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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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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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