



New Trends in Violence in Bangladesh

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Bangladesh has a vibrant, often violent, multi-party-political culture, characterised by polarisation, deep-seated intolerance and lack of respect for democratic norms. Parties generally sought to settle matters on the street rather than at the negotiating table through the political process of discussions and dialogues. This disregard for democratic dialogue has often led to violent clashes between opposing political forces, which continued through the one-sided 10th Parliament elections of 2014. The period leading to the 2014 elections was the most violent in the history of Bangladesh, claiming the lives of over 500 people.

After the 2014 elections, the security forces were used by the ruling Awami League to unleash repressive measures to marginalise the opposition, particularly BNP, which destroyed the long-held political balance in the country. Repressive measures included filing cases, arrests, convictions, and even disappearances of opposition activists. In cooperation with the bureaucracy, judiciary and the election authorities, the security forces'

heavy-handed behaviour delivered, through fraudulent elections, a one-sided victory to the ruling party at the end of 2018. During the last eight years (2014-2022) of non-competitive elections and shrinking political rights of citizens, the ruling party consolidated power by passing legislation such as the Digital Security Act (DSA) and other means to restrict human rights, civil liberties and media freedom. Bangladesh is now one of the 36 countries that Reporters Without Borders identifies as the 'Press Freedom Predators'. The widespread human rights violations have recently invited US sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). Some senior officials of security services and 12 international human rights organisations urged the UN not to involve RAB in peacekeeping missions. Recognising such widespread democratic deficits, Freedom House now calls Bangladesh a 'partly free' country, whereas Bertelsmann Stiftung a 'moderate autocracy' and International IDEA an 'authoritarian regime'. The exclusion of Bangladesh from the Biden Administration's recent democracy summit gave further credence to the country's autocratic image.

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CGS News and Executive Director's Note

The dominant ruling party also exploited religion to consolidate its position. The concentration of power by the dominant ruling party has undermined the traditional accountability mechanism through patronage distribution, widespread corruption, weakening of institutions and a culture of impunity. The politicisation of institutions allowed the people in positions of power to use their influence for looting and plundering and taking those loot abroad. Lack of the rule of law allowed such nefarious activities to proliferate, causing widespread governance failure in the country.

Since 2009, when the present Awami League government came to power, the nature of political violence has changed significantly. As stated earlier, during 2009-2014, the two major political parties – Awami League and BNP and its allies – engaged violently, resulting in widespread death and destruction. The principal motivation behind the violence was capturing and consolidating political space and winning elections to reap the rewards that go with elections. In their competition, Awami League, with the support of the securities forces, the bureaucracy and other state apparatuses, was a clear winner. In Bangladesh's winner-take-all culture and patronage-based political system, and polarised political culture, winners in elections control all privileges and patronages, totally depriving the losers. The losers now have to fight for their existence as the political division in Bangladesh has gradually degenerated into politics of annihilation.

However, with BNP marginalised and Awami League consolidating its position after the one-sided elections of 2014, the nature of violence has changed, and it became more of an intra-party affair within the ruling party. The primary motivation behind such intra-party violence was capturing positions of power – both party portfolios and elected positions – which provided access to patronages, privileges and riches. The party portfolios and elected positions also gave almost unfettered power to the incumbents, which could be utilised to indulge in illegal activities and get away as most unlawful activities in Bangladesh are carried out under the protection of the ruling party. Since the amount of patronage is not unlimited and the party ranks continue to swell because of the lure of patronage, the ruling party activists must fight for their positions, which give them access to power and wealth, often resulting in violence. We have witnessed the naked display of such intra-party violence during this present cycle of ongoing Union Parishad elections, which claimed more than 100 lives.

One of the principal drivers behind intra-party and inter-party violence in Bangladesh is corruption. In Bangladesh, politics has become a 'business' – making

money through corruption – and people now get into politics to be rich rather than public service. Thus, politics and corruption have become almost synonymous as politics allows people to access power and use it to enrich themselves illegitimately. Such opportunities create strong incentives for those in power to hold on to it at any cost, even resorting to violence against political opponents, resulting in inter-party violence. Similarly, the motivation behind violence within the ruling party is to capture party portfolios and elected positions, which opens doors for getting patronages and privileges, and sometimes increasing share of those ill-gotten benefits.

Although intra-party violence has been the dominant feature of Bangladesh's political scene in recent years, it may not stay that way for long, given that another national election is on the horizon. With the 12th national parliament elections less than two years away, the opposition political parties are likely to make an all-out effort to mount a movement before the elections to capture power. They will do so to claim the long-deprived bounty of patronage and remove threats against their existence. The recent sanctions on the RAB and some of the senior staff of the security services may make them less aggressive toward the opposition BNP – a sign of which may already be visible – which is likely to embolden the opposition parties to mount a challenge to the ruling party. Thus, another round of inter-party violence may not be ruled out during the period leading to the next general elections.

Although Bangladesh was created as a secular state, where Hindus and Muslims not only fought its war of liberation together, they also mainly lived peacefully together except for occasional incidents of grabbing of land owned by Hindus by those in power. However, in recent years, religious intolerance has seriously increased in Bangladesh, primarily due to the exploitation of religion by politicians and a growing religious fervour throughout the country, fanned by internal and external forces. The use of identity politics and the reported mistreatment of Muslims in neighbouring India have also contributed to communalism in Bangladesh. We may now be standing on a powder-keg of religious intolerance and hatred, which vested interested groups could exploit to ignite communal disharmony and violence. The attack on Hindus, their homes, and their places of worship in many parts of the country following a reported incident of disrespecting the Holy Quran in Cumilla last October was a wake-up call for the entire nation to take adequate measures against this menace.

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The Infighting of the Ruling Party: Rivalry in the Grassroots Level and Future Indications

MAHBUBUR RAHMAN

The country's 10th Union Parishad (UP) election started on 21 June 2021, being held under the party symbol for the second time. The salient fact about the election is the triumph of the independent candidates in all seven phases. In the first phase of the election, 24% of the winners in the Chairman position are independent candidates. The percentage stood at 40% in the second phase, while it rose to 45% in the third phase. The fourth and fifth phases of the UP election rose to even larger numbers, consecutively 49% and 50%. The independent chairman candidates grabbed 44% of the total win in the sixth phase. However, in the seventh phase, it rose to the biggest number. In the seventh phase, 64% of the winning Chairman are independent candidates, more than double from the ruling party Awami League's (AL) nominated candidates.

Though Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) officially boycotted the UP election, they did not restrict the independent participation of their members. According to a report by Prothom Alo, the win percentage of BNP independent candidates in the election is 9.39%, while it was only 8.94% in 2016. Nevertheless, this data shows that most of the independent winners were not from BNP; they were from the ruling party. Infighting inside a party is very common in our political culture; we have seen it happen in the past. However, the infighting in the recent local election grabbed the attention of everyone due to those unusual polls.

Three incidents of the election might give some insights regarding the issue-

In the third phase of the election, out of fifteen UP in the Faridpur-4 region (Vanga and Charbhadrasan), a stronghold of the ruling party, AL nominated candidates lost in fourteen Unions. Among the fourteen winners, nine are rebel candidates of the AL. They are the followers of the local AL Member of Parliament, Mujibur Rahman Chowdhury.

Faridpur-1 (Boalmari) used to be considered one of the strongest bases of AL as the symbol 'Boat' never lost any election there since 1991. However, nine lost the election under the party symbol out of ten nominated candidates in the fourth phase of the UP election. Among nine winning chairpersons, five are rebel candidates from the Ruling Party.

In the sixth phase of the election, seven out of the eight AL candidates lost the election in the Sadullapur Upazilla of Gaibandha. Among the seven other winning candidates, four are rebel candidates of AL.



Out of seven unions in Tahirpur, Sunamganj, no AL-nominated chairman candidate could win any seat in the seventh phase. Of the seven winning Chairman, four candidates are rebels from the ruling party.

While the national media tried to seek answers, the AL member of parliament of Faridpur-4 claimed that not giving the nomination to capable candidates was the reason behind this defeat. In an interview with the Daily Prothom Alo, Faridpur Upazilla chairman and advisory member of the district AL Shamsul Haque also indicated the nomination of ineligible persons as the reason. Nationwide, the underlying factors seem to be very similar in all cases. The local leaders feel that capable and deserving people did not get the nomination. Some rebel candidates also got support from influential

local leaders. Some of them felt undervalued by the party for not nominating them, but they decided to participate due to their popularity.

One thing is visible from the cases stated above, in the local election, the image of the individual matters more than the party symbol. Union Parishad usually consists of some of the villages of the same locality. UP politics are different from national politics as it concerns only the wellbeing and development of that rural area. The support and adherence depend on the local leader's activities, personality, and family status. Hence the nominated candidate may not be better than the other nomination expectant of the same party. So, arranging elections under the party symbol might be an option to rethink for the AL government.

This result brings another question to the table- 'will there be any impact of the result in the future?' In the national dailies, many local leaders and rebel candidates claimed that the grassroots level recommendations were not considered. According to Dhaka Tribune, the joint general secretary of the AL, AFM Bahauddin Nasim, acknowledged that there were some imperfections in the selection process. Some party leaders identified the nomination process, local leaders' influence, and local conflicts as the main factors as the election result. However, they think that the UP poll will not impact the national election.

Whether the party leaders think or not, this local election shows some implications for the future, which the party must seriously consider. There is an existence of clashes and a lack of harmony at the root level of the ruling party. If these issues are not sorted out, they will flare up in the coming days. If dedicated and capable leaders of the grassroots level feel undervalued, their voices must be heard, and party policies must be formed accordingly.

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Upcoming Events



23-25 July 2022

The Centre for Governance Studies will organize the first edition of the yearly international flagship conference BAY OF BENGAL CONVERSATION between 23-25 July 2022 in the Intercontinental, Dhaka. The Bay of Bengal has been an interconnected and interdependent region for centuries. Trade and migrations across borders have made the littoral ports and cities culturally diverse and mutually supportive. In recent years, the geostrategic shift from Euro-Atlantic to Indo-Pacific has provided the Bay of Bengal region with renewed geopolitical prominence. This unique platform will convene over 150 delegates from over 65 countries to join the brightest minds in Bangladesh to discuss, ideate, and debate the most pressing regional and global challenges. The dialogue will bring together diverse voices across sectors and geographies as it seeks to discover new ideas and propose new solutions that serve an emerging human-centric world order out of the Bay of Bengal.



16-25 October 2022

The Global Directions Conclave (GDC) is an annual intensive ten-day policy workshop scheduled to be held from 16-25 October 2022 in Dhaka and Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Each year, the Conclave will bring together 50 outstanding young leaders, between 25 and 35 years of age, from diverse backgrounds, geographies, and sectors. The young leaders will be nominated by heads of governments, private sector leaders, and global experts. The Conclave aims to foster leadership qualities among the selected fellows, engage them in discussions on issues that are trending worldwide, and serve as a networking platform. Through cross-border dialogue, deliberations, and debates with prominent figures from the world of politics, business, and academia, fellows of the Conclave will get opportunities to assess as well as confront conventional interpretations of the global challenges.

BNP Boycotting the UP Elections: Loss or Gain?

MAHTAB UDDIN CHOWDHURY

The politics of hatred and polarisation have resulted in various unpleasant practices in the political landscape. Boycotting an election is a strategy used by political parties to undermine an election's credibility. They expect voters to oppose the electoral system and enable political parties to attract observer organisations' attention from home and abroad. In Bangladesh, multiple political parties have followed this trend at various times.

BNP's election boycott in 2014 and its consequences

Having a lack of confidence in the government and election commission's ability to ensure a level playing field, the BNP boycotted the 2014 national elections. Although the aftermath of the election put the country in jeopardy owing to deadly clashes inside the nation, the political fallout from this stance was not favourable for the BNP. They could not generate widespread popular support to oppose the government, allowing the Awami League to continue their ruling. Meanwhile, the government continued its crackdown on the opposition, claiming that BNP used violent means for their anti-government protest. Raids and arrests were continued, and the BNP as a political party was on the verge of collapsing. Since 2015, three big youth mobilisations such as 'No Vat on Education,' 'Quota Reform Movement' and 'Road Safety Movement' have occurred, where BNP could not participate or stake a claim in any of the debates.

Nonetheless, they took part in the very next national election under the Awami government, which was also controversial regarding lack of inclusivity and participation. There were records of vote-rigging, violent acts against opposition candidates, and misuse of power by the government entities. BNP rejected the results amid vote-rigging claims despite winning very few seats in the election. They tried to justify their stance on the 2014 election by showing the calamity of the election, particularly under the ruling party and exposing the incompetency of the election commission.

The culture of rebel candidates in the local elections

BNP's decision in the last year not to contest in the local election warrants thorough case study based analysis. As indicated by their Organising Secretary Ruhul

Quddus Dulu, "What did we achieve through taking part in the previous polls? Nothing at all, but many cases have been filed against our leaders and activists. So why should we contest polls?" "The general election is ahead. Now we need to keep our togetherness intact. There is a great battle inside the parties like BNP for nominations, and it sometimes produces split within the party," he added. The statements that are given here demonstrate two main things. First of all, their previous experiences in different elections under this government were not good. Secondly, BNP wanted to forget the prior election experiences instead of focusing on the impending national election while avoiding any competition that could generate division within the party.

BNP's withdrawal from the recent local election allowed the AL to compete on an empty playing field. The opportunity did not bring many positive outcomes due to the increasing emergence of rebel candidates. In 2016, the AL won roughly 65 per cent of the local level seats; however, based on the results of the first six rounds of this year, the figure dropped to approximately 54 per cent. A similar scenario was also applicable to BNP. In 2016 BNP's official involvement led them to win 338 seats overall, but even without party symbol, the BNP leaders obtained 367 seats so far in the 2021-2022 UP election. Needless to say, absence from the election was not a blessing for either of the groups in respect to strengthening intimacy inside the party and obtaining voters recognition.

Concluding remarks

A participatory and inclusive election is a critical component of parliamentary democracy. A political party's ultimate goal is to form a government through electoral victory. Election participation necessitates substantial planning, diverse projects, and successful execution. Simultaneously, when a party develops its voting campaign, two distinct modes of communication are critical. One is intra-party communication, and the other is party-voters communication. The first helps keep party members proactive and motivated, while the latter increases the party's acceptance among the mass people. In the current scenario, neither the BNP nor the State can benefit from the culture of boycott as far as democracy is concerned.

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Engaging the Private Sector in Promoting an Inclusive, Accountable and Corruption-free System of Governance in Post-Covid-19 Era

Corruption remains widespread in Bangladesh, and it continues to create major hindrances to business, particularly the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which is the backbone of the economy. The poor ranking of the country, 168th out of 190 countries, in the Doing Business Index of the World Bank is a testimony to this fact.

Centre for Governance Studies, being cognizant of the poor status of SMEs in Bangladesh, has initiated a project with the support of the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) which will assess the state of corruption at the grassroots levels and its impacts on the private sector, particularly the SMEs. As a part of this initiative the Centre will organize private sector-led regional consultations, Call to Action Against Corruption (CAAC) Conference, networking events and a CAAC Summit on the role of the private sector in promoting an inclusive, transparent and corruption-free governance system. An action plan will also be prepared to carry forward the fight against corruption.



The Asia Foundation

The Fourth Estate: Under the Shadow of Restrictions and the Search for Ways Forward

A free and well-functioning media can play a conducive role in good governance and help combat national crises such as pandemic. However, in Bangladesh, where democratic space has shrunk remarkably in the past decade, media and journalists have been facing various challenges posed by the government while having little support from the media houses. Against this background, the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) intends to keep track of the fast-changing situation and identify the emerging challenges for journalists. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, public health, governance and security will also be assessed in the process. The Centre will undertake a study to gather evidence and initiate the advocacy and awareness-building activities for ensuring freedom of the press. As a part of the campaign, investigative reports and opinion pieces will be prepared as well as webinars and talk shows will be organised. This Program is assisted by UK Aid and The Asia Foundation.



The Dark Cloud over Freedom in Bangladesh: The Digital Security Act 2018

The Digital Security Act was passed by the Bangladesh Parliament in 2018 after 5 controversial sections of the Information and Communication Technology Act/ ICT Act were eliminated. Since the DSA Act-2018 came into force, journalists, social and human activists, educators, members of civil society, diplomats, and various international organizations strongly objected to nine sections of the law, which they described as detrimental to freedom of speech; these Sections are 8, 21, 25, 28, 29, 31, 32, 43 and 53. This act has rampantly been used to muzzle journalists and citizens who have raised concerns about the mismanagement of the government.

Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), is committed to promoting democratic value, good governance, freedom of speech and expressions, and fundamental civil rights. The Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), has taken the initiative to document the cases filed under the DSA 2018 since January 1, 2020.



Youth Researchers Development Forum (YRDF) is an initiative taken by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) to develop a platform for young research enthusiasts across the country. The platform will help young promising students develop their research skills through active participation in various research projects. YRDF will also provide them training on various research techniques and tools. The initiative will contribute to the development of a skilled and dedicated researcher community in the country.

National Dialogue on LDC Graduation



Celebrating 50 Years of Bangladesh



Enforced Disappearance and the State



Webinar on DSA



Now Available
Online Version



Executive Director's Note

On behalf of the Centre for Governance Studies, I am delighted to announce the release of the latest issue of Clips, the Centre's monthly newsletter.

The newsletter's primary purpose is to analyze the contemporary global and national issues concerning Bangladesh and the South Asian region. The issue's theme for the month is "Local Election in Bangladesh: Changing Trends and Future Indications."



The recent local election of the Union Parishad level in Bangladesh can be boiled down into three aspects for analysis. The first aspect is increased violence, political intolerance, and hostile rivalry. The political clashes in the local election have become a concerning issue nowadays. In every local election, violence escalates in several areas of Bangladesh, causing innocent lives to perish. Often, we see the culprits getting away without any punishment. The victim's families are left indefinitely waiting for justice.

The second aspect is the increased rebel candidates of the Awami League in all the phases of the Union Parishad election. Infighting is not a new concept in this country, but the number was unusual this time. The election polls were a bitter experience for the ruling party. The incidents beg the question as to whether this experience of the ruling party has any future indications or not.

The third aspect of the issue is the political stance of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in the election. BNP boycotted the election claiming some allegations against the ruling party. However, does this boycott help them ultimately? The current political strategy of the main opposition party indeed brings some discussion to the table.

Overall, the UP Election of 2021-22 was significantly different from previous elections due to multiple aspects. We have to see how the ruling and opposition party will deal with those aspects in the coming days.



Zillur Rahman

