

Bangladesh Student Union Elections: The Jamaat-E-Islami's New Leverage

September 29, 2025



On September 10, Bangladesh's Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) held its second student union elections since 1990; the last polls held in 2019 were widely boycotted amidst allegations of rigging by Bangladesh's then ruling party, the Sheikh Hasina led Awami League (AL). These [polls](#), which are now considered as a bellwether for Bangladesh's upcoming national elections in February 2026, were [swept](#) by the Jamaat-e-Islami's student wing, the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS). Marking the first time since 1971 that the Islamist body has won the DUCSU polls, the Shibir backed United Students' Alliance secured 23 out of 28 seats. On September 16, the ICS won its second [decisive victory](#) in the Jahangirnagar University Central Student Union polls, securing 20 of 25 seats. More such student union polls in Bangladesh are slated in the coming weeks, with Rajshahi University on September 25 and Chattogram University on October 12. For Bangladesh's political parties, these polls mark the first

electoral test at any level since the July 2024 uprising which ousted the Awami League from power and forced Sheikh Hasina into exile in India.

It is true that Bangladesh's student union elections, especially in the years that they were held in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, have tended to be [anti-establishment](#) – a character of campus politics that is common in South Asia. The dysfunction of student bodies, lack of elections under both BNP's Khaleda Zia and AL's Sheikh Hasina, political violence on campus, and students' jaded view of the legacy political parties would all objectively make the DUCSU election results' unsurprising, but it is its timing and victor which gives it a fresh bellwether character.

Do the Jamaat's varsity wins matter?

The series of Islamist wins in Bangladesh's student union polls are significant for India principally because it increases New Delhi's challenges in pivoting from partnering with a historically pro-India political party (AL), to a successor ruling party in Dhaka that might significantly diverge from the AL's positions. In India's strategic calculus, this challenge, no matter how daunting, could be managed by leveraging the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) fresh pragmatism towards India. The BNP has a history of hostility towards New Delhi, but this hostility has usually been an extension of its opposition to the AL. The AL's removal partially also removed the BNP's need to be characteristically hostile to New Delhi. The Islamist JeI however is an untested socio-political force in so far as its significance in Dhaka's formal power structure is concerned.

Consequently, given the Jamaat's pro-Pakistan tilt, its role in 1971 against Bangladesh's freedom struggle against West Pakistan and its subsequent role in attempted Islamization of Bangladeshi society – all collectively triggered alarm bells in India's strategic community. Rajya Sabha MP and former

Indian envoy to Dhaka, Harsh Shringla pointed to the JeI's history of atrocities against Bangladeshi Hindu minority; "they have blood on their hands", he [asserted](#) on September 14. Opposition MPs such as Shashi Tharoor (who also serves as the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs) have also [focused](#) on the Jamaat's student union wins, warning that "it is a worrying portent of things to come".

There is some recognition in New Delhi that Jamaat's electoral victories are less suggestive of student affinity for Islamist policies and more indicative of their collective desire for a clean third force in Bangladesh's politics. The Jamaat, notwithstanding its tainted 1971 legacy, does not have any responsibility for governmental wrongdoings and the authoritarianism of the AL which climaxed in early 2024. As a result, the formal ban on the Jamaat by Sheikh Hasina and the party's ostracization from Bangladesh's formal political structures, allowed the JeI to focus on entrenching its street power – for which the Chhatra Shibir has been a key spearhead. Bangladeshi experts have also suggested to CSDR that the JeI's principal focus is the capture of social and cultural institutions, with the long-term objective of influencing Bangladesh's social fabric. Bangladeshi political experts such as Md Shahabul Haque also [maintain](#) that while the student polls are a paradigm for Bangladesh national politics, they do not inherently indicate a right-wing surge in the country.

However, even if student motivations are not inextricably linked to the Jamaat's Islamist ideologies, it is now evident that the JeI can effectively leverage the democratic pressure pot that has built up across the last decade and benefit from popular democratic expression. This will leave Bangladesh's institutions as Islamist in effect, if not in cause. The Jamaat has also shown an ability to begin clearing its primary roadblock – its 1971 legacy. For instance, following their DUCSU victory, the Shibir backed student leaders [paid their respects](#) at the 1971 Liberation War Martyr's Memorial, and

offered prayers at the graves of those killed in the July uprising, adding that “Students will have the right to question us anytime, and our responsibility is to work for them.” More significantly, the Jamaat’s Assistant Secretary General [asserted](#) on September 14 that denying the 1971 Liberation War would mean denying the nation of Bangladesh itself, which was [interpreted](#) by the Bangladeshi press as the JeI moving closer to admitting its mistake. Earlier in January, the Chhatra Shibir [withdrew](#) a publication that criticized the Liberation War after protests from both the BNP and AL.

More than the student elections themselves, it is the Jamaat’s larger shifts in political posture that matter for the upcoming 2026 elections. The frustrations of the electorate are clear. What is less clear is which non-AL party will benefit the most as a result. Since August 2024, the new worry for the BNP has been the potential dwindling of its opportunity to capitalize on the AL’s exit before shifts in the national mood – especially with the IG’s slow pace of reforms and delayed commitment to elections. The rise of new parties such as the National Citizens Party (NCP) formed by students who led the July 2024 uprising, represent new variables for the BNP to contend with. Both parties have already accused each other of influencing the IG’s work.

Thus, if the BNP is viewed as being part of the older establishment and political system, no matter is own persecution by the AL, newer political forces represent an ability to undercut the heft that legacy parties such as the BNP hold. However, parties like the NCP, while new, do not have comparable strength in harnessing street power, in the way that the JeI does. This leaves the Jamaat in a unique position. The party’s nationwide appeal is uncertain, and it has not been electorally tested in decades, but it remains free to exploit the result of the student union elections to gain a better bargaining position with Bangladesh’s other

parties.

The BNP's Jamaat Challenge

It is the Jamaat's rise in Islamist bargaining strength, regardless of who forms the government in Dhaka in 2026, which presents the foremost concern for New Delhi. Thus far, Indian experts have favored an outreach to the Jamaat rather than hostility to the party, to prepare for such an increased Islamist role in Bangladesh's politics in the future. Even as India's electoral landscape has been marked with increasing instances of political leaders casting aspersions on Bangladeshi immigrants, the Jamaat has avoided engaging with such debates. Arguably recognizing its increased strength and influence in Bangladesh post August 2024, the Jamaat was early to [categorize](#) the party as "not a threat" to India, but to also [assert](#) that New Delhi "must not interfere" in Bangladesh's politics.

The Jamaat's electoral experience in the years that it did contest elections, has been unenviable, with the party relying on the BNP to gain greater political access. Presently, the Jamaat and the BNP have thus far avoided commitments to a formal alliance for the 2026 polls, with the BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed [ruling out](#) such a possibility as recently as August 25, even though he stated that the BNP is in talks with other "Islam-oriented" parties.

For the BNP then, the student elections are undoubtedly a test. The BNP's Chhatra Dal was the principal loser in the [DUCSU elections](#) which saw over 400 candidates registered, including by other student-led parties. The elections also showed that even those student leaders part of the July 2024 uprising had moved away from initial demands that campuses be depoliticized. Despite the small electorate, the tightly packed ballot list and the scale of the Jamaat's victory undoubtedly affects the BNP's own calculus for the 2026 polls.

In New Delhi, most advocacy continues to focus on preparation for a hostile government and the need for early engagement. However, it is the Jamaat's ability to convert campus wins into national electoral wins and its public postures in the lead-up to the February polls which will determine if its electoral standing improves. Should such indications increase, the BNP might be forced into reviewing the benefits of not allying with the JeI.