Keynote Address: Bangladesh Election 2026 and the Role of Civil Society

Distinguished guests, respected colleagues, and committed citizens,

We stand today at a defining moment in Bangladesh's democratic journey. On **12 February 2026**, our nation will hold its general parliamentary election, an event that goes beyond choosing a government. It is about reaffirming the democratic will of more than **127 million eligible voters** and determining the future direction of our republic after years of political turbulence.

Democratic Transition and Reform

Bangladesh achieved its independence in 1971. The year 2021 marks its 50th anniversary. The country has come a long way since its birth, and in 2020 graduated as a member of the middle-income countries category by maintaining a steady economic growth of 6-7 percent over the years. It has been able to hold on to its democratic processes over the years, despite the numerous obstacles thrown at it periodically. However, currently there is a serious concern about fairness of national elections, freedom of speech, growing inequality, and gross violation of human rights.

Bangladesh's political landscape has undergone profound change in recent years. Following mass public mobilization and

political upheaval, an interim government led by **Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus** assumed responsibility for guiding the country toward democratic restoration. Its mandate has been clear: to rebuild public trust, combat corruption, restore institutional credibility, and prepare the ground for a credible election.

Central to this effort is the **July National Charter**, a reform framework shaped by political actors and civil society alike. The upcoming election, alongside a **constitutional referendum** on this charter, represents not merely a procedural milestone but a foundational moment in redefining governance and accountability in Bangladesh.

Why the 2026 Election Matters

The stakes of the 2026 election are exceptionally high.

First, **democratic legitimacy** must be renewed. After years of concentrated power and contested electoral processes, a free, fair, and competitive election is essential to restoring confidence in democratic institutions and the rule of law.

Second, this election will determine whether ongoing **reforms take root**. Electoral credibility is the bridge between reform promises and democratic practice.

Third, the election carries **international significance**. A transparent and inclusive process can reestablish Bangladesh's standing as a credible democratic partner in the global community.

Fourth, the **character, integrity, ethics and morality** of candidates and their affiliation with political parties.

None of this is possible without a process that citizens trust across political affiliations, social identities, and generations.

Civil Society: A Democratic Pillar

Civil society is not a bystander in this journey; it is a **pillar of democratic renewal**.

Across the country, civil society organizations mobilize citizens, educate voters, and strengthen accountability. Groups such as the **Election Working Group** recruit and train observers, monitor electoral compliance, and help deter malpractice. Their presence at the grassroots level reassures voters that their voices matter.

Initiatives like **Citizen Observation for Inclusive and Accountable Elections** demonstrate constructive collaboration between civil society and the Election Commission. Such engagement brings independent scrutiny into the heart of election management and strengthens public confidence.

Civil society also plays a crucial role in **civic education and inclusion** particularly among young voters, women, marginalized communities, and Bangladeshis living abroad. Democracy cannot be credible if participation is limited or unequal.

Beyond election day, civil society helps build a **culture of accountability** by advocating transparency, human rights, and fair political competition. Its work continues into the post-election period monitoring power transitions, defending democratic freedoms, and ensuring reform commitments are honored.

Challenges Ahead

Despite progress, significant challenges remain. Political polarization, institutional distrust, and constraints on civic space continue to test Bangladesh's democratic resilience. International assessments recognize improvements but also stress the need for stronger protections for civil society actors, clearer regulations, and enhanced capacity for election observation. The role of civil administration and law enforcement agencies are vital in this election. My observation over the months concerns me as the fascist government recruits are holding leadership positions of these agencies.

Yet history shows us that democracy advances not in perfect conditions, but through collective resolve. Where institutions face limitations, civil society often becomes the bridge between citizens and the state the **voice of accountability** and the **guardian of democratic norms**.

Conclusion

As Bangladesh approaches the 2026 general election, the world is watching not merely an electoral contest, but a nation’s commitment to democratic renewal.

Civil society is not an accessory to this process; it is **essential to its success**. Let us recognize and support the observers, educators, advocates, volunteers, and citizens whose engagement sustains democracy. The officials of civil service administration and law enforcement agencies need to be responsible and accountable of their actions in this election.

For democracy does not thrive solely in ballot boxes or official results. It thrives in informed participation, civic courage, and the shared conviction that **every voice matters**.

Thank you.