

Political Violence in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh politics is considered highly contentious, with the little scope for the opposition to make its voice heard within the formal political system. Political violence emerges from a deep rooted political culture of intolerance, antagonism, revenge and arrogance. While difference in opinion between parties are common in democracies, in Bangladesh these often lead to the use of extreme form of violence resulting in death, injury and extensive damage to property. Dynastic politics and lack of democratic practices in internal organization of political parties have contributed to the country's prevailing situation of highly confrontational politics. As a result political violence remains stuck in a 'vicious cycle' where by undemocratic practices reinforce the political violence.

Keywords: Politics, Violence, Bangladesh.

Introduction

'All happy families resemble each other, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way'. So, Tolstoy began 'Anna Karenina'. Every other political society has unique features and objectives and marked by a strong individualism. Political violence is an alarming growing phenomenon in many parts of the world. The severity of violence in Bangladesh's politics is widely discussed at the national as well as international level. Again, politics is dominated by winner takes all mentality. In Bangladeshi system where the winning party enjoys the monopoly of power for the duration of their electoral term, [...] the ruling party and its innermost circle have emerged as the unrivalled center of political power.¹ As there is limited scope for the opposition to operate within the formal system, political violence has become the integral part of political change in power.

The Trends of Political Violence in Bangladesh

The international risk analyst Maplecroft, in its latest (2013) Conflict and Political Violence Index (CPVI), identifies Bangladesh as being at, 'high

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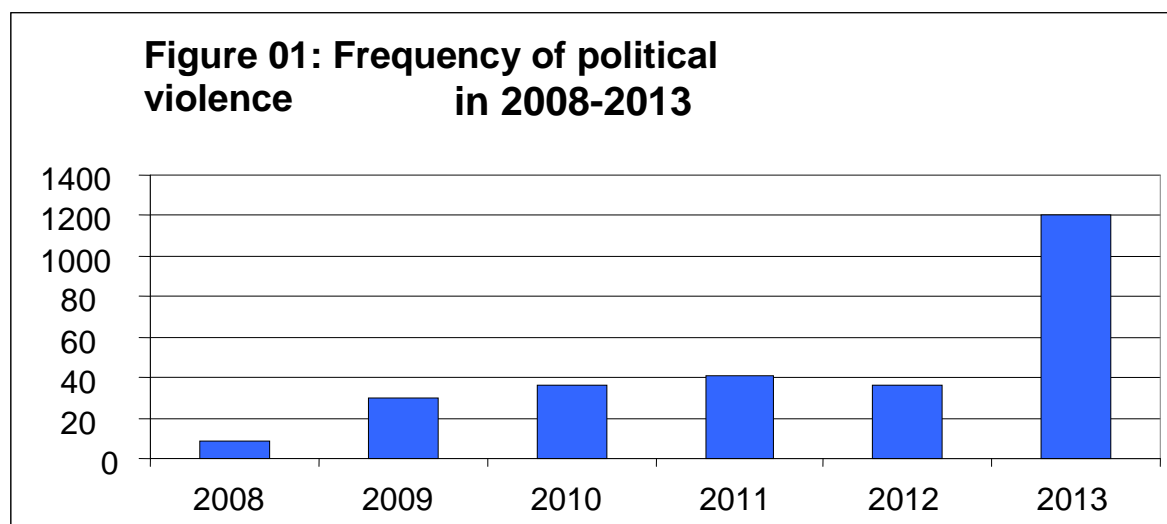
risk' for political violence. The CPVI ranking includes 197 nations among which Bangladesh was ranked 21st.

The political history of the Indian sub continent shows that the origin of violence in politics dates back to British colonial era. The dramatic transformation of East Bengal to East Pakistan and finally to Bangladesh, under the British rule and Pakistani rule respectively, was a narration of violent struggles (Khan, 2010).

The legacy of political violence was further perpetuated after independence. The period from 1971 to 1975 was a turbulent era, as elites with significant political power, but few economic assets, came to power in the newly independent country (Khan, 2010). Political violence henceforth become a means of capital accumulation (Ahmed, 2012).

In 1990's, Bangladesh began to practice a multiparty parliamentary political system, however, political violence in Bangladesh remains a tool to gain political supremacy.

The following figure-01 shows the reported violence against each year,



Source: State of Governance, Bangladesh 2013, BRAC Institute of Government and Development.

There are so many facets of political violence; it is difficult to put it together in a neat package to assess the trends of political violence in Bangladesh. Here, political violence will be assessed in terms of four factors (1) Killing (2) disappearances (3) torture, and (4) extra judicial killings.

1. Killing

Violence, often resulting in killings, is becoming a pervasive element in Bangladeshi politics. Supporters of different political parties, and

sometimes the supporters of different factions of one party, often clash with each other and with police during rallies and demonstrations. Awami League supporters, often with the convenience and support of the police, violently disrupted rallies and demonstration of the opposition parties which resulted in numerous deaths. Opposition parties also used armed violence and intimidation to disrupt their opponents' gatherings and rallies, as well as to enforce general strikes.

In terms of killing, the first three years after independence of Bangladesh, there were over 3000 political killings.² After 1975, except for the assassination of President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and President Ziaur Rahman in 1981, killing for direct political motive was not common till the mid-to-late 1980s. Bangladesh is again witnessing a rise in the number of political killings.

In 2013, 507 people were killed and 22,407 injured in a total of 848 violent incidents. Of the dead, 15 police personnel and 2 BGB members. In 2014, 47 people were killed and 8,373 injured in a total of 64 violent incidents.

According to the annual report of Ain-o-shalish Kendra (ASK) 2013, over 100 people died in violence during Hartals and road-rail-water way blockades, enforced by the opposition alliance following the announcement of the election schedule on November 25, 2014.

Law enforcers clashed with opposition activists during the shutdowns, while picketers set fire to a number of vehicles, leaving at least 75 people dead between November 26 and December 15.

2. Disappearances

Terming 'disappearances' a new addition to state terrorism, the ASK report (2013) claims that law enforcers in plain cloths took away people who later disappeared, often without trace.

In 2013, at least 53 people are victims of such disappearance. Of them 5 dead bodies were recovered and 3 people were placed in police detention, while the rest are still missing.

3. Torture

The 1999 Human Rights Practices report on Bangladesh states that the Constitution prohibits torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment; however, police routinely employ physical and psychological torture and other abuse during arrests and interrogations.

Torture may consist of threats, beatings, and, occasionally the use of electric shock. The Government rarely convicts or punishes those responsible for torture, and a climate of impunity allows such police abuses to continue.³ By 2015, the picture has changed dramatically.

4. Extra judicial killings

The 1999 Human Rights Practices report states that police committed a number of extra judicial killings and that security forces sometimes used unwarranted lethal force. The government reported that 101 persons died in prison and police custody during the first 9 months of the year. Most abuses go unpunished, and the resulting climate of impunity remains a serious obstacle to ending police abuse and extra judicial killings.⁴

Although, the government promised to stop extra judicial killings, a total of 72 people were killed by law enforcers in ‘crossfire’ Of them, 24 were killed by RAB (Rapid Action Battalion) 17 by police and 1 by BGB (Border Guard of Bangladesh), while 27 detainees died in police custody in 2013.⁵

Reasons for Political Violence

1. Weak democratic culture

An applied political construction of democratization can be assessed from the hearings held in the mid 1980s on issues of democracy before the Congress of the United States. A case analysis of seven hearings between 1985 and 1990 concluded that the Congress of the United States focused on seven aspects of democratization. These are (1) all components of a free and fair election, (2) the role of opposition political parties and their ability to participate in the election process, (3) the extent of human and civil rights violations, (4) the independence of the government and judicial branches, (5) all aspects of censorship, (6) the role of corruption and (7) the popularity of government.

Since 1991, Bangladesh has remained a parliamentary democracy with its President having predominantly a ceremonial role. But electoral process crippled time to time. The general elections of February 1996 were boycotted by the major opposition parties including Awami League, over the refusal (since 1994) of BNP to organize the elections under a neutral caretaker government, to ensure a free and fair campaigning and voting. After widespread agitation, through the thirteenth amendment of the Constitution the caretaker system was introduced. The June elections of 1996 were won by Awami League and Sheikh Hasina became the new

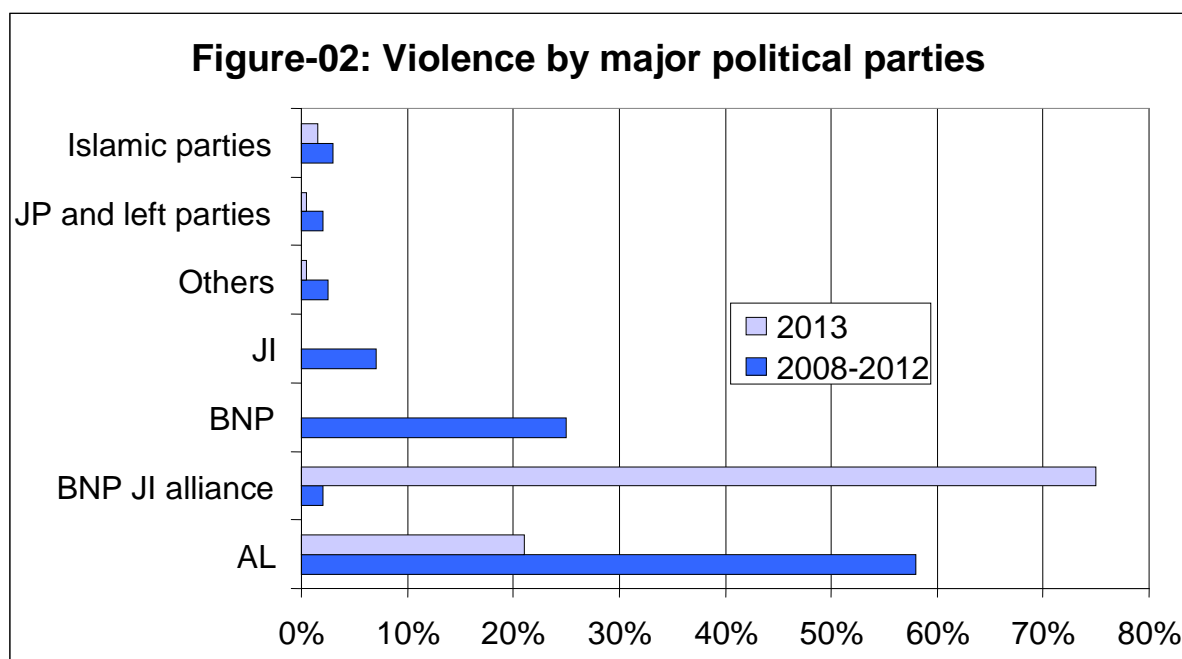
Prime Minister. After five years of Awami League rule, elections were duly held under the caretaker system and Khaleda Zia of BNP returned to power, leading a four party alliance of BNP, Jamat-e- Islami (jel), Jatia Party (Manju) and Islami oikka jote.

After political unrest in the run-up to the January 2007 elections, the country’s President Iajuddin Ahmed declared a state of emergency and a military backed non party caretaker government was installed, headed by senior civil servant Fakhruddin Ahmed. All political activities were banned which led in a marked reduction in political violence. After two years in power caretaker government stepped down and October elections of 2008 were organized and Sheikh Hasina leading a fourteen party alliance returned to power with two third majorities in the parliament.

The second Awami League tenure was marked by the abolishment of caretaker system through fifteen amendments and the war crimes tribunals. The trials led to violent protests, predominantly by the Islamist groups including of course Jamat-e-Islami, and clashes with state security forces and pro-government activists across the country.

5th January elections of 2014 were held under the ruling Awami League government and BNP boycotted the elections demanding the neutral caretaker system and the violence broke all the records of the past.

Figure-02 depicts the violence by major political parties in Bangladesh,



Source: *State of Governance, Bangladesh 2013, BRAC Institute of Government and Development.*

The figure-02 shows that party in power is more violent than the opposition parties. In new democracies, distorted democratic culture affects both the polity and political activists. Polity becomes power oriented in the sense that power turns out to be the motive force at every layer at administration. The political activists on the other hand, become motivated to use political power as the medium of power, influence, and in some cases property for mobilizing more power in their baskets.

The following table depicts the reasons behind weak democratic culture in Bangladesh,

Table-01: Why could democracy not be established in Bangladesh?

Causes	Percentage
Failure of political parties	32
Lack of democratic values	13
Illiteracy	12
Imperial conspiracy	9
Failure of government	5
Poverty	5
Intervention of army	4
Lack of commitment on the part of the parties	4
Bureaucratic conspiracy	4
Lust of power	2
Dependency on foreign aid	1
Others	3
Don't know	6
Total	100

Source: Khan et al (2009)

2. Lack of democratic practices in party politics

Political parties played a significant role in attaining independence in Bangladesh and subsequently struggled a lot to achieve democracy in the country. Yet, internal party democracy did not improve satisfactorily. Democratic principles and systems are not found in internal party organization like managing different tiers within the party, and electing party leaders and activists. Political party affairs revolved around personality cult of the party chief and general members were weighted down by the supreme leadership.⁶ The concentration of power, at the top of both the parties, have edified these leaders into unquestionable leaders to fellow party leaders and party workers; hence elevating them above all criticism. In this way, both Khaleda zia of BNP and Shekh Hasina of

Awami League remain key sources of power in their parties. Many important decisions are taken by dint of their personal charisma and without any discussion in party forums. If there is a discussion, it remains ceremonial. Other leaders could hold posts only according to the sweet will of their chiefs. The chiefs can do and undo anything they want in the party. Personal liking and disliking carry heavily in the weight for considering party positions and portfolios.⁷ Party councils and conventions are not arranged regularly. Again, election of party chiefs never took place in any party. Moreover, Article 70 of the constitution also a barrier to the democratic practice within the party politics.

The following table shows the scenario of democratic practices within the party politics,

Table-02: Internal democracies within parties.

Reasons	Percentage
Excessive domination by individual leaders	47.3
Lower level leaders are not involved in the decision making process	33
Party is run by coterie	6.2
Lack of democratic norms in the party	1.1
Dynastic politics prevails in the party	0.3
Others	1.1
Don't know	11
Total	100

Source: Khan et al (2009)

3. Dynastic politics

Unfortunately, Bangladesh has had a very poor tradition of growing leadership through democratic practices in the parties. Instead, the chiefs have been elevated to their positions under the aegis of what is an institutionalized dynastic culture effectively extending these undemocratic structures of power to the party level and subsequently as the incumbent ruler at the state level.⁸ As the party decisions are in the hand of the party chiefs, the internal organization of the parties have been weaken and reliant upon one person. These resulted into blood relation appointment and promotion and imposed nomination.

4. Relying on street power for perpetuating in power

As there is limited scope for the opposition to operate within the formal system—with opposition parties often boycotting parliamentary sessions, confrontational politics has often become the norm in Bangladesh since

the return to the democracy in 1991. These confrontations are of course highly visible in election times, as e.g. witness by the ever-returning discussion about the imposition of the caretaker systems. Many commentators of Bangladesh politics agree that political violence has become one of the defining factors of Bangladesh politics.⁹ Hartal, the general strike and total shutdown, is one of the main elements of this confrontational politics. It has been one of the defining features of Bangladesh politics since independence. Also in democratic period since 1991, Hartal has remained one of the preferred weapons of the opposition parties to voice their concern vis-à-vis the ruling party.¹⁰ The following table depicts the violence in hartal,

Table: 3 Distribution events, wounded and lethal casualties of (no) Hartal events.

		Event	Wounded	Lethal casualties
Hartal event?	No	75.10%	72.60%	80.40%
	Yes	24.90%	27.40%	19.60%

Source: Bert Suykens and Aynul Islam (2013)

The winner takes all from the politics in Bangladesh is considered one of the main reason why opposition parties take to the streets to voice their concerns rather than using the parliament.

5. Dysfunctional party politics

Prior to independence, the political leaders placed a great deal of emphasis on the liberal democratic values, they pledged to achieve these goals. Before independence, liberty and freedom were the goals, and participation a means to achieve them, but after independence nation-building became the goal, and effective government a means to achieve that goal. The task of establishing an effective government was equated with that of regime stability—the perpetuation in power of a particular ruling elite or a person. This concern for staying in power brought a change in the ruling elite’s attitude to political participation and their commitment to the liberal democratic model of government and politics. The liberal democratic model assumes that the ruling elite will participate in the system of alterocracy—that there will be periodic rotation of the ruling elite through the mechanism of election. The politicians rejected even this concept of alterocracy¹¹ (Jahan, 2005).

6. Lack of political trust

When the current prime minister of the country accuses the former prime minister of attempting to kill her, the political system lacks trust. When

the leadership of the different political parties can not sit together to work out a win-win situation out of the most simple issues, let alone the most difficult situations, there is no trust in the political system.

7. Politicization of bureaucracy

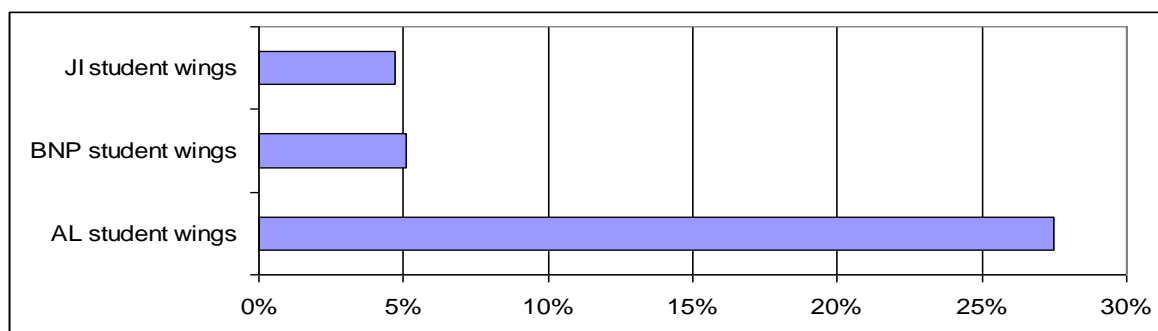
After independence, all political parties in power tried to create loyal bureaucracy through recruitment, promotion and punishment, as they can be used in election engineering. In case of Bangladesh law enforcement bodies are highly accused for using against the opposition.

8. Student, youth and other wings

Many political parties have a number of ancillary organizations, focusing on specific groups like students, youth, women, workers, or farmers. These organizations, both from Awami League and BNP are organized with a hierarchy of committees, under a president and a general secretary starting from the central level committee to union and word committees or to university, college, and student hall committees. Both organizations are divided into factions rallying under different leaders.

Violence is endemic among the student political wings of the major national political parties, and between rival factions within the parties.¹²

Figure-03 depicts the violence by different student wings of political parties,



Source: *State of Governance, Bangladesh 2013, BRAC Institute of Government and Development.*

Conflict and enmity between parties and party factions for ensuring political dominance is one of the largest reasons for political violence. The term ‘political dominance’ includes incidents such as when one party/ faction tries to establish control in certain region or institution (e.g. educational institution or dorm) with the motive of gaining economic benefits (e.g. fighting for tender submission/ contracts/ encroachment of land and application for jobs) or establishing political control.

9. Interference in judicial system

With regard to fair public trials, there is significant evidence, from the beginning of the independence, Bangladesh that shows that there are major flaws in both police practices and in the judicial system.

Courts are generally able to operate free of interference from the executive in the late 1970s but in the late 1990s, courts are increasingly being threatened by the political executive especially in case that are political or security related. Though the Article 22 of the Constitution ensures the independence of Judiciary, the judicial system is not free of interference. A continuing aspect of denial of basic human rights is the ability of Bangladesh government to arrest and detain persons arbitrarily, as well as to use national security legislation (the Special Power Act) to detain citizens without formal charges or specific complains being filed against them. There is also a rise in the number of such arrests. Under the Special Power Act, the Government or a district magistrate may order anyone detain for 30 days to prevent an act likely 'to prejudice the security of the country'.¹³ In practice detainees sometimes are held for longer periods without the Government stating the grounds for the detention or formally approving it. Detainees may appeal their detention and the Government may grant early release.

An issue of great significance in assessing democracy and human rights in Bangladesh is whether there has been any intimidation of the higher court by the political party in power. It can be stated that while there is no direct intimidation, a sufficient number of significant political executives had interjected their zeal into what is the expected outcome of the review of the decision of the lower court by the higher court. These do not bode well for human rights and rule of law in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The political culture of Bangladesh goes beyond 'healthy competition' and is becoming more confrontational day by day. Parties prefer to solve their differences in the street rather than a democratic political way. The party in power, found to be engaged in more violence than the opposition which ultimately indicates that control of economic resources could be the ultimate determinant of political violence. During elections, the political factions of parties become united towards fighting against the opposition, with the ultimate aim of being in power, thus ensuring control of resources.

The lack of intra party democratic practices along with the absence of ideological harmony and weak institutional mechanisms are promoting violence in politics.

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