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THE MONSOON REVOLUTION AND LIMITATIONS OF POLICE REFORM IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract This article examines police reform undertaken in the aftermath of Bangladesh's Monsoon Revolution of 2024. Drawing on 20 semi-structured interviews with law enforcement officials, legal professionals, journalists, civil society actors and academics, the article analyses policing practices before, during and after the uprising. The findings show that policing during the uprising largely reflected entrenched authoritarian practices, including excessive use of force, politicisation and systematic human rights violations, rather than a temporary institutional breakdown. While the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus articulated a reform agenda and established a Police Reform Commission, initiatives remained constrained by structural legacies, weak accountability mechanisms and limited political consensus. These initiatives for reforms signal intent but ultimately fall short of substantive democratic transformation, highlighting the lack of democratic policing in Bangladesh.

Keywords: *Police reform, democratic policing, Monsoon Revolution, interim government, Bangladesh*

Introduction

Policing occupies a central position in the governance of South Asian states, where law enforcement institutions frequently operate at the intersection of colonial legacies, partisan politics and contested state authority (Arnold, 1986; Verma, 2005). In these contexts, the police are not merely instruments of crime control but key actors in the management of political order, dissent and regime stability. Bangladesh presents a particularly revealing case for examining democratic policing because the police have long functioned as a political institution, deeply implicated in the maintenance of ruling power and the suppression of opposition, rather than a public-service institution (Grant, 2018; Riaz, 2021). Democratic policing has emerged as a central concern in contemporary debates on governance, institutional legitimacy and state–society relations, particularly in contexts marked by democratic erosion and

authoritarian resilience (Goldsmith & Dinnen, 2007; Manning, 2010). Existing scholarship has focused primarily on strong democracies; comparatively less attention has been paid to how policing institutions behave during moments of acute political volatility in hybrid or authoritarian-leaning regimes (Cao et al., 2014).

Bangladesh provides a critical case for examining these dynamics. The student-led uprising of July–August 2024, followed by the collapse of the Awami League government, constituted a profound legitimacy crisis for Bangladesh Police and created a rare political opening for reform. The anti-quota reform movement in Bangladesh began on 1 July 2024 as a student-led protest against the government's quota system, which reserves seats for various categories of people in public jobs. Throughout July 2024 till 5 August 2024, it evolved into a broader pro-democracy uprising. After a violent crackdown by the government in July that killed many student protesters, the movement came to be known as the Monsoon Revolution. With the fall of the Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) government, a new political reality with an interim government came into being on 8 August 2024 (Mahmud, 2025: 446). The uprising marked a decisive political setting. It exposed the coercive foundations of policing under the Awami League government and generated public demands for accountability, neutrality and institutional reform. At the same time, the transition to an interim government created uncertainty about whether policing practices would change meaningfully or be merely rearticulated under a different political configuration.

Following the collapse of the Awami League government, the interim administration led by Muhammad Yunus publicly identified police reform as a central component of its transitional agenda. As part of this commitment, the government announced a series of reform-oriented measures and constituted a Police Reform Commission tasked with reviewing existing policing laws, accountability mechanisms and operational practices. The formation of the commission signalled an official recognition that entrenched patterns of politicisation, impunity and coercive policing had undermined public trust and democratic governance. At the same time, the scope, sequencing and political sustainability of these reform efforts remained uncertain, particularly in the absence of an elected government and durable political consensus.

Amongst the most prominent attempts at police reform in Bangladesh were undertaken during the Police Reform Programme (PRP) (2005–2015), implemented in two phases by the Government of Bangladesh in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, the European Union and the Department for International Development, UK. The PRP aimed to professionalise the police through improvements in investigation practices, community policing and rights awareness, contributing to incremental capacity-building and limited procedural change (Kashem, 2021: 817). However, it failed to produce sustained transformation in policing practices or accountability structures. Police reforms proposed by the caretaker government led by Fakhruddin Ahmed through the Police Ordinance, 2007 were also not fruitful, not only because the ordinance itself was not promulgated but because there was a pervasive lack of political commitment to curtail the

influence of politicians on the police. The failure of these measures reflects structural and political constraints rather than technical shortcomings: Specifically, the PRP became a victim of politics of convenience and did not inspire the police to engage in human rights-based democratic policing (Kabir, 2024).

This article conceptualises democratic policing not as a normative ideal detached from political realities but as a relational outcome produced through interactions between police institutions, political executives and society. Where these relationships are structured by partisan control, impunity and coercive professionalism, policing may retain formal legality while functioning in substantively authoritarian ways (Manning, 2010; Pino & Wiatrowski, 2016). The Bangladesh case illustrates this tension with particular clarity. Accordingly, this article examines democratic policing in Bangladesh by analysing policing practices before, during and after the student-led uprising of July–August 2024. The article advances three core arguments. First, democratic policing in Bangladesh has been systematically eroded by politicisation, impunity and a conception of professionalism centred on coercive capacity rather than public service. Second, policing during the July–August 2024 uprising represented a continuation of long-standing authoritarian practices rather than a temporary breakdown of institutional norms. Third, while post-uprising reform initiatives introduced by the interim government—including the establishment of a Police Reform Commission—signal a rhetorical commitment to democratic policing, their transformative potential remained limited by structural constraints, weak political consensus and enduring institutional legacies.

Bangladesh is a distinctive case but not analytically isolated. The institutional foundations of the Bangladesh police remain deeply shaped by colonial governance structures, most notably the Police Act of 1861 and the Police Regulations of 1943, which prioritised surveillance, coercion and executive control over public accountability (Hossain & Rahman, 2017: 46). Similar institutional continuities persist across South Asia, where colonial policing frameworks were retained after 1947 with limited structural transformation (Arnold, 1986). Bangladesh constitutes a critically unique case in which broader theoretical tensions surrounding democratic policing are particularly visible. Comparative research on postcolonial and hybrid regimes shows that politicised security forces, weak accountability mechanisms and donor-driven reform cycles are common features across many Global South contexts (Goldsmith & Dinnen, 2007: 1092). Bangladesh, thus, offers analytically generalisable insights into how policing institutions function when democratic norms collapse and how reform efforts unfold under conditions of political uncertainty.

Theoretical Framework: Democratic Policing in the South Asian Context

Democratic policing refers to a form of policing in which the exercise of coercive authority is legally constrained, politically neutral, publicly accountable and oriented

towards the protection of citizens' rights rather than the preservation of ruling elites (Bayley, 2001: 13–15; Manning, 2010). In South Asian contexts, however, democratic policing cannot be understood as a stable institutional model or a technical reform template. Instead, it must be analysed as a historically contingent governance arrangement, shaped by colonial legacies, postcolonial state-building and enduring struggles over political authority (Verma, 2005). Democratic policing, in this context, confronts not merely outdated laws but a deeply institutionalised governance logic in which coercion is normalised, and accountability remains weak.

Police reform in the post-authoritarian periods often requires a shift from authoritarian policing to democratic policing. Democratic policing promotes transparency, accountability and adherence to law (Skilling, 2016: 4). In post-authoritarian settings, democratic policing is often articulated as a shift away from coercive rule towards greater transparency, accountability and legal restraint (Bayley, 2001; Goldsmith & Dinnen, 2007; Manning, 2016). David Bayley identifies two essential features of democratic policing: responsiveness and accountability (Manning, 2016; Neild, 2001; Stone & Ward, 2000). Bayley states that democratic police should be responsive to the needs of individuals and private groups as well as enhance the legitimacy of government (Bayley, 2001: 13–14).

Democratically responsive policing can be explained by two prior qualifications: first, a focus on equity of policing; and second, the capacity to deliver a minimum level of service and security (Aitchison & Blaustein, 2013: 500). Equity can be explained through the procedural justice theory, which is rooted in fair and respectful treatment by the police towards the citizens (Burke, 2020; Muntingh et al., 2021; Tyler, 2005). The procedural justice perspective argues that the legitimacy of the police is linked to public judgements about the fairness of the processes through which the police make decisions and exercise authority (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003: 514). Skilling (2016) argues that if the police exercise their authority through fair procedures, they will be perceived as legitimate by the public, and the public will be willing to cooperate and assist them. However, if the police are perceived to be unfair, it will lead to alienation, defiance and non-cooperation. The greater the procedural justice, service and security ensured by the police force, the greater the responsiveness and the higher the quality of democratic policing.

The difference in policing between a democratic and an authoritarian regime lies in accountability mechanisms. Police must be accountable for both their behaviour and the protection of public safety, and they must be accountable to multiple mechanisms (Stone & Ward, 2000: 11). Stone and Ward (2000: 11) propose that police in democracies must be accountable in three stages: first, internal or departmental mechanisms; second, state or governmental mechanisms; and third, social or civil society mechanisms. To investigate any alleged police misconduct or failure to ensure public safety, there must be a transparent chain of command within the police institution to which the alleged officer must answer. After internal accountability is conducted, operational direction must be provided by elected officials or legislative committees to investigate individual cases of alleged misconduct. After these state

control mechanisms, Stone and Ward (2000: 13) propose community-based and/or human rights organisational control over the police.

The organised use of force by the police against their own people requires constant and complex democratic oversight, especially when directed at groups that are under-represented through democratic processes—which is a common phenomenon in hybrid democracies like Bangladesh. Stone and Ward (2000: 18) recommend that, beyond the community, state and internal mechanisms, police must be accountable to an independent judiciary. If executive control is meant to keep police accountable to the democratically elected government, judicial oversight is meant to keep the police accountable to the rule of law.

Political neutrality constitutes another core principle of democratic policing. In democratic systems, police are accountable to law rather than to ruling parties or political elites (Bayley, 2005: 145). In Bangladesh, however, policing has long been structured by partisan alignment and political instrumentalisation. Successive governments have relied on the police to suppress opposition, manage electoral competition and intimidate dissenting voices. Such partisan incorporation of the police undermines democratic policing by collapsing the distinction between state authority and party power, a pattern widely observed in hybrid and competitive authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Methodology

This article is premised on a qualitative, exploratory, single-case study design to examine democratic policing and police reform in post-revolution Bangladesh. It does not seek statistical representativeness or population-level generalisation. Instead, it aims to generate contextually grounded and analytically rich insights into policing practices, institutional dynamics and reform constraints during a period of acute political transition. Such an approach is consistent with established qualitative research traditions in South Asian political and governance studies, where the objective is analytical generalisation rather than statistical inference (Bryman, 2016; George & Bennett, 2005).

The primary qualitative data consist of 20 semi-structured interviews conducted between May 2025 and September 2025. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling, supplemented by snowball referrals, to identify individuals with direct professional, institutional or experiential knowledge of policing practices and police reform in Bangladesh. This strategy prioritised relevance, expertise and positional insight over numerical representativeness (Bryman, 2016). Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted either in-person or via a secure online platform (University of Nottingham's MS Teams). Interviews were carried out across all eight administrative divisions of Bangladesh, that is, Dhaka, Chattogram, Barisal, Mymensingh, Khulna, Sylhet, Rangpur and Rajshahi. The geographic spread was intended to capture variation in policing contexts rather than to claim national representativeness. All participants were anonymised and identifying details were

Table 1 **Summary of Interview Respondents.**

Respondent Category	*Specific Designation*	*Count*
Law enforcement officials (Respondents 1–10)	Sub-Inspector (2); Office-in-Charge of Police Station (3); Assistant Superintendent of Police (2); Additional Deputy Commissioner (1); former Superintendent of Police (1); former Deputy Inspector General (1)	10
Legal professionals (Respondents 11)	Human rights lawyer in the Supreme Court of Bangladesh	1
Journalists (Respondents 12–13)	Crime reporter of a print newspaper (1); Editor of Defence and Security Magazine/Journal (1)	2
Civil society and international actors (Respondents 14–18)	Member of the United Nations Development Programme in Bangladesh (1); Member of the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime in Bangladesh (1); think tank and security sector reform specialist (2); human rights activist and member of an NGO (1)	5
University academics (Respondents 19–20)	Professor in the field of Public Administration (1); Associate Professor in the field of criminology and police science (1)	2
Total		**20**

removed or generalised to protect confidentiality, particularly given the political sensitivity of policing, repression and human rights violations in Bangladesh. Table 1 provides the details of the respondents.

Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, following an iterative coding process. Initial codes were derived deductively from the theoretical framework, particularly concepts related to democratic policing, politicisation, accountability, procedural justice and reform signalling; inductive codes emerged thereafter from the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The analysis does not treat interview accounts as objective representations of reality but as situated interpretations shaped by respondents' institutional positions and experiences. This reflexive approach is important in politically polarised and post-authoritarian contexts.

To strengthen analytical credibility and mitigate the limitations of a small, purposively selected sample, the study employed data triangulation in three ways. First, interview findings were systematically cross-referenced with secondary sources, including reports by human rights organisations (*Odhikar, Ain o Salish Kendra*, and Human Rights Watch), media investigations, UN fact-finding reports and official policy documents related to police reform. This allows claims emerging from interviews to be corroborated, contextualised or problematised. Second, source triangulation is achieved by comparing perspectives across different respondent categories, which are law enforcement, legal professionals, journalists, civil society actors, international practitioners and academics. Consistencies across these groups are treated as analytically significant, while divergences are interpreted as indicative of institutional tensions or contested narratives. Third, temporal triangulation is embedded in the research design by examining policing practices across three distinct

phases: the pre-uprising period, the July–August 2024 protests and the post-revolution reform phase. This temporal structure allows the study to assess continuity and adaptation in policing practices over time.

The article explicitly acknowledges its limitations. The small sample size and non-random selection preclude claims of statistical representativeness or external validity in the positivist sense. Findings should therefore be interpreted as context-specific and exploratory, aimed at explaining mechanisms and institutional dynamics rather than measuring prevalence or causal effects. Nevertheless, the study offers analytical generalizability by linking empirical observations to established theories of democratic policing, authoritarian resilience and postcolonial state institutions. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on policing and governance in South Asia and other hybrid or post-authoritarian contexts.

Domestic Politics and Erosion of Democratic Policing in Bangladesh

Policing in Bangladesh continues to be influenced by the legacy of British colonialism as well as the Pakistani national project in terms of its structure, functions and regulatory mechanisms (Hossain & Rahman, 2017: 56). The state maintains firm control over police operations and budget; politicisation of the police is considered one of the major problems, as is the case in many formerly colonised, Global South nations (Grant et al., 2018: 27). Even after Liberation from Pakistan in 1971, the ruling political party and ruling elites in Bangladesh have always politicised the police to use them against their political opponents. From recruitment to operations, policing in Bangladesh has been subject to nepotism driven by the affiliation of the political party in power. In a democratic context, police should be accountable to the law rather than to ruling governments or parties (Bayley, 2001: 14). The failure to guarantee impartiality represents a severe breach of both constitutional duty and international standards. All governments, including the interim government, have looked to the police to achieve their political objectives. The politicisation of the police was also strongly evident during the then-incumbent Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) administration from 2001 to 2006. According to the International Crisis Group (2009), the police acted and reacted according to the BNP government during an incident in April 2004, when ten truckloads of illegal weapons were held, and on 21 August 2004, when several grenade explosions occurred in an attempt to assassinate Sheikh Hasina, the then leader of the opposition.

Since the BAL, the party that was recently ousted from power, had a landslide electoral victory in 2009, the politicisation of security agencies such as the police was no less than authoritarian, with the government's dependence shifting from the people to the police (Jackman & Maitrot, 2022: 1520). This nexus has existed in some form throughout Bangladesh's history, but has changed in key respects over the past decade as the ruling party has become increasingly dependent on the coercive power of the police and other agencies to suppress those who have opposed the

government (Jackman & Maitrot, 2022: 1517). The Bangladesh police force turned a blind eye to electoral manipulations by BAL activists and was often believed to have delivered the outcome in the 2018 national election (Ruud, 2021: 261).

Police organisations that normalise coercion and impunity often deprioritise meritocracy and service-oriented policing (Pino & Wiatrowski, 2016). Instead, loyalty to political elites and coercive control become the defining markers of professional success. This undermines skill development, accountability and impartiality, while embedding authoritarian practices within organisational culture. Unresolved issues pertaining to police personnel's promotion, posting and social welfare have also led to undemocratic policing practices in Bangladesh. In explaining the root cause of severe politicisation of the police apparatus, a crime reporter of a print newspaper based in Dhaka mentioned, 'One of the primary reasons BAL could lead to the extreme politicisation of the police was rooted in being able to secure power for three consecutive terms, resulting in complete control over recruitment, posting, and promotions' (Respondent No. 13, 2025). Out of a total of 2 lakhs, approximately 80,000 members of the police force were recruited over the last 15 years under the BAL government based on political affiliation (The Daily Star, 2024). In almost all ranks, police officials try to manipulate their postings and promotions by growing closer connections with politicians or police leadership. Bangladesh police lack established selection criteria for postings and promotions, leading police officials to seek political patronage over procedure and accountability.

Corruption is a major barrier to democratic policing in Bangladesh. Inhuman working hours and inadequate pay scale are related to corruption in policing. Constables in the lower ranks suffer the most from low salaries, poor working conditions and severe overwork. Being underpaid and working overtime often leads to undemocratic practices. According to a serving police officer in the rank of Assistant Superintendent of Police currently posted in Khulna, 'We are expected to be on duty almost 24/7, for which we, on most days, end up working around 12 to 15 hours a day. Hardly do we get to have any weekend' (Respondent No. 06, 2025). Even though the budgetary allocation for police increased by 433% during the 15 years of BAL (Hasan, 2024), this has hardly helped to improve the living standards of police officials or reduce corruption. Studies such as Van Rijckeghem & Weder (2001), a cross-country comparison of 31 case studies of developing countries, show that increasing wages is unlikely to reduce corruption unless there is a strong political commitment and efforts to reform society. According to Malik and Qureshi (2021: 1446), police reform initiatives to curb corruption in Pakistan have failed and are unlikely to succeed unless there is strong political will among elites.

Policing in Bangladesh has been marred by systematic human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, custodial torture and excessive use of force against protesters. While such practices are violations of international human rights norms, their significance extends further—they fundamentally erode both the professional competence and democratic legitimacy of the police as an institution. From a democratic policing perspective, legitimacy rests on legality, propor-

tionality and adherence to the rule of law (Manning, 2010). When police forces engage in practices that contravene these principles, they undermine public trust and delegitimise their own authority. Sunshine and Tyler (2003: 519) argue that procedural justice and respect for rights are critical for fostering compliance and cooperation. In Bangladesh, however, rights violations have increasingly fostered fear and disengagement among citizens, severing the normative bonds between police and community.

Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs), including the police, are routinely involved in human rights violations without being held accountable or punished. This is because the LEAs involved in extrajudicial killings, custodial torture and forced disappearances do not generally seem to be held accountable by any authority: They are mostly immune from punishment, which has become a significant concern in Bangladesh and has created worry among human rights activists and civil society members (Uddin, 2024: 744). According to Human Rights Watch World Report 2024, the security forces of Bangladesh have carried out over 600 enforced disappearances since 2009. Tables 2 and 3 reflect the police's extrajudicial killings

Table 2 **Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances by LEAs in Bangladesh, 2009–24 *(Odhikar).***

Year	*Extrajudicial Killings*	*Enforced Disappearance*
2009	154	3
2010	127	18
2011	84	31
2012	70	24
2013	329	35
2014	172	39
2015	185	65
2016	178	90
2017	155	86
2018	466	97
2019	391	77
2020	225	31
2021	107	23
2022	31	21
2023	24	52
2024	18	20
Total	**2,716**	**712**

Source: Data reorganised by the authors from *Odhikar*, a leading human rights NGO in Bangladesh.
Note: LEAs include Police, RAB, BGB and other state security bodies. Totals reflect victims, not incidents.

Table 3 **Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances by LEAs in Bangladesh, 2014–24 (Ain O Salish Kendra).**

Year	*Extrajudicial Killings*	*Enforced Disappearance*
2014	54	–
2015	192	55
2016	195	97
2017	162	60
2018	466	34
2019	388	8
2020	222	6
2021	80	7
2022	19	5
2023	20	9
2024	21	2
Total	**1,819**	**283**

Source: Data reorganised by the authors from Ain o Salish Kendra, a leading human rights NGO in Bangladesh.
Note: LEAs include Police, RAB, BGB and other state security bodies. Totals reflect victims, not incidents. Dash indicates no figure reported.

and enforced disappearances documented by two independent human rights organisations. One of our respondents, a human rights activist and NGO member based in Rajshahi, explained, 'As police are not held accountable by any internal mechanism or external bodies or commissions, it did not restrict some members of the police from overtly and covertly violating human rights' (Respondent No. 18, 2025). This highlights how accountability—one of the cornerstones of democratic policing—has been consistently absent from policing in Bangladesh. Police practices have consistently breached procedural justice norms and undermined democratic policing principles.

The state routinely uses policing for politically motivated goals to intimidate, coerce and suppress political adversaries, dissenting voices, vulnerable populations and ordinary citizens. Police indiscriminately arrest innocent civilians merely on the basis of suspicion and without any court warrant, often as a means to extort bribes (Solaiman & Rafiqul, 2003: 1). Those unable to pay are placed in remand, where they may be subjected to barbarous treatment, sometimes resulting in death. An in-depth analysis by Kashem (2021: 827) revealed that the PRP had a component of capacity-building of evidence-based investigation, but police in Bangladesh continue to rely on oral confessional evidence. Police reliance on oral confessional evidence rather than on evidence-based investigation hinders the equity of policing and

undermines transparency, raising questions about the fairness of the processes used to carry out investigations. Although the Bangladesh Police Act, 1861, and the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898, mandate equal treatment of detainees regardless of political affiliation, opposition activists allege disproportionate targeting during protests and crackdowns.

Policing During and After the Monsoon Revolution

In mid-July 2024, the Bangladeshi government and the ruling BAL escalated efforts to suppress peaceful student protests by mobilising armed supporters and using excessive force. Attacks were incited against students by the police force, including at Dhaka University on 17 July 2024, with actions that violated international human rights law. According to a fact-finding report by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR, 2025) titled *Human Rights Violations and Abuses related to the Protests of July and August 2024 in Bangladesh*, there is conclusive evidence that less-lethal weapons and firearms loaded with lethal ammunition were unlawfully used. Analysing the deaths of 175 victims from documents of 11 hospitals in Dhaka city, and other public hospitals from 12 other cities, it was learned that 137 had wounds from lethal bullets and 22 had wounds from shotgun pellets; out of the remaining victims, 10 had marks of beating, and four died in arson attacks on vehicles and establishments (Moral & Hassan, 2024). The police conducted nightlong raids to arrest those involved in the student-led anti-quota movement (Tieri & Hossain, 2024: 271). According to Human Rights Watch (2025), based on interviews with victims or their relatives and eyewitnesses during the protests and after, it was found that when violence broke out on 15 July 2024, police responded with excessive force, firing live ammunition indiscriminately at unarmed students and, in some cases, shooting people from point blank and in the back as they fled. All of this evidence leads to the inevitable conclusion that Bangladesh police failed to perform democratically responsive policing, ensure respectful treatment towards citizens, and uphold the values of human rights during this period.

Police officers received both explicit and implicit orders throughout the protests from political elites to use lethal force. An investigative report from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) confirmed how the top political leadership, led by the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, authorised security forces to use lethal weapons for a deadly crackdown on student-led protests (BBC Eye, 2025). From 22 to 26 July 2024, 31 people died from police firing (*The Prothom Alo English*, 2024). UNOHCHR found a pattern of arbitrary arrest and detention of individuals by the police between 15 July 2024 and 5 August 2024. Police and intelligence officials even arrested injured persons in hospitals and medical centres or on their way to receive urgent medical care, including by stopping and searching ambulances or by tracking them down after they received medical care (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

This makes it possible to surmise that the police played a central role in the state's violent and systemic crackdown on dissent: In other words, they failed to uphold the rule of law and human rights principles, which are fundamental to democratic policing.

After Sheikh Hasina fled to India and the BAL government fell, ambushes of police officers and vandalism and attacks on police stations were reported across Bangladesh. Police across Bangladesh was largely inactive from 5 August 2024 to 11 August 2024 due to safety concerns. As many as 187 senior police officers, believed to be BAL loyalists, have not returned to duty and remain in hiding (Hasan 2024). One of the policemen at the rank of Assistant Superintendent of Police, currently posted in Barisal, stated:

> Police morale has been very low since August 5th, 2024, and the situation is seriously hampered. Even during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the police did not leave their duty station, as we saw after the fall of the Awami League government. The reality is it is very unlikely the situation would go back to normal so soon. (Respondent No. 07, 2025)

Even a year and a half after the interim government took charge, questions remain about police efficiency due to loss of credibility and moral authority for their role during the uprising, indicating structural weaknesses in capacity and accountability mechanisms. Before 5 August 2024, the police used to respond or show up within 20 to 25 minutes after receiving a complaint. Immediately thereafter, it took them twice as long, sometimes two to three hours, to respond to calls for assistance, even as some calls went unanswered (Bhattacharjee & Khan, 2024). The quality of policing required to restore law and order, as well as the practices of democratic policing, remained largely absent. Since Muhammad Yunus led the interim government that assumed office, there was high hope that the police would operate independently to ensure justice and no longer be a political tool of the government. Many incidents show that police lacked responsiveness, with actions that are neither prompt, equitable nor transparent. In December 2025, for instance, LEA and police failed to protect the offices of *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*, the two leading newspapers of the country, as well as Chhayanaut, one of the country's most renowned cultural institutes, from right-wing mob attacks, vandalism and arson.

Questions about the police's political neutrality and having double standards also became visible in some cases. The Dhanmondi 32 residence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has been subject to vandalism at least thrice since 5 August 2024, with even heavy machinery such as an excavator being used. The police have also shown double standards in policing practices in dealing with meetings, rallies, processions and protests near the chief adviser's official residence, Jamuna. Despite the Dhaka Metropolitan Police banning any gathering near the chief adviser's official residence since March 2025 (New Age, 2025b), the National Citizen Party—a party formed by students' leaders who led the massive student–public–worker

uprising—was allowed to arrange mass rallies near the chief adviser's residence demanding BAL to be banned.

Absence from duty, inefficiency in performance, inability to maintain equality and lack of responsiveness to citizens rather than to political elites reflect a lack of accountability and oversight in the police force. This has been attested both internally and by independent external bodies such as the judiciary and ombudsman institutions. Extrajudicial killing has not entirely stopped under the interim government: While the overall number dropped significantly under the interim government, at least forty people were shot dead, tortured in custody, or beaten to death between August 2024 and September 2025 (Sujan, 2025).

However, there have been some enabling changes in policing practice in post-revolutionary contexts that relate to democratic policing principles. The Odhikar Annual Human Rights Report 2024 and Ain O Salish Kendra 2025 statistics indicate that there have been no recorded cases of enforced disappearance under the interim government. The police have also established citizen forums to build good relations with the public (Bhuiyan, 2024), an effort to restore public trust after the misdeeds during the uprising.

Limitations of Police Reform Under the Interim Government

Studies have shown that democratic policing is essential in emerging democracies to balance security needs with upholding human rights (Cao et al., 2014; Manning, 2010). Bangladesh police have procured and used in the past lethal weapons like 7.62-mm semi-automatic rifles, light and submachine guns, and 7.22 semi-automatic rifles (Islam, 2025). The use of lethal weapons is against the safeguarding of justice and the human rights principle of democratic policing. According to a security sector reform specialist based at a think tank in Dhaka, 'Normal police do not need these lethal weapons. These are equipment used by the military, not for the police' (Respondent No. 16, 2025). Considering such concern, the interim government decided, as part of police reform initiatives, that police will no longer be allowed to use lethal weapons and will gradually surrender the same, except for specialised forces like the Armed Police Battalion (Khan, 2025). To further increase police transparency and accountability, the Home Affairs Adviser of the interim government ordered that the Detective Branch of the police will no longer be permitted to arrest individuals in plain or civilian clothing (New Age, 2025a). During the interim government and after the elections of February 2026, there have not been many complaints about police raids or arrests in civilian clothes or the use of lethal weapons, even though there remain some allegations of human rights violations like custodial torture.

To counter enforced disappearance and uphold human rights, the Police Reform Commission also proposed clear-walled interrogation cells in police stations, installation of CCTVs with a central database, and that police officers during raids must wear GPS trackers and bodycams (Islam & Khan, 2025). Undoubtedly, implementing

all these requires time for structural adjustments as well as budgetary allocation. As part of a broader reform initiative to increase transparency and accountability of police for the national election held in February 2026, the interim government planned to deploy 40,000 body cameras. During the national election in 2026, Bangladesh police and the Election Commission used body-worn cameras along with CCTV, drones and live video feeds from unmanned aerial vehicles, alongside a dedicated election security mobile application to live monitor security at voting centres across the country (The Daily Star, 2024).

According to Biswas (2023: 265), patronage politics in Bangladesh obstruct social inclusivity in community policing. Community policing in Bangladesh has been a burden-sharing mechanism with the community instead of including community members in decision-making on security, law and order (Biswas, 2023: 269). No substantive reform initiative is evident in citizen platforms and community policing, which are essential tools for enhancing relations with the general public, fostering trust and promoting transparency in policing practice. To address these concerns, the Police Reform Commission proposed forming a committee comprising representatives from all political parties at each police station or *upazila* (sub-district), which would work as an oversight body to prevent corruption at the local level. However, these proposals have not been implemented even after the February 2026 election.

As per the chief adviser's address to the nation on 5 August 2025, the interim government had completed sixteen police reform initiatives as recommended by the Police Reform Commission. Notable amongst these are the formation of a dedicated cell in the police headquarters where complaints can be logged against police for any human rights violation, the launch of an online General Diary service, the commencement of training of police personnel in managing civil unrest and riot management in accordance with the five-step policy laid down by the United Nations, and the introduction of the Code of Criminal Procedure (Second Amendment) Ordinance, 2025 to make changes in both pre-arrest and post-arrest processes. Despite questions about the political government's level of commitment to upholding such practices, if properly implemented, this can help police provide a rights-based service that takes human rights into account. The interim government also approved the long-anticipated Police Commission Ordinance in December 2025, which was meant to facilitate the formation of a five-member commission aimed at making the police more public-centred, more accountable and more cognisant of human rights (The Financial Express, 2025), yet this proposal too remains unimplemented six months after the democratic transition.

However, the Police Commission Ordinance, 2025, is unlikely to fulfil its purpose due to its proposed structure and operational conditions. It has been argued that the police commission will not be able to operate independently of political, governmental and police influence due to interference from the Home Ministry and bureaucrats (Iftekharuzzaman, 2025). Another major drawback is that the ordinance carries no provisions to increase internal police accountability for recruitment,

transfers and promotions, a long-debated issue. According to a former Superintendent of Police based in Barisal: 'The interim government did not take any steps to introduce a police complaints commission alongside the police commission to oversee the problems relating to recruitment, transfers, and promotions' (Respondent No. 09, 2025).

Lack of political commitment remains the primary challenge to democratic policing and police reform. To address this, the interim government issued the July Charter, signed by most mainstream political parties. The July Charter 2025 is a political declaration following the mass uprising that outlines the comprehensive reform initiative in Bangladesh, including the constitution, electoral system, judicial system, public administration, policing system and anti-corruption mechanisms. The National Consensus Commission, chaired by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus and vice-chaired by political scientist and professor Ali Riaz, adopted the points and decisions by consensus. Alongside the parliamentary election, the people of Bangladesh voted on the same day in a national referendum on the July Charter 2025, with 62.74% of votes polled in favour (Alangir & Rahman, 2026). However, as major political parties remain indifferent to this charter's implementation strategy, grave concern persists about its future. Additionally, one major criticism of the July Charter regarding police reform is the lack of meaningful dialogue among political parties, facilitated by the National Consensus Commission, which may result in insufficient political commitment to police reform in the future.

The long history of power tussles between the police and the administrative services is another key obstacle to police reform. While the police require greater autonomy in decision-making from the Home Ministry in order to reduce bureaucratic influence, Deputy Commissioners are seeking full control over Superintendents of Police and Officers-in-Charge of police stations within LEAs at the district level (Khan, 2025). This institutional contest over authority creates ambiguity regarding operational control, administrative responsibility and accountability within the policing system. Greater bureaucratic control may further constrain police decision-making, particularly when administrative priorities conflict with professional policing requirements. At the same time, excessive organisational autonomy without effective oversight could weaken democratic accountability. The problem is therefore not simply determining which institution should exercise greater authority but establishing clearly defined roles, transparent lines of accountability and safeguards against political or bureaucratic interference. The persistence of colonial administrative practices further complicates this process, as bureaucratic influence remains embedded in Bangladesh's broader governance structure (Uddin, 2009: 210). Meaningful police reform consequently requires institutional arrangements that balance police professionalism, operational autonomy and democratic oversight rather than merely reallocating authority between competing state institutions.

Lastly, police reform in Bangladesh has always been tied to donor funding by countries of the Global North, prioritising Western countries' strategic interests in

security, economy and foreign policy rather than making police adaptive to social circumstances and changing policing practices (Kabir, 2024). Guidance and implementation support from international organisations such as the United Nations and other democratic states are essential. Nonetheless, there must be a balance between global standards and local practices. Best policing practices in one context cannot be transferred elsewhere, particularly when states still have colonial legacies, underdevelopment-related problems and high levels of normative and regulatory pluralism.

Conclusion

The systemic erosion of policing standards prior to 2024, due to politicisation and institutionalised impunity, proves that the police functioned primarily as an arm of executive control rather than a citizen-centred service. Police involvement in corruption, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and indiscriminate arrests contradicts the principles of democratic policing. Police action during the Monsoon Revolution violated human rights through excessive use of force and heavy-handed tactics. Consequently, police behaviour and use of lethal weapons in response to a massive public uprising in July–August 2024 represented the logical extension of an entrenched institutional logic rather than an isolated operational breakdown. Public confidence in the police has declined sharply, and morale among police personnel has also suffered.

After the Monsoon Revolution, the interim government undertook police reform as one of the six main areas of national reform and introduced notable measures, including restrictions on lethal weaponry, a prohibition on plainclothes arrests and new oversight commissions. While changes in the political landscape opened avenues for police reform and transition to democratic policing, many practices have continued unchanged. This is because the police reform initiatives taken by the interim government were largely top-down and focused mainly on organisational restructuring rather than substantive changes. Existing structural limitations, including bureaucratic frictions, colonial-era legacies, the legal framework and a lack of political consensus on the July Charter, also hinder any durable police reform. Achieving democratic policing standards also requires moving beyond Western, donor-driven technical restructuring: Policing in Bangladesh requires enhanced public accountability, political neutrality and answerability to both the state and society. Democratic policing in Bangladesh demands durable cross-party commitment and introduction of oversight mechanisms led by civil society, which will hold the police accountable to the rule of law rather than political elites.

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