

Proportional Representation (PR) and the First Past-the-Post Voting System (FPTP)- A Debate

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The ongoing debate over constitutional reform and governance in **Bangladesh** has generated significant interest among both scholars and the wider public. Despite personal commitments that limit my availability, I feel a responsibility to contribute to this discussion, drawing on my academic background in democratic governance. My undergraduate dissertation in History, written under the thematic framework of *Empire*, examined the framing of the **India** Constitution in 1947—a formative moment that offers valuable comparative insights for Bangladesh today.

The Indian constitution-making process confronted the immense challenge of designing a governance framework for a newly independent and highly diverse society. Its framers undertook extensive comparative research into democratic systems, assessing their strengths and limitations before opting for a parliamentary model. This choice was guided by concerns for political stability, inclusive representation, economic development, and the protection of civil liberties. That historical inquiry shaped my understanding of constitutional design and continues to inform my perspective on contemporary governance debates in Bangladesh.

India's founding leaders sought not merely political independence but a democratic system capable of improving social and economic conditions. They emphasised cooperation between central, regional, and local governments, alongside the empowerment of local political institutions. In evaluating parliamentary models, they focused primarily on proportional representation and the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system, while also briefly considering the **Switzerland** model, known for its federalism and mechanisms of direct democracy.

While the Swiss system represents an advanced form of democratic participation, its reliance on frequent referendums and high administrative capacity makes it costly and difficult to replicate in developing democracies. Its resemblance to the direct democracy of ancient **Greece**, where citizens gathered in the polis to vote, underscores the cultural and infrastructural prerequisites for its success. In my view, Switzerland's system is highly effective where democratic norms are deeply embedded and educational standards are high, but it may be impractical for Bangladesh at present.

Comparative experience also demonstrates that democratic success is not uniform. Over recent decades, **China** has achieved remarkable economic growth under an authoritarian system, while democratic countries such as **Japan, South Korea, and Australia** have combined economic progress with strong protections for civil liberties. These contrasts highlight that institutional design must align with historical, social, and economic realities.

I initially chose India as a comparator for Bangladesh due to their shared socio-economic and cultural contexts. However, recent developments suggest that Bangladesh, if governed by a suitable institutional framework, could evolve along lines closer to **Singapore**, Japan, or South Korea, potentially serving as a regional democratic model.

Proportional representation (PR) is widely used in centralised parliamentary democracies, particularly in Western Europe, including the **Netherlands, Germany, and Belgium**. Under PR, parties present ranked candidate lists, and parliamentary seats are allocated in proportion to vote share. This system prioritises national policy debates while allowing regional interests to be addressed through local political institutions. Coalition governments are common, encouraging compromise and cross-party cooperation, though they may also introduce a degree of instability.

By contrast, the FPTP system—used in Bangladesh as well as **United Kingdom, Canada, Pakistan**, and India—tends to produce decisive electoral outcomes. However, in Bangladesh this model has contributed to entrenched patronage networks, excessive bureaucracy, and the concentration of power. Politics has increasingly become a source of employment and influence rather than public service, fostering intolerance, repression, and periodic military interference.

Since independence, Bangladesh has largely been governed by a small number of political families, often under the formal structure of democracy but without its substantive ethical foundations. Accusations of judicial control, suppression of dissent, and restrictions on free speech have been persistent, undermining democratic institutions. As a result, democratic values have not been fully institutionalised, and political competition has frequently degenerated into coercion and violence.

These failures cannot be attributed solely to electoral systems. Rather, they reflect a deeper disregard for democratic ethics among political elites. Constitutional reform alone will not resolve these issues unless accompanied by a cultural transformation that prioritises free and fair

elections, an independent judiciary, a credible opposition, and robust protections for freedom of expression.

A PR-based parliamentary system could help address some of these structural weaknesses. Its more centralised and less bureaucratic nature may reduce localised patronage, while coalition governance encourages dialogue across ideological divides. For example, if the **Bangladesh Nationalist Party** were to receive 45 percent of the national vote, it would obtain a corresponding share of parliamentary seats, making cooperation with other parties essential for governance. While coalition politics can be unstable, it also fosters moderation, inclusivity, and shared responsibility.

Ultimately, Bangladesh requires a system that broadens citizen participation and brings individuals from diverse backgrounds into Parliament. Cross-party collaboration can strengthen democratic culture, reduce polarisation, and improve governance outcomes at both national and local levels. Given the country's current political and social conditions, proportional representation offers a promising path toward a more inclusive, accountable and resilient democracy, and concurrently a centralised government with less bureaucracy.

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