

Economic Liberalisation and Confrontational Politics in Bangladesh

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In recent years, confrontational party politics has become the dominant feature of the political culture in Bangladesh. In 1997, Amnesty International reports “dozens of political activists were killed and hundreds more injured in clashes between opposition and government supporters” (Amnesty International 1997). In 2000 Amnesty international further reports “political confrontations between the major opposition parties and the ruling Awami League, which were at times violent, dominated politics in Bangladesh” (Amnesty International 2000). Similarly, in 2004, Amnesty International reports “Dozens of people died in violence during and after local elections in the first quarter of the year. Several opposition politicians were assassinated. Corruption and poor governance remained key factors blocking economic prosperity. The government reportedly pressured judges to dismiss criminal charges against ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party supporters. Most sessions of parliament were boycotted by the main opposition party, Awami League” (Amnesty International 2004).

Confrontational politics in the context of Bangladesh is not a new phenomenon but what new is its alarming proportions. In the past, the scale of political violence was limited. The party cadres were motivated much more by political ideologies for bringing changes in society in terms of political and economic emancipation of common people (Ahmed 2003). But the entire scenario has changed over more than a decade with the change in economic and political process and extreme reliance on the philosophy to assume power by any means. This particular political trend is posing increasing threat to democratic institution building process in Bangladesh. And this has given enough leverage to many within the society to undermine or discredit the democratic governance on the ground that common people feel much more insecure now (under democratic rule) than in the past (under autocratic rule) because of the long-standing anarchic situation stemming from confrontational party politics (Monem 2002).

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If we take a look at the recent political trends it appears that since 1980's political violence and confrontation in Bangladesh has been on the rise and the scale further increased during the 1990's and reached somewhat at its peak after 2000. Now this leads to an obvious question: what is the reason behind this growing political confrontation? In this paper we argue that in the context of Bangladesh the existing political trend is directly related to the changes which have taken place in country's political and economic fronts. On the political front, throughout the 1980's Bangladesh experienced a long period of military and quasi-military rule and on the economic front, it experienced a reversal of the state dominated economic policy to market economy. This was the time when the confrontational politics had been on the rise.

The autocratic regime of General Ershad was ousted in 1990 by a strong popular upsurge, and parliamentary democratic process was re-established. With the general election in 1991, held under a non-party caretaker government, a stable two-party political system has emerged, which was perceived to be an advantage. Two principal political parties Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Bangladesh Awami League (AL) command together an overwhelming plurality amongst the voters and demonstrate strong grass root support. Each party has held office and has demonstrated that it can win an election. Each party remains well represented in parliament and is sufficiently strong on the ground to be able to challenge any attempt by a ruling party to impose its will on the people. Three general elections in 1991, 1996 and 2001 were held under caretaker governments, which both parties had a taste of power. At present we have constitutionally assured system of free and fair elections which has been tested over two general elections and we have two major political parties with an equal capacity to win an election (Sobhan 2002). In spite of this, over the years we have experienced a culture of confrontational politics. The direct result of which is an ineffective parliament and where the opposition opts to remain outside parliament and walk in the streets demanding the resignation of a government long before completion of its term in office. Now the obvious question is: why then the political system in Bangladesh is in a state of total confrontation? In the following part of the paper we will try to answer this question and we also make an attempt to establish a link between confrontational political culture and economic liberalisation. This paper has several sections. In section 2 we assess the nature and extent of confrontational political culture in Bangladesh and also it considers impact, Section 3 deals with the extreme political tactics adopted by the ruling and the opposition party to retain or gain political power. In Section 4 we briefly examine Bangladesh's economic liberalisation process and Section 5 sheds light on the economic liberalisation vis-à-vis the emergence of new

economic elite and their entry into politics and its impact. Section 6 looks at the theoretical underpinnings on links between economic liberalisation and confrontational politics incorporating the Bangladesh context and section 7 provides some concluding remarks. First let us look the nature, extent and impact of confrontational politics.

Confrontational Politics: Nature and Extent

In the specific context of Bangladesh, the emergence of two strong political parties within the political system has led to a breeding of a culture of intolerance amongst the two principal parties. Each party questions the legitimacy of its rival to a point where they behave as if they would like to drive out their rival from the political arena (Sobhan 2002). Politics as a result has become confrontational, violent, abusive and disconnected from popular concerns. The very issues which now find the opposition AL on the streets had kept the BNP on the streets during the term of office of AL.

Other main issues which is dividing the parties lies in the perception of the way the opposition is treated by the ruling party. The opposition argue that they are often oppressed by the government through the arrest and harassment of party workers, the disparity of speaking opportunities in the parliament and denial of equal time in the electronic media. Such issues of unfair democratic practise remain the principal reason offered by the opposition to justify their frequent declarations of hartal and boycott of parliament.

Furthermore, they remain willing to share time with the opposition in parliament who in any case tend to abuse their time in parliament through unparliamentary behaviour. The opposition claims that the partisan role of the Speaker in Parliament and the high handed behaviour of the government provokes their misbehaviour. Both facts and their interpretation thus divide the ruling and opposition parties who thereby convince themselves of the rectitude of their position which serves to intensify the political confrontation and a dysfunctional parliament is the inevitable consequence of this confrontational politics.

A Dysfunctional Parliament

In practice, however, the bipolar system has yielded results that remain largely contrary to popular expectations. In the 5th and 7th Jatiyo Sangsad the ruling parties demonstrated a high degree of intolerance to the concerns of the political opposition. Both regimes denied equal time to the opposition in Parliament as well as over the official electronic media. Nor did either regime make any more than token attempts to consult the opposition on issues of policy and governance. Under both regimes, opposition workers have been periodically exposed to harassment and detention through a partisan use of the law enforcement agencies.

A bipolar polity has, to some extent, contributed to the confrontational style of our national politics that is undermining the working of the parliamentary system. The emergence of two parties of equal strength has also contributed to the emergence of a duopoly over the national political system. This duopoly has served to stifle any challenge by smaller parties. The duopolistic presence of the two major parties has encouraged their insensitivity to the concerns of their allies, their direct supporters, their voters and even to the concerns of their party's rank and file. This sense of arrogance within the leadership structure of both parties is premised on the belief that within a duopolistic political system the supporters have no option but to support one or the other party. This duopolistic structure has thus eroded the pluralism as well as challenge within the political system that has contributed to the emergence of structural weakness within the two parties as well as reduced the choices available to the electorate.

There is no dialogue or effective working relation between the ruling and the main opposition party. The last two parliaments were de facto dysfunctional, with a high degree of intolerance of the ruling parties to the opposition. Both regimes denied equal time to the opposition in parliament as well as official electronic media. Each time, immediately after the election results were declared, the defeated party rejected it with an argument that the polling was rigged. Then, each opposition party complained that the ruling party had no intention to have the opposition in the parliament, and the ruling party compelled the opposition to boycott the parliament, to go to the street, and to call general strikes. Political dissention has led to the loss of nearly 200 work days in the past five years and a whole month in 1999 through hartals or general strikes which close down the formal economy. Each day loss has been roughly estimated by the World Bank to cost some \$60 million (World Bank 2003).

The malfunctioning of Parliament has its roots in the degeneration of the principal political parties themselves. Over the years, both the political parties have been witness to the infiltration of their parties by a breed of activists who increasingly tend to be motivated by private agenda. Today the ideological divide, as it impinges on immediate issues of development policy, is virtually non-existent between either party. Thus, both parties have developed party manifestos that serve as little more than pro forma obligations to their electorate that rarely intrude into their legislative practice or executive behaviour.

Both parties have a large number of political workers. Neither party has any clearly identified role for its party workers who are thus mostly used as mobilisers and organisers during election campaigns. Opposition party

workers are also used to mobilise people for public agitations whilst ruling party workers are correspondingly deployed to oppose or frustrate such agitations. Party workers, paradoxically, feel particularly neglected when their party comes to power. There is no perceived role for such ruling party workers either in disseminating the policies of the government before the electorate or in monitoring the state of governance at the local level. Some workers do spontaneously take some initiatives in both these areas but this does not originate from any organised initiative by the ruling party.

Successive ruling parties tend to demonstrate more faith in the bureaucracy, which emerges as their instrument of choice in not just implementing government decisions but in guiding their policy choices. As a result party workers feel devalued at a time when their links with the grassroots should have been put to good use by a ruling party. This sense of purposelessness, particularly when a party is in office, drives workers to using their political access to the party in power to seek official patronage for enhancing their material fortunes either as intermediaries with the executive or for pursuit of direct benefit. In this role, ruling party workers increasingly develop either collusive relations with the bureaucracy or conflictual relations when their particular expectations cannot be satisfied. Such tensions constrain the process of governance in various echelons of government and contribute to the alienation of the ruling party from its traditional sources of support.

Nowhere is this dysfunctional relationship between party and state more apparent than in the enforcement of law and order. Here party workers intervene with the machinery of law and order to ensure that it is not deployed against party workers who violate the law or participate in criminal behaviour. Wherever possible such political activists attempt to use the law agencies to victimise their political rivals by issuing warrants of arrest and actually detaining such workers on real or imaginary charges. This partisan approach to law enforcement extends from the top to the bottom of the political system and applies to the behaviour of both the parties when in office.

Tactics of Retaining or Gaining State Power Political Violence

Political violence has put Bangladesh into a deep crisis in governance. With increasing crime and violence the law and order situation of Bangladesh is about to collapse. Killing, rape, abduction, hijacking have increased alarmingly over the years. In 2002 alone, 283 people were killed as a result of violence of one sort or the other, 35 of them for political reasons in September 2001. Failure of police in maintaining law and order has led to such a point that the government had to summon armed forces to curb terrorism. Started on October 17, 2003 the army-aided crack down on terrorists is now going on in which more than 25

people died in their custody, during and after interrogation. It is noteworthy that, despite human rights organizations' allegations of human rights violation, general people are seemingly relieved from the overwhelming insecurity feeling that prevailed prior to the crackdown. This implies that people's faith on rule of law has eroded seriously.

People's disbelief in state authority and rule of law also reflects in the incidents of *gonopituni* or mass beatings in which alleged criminals are killed mercilessly. More than 40 alleged criminals were reportedly killed in mass beatings in 2002. Recently, in a North-western district of Rajshahi we have seen that several thousand activists of Islamist death squad Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB) armed with bamboo poles and hockey sticks staged a showdown under police escort in Rajshahi city. They also asked the administration and the media to support it in eliminating outlaws. The operations commander of JMJB known as Bangla Bhai, openly claimed the killing of at least eight outlaws in the northwest since April 1, 2004. All these are happening because people have a very little trust in the government. The JMJB termed its activities 'a great initiative to eliminate outlaws and terrorism'. Later, the Prime Minister Khaleda Zia instructed the police to arrest him, but police failed to arrest him as reported in the newspaper. A home ministry official quoting intelligence reports said that government was divided on the decision of his arrest as two religion-based parties, including the Jamaat-e-Islami, an ally of the present government, are not only backing the JMJB and Bangla Bhai, but also helping the Islamist outfit with manpower and light weapons (The daily Star 19.04.04).

Mastans (Musclemen) in Politics

From confrontational approach to politics among the main political parties has created a tendency to use violence in politics, as a result of which a breed of young people has entered national politics, who are locally called mastans commonly referred to as terrorists, though cannot be certainly categorized as such in real sense. Both BNP and Awami League and also other parties, have their respective youth fronts, which are led and supported by mastans. They have emerged as a major factor in politics as well as social life in Bangladesh. Most of the political figures patronize mastans in order to ensure their election and retention of political authority in their constituencies. Politicians are increasingly using mastans as a political resource in the contention of political office and state patronage to access public resources. Notably, in the Dhaka City Corporation there are 20 elected ward commissioners against whom there had been and are criminal cases (The daily Star, 22.01.2003).

Now let us turn to country's economic front to take a quick look at Bangladesh's economic liberalisation process.

Economic Liberalisation in Bangladesh

Within nearly three decades of its independence, Bangladesh has moved from an economic policy of socialist transformation to the restoration of an open economy by way of economic liberalisation in terms of substantial privatisation. Not only has liberalisation been shaped by politics, it has also shaped the politics of the country to a considerable degree. Bangladesh embarked on economic liberalisation process under the military bureaucratic regime of General Ziaur Rahman after the political changeover in 1975. Later, during the era of General Ershad this process was further intensified. Successive ruling parties used liberalisation process to reward clienteles, thus deliberately selected policy measures that could be taken advantage of only by its supporters, who would then return the favour with political loyalty and whose support was crucial for their political survival. Now, those who were not linked with the ruling party were left out of this network of patronage distribution. In fact, politics is central to economic liberalisation in general: in its causes, its conduct and its impact. As Henig and Feigenbaum (1994) observe that some groups in a more liberalised arena would find their interests more clearly defined and more readily promoted; other groups would find the opposite. Because liberalisation is an intensely political phenomenon.

In Bangladesh, in the name of private sector development General Zia and Ershad regimes doled out money from public financial institutions or banks to purchase public enterprises being divested or their shares, thus made the interest groups financially dependent and subsequently used them for their own ends. What is significant is that situation on this front got worse after the democratic transition in 1991. Both the BNP and Awami League governments were not found to be thinking in terms of maximising economic benefits of economic liberalisation. Rather, they were concerned about targeting certain groups with selective benefits (Monem 1999). Because of the degree of economic and social stratification of Bangladesh society, politicians played different interests off against each other and used economic liberalisation process in a way that optimised their chances of retaining office, re-election, and consolidating political support, regardless of whether those policies promoted the long-term interests of the general public. Now let us look at the main features of Bangladesh's economic liberalisation process

- Denationalisation and privatisation of public enterprises
- Private sector development
- Overall deregulation of the economy
- Gradual withdrawal of quantitative restrictions
- A tax structure dearer to the private investment
- Encouragement of foreign investment (both direct and joint ventures)
- Ensuring a private business-friendly environment

Central to the economic liberalisation process was privatisation and private sector development. Since 1975 until June 2004, 956 small, medium and large scale industries of various categories had been sold to the private entrepreneurs. In most cases the regimes had sold those enterprises to their kinsmen and as a direct result of that substantial under-pricing took place. With regard to the transfer of state assets, under-pricing was the main feature of Bangladesh's privatisation programmes under the military regimes. It is to be noted that there has not been any sharp break with this past tradition even under the democratic regimes.

Table 1: Under-Valued Privatisation of Textile Mills during the Khaleda and Sk. Hasina Eras

Name of the textile Mills Privatised	Estimated Value (in million Tk.)	Sale Price (in million Tk.)	Difference (in percentage)
Kishorgonj textile mill	326.9	95.3	-70.8
5 R textile mill	271.1	50.0	-81.6
Sinha textile mill	85.9	117.6	36.9
Madaripur textile mill	213.3	80.7	-62.1
Kohinoor textile mill	256.0	180.5	-29.5
Style fabrics textile mill	19.4	12.5	-35.6

Source: Compiled and calculated, on the basis of the information received from Bangladesh Privatization Commission, Dhaka, 2003.

Following the first rule of politics, that one punishes one's enemies and rewards one's friends, the tactical advantage of privatising public enterprises was that public enterprises or their shares were sold to kinsmen and clients of the ruling elite at a generous discount. Those who failed to show immediate allegiance to the government or known for their intimacy with an earlier regime were discriminated.

All the regimes made sure that those who loyal to them receive preferential treatments in every possible way. But it in Bangladesh the business elite generally shifted their allegiance with every change of regime. Let me cite an interesting example to explain the relationship between the government, private sector and also civil society. During Ershad era, for example, owners of privatised jute mills demanded subsidies to offset the operating losses of their respective mills. The owners through their associations persuaded the government for loss financing and threatened that failure to meet their demands might result in private sector jute mills being closed. The government subsequently announced generous loss-financing packages. Strikingly, at that time the minister for jute affairs was serving as the executive president of the private sector jute mills association which meant it was the same person who demanded subsidy and who ultimately granted subsidy to the jute mill owners.

Over the years, privatisation programme was used by all regimes, be it military or democratic, as a means to launder black money accumulated and hoarded by a group of people from earlier eras. In the name of encouraging privatisation all the successive regimes announced that sources of unregistered incomes would not be questioned if these were used to purchase public enterprises being divested or to purchase their shares, or invested in the industrial sector. This was a deliberate strategy adopted by both of these regimes to reward their powerful backers and supporters.

Now, in the name of private sector development, steps were taken to advance bank loans through the medium of the development financing institutions and nationalised commercial banks basically to a group who were either kinsmen of or loyal to successive regimes. The members of these groups later refused to undertake any obligations associated with industrial investment and debt repayment, and ultimately leading to permanent bank-loan default culture.

According to the governor of the Bangladesh Bank, Tk. 5000 crore of default loans were lying with 156 business houses. Seventy five percent of the total bank loans of over Tk. 13,000 crore were held by 1800 persons, and just 10 defaulters were holding back nearly 300 crore Tk. The number of wilful defaulters was higher than the people in real trouble (BSS 2002). In fact, the business groups have taken full advantage of successive governments' privatisation and liberal economic policy. They obtained credit, but seldom repaid. Governments were either unwilling or incapable of recovering these loans. One estimate shows that a total of Tk. 1100 crore bank loan has been pocketed by a group of 20 business houses between 1975 and 2001 (The Weekly Notun Din 2002). Between 1991 and 2001, a total interest of 5000 crore Tk. had been written off in the name of encouraging privatisation and private sector investment (Bangladesh Bank 2002).

Economic Liberalisation and New Elite into Politics

Economic liberalisation opened up more opportunities for many and created a new class of economic elite. The elites, created by successive regimes running a virtual personal rule, had no time for political socialization. The new economy after independence created a regime of permit seekers who mostly were related to the ruling Awami League. After the 1975 change-over, economic policies gradually changed in favour of privatization and liberalization, giving rise to a class of businessmen, distributive traders, retailers and rent-seeking class but not a class based on productive activities.

This newly-rich class depended more on politics than enterprise and initiatives for success. Thus, the nexus between politics and business became deeper. Another trend was lateral entry into politics from business and from civil and military bureaucracy. The process was

accelerated through successive spells of military rule and arduous efforts by each military regime to turn to politics to legitimize its rule. This backdrop shows that politics has become a profession or a tool or medium of business in place of a career or a pursuit. Corruption in politics was a natural corollary. A look at the composition of the political elite makes it evident that politicians in politics declined while those from business and with active business interests, from civil and military bureaucracy have been rising steeply.

Table 2 : Occupational Background of MPs (in percentage)

Year of election	Nature of Occupation					
	Law	Business	Professional	Politics	Agriculture	Others
1973	26.5	23.7	15.2	12.7	17.6	4.3
1979	23.8	27.7	12.7	N/A	14.6	21.2
1986	20.5	56.7	11.5	4.3	4	3
1991	19	59	14	2	4	2
1996	11	71	12	3	2	1
2001	8	73	9	4	4	2

Source: Ahmad Ullah, *Members of the fifth Jatiya Shangshad: A Documentary (in Bengali)*, Dhaka, Suchayan Prakashan, 1992); Talukder Maniruzzaman, "The Fall of the Military Dictator: 1991 Elections and the Prospect of Civilian Rule in Bangladesh," *Pacific Affairs*, No. 65 (1992), pp. 203-23.; Q. A. M. Alam, "The Nature of the Bangladesh State in the Post-1975 Period", *Contemporary South Asia* No. 2 (1993), pp. 311-25. And also our own calculation of the occupational background of the MPs of 1986, 1996 and 2001 parliament on the basis of the book containing information on MPs. Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs, 1987 and 1997, 2002, Government of Bangladesh.

The nexus between business and politics increased with every change of government. The increase of the number of businessmen among lawmakers and political policy-shapers is not necessarily a negative feature of an evolving democracy. Businessmen with a sense of social responsibility and corporate style of dealing may, in fact, invigorate both democracy and a competitive, open market economy. The problem in many developing countries including Bangladesh is that the businessmen, like the politicians, are also new and often uninitiated in the art of responsible business and politics.

The new rich, with honourable exceptions, with their political clout use the government machine to further their own selfish ends. It seems that the greatest obstacle to effective parliamentary democracy and meaningful socio-economic development of Bangladesh is in the absence of a standing class long accustomed to rule responsibly. Unless and until such a competent and responsible set of people come to political leadership within the parliament and outside, elections at regular intervals, even under neutral, non-partisan caretaker government will not help Bangladesh achieve a vibrant Parliamentary democracy that can ensure meaningful national, political and economic development.

Link Between Liberalisation and Confrontational Politics

Over more than last two decades, Bangladesh has implemented economic reforms designed to transform its state-dominated economies to deregulated market economies. Dreze (2000) argued that economic liberalisation can have a very profound and disruptive effect on the structure of society and polity. It may also lead to political and social disorder. Against this backdrop and in the context of Bangladesh, we argue that liberalisation was not just a turning point in economic policy, but gave momentum to the profound and disturbing transformation that has occurred in social and political life of the country. In fact, political culture that exists in present Bangladesh is not merely an exogenous development, or not entirely independent of or unrelated to the nature and consequences of economic policy shift which occurred over more than two decades. Rather, country's current culture of confrontational politics and democratic decay has been aggravated by its economic liberalisation process.

Liberalisation should not be seen only as growth promoting, it can significantly undermine conditions that facilitate rampant corruption and also opens up other rent-seeking avenues. Besides, the liberalisation process itself also generates new incentive structures and reward systems (Dunham and S. Jayasuriya 2000). As a matter of fact, liberalisation process could neither reduce nor eliminate rent extraction. Rather, like many other countries, economic liberalisation expanded the opportunities on a quite unprecedented scale. Politicians, state bureaucrats and a new group of wealthy people, the military hierarchy, found a fertile ground for large-scale self-enrichment through the control of state power. However, since opportunities for corruption and patronage were directly threatened by existing political structures and normal democratic processes, incentives to undermine legal and political institutions grew.

In particular, in the context of a reform programme aimed at a complete transformation of state-dominated economies, it opens up rent-seeking opportunities on unprecedented scale. While the final outcome of a successful liberalisation programme will be a diminished role for the state, during the transition period the state controls the liberalisation process, and those who control or who can influence the state find themselves in a highly privileged and very fortuitous position. The state decides which sectors are liberalised, which activities are to be privatised, how tendering will be dealt with, and what will be the terms of any eventual sale to the private sector (Stewart 2000).

With privatisation, it is possible for the first time to sell off valuable state assets as a core component of a government economic policy programme. From the viewpoint of the private sector, economic liberalisation also means that the potential rewards for investment become correspondingly larger. Both domestic and foreign entrepreneurs are willing to pay more

for the opportunities offered than in the pre-reform era. The selective application and manipulation of trade and investment liberalisation is a powerful weapon that can be used to political and personal advantage.

Many supporters of liberalisation see any corruption in the course of reform as a transitory phenomenon, a cost society has to bear until it has an efficient market economy, in the belief that liberalisation will "reduce the opportunities for corruption in the long-run" (Tanzi 1998). As we have seen, liberalisation has provided additional resources for existing structures of patronage, and it also created new structures whose interests are in no sense compatible with a liberal economy that could eliminate rent extraction. The danger then is that, as the stakes get higher, political power is sought for the control it gives over the distribution of a potentially rapidly expanding pot of economic resources (Stewart 2000). Therefore, holding on to power becomes a matter of fundamental importance, both because of the *largesse* and *influence it yields* and *because of the much increased cost of being marginalised as losers*. As a result, incumbents become more willing to subvert political institutions, processes and movements that threaten their grip on power. Public scrutiny and dissent is suppressed, activities of political opponents and their supporters are undermined and democratic freedoms are eroded.

Concluding Remarks

Socio-political changes should not be viewed as exogenous developments, quite unrelated to the shift in a country's economic policy in terms of economic liberalisation, deregulation or privatisation. In the context of Bangladesh, economic liberalisation started in the early 1980s and confrontational politics of the present scale is a phenomenon which essentially had loomed large since 1990s, particularly after the so called democratic transition. So, one may ask: is there a relationship between economic liberalisation and confrontational political culture? In fact, confrontational politics and large scale political violence had its root in the era of Ershad (1982-1990). It may be mentioned here that Ershad followed a vigorous economic liberalisation process. About 60% of the total transfer of public enterprises took place during his tenure in office. Some got special favours and preferential treatments than others.

As a result of that various levels of discontentment began to arise among groups within the society and polity depending on what they have achieved in terms of material gains or the future possibilities of such gains. This actually had a long-term impact on the overall political layout of the country as it sharply divided the society along the lines of the winners and losers. This process was held together and further nurtured by the so called democratic regimes in Bangladesh. They went even further down the road to reward only the groups who were loyal to them and discriminated the rest or in another words their opposition which obviously led to sharp political confrontation.

The main problem here is this: no party wants to lose out as being in the opposition, and being in the opposition means not being able to make fortunes or dispense political patronage among the party supporters in terms of larger economic gains flowing from the economic liberalisation process. Thus, unseating a government through whatever means available becomes the most important guiding force for the party which is in opposition. On the other hand, holding onto power by any means becomes the most important motivating factor for the ruling party and its supporters as it ensures the quick and substantial economic gains for them. The inevitable outcome is confrontational politics. To achieve their respective ends, both the ruling and opposition parties resort to political violence through musclemen. But the ruling party enjoys leverage to use law enforcement agencies to undermine the threats posed by the opposition political parties.

For instance, in last March'2004, Awami League vowed to unseat the BNP government by 30th of April through strong popular upsurge. As a counter measure, BNP Government started a programme of mass arrests across the country in the run-up to the April 30 deadline of the main opposition Awami League (AL) to unseat the BNP-led coalition government. Unsuspecting and innocent young men were picked up by police from railway stations, bus stands and all such places. The number of arrestees in Dhaka alone exceeded 6,069. Of the total, 4775 were arrested under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Ordinance and sentenced them without producing before magistrates, let alone a scope for self-defence. Police also arrested many people under Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), ignoring the High Court (HC) directive that any arrest on suspicion was illegal. There is no doubt that such a crackdown amounted to a gross violation of human rights. All this was done in the name of resisting the opposition's oust-the-government agenda (The Daily Star 25.04.04).

In the present context, the nexus between politicians, business, the mastans and the law enforcement agencies is now becoming embedded into the political structure of Bangladesh. Bangladesh's increasingly dysfunctional political system is not only subverting our development potential — it is also posing a serious threat to the sustainability of democratic politics. The confrontational approach to politics is now fostering a tendency to use violence to resolve issues that should be addressed through political dialogue. This cult of violence is elevating the role of the mastan (musclemen) and the terrorist in national politics, and undermining the contribution of honest and dedicated political workers. Parliament is tending to become irrelevant to the political system and people are questioning the value of this vital institution for sustaining democracy.

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