED's election observation activities conducted between 28 December 2025 and 8 February 2026.

- **Election preparations**

Preparations of the elections, which will take place in 42,779 polling stations across the country, are well underway. Organising any election in Bangladesh is a complex task and the Election Commission has informed that preparations are largely on time. Election Commission officials at sub-national level assess their own preparedness positively: more than 98 percent of officials met by AFED citizen observers express that they are either very well or well prepared for Election Day.

Sixty-nine Returning Officers were appointed on 11 December 2025. During the last week of January, 82 percent of Election Commission Officials reported that the appointment and training of polling staff had been completed. Based on meetings with almost 200 Election Commission officials in the field, only 39 percent confirmed that gender balance and minority inclusion were considered in the recruitment processes.

Trust in the Election Commission is critical to the credibility of the electoral process and the outcome. Party and candidate teams that AFED citizen election observers met express trust in the Election Commission, with more than 80 percent considering that the Election Commission is independent and impartial.

- **Nomination of candidates**

A total of 2,034 candidates are standing for election, from 51 political parties and 249 as independents. BNP's internal candidate process partly resulted in tensions and electoral violence that carried on during the campaign period.

According to the Election Commission, only 79 candidates are women and one candidate is a *hijra* (transgender) candidate. The failure of political parties to nominate women as candidates for the election is appalling. This demonstrates that Bangladesh has a long way to go to ensure equal participation of women in political life.

- **Voter education and information**

Voter education and information are essential to ensure that voters understand their political and electoral rights as well as how to cast their vote. Nonetheless, AFED long-term observers witnessed limited efforts in this regard. Voter education activities and materials were seen in 82 percent of AFED's campaign observations whereas information about the referendum was visible in 50 percent of the AFED observations. Although political parties started late to take sides on the referendum, a specific referendum outcome was promoted in 60 percent of the electoral campaigns observed. We commend the authorities for having strengthened the measures to increase voter awareness, and for strong efforts also linked to make the referendum more widely known in a fairly short timeframe. However, the interim government has advocated clearly for a "yes" in the referendum, provoking controversies among political stakeholders and criticism by the Election Commission.

- **Electoral campaign**

The election campaign is well under way, and political parties and candidates have eagerly engaged with supporters and reached out to voters. The electoral campaign officially started on 22 January but AFED observers witnessed a total of 239 campaign activities taking place before this date. In the campaigns observed by AFED observers, corruption, employment, education and development projects were the most salient issues.

In almost half of the campaigns observed, the Election Commission organised joint events in which all candidates were present on the same stage to discuss their election manifestos and announce their commitment to comply with the code of conduct.

Up until 8 February, AFED has observed 454 campaign rallies. In 90 percent of conversations with political parties and contestants, it is positive to note that campaign teams confirmed they were generally able to conduct their campaign freely. This is consistent with AFED observations on the ground. In less than two percent, party or candidate teams expressed that they had faced denial of permission for venue location.

AFED observers were informed about 28 incidents of cash or in-kind vote buying and gift-giving, such as essential items, transport tokens or mobile recharges, which is strictly prohibited by law. However, during campaign events, AFED directly observed 56 cases of food distribution and two cases of the handing out of money.

There has been a substantial number of breaches against the rules established for campaign materials, with numerous cases reported concerning the use of colours in promotion materials, banners exceeding size limitations, and the use of festoons and prohibited images.

Among 200 Election Commission officials that AFED observers have met, 37 noted that they had received documented campaign violations, resulting in issuance of warnings and instructions as well as further investigations.

Law enforcement officers were observed to be present in two-fifths of the campaign rallies observed, with their presence assessed as appropriate in the majority of events, but in 20 percent as inadequate.

- **Electoral violence and intimidations**

Bangladesh has a history of election-related violence; however, the current electoral process has so far been marked by a lower level of violence.

That said, AFED notes with concern recent reports on elections-related killings and violent incidents, for example in Bhola, Bagerhat, Patuakhali, Chittagong, Sirajganj, and Mymensingh districts. AFED has received 25 reports from political parties and candidate teams of incidents of riots, clashes and physical assaults on party supporters, volunteers, or campaign workers. However, political stakeholders submitted complaints only in half of the cases. In addition, they reported 75 cases of incidents of intimidation and harassment.

Two-third of Election Commission officials confirmed that they were operating polling stations in sensitive and high-risk locations. For Election Day, they identified intimidation and harassment, the spreading of misinformation and rumours, disorderly conduct, and

clashes and violence as the main security risks. Many interlocutors anticipate that violence will rise, flagging the risk of violence in highly competitive constituencies not only for Election Day, but also between supporters of winning and losing candidates in particular after election day.

- **Inclusion of marginalised groups**

AFED notes with great concern obstacles to effective participation of women in this electoral process. Comprehensive work lies ahead to promote meaningful women inclusion in Bangladesh party politics. Women were represented as speakers at 17 percent of observed campaign events and were visibly present at 33 percent of events. The extent to which women's inclusion is reflected in the Election Commission's policies and structures appears limited. A comprehensive assessment of women inclusion will form part of the AFED final report and recommendations.

Members of religious, ethnic or linguistic minority communities were present in 54 percent of the observed campaign events. That said, AFED has observed nine cases of harassment and intimidation targeting minority communities, including in Jessore, Patuakhali, Dinajpur, and Khulna districts. The concerns of minority communities to risks of violence and post-election retaliation is high, in particular among Hindu communities, based on historical experience and violence that occurred during the transition.

Election Commission officials at sub-national level stated that special measures have been adopted to safeguard the voting rights of marginalised groups, including separate queues and assistive staff for women, elderly, and minority voters, enhanced security at specific polling centers, and targeted voter awareness campaigns. We will continue paying attention to the inclusion of minorities in our election day observations.

- **Citizen observation**

AFED acknowledges the Election Commission's efforts to ensure transparency in the electoral process and to facilitate the participation of citizen election observers. The lowering of age requirement for observers from 25 to 21 ensures inclusion of a younger generation in this exercise of democratic rights. The Election Commission showed goodwill and flexibility during the accreditation process, which contributed to its smooth implementation. Overall, the Election Commission has provided accreditation for 81 national election observer organisations, and over 55,000 individual observers. However, AFED notes that most of these organisations are new and without experience, with their sources of funding remaining undisclosed.

## **Preliminary/urgent recommendations**

**We call on the Election Commission** to ensure the smooth running of the Election Day. Any operational obstacles must be solved with immediate actions. Election officials bear a specific responsibility to protect the right of women and minority communities to vote freely and in secrecy.

**We call on political parties and candidates** to take their responsibility for ensuring a peaceful Election Day. Party leaders or candidates could consider making joint statements

on their commitment to peaceful elections in vulnerable areas. Political parties and candidates bear a significant responsibility to ensure that their conduct, and that of their supporters, remains peaceful and free from violence, intimidation, and harassment on Election Day - but also after the polls.

**We call on security forces** to undertake their work with diligence and protect the right of voters to go and vote on Election Day, and to ensure that law and order as well as protection for vulnerable communities is provided well after election day.

**We call on fact-checking organisations and media** to coordinate with the Election Commission and Law Enforcement to conduct real-time fact-checking to debunk mis- and disinformation before they trigger any unrest on Election Day and in the post-election period.

**We call on citizen election observers** to remain independent and non-partisan and undertake their work professionally and with diligence.

**We call on all voters** to vote to make their voice heard and vote according to their own conviction. Ensure the secrecy of your vote, it is provided to you by law.

## **Next steps**

On Election Day, AFED will increase its presence by deploying more than 2,600 Election Day observers to observe voting and counting processes. AFED will share information with the public on the conduct of the elections and the referendum. Preliminary findings from Election Day observation will be presented in a Press Conference at the Six Seasons Hotel on 13 February at 2pm.

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