

Issue Brief

March 2025

No : 423

A General's Warning:
How Political Infighting
is Endangering
Bangladesh's Future

Anjali Manhas



A General's Warning: How Political Infighting is Endangering Bangladesh's Future

Anjali Manhas

Abstract

Bangladesh continues to experience political upheavals that are characterised by persistent instability and increasing security concerns. General Waker-Uz-Zaman has issued an appeal for institutional discipline and national cohesion which represents a crucial development in Bangladesh' democratic journey. The paper evaluates the justification behind the General's warnings through an analysis of political polarisation alongside institutional breakdown and violent trends in Bangladesh's historical context. The study reveals that Bangladesh remains at a critical juncture because failure to maintain institutional integrity would endanger its democratic foundations and create imminent threats to its national security through previous cases of warnings dismissal. This Research advocates that Bangladesh should pay attention to the issued warnings to achieve political stability and to establish a sustainable democratic system.

Keywords : National Security threat, Political upheaval, Warning, Crisis Timeline.

Introduction

Speaking at the inaugural ceremony on National Military martyrdom Army Day in Dhaka on 25 February 2025, General Waker-Uz-Zaman delivered a stark evaluation of Bangladesh's fragile state. The Chief of Army Staff directly connected the deteriorating security conditions to continuous political unrest, thus regretting that the country's political elite has been made "preoccupied with vilifying one another" (Majumdar, 2025) instead of working on key governance concerns. He pointed out on the fact that numerous officers are now facing legal charges in court or in prison, which is creating an atmosphere of fear in the force (Laskar, 2025). He emphasized that this breakdown of law enforcement capabilities directly threatens Bangladesh's stability and security. Perhaps most ominously, the General warned that internal divisions must stop defending Bangladesh's sovereignty, while signalling that the interim government seems to be heading toward elections within 18 months timeframe.

This warning arrives at a time when Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture, with deepening political divisions threatening to dismantle decades of economic and social achievements. When the chief of Army Staff speaks so publicly, it is more than ordinary military anxiety—it reveals fundamental fissures in the country's system of governance.

This paper discusses the historical context that makes General Zaman's cautions especially pertinent, looking at how past experiences of political conflicts have compromised national security and institutional integrity. The ongoing crisis follows a familiar pattern: politicized institutions that fails to act as mandated, security gaps emerge, and the military leadership feels compelled to address governance deficiencies. General Zaman identifies that Bangladesh may be setting itself up for a pattern of instability which has repeatedly derailed its democratic evolution.

The issue is not just about political stability but Bangladesh's ongoing sovereignty and development trajectory. As the regional powers compete for strategic advantage and non-state actors exploit governance vulnerabilities, the cost of ongoing political dysfunction rises ever higher. General Zaman's move is therefore not simply a matter of military concern but an important warning about Bangladesh's very existence as a unified, independent nation.

A Timeline of Crisis in Bangladesh's Political History

Bangladesh's political history reveals a trend of instability where in warnings, as General Zaman's have been consistently ignored, often leads to severe consequences. Understanding this historical background is essential to grasp the seriousness of the current situation.

Figure 1: Timeline of Bangladesh' Political Turmoil

Year	Event	Explanation
1971	Bangladesh Liberation War	The conflict secured Bangladesh's independence but also created political foundations constructed on war, perpetuating long- term polarisation. (Haqqani, 2024)

1975	Assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman	A military coup led to the assassination of the nation's founding leader, establishing the precedent for extra-constitutional intercessions amid political crises. (Sawa et al., 2023)
1991	Restoration of Democracy	Bangladesh eventually returned to democratic rule, with political cleavages continuing, gradually weakening the institutions of democracy. (Haqqani, 2024)
2007	Military-backed Caretaker Government	Because of violent political turmoil, the armed forces briefly stepped in, bringing out the weaknesses of democratic governance in Bangladesh. (Human Rights Watch, 2008)
2009	Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) Mutiny	The uprising resulted in the deaths of 74 individuals, 57 of whom were army officers, demonstrating the risks associated with internal security collapses. (Al Jazeera, 2024)
2014	Disputed General Elections	The elections were boycotted by the leading opposition parties, resulting in riotous protests and additional political instability. (Riaz, 2014)
2018	Controversial Elections and Allegations of Vote Rigging	Claims of election manipulation further entrenched suspicion on the electoral process and heightened political polarisation. (BBC News, 2018)
2024	Installation of Interim Government	The current government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus aims to stabilize the nation and conduct elections by December 2025, marking another attempt to reshape Bangladesh's political course. (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2025)

The historical pattern of instability in Bangladesh highlights the fact as to how political infighting and weak institutions have repeatedly lead to crises. General Zaman's call for 'unity, discipline, and electoral integrity' aligns with these past lessons, emphasizing on the fact that Bangladesh must address its institutional weaknesses to ensure long-term stability. His warnings are not just cautionary but essential for preventing future unrest.

Bangladesh's National Security at Risk

Bangladesh's ongoing political bickering has generated significant security vulnerabilities. As political leaders are preoccupied with securing power instead of ensuring

effective governance, national security institutions have become progressively compromised. The politicization of security forces has eroded their operational efficiency and destroyed public confidence in these institutions. For instance, the violent repression of demonstrations, particularly those involving students (Human Rights Watch, 2025), has exposed security shortcomings, through excessive force and obstruction of medical aid leading to hundreds of casualties, as a UN report (OHCHR, 2025) estimates, hundreds of deaths and injuries. Additionally, the rise in extremism and sectarian violence, marked by attacks on minorities and reported instances of communal violence, also weakens security, driven by political polarisation (Haqqani, 2024). These conflicts have resulted in the seizure of major institutions, eroding the rule of law and diminishing the state's ability to maintain security and protect its citizens.

The police force, in fact, is now facing an unprecedented crisis. Following the recent political transitions, numerous officers are now subjected to legal charges for alleged abuses purportedly committed under the former government. At least 41 retired police officers were arrested among 1,059 officers who were accused of crimes linked to the 2024 student-led movement that overthrew Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. High ranking officials, such as retired Inspectors General of Police (IGP)— Chowdhury Abdullah Al Mamun and AKN Shahidul Haque, former Police Commissioners— Mohammad Asaduzzaan and Mian Saiful Islam were among those arrested. Additionally, the ex-additional commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, Harunur Rashid, has the maximum number of cases against him, totalling to 174 (PTI, 2025). This has instilled fear and reluctance among police officers, making them afraid of taking firm action in case they are later sanctioned. As a result, the police has opened up security gaps in some regions of the nation, thus exposing citizens to insecurity and eroding the rule of law.

As civilian institutions weaken, the military increasingly finds itself filling the void. The military has been deployed to maintain public order, guard strategic infrastructure and, in some cases, administer civil governance in some locations. This indicates the ability of the military to respond to institutional failure, as also raises concerns about a shift from civilian to military governance —exactly the situation General Zaman cautions against.

This trend follows a similar pattern observed in countries such as Pakistan, Egypt, and Thailand, where weak democratic institutions and party polarization have expanded the

military's role in politics. Initially, military involvement in civilian functions was justified as a means of providing stability thereafter causing problems for democratic development and ushering in sources of further contention. The security threats, stemming from political fragmentation, goes beyond internal issues. Bangladesh's strategic location between South and Southeast Asia renders its stability a regional concern. Compromised security institutions and governance gaps provides opportunities for non-state actors, including extremist groups seeking influence in the area.

General Zaman's warning, speaks not only about the domestic politics but it also speaks about the very survival of the nation amidst an increasingly contested global geopolitical landscape. Without coordinated political leadership and well- disciplined institutions, Bangladesh is likely to become a battleground for competing foreign interests, thus further eroding its sovereignty and security.

Bangladesh's Military Dilemma

The Bangladesh military has traditionally played the role of final guarantor of national stability, stepping in when political processes fail; however General Zaman's recent comments indicate a more subtle understanding of the military's relationship with civilian government. While recognising the responsibility of the armed forces to ensure stability, he stresses the need to return to civilian rule and military professionalism—"remaining in the barracks" once order is restored (Ghoshal & Paul, 2024).

This role is in line with lessons of earlier military interventions, especially the caretaker government of 2007-2008 (Human Rights Watch, 2008). Although, this military-backed regime initially stabilised an unstable political landscape, it found it difficult to institute sustainable reforms and eventually experienced waning public support. The experience proved that although military intervention could solve pressing crises, it could not replace legitimate political processes in the long run.

The 2009 BDR Mutiny again offered a dismal reminder of the risks of institutional fissures. The mutiny not only meant tragic loss but also generated conflict between the civil and military leadership regarding a response (Bose, 2024). This crisis underscored just how important institutional discipline and definite civil-military lines are for national stability.

If Bangladesh's political forces do not respond to General Zaman's call for unity and institutional integrity, the nation has bleak prospects. An extended military role in politics might bring temporary stability but would most probably set back the development of strong democratic institutions. Even more alarming is the possible further breakdown of public trust in democratic mechanisms. When the people lose trust in elections and civilian institutions, democracy itself stands exposed to authoritarian options.

The army therefore has the challenging task of maintaining stability without hindering democratic progress. General Zaman's warnings demonstrate this dilemma, acknowledging the military's role while affirming that, sustained stability depends upon effective civilian institutions and political maturity.

The Road to Stability of Bangladesh is Free Elections and National Unity

The planned 2025 elections are a potential turning point in Bangladesh's democratic journey. If held freely and fairly, they could help in restoring citizens' confidence in the democratic systems and building a government with the legitimacy needed to drive meaningful change. Muhammad Yunus' caretaker government has the challenging task of preparing for these elections while navigating through intense political pressures.

Electoral reforms should be implemented to correct the systemic flaws that tainted past elections. These include setting up an independent election commission, having transparent voter registration procedures, granting equal access to the media for all parties, and having security apparatus that defends rather than controlling the electoral process. Additionally, international monitoring and technical help could serve as further insurance against manipulation.

Aside from election technicalities, General Zaman's appeal for consensus underscores a deeper need for democratic stability. Political maturity demands leaders to accept the outcomes of elections, honour opposition rights, and cooperate over matters of national interest. It calls for going beyond the personalised politics, that has plagued Bangladesh's political sphere, and embracing a more institutionalised democratic framework.

National cohesion is not about suspending political difference. Instead, it involves recognising fundamental principles that must be upheld by all sides: respect for the autonomy

of institutions, fidelity to constitutional process, and the rejection of political violence. When political leaders commit to such shared foundations, they establish the groundwork for sustainable democratic rule.

Institutional credibility is the third component of General Zaman's message— is contingent on both structural change and a shift in political conduct. Institutions are legitimised when they act in public interest, not in partisan interests, when their processes are open and predictable, and when they apply the same standards to all citizens. Restoring this credibility will take consistent effort over multiple election cycles.

Conclusion: A Nation's Survival Hangs in Balance

Bangladesh's history demonstrates a clear and troubling trend wherein political discord and institutional corruption for partisan gain naturally leads to instability. General Waker-Uz-Zaman's warnings are not simply military concerns, but existential realities about Bangladesh's stability as an independent nation.

The political stakes are heightened to the matter of national survival. In an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape, fragmented countries become susceptible to external manipulation or influence. Given Bangladesh's geographic position and emerging economic significance, it presents a potential target for rival regional powers. In the absence of internal unity and strong institutions, the nation would be reduced to a battleground for foreign interests at the expense of its hard-won sovereignty.

To escape historical cycles of instability, Bangladesh must take some crucial steps. Political stability calls for political leaders to be able to differentiate between a healthy political rivalry and polarizing forces that undermine state capabilities. This implies a commonality in basic agreement over democratic norms and national interests beyond partisan cleavages.

Strengthening institutions require structural reform as well as a shifted political culture. Independent mechanisms of oversight, appointment based on merit, and guaranteed tenure for officials could insulate institutions from the encroachment of politics. Lastly, conducting free and fair elections is the ultimate test of Bangladesh's democratic devotion. The 2025 elections cannot replicate the defects of the past electoral cycles, instead set new standards for transparency and inclusiveness.

If Bangladesh's policymakers ignore General Zaman's advice, history predicts a bleak outcome: continued institutional collapse, accelerated polarization, and civil conflict. However, by listening and implementing reforms deemed necessary, Bangladesh can break free from the legacy of history to forge a new, more solid, democratic order. The question before Bangladesh's political elite is not so much about authority as about the existence of the nation as a solid, unified sovereign state.

References

- Al Jazeera. (2024, December 26). *Bangladesh to investigate 2009 paramilitary mutiny massacre*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/26/bangladesh-to-investigate-2009-paramilitary-mutiny-massacre>
- BBC News. (2018, December 31). *Bangladesh election: PM Sheikh Hasina wins landslide in disputed vote*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46718393>
- Bose, I. (2024, December 26). *Bangladesh to investigate 2009 paramilitary mutiny massacre*. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/12/26/bangladesh-to-investigate-2009-paramilitary-mutiny-massacre>
- Ghoshal, D., & Paul, R. (2024, September 24). *Exclusive: Bangladesh army chief strongly backs interim government, eyes elections within 18 months*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-army-chief-pledges-support-yunus-interim-government-come-what-may-2024-09-24>
- Haqqani, H. (2024, September 12). *Ouster in Bangladesh fuels instability*. Geopolitical Intelligence Services. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/bangladesh-ouster>
- Human Rights Watch. (2008). *Bangladesh events of 2007: World Report 2008*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2008/country-chapters/bangladesh>
- Human Rights Watch. (2025, January 27). *After the Monsoon Revolution: A Roadmap to Lasting Security Sector Reform in Bangladesh*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/01/27/after-monsoon-revolution/roadmap-lasting-security-sector-reform-bangladesh>

India Today. (2025, February 26). *'Anarchy our own making': How Bangladesh army chief read country the riot act.* <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/anarchy-our-own-making-how-bangladesh-army-chief-read-country-the-riot-act-2685935-2025-02-26>

Laskar, R. H. (2025, February 25). *'Am cautioning you': Bangladesh Army chief reads riot act to political forces.* Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/am-cautioning-you-bangladesh-army-chief-reads-riot-act-to-political-forces-101740501241352.html>

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2025, February). *Bangladesh: UN report finds brutal, systematic repression of protests, calls for accountability.* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/02/bangladesh-un-report-finds-brutal-systematic-repression-protests-calls>

PTI. (2025, February 17). *41 former police officers arrested in Bangladesh for committing atrocities during student-led protests last year.* The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/41-former-police-officers-arrested-in-bangladesh-for-committing-atrocities-during-student-led-protests-last-year/articleshow/118327236.cms>

Riaz, A. (2014). *Shifting tides in South Asia: Bangladesh's failed election.* Journal of Democracy, 25(2), 119–130. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/shifting-tides-in-south-asia-bangladeshs-failed-election>

Sawa, T., Kelley, M., Bare, E., & Al Imran, A. (2023, November 21). *The assassin next door.* CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/newsinteractives/features/the-assassin-next-door>

About the Author

Anjali Manhas is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), where she specializes in defence and strategic studies with a focus on South Asian geopolitics. She completed her Master's in Defence and Strategic Studies from Rashtriya Raksha University, where she developed a strong foundation in security, international relations, and strategic analysis. Anjali's current research centers on Bangladesh, examining its security dynamics, regional relationships, and strategic posture in South Asia. Her work aims to contribute to policy development and strategic insights for enhancing regional stability and security. With a keen interest in defence and strategic affairs, Anjali is committed to advancing knowledge and fostering a deeper understanding of South Asian security issues.



All Rights Reserved 2025 Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, copied, archived, retained or transmitted through print, speech or electronic media without prior written approval from CLAWS. The views expressed and suggestions made in the article are solely of the author in his personal capacity and do not have any official endorsement. Attributability of the contents lies purely with author.