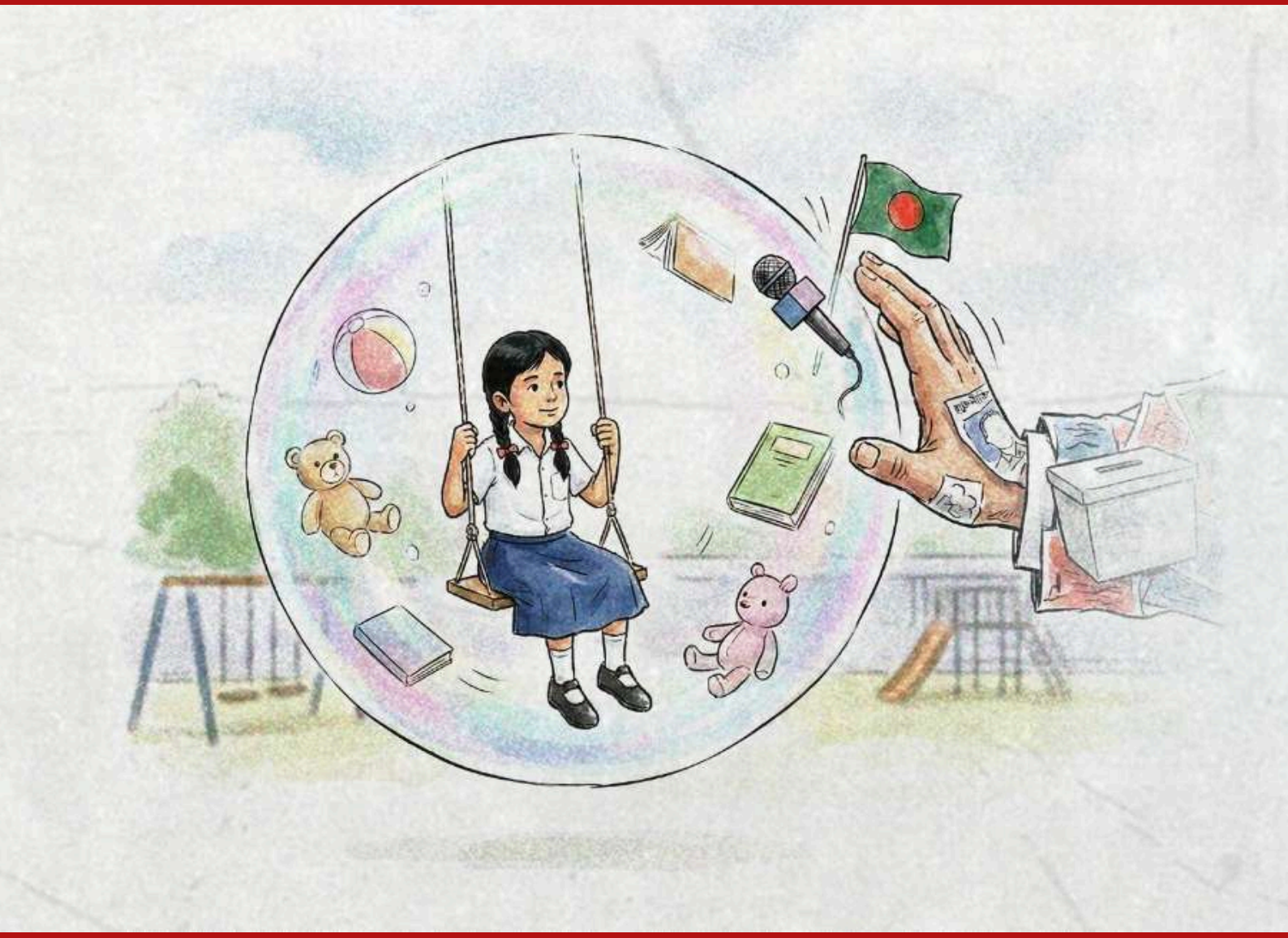
Child Rights & Election Monitoring Initiative (CREMI)

Analysis of Child Involvement in the 2026 Bangladesh Parliamentary Election

A Joint Initiative of **Bangladesh Media Monitor** and **Kashful Foundation**



JUNE 2026

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Author:
Tanvir Alam Rifat

Contributions by:
Israt Jahan Tuna

Reviewed and Edited by:
Muhammad Abdul Mokim

Publisher:
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Email: info@bdmm.org
Website: www.bdmm.org

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Tanvir Alam Rifat
Coordinator, CREMI

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Executive Summary

This observation was conducted under the Child Rights & Election Monitoring Initiative (CREMI), a joint initiative of Bangladesh Media Monitor and Kashful Foundation. It documented and analyzed over 450 specific incidents of child involvement in electoral campaigns during the official campaign period (January 22, 2026 to February 10, 2026) for the Thirteenth National Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh. The primary objective of the research was to assess the use of children in electoral politics, associated risks, and party-specific trends. This study primarily employed an incident-based quantitative monitoring methodology to analyze the nature and extent of children's political exploitation.

Out of the total 453 incidents documented, the largest share was associated with the campaigns of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (281), Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) (93), and National Citizen Party (NCP) (34). Twenty-two incidents were also identified in the campaigns of independent candidates. Additionally, 23 incidents were identified in the campaigns of other political parties and the referendum campaign. The documented incidents include 2 cases of child fatalities and 2 cases of serious physical injury, indicating the involvement of children in a high-risk political environment.

Analysis of the patterns of child involvement revealed two main forms: (a) direct political participation and (b) symbolic or performative involvement. First, a significant number of children were directly engaged in political activities, where they participated in processions, rallies, and street corner meetings, providing slogans, carrying banners or placards, or ensuring a visible presence beside the candidate. Second, in many incidents, children were observed performing symbolic or performative roles, such as carrying party flags, drawing symbols on their cheeks, wearing specific colored or symbolic attire, participating in political songs or poems, and inclusion in promotional photos and videos.

Age-based analysis suggests that in most cases, the children involved were relatively young, with a higher presence of children under 10 years old across almost all-party campaigns. Reports of child fatalities in

political violence in Satkhira and Chattogram clearly indicate the direct risk of this involvement.

The overall analysis suggests that the tendency to use children in electoral campaigns is not limited to a single party but is a clear cross-party phenomenon. While the number of incidents is higher for larger parties, similar behavior is observed among smaller parties and independent candidates. This trend reflects a structural political culture where children are used as instruments to generate sympathy or as a strategy to increase the visibility of the campaign. Consequently, it is not an isolated incident but a recurring and institutionalized electoral behavior.

However, as this study relies primarily on media and observation-based sources, there is a possibility of underreporting of some incidents. Due to constraints of time and resources, not all information could be verified in the field. Furthermore, long-term trends could not be analyzed due to the specific timeframe. There are plans to publish a more extensive and verified study in the future to overcome these limitations.

A more nuanced picture emerges from the analysis of the Candidate-Standardized Incident Rate (CSIR), which measures the proportional intensity of incidents relative to the number of candidates. In this analysis, the intensity of child use was highest for the National Citizen Party (NCP) (1.13), and high for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (0.97). Conversely, Islami Andolon Bangladesh, despite fielding a large number of candidates, maintained the lowest rate of child involvement (0.01). This discrepancy indicates that the use of children is not solely dependent on party size but is a structural campaign strategy.

The extent of child involvement in high-risk environments is alarming; direct physical violence components were present in approximately 5.2% of the documented incidents. The incidents of child fatalities and serious injuries (in Satkhira and Chattogram) reflect a direct threat to children's physical safety amidst electoral tension. In this context, the use of children as 'rhetorical tools' in political campaigns and, in some cases,

as 'human shields' in illegal gatherings, constitutes a clear violation of child rights.

Based on the data, specific policy measures are necessary to prevent the political exploitation of children. The Election Commission (EC) must define the political use of children as a clear 'punishable offense' in their code of conduct and include it as a performance indicator in their own monitoring cell. Political parties should appoint 'Child Protection Focal Points' at the organizational level and provide training to grassroots workers. Simultaneously, law enforcement agencies must formulate a 'Standard Operating Protocol (SOP)' to safely remove children from conflict-prone areas, and media outlets should follow sensitive reporting protocols, including 'face-blurring' technology to protect children's identities. Overall, this research confirms that the use of children in electoral campaigns is a clear violation of the 'Children Act, 2013' and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). An immediate multi-stakeholder solution is required to move away from this trend.

Introduction

This study is an electoral observation initiative conducted under the Child Rights & Election Monitoring Initiative (CREMI), aimed at analyzing the nature and risks of child involvement in electoral campaigns. Political activities in Bangladesh typically intensify around national elections, involving various political parties conducting processions, rallies, campaigns, and public relations activities. Recent electoral observations indicate that the presence of children in these political activities has emerged as a visible trend. Children are seen participating in processions, rallies, and campaign activities in various settings. Research by Rakusa-Suszczewski (2021) suggests that in populist politics, children are a 'symbol' or an 'imaginary image' of the nation, who are used merely as 'objects' without regard for their own political opinions. Furthermore, children are used as a shield to undermine political opponents, create societal divisions, and spread propaganda.

Walters' (2024) research paper on the political and symbolic use of children suggests that children are used as 'rhetorical tools' and 'symbols' in political campaigns to influence the emotions of adult voters (such as hope, fear, anger, etc.) and to cultivate nationalist values. In her research, she provided evidence of using children to influence elections, demonstrating how Republicans used children in nine US state senatorial election campaigns in 2022 to implement a larger cultural and political agenda. They instilled fear in voters that leftists were 'indoctrinating' children in public schools, leading children to hold adverse attitudes towards their own country.

In this context, the presence of children in the electoral environment appears to be a significant observable issue. The safety and protection of children are recognized priorities within national and international policy frameworks. However, the involvement of children in the political activism and tense environment of election time can increase the level of potential risk to them. Consequently, the issue of children's participation in electoral campaigns is considered a matter of significant public interest. This study analyzes the issue not from an evaluative position but as an observation-based reality.

Although isolated incidents of child involvement in elections have been reported in various media, a consolidated, party-specific, region-specific, and pattern-specific analysis of these incidents is comparatively absent. In this context, the necessity for an evidence-based and structured analysis becomes clear, which determines the relevance and rationale of this research.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this research is to systematically document incidents of child involvement in electoral campaigns and analyze them based on party affiliation, region, and type of involvement. Furthermore, a key objective is to provide a preliminary evidence-based understanding by identifying the potential risks and the broader trends of child involvement. This allows for an informed contribution to related policy discussions.

Policy Gap

Existing research on electoral violence, political polarization, and democratic processes contains significant international and national contributions. Reports from the International Crisis Group, UNDP Bangladesh, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) provide analysis of electoral conflict, political tension, and the law-and-order situation. While these studies are crucial for explaining the overall political environment and the dynamics of violence around elections, the use of children as a campaign medium among various social and political groups and its effect on children's lives have not been separately discussed.

On the other hand, extensive international research exists on child rights, protection, and the position of children in high-risk environments. UNICEF, Save the Children, and Human Rights Watch provide broad research and policy analysis on children's safety, physical and psychological risks, and protection frameworks. In Bangladesh, the Child Act 2013 and the National Child Policy establish an institutional framework for the protection and welfare of children. However, these

studies and policies have not considered children's involvement in the context of electoral politics as a distinct field of analysis.

Furthermore, while the media in Bangladesh reports on various events and political activities during elections, information related to child involvement is usually isolated and incident-based. This information is not organized into a consolidated database and has not been subjected to party-specific, region-specific, or risk-based analysis. Consequently, a comprehensive, comparative, and evidence-based picture of children's involvement in electoral campaigns remains absent.

The above review suggests that research on election-related violence and research on child rights — although both fields are separately developed — suffer from a clear analytical disconnect. Children have not been included as a separate unit of analysis in electoral research; conversely, research on child rights has not systematically analyzed children's involvement in electoral campaigns.

Moreover, due to the fragmented and unorganized nature of information published in the media, a reliable and consolidated picture of the nature, extent, and trends of child involvement in electoral campaigns is unavailable. Specifically, analytical frameworks such as party-specific trends, regional distribution, and risk-based categorization are absent in existing research. Therefore, a clear knowledge gap is identified — the lack of systematic, quantitative, and structured analysis regarding children's involvement in electoral campaigns.

In this context, the current research attempts to partially fill the mentioned gap. It documents incidents within a specific timeframe and presents an evidence-based analysis by creating an organized dataset through party-specific, regional, and risk-based categorization. As a result, this research establishes an important connection with existing literature and provides a basis for future studies.

Objectives

The main goal of this research is to systematically document incidents of children's political involvement during the election period and to present an objective statistical picture and evidence-based analysis thereof. The observation attempts to identify the patterns, scale, and geographical spread of the use of children in electoral campaigns across the country.

The specific objectives of this research are:

1. To systematically document incidents of children's political involvement during the election period.
2. To identify the various forms and classifications of children's political use.
3. To prepare the necessary data for comparative analysis based on party affiliation and independent candidates.
4. To determine the spread and geographical trends of incidents across different regions.
5. To identify the types of risk associated with different levels of political involvement.
6. To evaluate the presence of physical injury or direct violence among the documented incidents.
7. To observe the nature and sensitivity of the presentation of these incidents in the media.

Additionally, a key objective of this research was to present a comparative outline of published and unpublished incidents, making it possible to provide a preliminary understanding of the overall and structural trend of using children in violation of existing electoral codes of conduct.

Methodology

This observation was conducted using an incident-based quantitative monitoring method. Incidents of children's political involvement during the electoral campaign period were collected, documented, and categorized. The designated official campaign period, from January 22 to February 10, 2026, following the declaration of the schedule for the

Thirteenth National Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh on December 11, 2025, was considered the scope of this research. Each incident was subjected to a determined verification process before being included in the database.

Data was collected from multiple open-source outlets, including national and local news media, online news portals, videos and visual content obtained from social media. Field-level observation was another key source. For each incident, the source link, publication date, and collection date were preserved. If multiple news sources were found for the same incident, it was counted as a single incident to prevent double counting.

Specific criteria were followed for incident inclusion. Conditions for inclusion were: (1) the person involved being a minor or under 18 years of age, (2) visible participation in an electoral campaign or political activity, or (3) a direct connection with the political party's activities despite being a minor. Incidents where age could not be confirmed or political involvement was not clear were not included in the final database.

A three-tiered evaluation method was followed for verifying each incident. Level 1 incidents were identified as those based on a single news source, Level 2 as those supported by multiple news sources, and Level 3 as those with visual evidence or direct confirmation. Information was presented considering the strength of the source in the analysis.

The collected data was classified using a predetermined coding structure. For each incident, the date, district, relevant political party, type of activity, risk level, presence of violence, and type of source were noted. The risk level was divided into three categories: Low (peaceful presence or leaflet distribution), Moderate (procession or active slogan shouting), and High (involvement in conflict-prone or violent environments). This classification was based on procedural guidelines.

In the data analysis, after determining the total number of incidents, party-specific, district-specific, and risk-specific percentages were

analyzed. The proportion of incidents involving violence was calculated separately. At the same time, a review was conducted of how many incidents were published in the media and how many remained unpublished, in order to present a preliminary visibility analysis.

To mitigate the natural 'size bias' resulting from the larger number of candidates participating in the election for major political parties, a standardization technique commonly used in quantitative event data analysis was applied in this research. Comparing the raw total number of incidents would disproportionately favor larger parties and obscure the intensity of child involvement in smaller parties. Therefore, the total number of documented incidents for each party was normalized against the total number of their respective contesting candidates (which serves as a proxy for the scope or base opportunity of the electoral campaign). This standardization, or Candidate-Standardized Incident Rate (CSIR) method, provides a ratio that reflects the relative intensity and structural nature of political exploitation of children across different organizational scales.

This observation was conducted solely based on documented and verifiable incidents. Incidents that were unpublished or could not be verified were not included in the database. Consequently, the actual number of incidents may be higher than the documented number. Limitations in manpower and resources acted as a factor in conducting the data collection process of this research. Due to the predetermined timeframe and available human resources, it was not possible to collect information from all possible sources. This may lead to the possibility of underreporting or incomplete presentation of some incidents.

Furthermore, since the scope and depth of information collection depended on existing resources and capacity, the research results need to be considered in that context. Nevertheless, the collected data present a preliminary evidence-based picture that can serve as a foundation for future, more extensive research.

Key Findings

A total of 453 incidents of child involvement were documented during the specified period. These incidents were spread across multiple districts and associated with various political parties. Each incident was included in the database through a verification process.



Figure 1: (Left) A group of children, aged 3 to 10 years, holding campaign leaflets for Masud Saidee, the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami nominated candidate for the Pirojpur-1 constituency. (Right) A group of children, aged 3 to 10 years, holding campaign leaflets for S M Jahangir, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) nominated candidate for the Dhaka-18 constituency. Source: Images obtained from social media.

Party-Specific Statistics: The largest portion of these documented incidents is associated with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Child involvement was identified in 281 incidents of their campaign, constituting approximately 62% of the total incidents. This statistic is significantly higher than all other parties. Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) holds the second-highest share (20.5%) with child involvement in 93 incidents. Thus, these two parties account for approximately 82.5% of the total incidents. The participation of children in 34 incidents in the campaign of the National Citizen Party (NCP) is comparatively lower (7.5%). Additionally, child involvement was identified in 22 incidents (4.9%) in the campaigns of independent candidates. Child involvement was also observed among other political parties, including BASAD (2), JSD (2), Islami Andolon Bangladesh (4), Islamic Front Bangladesh (4), Khelafat Majlish (4), Gono Odhikar Parishad (1), Gono Songhoti Andolon (1), Insaniyat Biplob (1), SDP (1), and the referendum campaign (3) are

notable. The rate of incidents for smaller and marginal parties is comparatively low (less than 1% each).

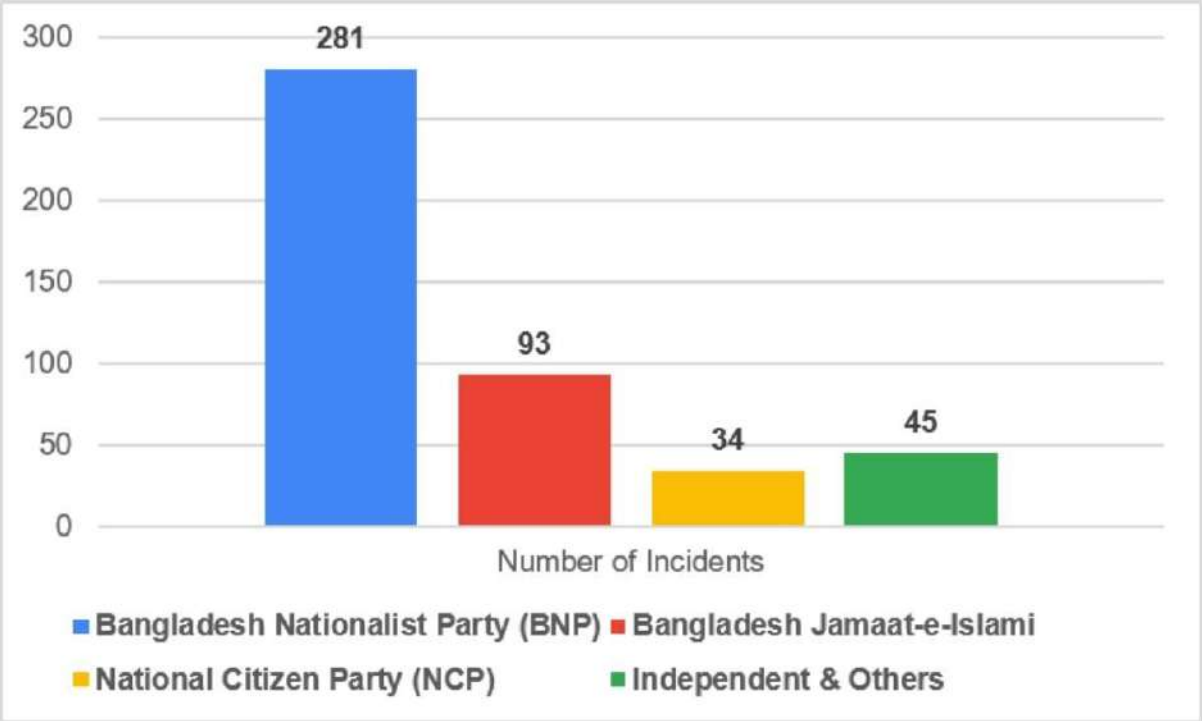


Figure 2: Distribution of child involvement incidents among political parties during the 2026 electoral campaigns. (Note: The colors representing the political parties in the bar chart are generated by default and were not intentionally selected.) Source: Child Rights & Election Monitoring Initiative (CREMI) observation.

Analysis of the level of physical risk among the documented incidents shows that two separate incidents of child fatality were recorded during political conflicts in Satkhira and Chattogram. Additionally, in at least 02 incidents, children suffered direct serious physical injury. It is notable that children were included in risky campaigns in 21 incidents. According to Herawati and Hananto (2020), this type of use of children in electoral campaigns is essentially a form of child exploitation, which poses a severe threat to their physical and psychological safety.

The tendency to use children politically in campaigns was not limited to the capital or any specific region; rather, it had become a systematic practice nationwide. Geographical analysis of the collected data suggests that children were involved in campaign activities in almost every division and a significant number of districts across the country. The geographical spread of this political use of children can be primarily

divided into three main categories: high-intensity trends, moderate involvement, and sporadic use.

High-Intensity Trend Regions: Data analysis shows that the rate of child use was highest in the capital city Dhaka and its surrounding constituencies. Children were extensively used in the campaigns of various political parties and independent candidates in more than 16 constituencies of Dhaka (e.g., Dhaka-2, 3, 4, 6 to 19). In Dhaka-17 constituency, a total of 30 incidents of child presence were observed in the campaigns of Tarique Rahman (25) and Dr. S M Khaliduzzaman (5).



Figure 3: (Left) A child holding a microphone and chanting slogans during the campaign of Mirza Abbas, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) nominated candidate for the Dhaka-8 constituency. (Right) A child seen holding a microphone and chanting slogans at a street-corner campaign for Nasiruddin Patwari, the National Citizen Party (NCP) nominated candidate for the Dhaka-8 constituency. Source: Images obtained from social media (the left image specifically from Mirza Abbas's social media).

In Dhaka-08 constituency, a total of 24 incidents of child presence were observed in the campaigns of Mirza Abbas (18) and Nasiruddin Patwari (6). Furthermore, 91 incidents were identified in Dhaka district alone, associated with Dr. Shafiqur Rahman (23) in Dhaka-15; Nahid Islam (5) in Dhaka-11; and Tasnim Zara (9) in Dhaka-9, which is significantly higher than other districts and reflects a notable presence of children in capital-centric political activities. However, due to higher media coverage of political activities centered in the capital, the number of incidents in Dhaka district (91) may be higher. Many incidents from marginalized or remote areas remained out of media sight, potentially creating a 'Reporting Bias' in the data.

Outside Dhaka, this trend was observed at an extremely alarming level in Laxmipur, Brahmanbaria, Chattogram, Cumilla, and Narayanganj districts (e.g., Cumilla-4, 7, 8, 9, 11 and Narayanganj-1, 3, 4). For example, a maximum of 22 incidents of child use were identified in the campaign activities of Shahid Uddin Chowdhury Annie in Laxmipur-3 (Sadar) constituency. Similarly, 7 incidents were proven in the campaign of Hasnat Abdullah in Cumilla-4 (Debidwar) and 7 incidents associated with Dr. Foizul Haque in Jhalokati-1 (Rajapur-Kathalia) constituency. In addition, 3 incidents were documented in the campaign of Barrister Rumin Farhana in Brahmanbaria-2 (Sarail-Ashuganj) constituency. Although the magnitude in terms of numbers may seem comparatively low for some candidates, these specific constituency-based statistics primarily prove that this high-risk sphere of using children in political campaigns had spread in parallel across various regions of the country.

Similarly, widespread participation of children in leaflet distribution and processions was observed in Brahmanbaria-1, 2, and 6 constituencies. Clear evidence of engaging children in political slogans and processions also exists in various constituencies of the commercial capital, Chattogram.

Moderate Involvement Regions: The second tier includes several districts across the country where children were regularly used for campaign purposes in multiple constituencies. These include Noakhali, Cox's Bazar, Jhalokati, Sherpur, Jhenaidah, Bagerhat, Tangail, Patuakhali, and Natore. Children were involved in political activities in at least six constituencies in Noakhali district and three constituencies in Cox's Bazar. A similar picture was seen in the southern districts of Patuakhali, Jhalokati, and Bagerhat. Among the northern regions, multiple incidents of engaging children in public meetings and processions were documented in Natore district's constituencies 1 and 2, and in the central region's Tangail district's constituencies 2, 5, and 8.

Sporadic and Other Regions: Besides the major districts mentioned, sporadic evidence of using children for political purposes was found almost everywhere in the country. This trend spread from the northern

districts of Kurigram, Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, and Rajshahi to the southern regions of Bhola, Pirojpur, and Satkhira. Even in peripheral areas like Sylhet, Habiganj, Sunamganj, and the Hill Tracts districts of Bandarban and Khagrachari, political parties used children in their campaigns.



Figure 4: Two children dressed as the late former BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia, asking for votes for the 'Sheaf of Paddy' (election symbol of BNP) on the stage of an election rally for Salahuddin Ahmed, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) nominated candidate for the Cox's Bazar-1 constituency, held at the Malumghat Ideal School field in Chakaria. Source: Image obtained from Salahuddin Ahmed's social media.

Overall analysis clearly shows that the use of children as a political tool in the 2026 election was not an isolated or localized issue. Rather, it had become an integral and systematic strategy of political parties' campaigns, extending from urban centers to remote rural areas.

Furthermore, one of the main mediums of this election campaign was impersonation. Children were dressed up in the guise of various political current and former leaders and used as a campaign medium. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party used children dressed in the guise of the late Khaleda Zia as a campaign medium, a trend more prevalent than in any other party.

Media coverage was considered important in one part of the research. It shows that most of the 453 documented incidents were broadcast in national or local news media. Among these, in at least 32 incidents, media outlets directly published news involving children in print or digital media. Bangladesh's leading media outlets such as Amader Shomoy, ATN News, Bangladesh-er Khobor, Bangladesh Protidin, Channel i, Dainik

Sarezamin, Ekattor TV, Gonokantho, Ittefaq, Jamuna TV, Jugantor, Kaler Kantho, News 24, Prothom Alo, Shomoyer Alo, Somoy TV, and Bhorer Pata reported such news. Conversely, some incidents were not published in mainstream media or were locally broadcast at a very limited scale. The use of children as promotional content on social media was also significantly notable.

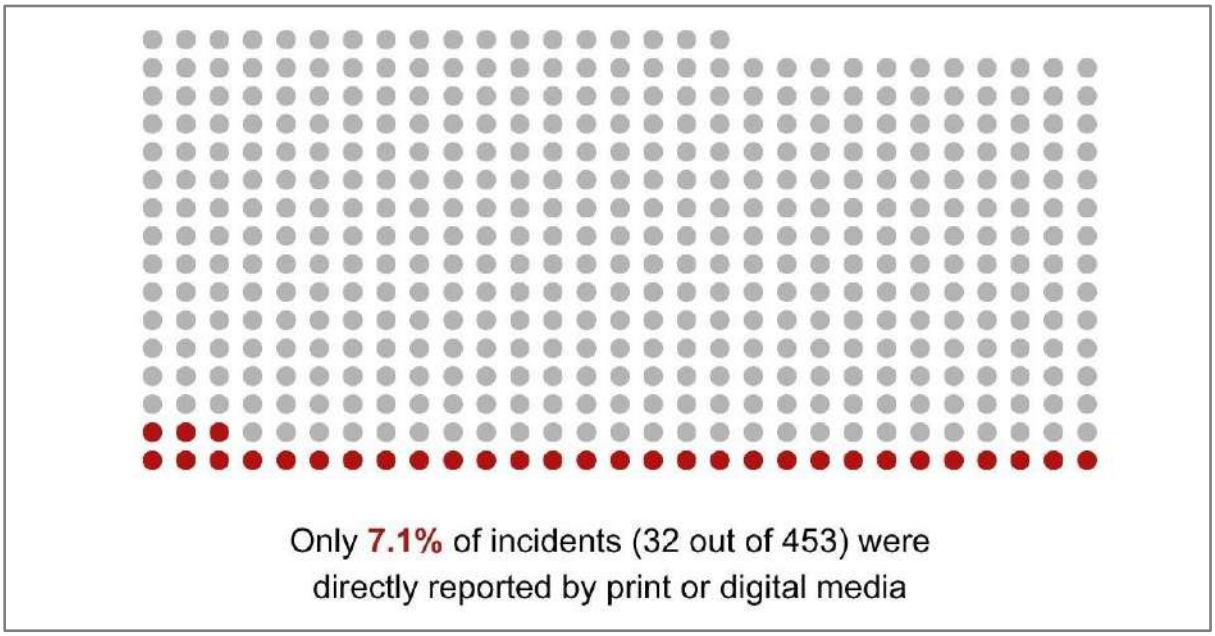


Figure 5: Media coverage of child involvement incidents. Out of 453 documented incidents during the 2026 electoral campaigns, only 32 were directly published in print or digital news media. Source: Child Rights & Election Monitoring Initiative (CREMI) observation.

In our observation, a Dismislab study revealed that in the Thirteenth National Parliamentary Election, children were used directly as political 'symbols' to shout hate speech slogans to attract the attention of adult voters and gain their sympathy (Toma et al., 2026).

Discussion

The overall results of this study suggest that children's involvement in electoral campaigns is not merely an isolated incident but an observable trend prevalent across multiple political parties. Although a significant portion of the collected data (approximately 62%) is associated with one specific party, the presence of children in the campaigns of other large and small parties indicates that this is a 'Cross-party' political culture that has developed regardless of party affiliation. This trend suggests

that the use of children as an accessory to campaigning has become institutionalized in Bangladesh's electoral politics.

Candidate-Standardized Incident Rate (CSIR) analysis shows that the intensity of child involvement is highest for the National Citizen Party (NCP). The party, despite having candidates in only 30 constituencies, documented 34 incidents of child involvement, resulting in a ratio of 1.13. This means that, on average, more than one child was used in the electoral campaign for every constituency where the party fielded a candidate. This indicates a comparatively High Density trend.

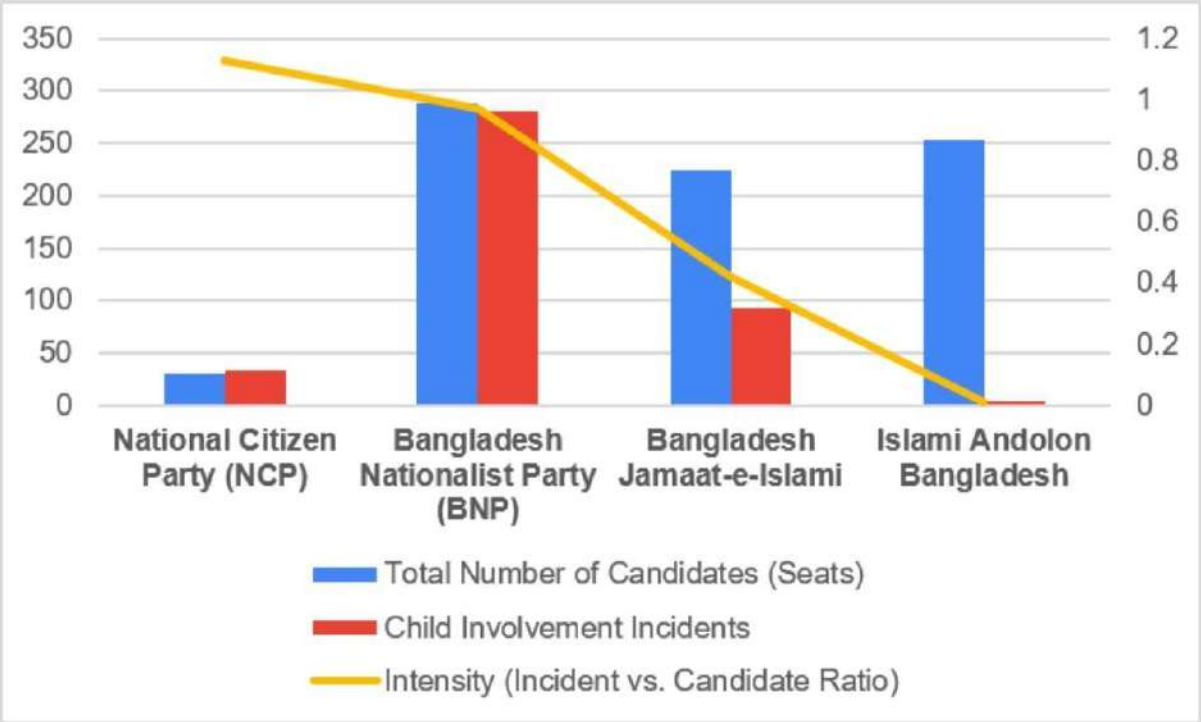


Figure 6: A combination chart (bar and line) illustrating the Candidate-Standardized Incident Rate (CSIR), which shows the intensity of child involvement incidents relative to the total number of candidates across different political parties. Source: Child Rights & Election Monitoring Initiative (CREMI) observation.

On the other hand, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) contested in a maximum of 288 constituencies and documented 281 incidents of child involvement in their campaigns. In this case, the ratio is 0.97. This also indicates a comparatively High Density trend.

The Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami contested in 224 constituencies and documented 93 incidents of child involvement in their campaigns. In this case, the ratio is 0.42. This means that, on average, at least one incident of child use occurred for approximately every 2 constituencies of the party. This indicates a comparatively Moderate Density trend.

However, the most noticeable contrast is seen in the case of Islami Andolon Bangladesh. Despite having candidates in the second-highest number of constituencies (253), their rate of child involvement is only 0.01.

This data analysis suggests that:

- The use of children in the campaigns of BNP and NCP has become a common and structural electoral behavior.
- Islami Andolon Bangladesh, despite campaigning in a large number of constituencies, has visibly maintained strong organizational control in avoiding child involvement.

This research proposes the ratio of child involvement incidents versus the number of candidates as an 'Exploratory Metric.' A limitation of this method is that the number of candidates and the actual Campaign Volume may not always be proportional; a candidate's presence does not mean their campaign size is equal to a candidate from another party. Despite this limitation, this metric is highly relevant to this research because raw data analysis might suggest that the trend of child use is limited only to larger parties (e.g., BNP or Jamaat). However, this metric proves that despite having comparatively fewer candidates, parties like the National Citizen Party (NCP) have the highest intensity (1.13) of child use in their campaigns. This indicates that the use of children is not solely dependent on party size but is part of a deep-seated structural political strategy.

Analysis of the risk level found in the research reveals that a large proportion of children participated in political activities in high-risk or tense environments. Specifically, direct physical violence components were present in approximately 5.2% of the total documented incidents.

This indicates that children's participation in electoral campaigns is not just a symbolic issue but has emerged as a direct threat to their physical safety.

During election-time hartals or blockades, street children are used for illegal activities such as throwing petrol bombs, vandalizing vehicles, and participating in processions. They are hired for these tasks by local 'Boro Bhai' (influential figures) or political power-brokers for money (BDT 200-1000). Due to 'Patron-client' relationships, meaning seeking protection from influential figures to survive on the streets, children are compelled to participate in these political processions and acts of violence (Rahman et al., 2018). The vocal presence of children in high-risk environments suggests that children's protection is still severely neglected in the field-level activities of political parties. Although the presence of violence and fatalities may appear statistically limited, their significance is immense in the context of children's rights and safety. Continuous political exploitation and lack of rights eventually lead to an increase in juvenile delinquency. Das & Huq (2025) demonstrated in their research paper that among the main causes of increased juvenile delinquency in Bangladesh, 'political exploitation' or their use in political work is a key factor, alongside poverty, family breakdown, and peer pressure.



Figure 7: (Left) Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal leaders encouraging children to chant slogans for the 'Sheaf of Paddy' (election symbol of BNP) at a primary school in Bhurungamari Upazila, Kurigram, on January 22, 2026. Photo: Prothom Alo. (Right) A group of children aged 3 to 10 years chanting slogans during a campaign for Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami. They are wearing election campaign t-shirts featuring the 'Scales' (the electoral symbol of Jamaat-e-Islami). Photo: Obtained from social media.

Although the "Jatiya Sangsad Election Code of Conduct, 2025" document does not contain any specific policy or restriction regarding the use of children in electoral campaigns, using children in political processions conflicts with the definition of 'begging' or exploitation in the Children Act 2013 of Bangladesh. Section 16 of the Act states that displaying a child to the public to collect money by singing or by any other means for personal gain is included in exploitation. When political parties use children to shout slogans in processions, it negatively affects children's psychological development and creates a risk of using them as a political shield (Government of Bangladesh, 2013).

The death of a 14-year-old boy named Saiful Islam at a public meeting of BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman in Chattogram has been documented. Furthermore, two people injured in a stampede on the same day were admitted to Chattogram Medical College Hospital. Saiful was rescued from the assembly area and taken to a private hospital, where doctors declared him dead. Political parties bring children to rallies to increase the size of the assembly but do not arrange any 'Safe Zone' or emergency health services for them. Stampede risk and physical illness in such environments can be fatal for children.

Additionally, seven-year-old Nusrat died in Ashashuni Upazila of Satkhira on January 30 after being hit by an engine-driven rickshaw-van while collecting leaflets thrown from a government referendum campaign vehicle. She died due to severe head and waist injuries and excessive bleeding. The death of 7-year-old Nusrat proves that children's safety is completely ignored when they are used as a "target audience" or "accessory" in campaigns.

The deaths of children in incidents like Satkhira and Chattogram, and the presence of high-risk campaigns and physical injuries in approximately 5% of incidents, indicate that involving children in electoral excitement can take a severe turn at any moment. In Bangladesh, children are placed in the front rows of illegal and high-risk gatherings such as political processions, road blockades, and picketing, and are often used as 'Human shields'. Due to participating in these illegal processions despite

being minors, approximately 50,000 children are at risk of arrest every year, and about 3,000 of them go to jail (Ullah, M. T. (n.d.)). These figures reflect the lack of accountability of political parties. Although not all political participation is violent, even this minimal presence of violence clearly highlights the existing structural weakness in ensuring children's protection.

Examples from countries like Nepal and Indonesia prove that this illegal culture of using children as political tools continues across Asia due to a lack of political will, despite having legal frameworks (Rathour, 2026; Herawati & Hananto, 2020). Rofiqul Alam Majnu, the BNP-nominated candidate in Feni-1 constituency, encouraged the inclusion of children as a campaign medium on his own social media and used them to promote slogan videos on social media. Consequently, it is evident that candidates knowingly used children for their own purposes.

As part of the campaign, many activists were seen entering schools during classes to encourage parents of children to vote. BNP-nominated candidate Shahid Uddin Chowdhury Annie in Laxmipur-3, Jamaat-nominated candidate Abdul Matin in Magura-1, BNP-nominated candidate Mia Nuruddin Ahmed Apu in Shariatpur-3, and BNP-nominated candidate Saifur Rahman Rana in Kurigram-1 particularly campaigned among children in schools. The discrepancy in the party-specific incident rates versus the number of candidates suggests that this trend is not solely dependent on the abundance of candidates but is heavily influenced by the party's organizational perspective and campaign strategy.

Analysis of the field-level data, campaign types, and environmental risk found in the research shows that using children on crowded and uncontrolled roads puts them at direct risk of accidents. For example, the presence of children in campaigns on the road and simultaneously running cars, and the hurried moving of children to the side when a car horn is sounded, increases the risk of sudden accidents. In addition, using children in unstable campaigns while riding in vehicles, near dangerous environments like ponds on the roadside, and in the middle of

the road, poses an immediate danger to them. Even campaigning at night with low visibility and limited control creates a high-risk environment for children. Rahman et al., 2018 clearly demonstrated in their research that 'Road accidents' and unsafe environments are a constant threat to the physical safety of children involved in political and other activities on the streets or in open spaces.

In addition to environmental risks, uncontrolled crowds and direct political conflict make children's lives even more vulnerable. Research data suggests that crowd pressure and chaos in uncontrolled public meetings or processions, and situations involving warnings via megaphones, create a high probability of being trampled or stampeded. The most alarming factor is the presence of children during confrontations between two opposing political parties, which puts them at risk of direct conflict or collision.

Similarly, regarding the protection of children from such high-risk environments in electoral campaigns, Herawati and Hananto (2020) referred to the policies of the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI). They pointed out that bringing children to open campaign fields or crowds, which is life-threatening to them.

Collectively, these incidents prove that political parties are severely neglecting children's safety to increase the visibility of their campaigns. This is not only a violation of policy but also a severe threat to children's physical and mental safety and is clearly contrary to existing child protection policies.

Policy Recommendations

Considering the results obtained from quantitative and qualitative analysis, a coordinated and multi-stakeholder Policy Framework is necessary to prevent the political use of children and ensure their safety during the election period.

1. For Political Parties

To avoid the high intensity of party-specific involvement, political parties must establish a bipartisan consensus by including explicit child protection clauses in their constitutions or election manifestos (Rathour, 2026). To circumvent the structural risk of using children merely as 'performers', 'rhetorical tools', or 'symbols' in campaigns, it is essential to appoint 'Child Protection Focal Points' at the local level alongside training for grassroots workers (Walters, 2024; Rakusa-Suszczewski, 2021). Simultaneously, institutional safeguards, such as Nepal's 'Schools as Zones of Peace' (SZOP) directive, must be ensured to keep educational institutions free from political influence (Rathour, 2026).

2. For the Election Commission

To protect electoral integrity, the Election Commission must define the political use of children as a clear 'punishable offense' in the existing code of conduct (Herawati & Hananto, 2020). Following successful examples from neighboring countries' election commissions, specific directives are needed to completely prohibit the use of children in direct field-level campaigns (e.g., throwing leaflets from moving vehicles) and for spreading hate speech on social media (Toma et al., 2026). It is equally necessary to include 'Child Involvement' as a separate 'Performance Indicator' in the Election Commission's own monitoring cell.

3. For Law Enforcement Agencies

To prevent the illegal use of children as 'Human shields' to deter police action in conflict-prone electoral areas, law enforcement agencies must increase special surveillance (Ullah, n.d.; Rahman et al., 2018). It is essential to formulate a 'Standard Operating Protocol' (SOP) and 'Child-Sensitive Policing' under the leadership of Child Affairs Police Officers (CAPO) to safely remove children from high-risk areas, alongside ensuring mental health support and long-term diversion for children (UNICEF, 2025; Das & Huq, 2025). However, how these foreign electoral laws and child protection frameworks from India, Nepal, or Indonesia can be adapted or applied to the domestic context remains a subject for future research and an important topic for expert discussion.

4. For Media and Related Organizations

The role of the media is not limited to news dissemination; rather, it is a highly powerful medium in shaping public opinion and influencing policy-making. The data obtained from the research indicates that a radical change is needed in the ethical and professional conduct of the media regarding child protection during election periods.

4.1 Sensitive Visual Representation and Privacy: The research found that pictures or videos of children in political campaigns are often broadcast without any censorship, which is risky for the child's long-term social and psychological safety. Toma et al. (2026) showed in their research that after children's political videos go viral on social media, they face severe cyberbullying and hate speech comments. Therefore, when broadcasting images of children in political processions or rallies, it is essential to completely conceal their identity using 'Face-blurring' or pixelation technology and reduce their digital footprint. Hintalovon Foundation (cited in Toma et al., 2026) explicitly mentioned that children are not public figures or representatives; therefore, using children's images in campaigns, even with parental consent, is a direct violation of their rights.

4.2 Institutional Editorial Policies and Child-Safety Protocols: The use of children in electoral campaigns must be viewed as a 'human rights issue' rather than merely 'political news.' Following the model of the 'Eurochild' Child Protection Policy mentioned in the research by Janta et al., (2021), every media house must formulate a special 'Child-Sensitive Reporting Protocol' for the election period. If children are present in any news report, news editors and gatekeepers must ensure through a checklist before broadcast that the child had Informed consent and that the child is not being subjected to any abuse or risk.

4.3 Sensitive Interviews and Investigative Journalism: Journalists must adopt strategies to avoid putting any psychological pressure on children involved in political activities during interviews and to avoid direct political questions. Alongside this, investigative reporting should be

conducted on the underlying reasons for the use of children in electoral campaigns and the accountability of the political actors involved, instead of just showing their pictures, and a balance must be maintained between the sensitive content of the news and Public Interest.

5. For Relevant Government Agencies and the Department of Social Services

5.1 Creating a Consolidated Database: The National Child Protection Authority or the Department of Social Services must create a consolidated database of child involvement after every election. UNICEF specifically emphasized the creation of such a 'Complete Information Management System' or database to assess the legal protection of children and the effectiveness of existing policies in their report (Nurumov & Urumova, 2022). This will be helpful for future policy determination and reporting to international human rights organizations.

5.2 Increasing Parental Awareness: Special campaigns can be run through the National Mass Communication Department to raise awareness among parents about ensuring the safety of their children during the election season. Herawati and Hananto (2020) noted that sometimes parents or family members take children to high-risk political campaigns due to a lack of public awareness; therefore, increasing social awareness alongside law enforcement is essential.

Children's involvement in electoral campaigns is not merely a matter of political behavior but a direct violation of the 'Children Act, 2013' enacted by the Government of Bangladesh (2013) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). To build a healthy and democratic electoral culture, political parties must move away from the traditional practice of using children as political 'rhetorical tools' (Walters, 2024). The implementation of these recommendations will not only ensure a safer election but will also play a vital role in building a violence-free future for children.

Limitations of the Study

Like any systematic research, this study also has some limitations that need to be considered when analyzing the results.

Firstly, this observation presents a preliminary data-based analysis that is only a partial representation of the overall electoral reality of Bangladesh. Due to limitations in manpower and necessary resources, it was not possible to cover all districts or all political programs equally across the country. Consequently, this report is based on information received within a specific timeframe.

Secondly, data collection primarily utilized direct observation, local sources, and open sources. In some cases, the opportunity for triangulation of information was limited, especially for incidents in remote or inaccessible regions where direct field-level access was not possible. However, maximum effort was made to ensure the reliability of the collected data.

Thirdly, this observation does not claim to include all incidents of child involvement that occurred during the election period. Many incidents were not published in mainstream media or were confined to the local level, making it possible that they were outside the scope of this reporting. Consequently, the possibility that the actual number of incidents is higher than the documented number cannot be dismissed.

Fourthly, the percentages and ratios presented in this report are calculated solely based on the documented 453 incidents. These statistics do not represent a full Representative Sample of the national level. That is, the opportunity to consider the percentages obtained here as the final or accurate ratio for the entire country is limited.

Fifthly, the 'cross-tab' analysis based on party and risk level shown here primarily indicates the proportional relationship between various variables. However, determining the specific social or psychological cause-and-effect reasons behind the political use of children is outside the scope of this report.

Finally, despite these limitations, the current research successfully presents a preliminary and evidence-based picture of the use of children in electoral campaigns. A more profound and influential evaluation on this subject may be possible in the future through a larger sample size, extensive field-level data, and comparative analysis of multiple election cycles.

Conclusion

This research analyzed 453 incidents of children being used in campaigns during the 2026 national election (January 22 to February 10) and found that the use of children in electoral politics is not just an isolated incident but a deep-seated structural trend. Although the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami had the highest numerical presence of children in their campaigns (281 and 93 incidents, respectively), a different picture emerges when analyzing the intensity or proportional prevalence index against the number of candidates. According to this index, the National Citizen Party (NCP) had the highest rate of child use (1.13), with the ratios for BNP and Jamaat being 0.97 and 0.42, respectively. In contrast, Islami Andolon Bangladesh, despite fielding candidates in a large number of seats (253), managed to keep their rate of child involvement at virtually zero (0.01), which is a significant example of positive organizational control. While there is much research on elections and child rights in Bangladesh, this study clearly highlights the culture of political parties using children as 'tools' or 'symbols' by removing the size-related bias in the data, which could add a new dimension to political science research.

In the context of tragic incidents like child fatalities in high-risk environments (e.g., the incidents in Chattogram and Satkhira), all stakeholders must take immediate effective policy measures. The Election Commission must explicitly include the use of children in political campaigns as a 'punishable offense' in their code of conduct and maintain it as a performance indicator in their own monitoring cell. Additionally, political parties should include child protection in their manifestos and party constitutions and appoint 'Child Protection Focal

Points' at the field level so that children can be kept safe from crowded and risky gatherings. Simultaneously, law enforcement agencies must create a 'Standard Operating Protocol (SOP)' for the rapid removal of children from conflict-prone areas. Media outlets should also follow sensitive reporting protocols, including concealing children's identities or blurring their faces in news broadcasts, to ensure that their social and psychological safety is not compromised in any way.

Since this is a preliminary exploratory study and relies primarily on 20 days of media and open-source information, there is a possibility that some marginal incidents remained out of sight or were 'under-reported'. Understanding long-term trends will require future data collection on a larger scale and comparative analysis of multiple election cycles. In conclusion, children's involvement in electoral campaigns is not merely a political strategy, but a clear violation of the Children Act 2013 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). To ensure a truly safe and healthy democratic electoral environment, political parties must immediately abandon this unethical culture of using children as political shields or instruments to enhance campaign visibility.

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Annex

During the campaigns for the 13th National Parliamentary Election in 2026, the structural use and exploitation of children in political activities were widely observed. To combat this alarming trend and raise public awareness against child rights violations, Bangladesh Media Monitor (BDMM) and the Kashful Foundation, the joint initiators of this research, launched a digital campaign titled **#NotYourCampaignProp** on social media.

Below are selected digital posters distributed across social media platforms as part of this public awareness initiative:











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