



Bangladesh Holds Historic and Peaceful 2026 Parliamentary Elections and Referendum despite Partisan Activities near Polling Stations Risking Improper Influence and Clear Accessibility Challenges

**12 February 2026
Dhaka, Bangladesh**

The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) commends the people of Bangladesh for their participation in the peaceful and orderly Parliamentary Elections and Referendum held on 12 February 2026. Nineteen months after the historic July Uprising, voters across Bangladesh arrived at polling stations with anticipation to cast their votes.

ANFREL acknowledges the efforts of the Bangladesh Election Commission, polling officials including security forces, support staff, and dedicated volunteers across the country in administering a generally orderly elections.

ANFREL observers visited 414 polling booths across Bangladesh, including 169 in rural areas and 234 in urban locations, across all eight divisions of the country, covering 71 percent of Bangladesh's 64 administrative districts. ANFREL observers monitored the full electoral process from the opening of polling stations, through voting procedures during the day, to the closing and counting process.

Opening Process

The opening process was generally conducted in an orderly manner across observed polling stations, with polling officials present and essential materials available in most locations prior to the start of voting. However, some stations experienced minor delays leading to uncertainty of entry for polling agents and observers. This led to tensions and, in isolated instances, physical confrontations between representatives of competing parties. Most polling stations displayed voter guidelines, explanations of the referendum, and lists of political parties and their symbols. Assistant Presiding Officers (APOs), supported by Polling Officers, commenced voting at 7:30 AM in most polling stations with a few polling booths experiencing delays.

Voting Process

ANFREL observed that polling booths were arranged to ensure the secrecy of the ballot-marking process while also ensuring that polling agents, and observers are able to oversee the overall voting process with the ballot box clearly visible at all times. At the initial stage of voting, longer queues were observed with a slight increase during the middle of the voting period until a decline toward closing time but consistently being described as orderly throughout the day with close to 80% of reports identifying orderly queue outside polling booths.

Male APOs were more prevalent, although a notable presence of female APOs accounting for close to 30% of observed polling booths. During voting, polling staff in most stations actively explained to voters how to properly fold the ballot. Nearly 90% of reports from Observers showed no discrepancies in general voting procedures. Polling agents, domestic and international observers, and members of the media were largely present at polling centres. However, it was observed in some polling stations that polling agents did not possess proper

identification cards, and in a few cases identification badges displayed the face or symbol of their respective party which could affect the neutrality of the polling environment. In one reported instance, the tendered vote procedure was applied and generally followed in accordance with regulations.

Closing and Counting

94% of observed polling stations closed on time, with no reported incidents disrupting the closing process. This continued with the counting process. Most of the observers reported that polling agents did not have any issues with the count nor the process. However, in two (2) areas, polling agents raised concerns with how the counting process was implemented citing issues that made it difficult for the agents to properly observe the sorting, and counting of ballots. These were also issues ANFREL observed in the counting process. More than 50% of ANFREL's observers find that the Presiding Officer failed to announce the serial numbers during the opening of the ballot boxes, close to a third found that the counting center did not remain under CCTV surveillance, and 30% of Presiding Officers failed to ensure counting in two separate groups (one for National Parliament ballots and one for Referendum ballots). ANFREL also found that provisions for food and water were not sufficient for poll workers in half of the counting centers. These issues had no significant impact on the integrity of the process. However, these are issues that should also be addressed in future elections.

Inclusivity and Accessibility Gaps Observed

ANFREL observed notable gaps in accessibility and inclusive voting arrangements across many polling stations. Most polling stations lacked ramps and wheelchair access, and in several locations voting booths were situated on upper floors, creating mobility barriers for persons with disabilities and elderly voters. No tactile ballots or sign-language interpretation materials were available, limiting independent participation for voters requiring such assistance.

While some voters received support from family members, assistance was frequently provided by polling officials and members of the ANSAR & VDP (Bangladesh Ansar and Village Defence Party), who helped guide voters and facilitate movement within polling premises. Clearly accessibility largely depended on personal assistance rather than structural accommodation.

Party Supporter Activities near Polling Stations

ANFREL observed the presence of party-affiliated individuals and activities in the vicinity of several polling stations. Outside station entrances, aside from campaign posters and banners, voter identification desks operated by political parties distributed voter slips, some bearing party logos and candidate images. In certain locations, voters were seen presenting these slips to polling agents as soon as they entered the polling booth premises. This practice presents a serious vulnerability because it may function as a verification mechanism for vote-buying arrangements, thereby increasing the risk of undue influence. Failure to address this would lead to creating more opportunities for undue influence and vote buying. This risk was reinforced by a reported suspicious negotiation between a voter and a polling agent consistent with vote buying behaviour. These are notable concerns that might have a greater impact if not addressed in future elections.

Security Environment

Security arrangements were extensive and highly visible throughout the electoral process. At polling stations, the presence of security forces generally helped maintain order. ANFREL observers noted instances where Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) units conducted random security checks in and around polling areas. However, overall actions of security personnel contributed to a largely peaceful environment despite isolated incidents. While these checks did not

generally interrupt voting, they should be carried out carefully to avoid instances creating uncertainty among voters and observers.

ANFREL observers also visited the Police Special Branch and Police Headquarters to validate the situation on the ground. According to authorities, no casualties were reported and no polling stations were cancelled. Reported incidents mainly involved minor clashes, attempts at illegal voting, several detentions, and reported efforts to obstruct the process. Alongside this, ANFREL visited the Bangladesh Election Commission's situation room and command center, where officials monitored the electoral process through live feeds from CCTV cameras, body-worn cameras, and drone surveillance deployed across polling areas.

Overall, the electoral and referendum day was festive, orderly and peaceful. In the context of Bangladesh's post-July Uprising transition, continued cooperation among the Bangladesh Election Commission, political parties, civil society, and security authorities remains important to strengthen public confidence and support ongoing electoral reforms.

ANFREL will hold its press briefing and launch the Interim Report of the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) for the 2026 Parliamentary Elections and Referendum on 15 February 2026, from 10:00 to 11:30 AM., at The Westin Dhaka, Gulshan Avenue, Grand Ballroom (Level 1).

ABOUT ANFREL

The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), established in 1997, promotes democratic elections in Asia through election observation, capacity building, and advocacy efforts. ANFREL has a longstanding engagement in Bangladesh, including its observation of the 2001 and 2008 National Parliamentary Elections, during which it assessed polling, counting, results management, and the broader conditions for political participation.

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For media inquiries, Please Contact:

Ms. Brizza Rosales, Mission Executive Director – brizza@anfrel.org

Mr. Tharindu Abeyrathna, Mission Coordinator – tharindu@anfrel.org

Mr. John Reiner Antiquerra, Senior Program Officer for Outreach and Communication – john@anfrel.org

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