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## Political violence in Bangladesh and the role of opposition (2006-2016)

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### Abstract

Violence and the birth of Bangladesh are interconnected in such a manner that it is hardly separated. The political instability and lack of governance have become the obstacles to controlling violence effectively against the numerous sections of the society. A long period of military dictatorship, the persistent problem of political intolerance, and the growth of religious extremism supported these trends till now. The forced unlawful killings were not even investigated. The introduction of a Neutral Care Taker Government in 2008 gave some hope for good governance but after the abolition of NCG, the old trend of opposition-led political violence was reintroduced. Factional conflicts are a new feature of political violence in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** political violence, role of opposition

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### Introduction

Democracy provides more opportunities to express differences and offers a greater role to opposition political parties by criticizing the government's policies. Opposition is termed as a keystone to electoral democracy because elections are possible only if people have at least two choices. Political violence is not unique to Bangladesh. Most developing countries or newly independent countries have been experiencing severe bouts of internal commotion since their independence. But in the case of Bangladesh, it is possible to differentiate the nature of violence. Since the time of independence Bangladesh has hardly ever been free from violence, but in contemporary times, while violence turns to religious extremism, rises in militancy, and political violence, it has become a larger problem for the country. The political instability and lack of governance have become the obstacles to control violence effectively against the numerous sections of the society.

In terms of Bangladesh, the term political violence can be defined as the violent tactics used by some political parties and particular groups opposed to the government's functions with an overt desire to get a political concession. These tactics also include the protest activities which many times convert into violence known as hartals and several methods of illegitimate actions adopted by the several political parties.

Mujib-Ur- Rahman declared a state of emergency on January 25, 1975, by banning opponent political parties. The introduction of the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) with dictatorship rule created disappointment and doubt among the opponents. The dictatorship became the reason behind the assassination of Mujib in August 1975 which plunged the country into many years of military rule. In 1978, Zia-ur-Rahman became the President of the country and signed an indemnity ordinance through which all the criminals that enrolled in Mujib's assassination got released. Again country fell into a deep political crisis when Zia was assassinated in Chittagong by the rebellious elements of the military. on March 24, 1982, General Ershad took office in a bloodless coup by declaring that the Nation is in 'grave political, economic and societal crisis. That period was termed as the death of democracy (Datta, 2005) <sup>[16]</sup>.

The 1990s decade was the very first time when Opposition political groups were united against the Ershad government. General strikes, protests, and public rallies increased in number, and law and order had been failed. The other incidents which made the distrust wider among political parties and people were; the controversial by-poll in March 1994, the one-party election in 1996 (re-elected Khalida Zia and boycotted by other parties), the 2001 election, and after election vandalism by BNP and other more incidents happened which increase the distrust among the major political parties.

After taking office by BNP in 2001, immense human rights violations incidents happened, particularly contrary the religious minorities groups (Odhinkar, 2011). Thus, political violence remained almost the same during BNP- jamaat period from 2001 to 2006. The ruling party had lost its faith in the populace because of misrule, misuse of authority, rapes and extra-judicial killings, and tortures during the whole period. It is surveyed that nearly 400 people have been killed and more than nearly equal to 17000 people had been injured, mainly in street violence among the members and party workers during political rallies.

*"Acts of disruption, destruction injury whose purpose, choice, of targets or victims, surrounding circumstances, implementations and effects has political significance, that tends to modify the behavior of others in a bargaining situation that has a consequence for the social system."*

### Neutral Care Taker Government and Violence in Bangladesh

In 2006, Bangladesh was in political turmoil. After Operation Clean Heart by the army, the extrajudicial killings by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and security conditions got worsened. In October 2006, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led four-party alliance dissolved the parliament, and appointed a CA while Awami League-led fourteen party alliances raised the issue of transparency and partiality. The political conflicts that resulted in custodial deaths were common phenomena.

Religious extremism was gradually increasing and had a connection with militant organizations like Jama'tul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Harqatul Jihad and Ahle Hadith. World report on human rights watch 2007 stated that from December 2005 to October 2006 nearly 300 alleged militants were arrested out of which six were JMB leaders.

**Table: 1** Violent Political Incidents, Injured and Deadly Casualties (2006-2013)

Years	Incidents	Injured	Lethal casualties
2006	2051	21607	330
2007	274	1689	90
2008	379	2413	84
2009	985	5975	105
2010	993	8542	139
2011	1096	12159	124
2012	1333	14442	109
2013	3870	30353	765
2014	664	8373	147
2015	865	6673	846
2016	907	11462	177
Total	13417	123688	2916

**Source:** suykens and Islam, "The distribution of political violence (2002-13)", 2015 up to 2013 and 2014-15-16 compiled by author from Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) and Dhaka Tribune.

On January 11, 2007, military hold the power indirectly by taking profit of violent condition of the country. Now military backed or unelected Caretaker Government ruled over the country for two years illegally while it had duty to conduct election within three months of dissolved parliament. State of emergency imposed which further lead to stop all political activities and human rights scrunched by torturing in jail, suppression of journalists and other politically linked people etc (Odhikar, 2011).

According to the research done by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD, BRAC University), from various media sources stated that during 2008 to 2013 violence moved in all 64 districts of the country with a number of 2700, that was 2500 from 1991 to 2001. It further said that during the period 2001 to 2006 overall death by political violence was nearly equal to 500 which further increased compared to previous years.

After the revival of democracy, it was thought that election results acceptance by all political parties may be a move towards stability and development and Violent activities will also be reduced over time. But the above table shows that massive political confrontation was started from the very beginning of the first year of the ninth parliament. The third-year 2011 was the only year that show the lowest violence with deaths of 135 wounded 11532. Opposition parties came outside the parliament against the installment of International War Crime in 2010. The motive of that institute was to carry out the trials against those who perpetuated many crimes against the freedom fighters of the liberation war in 1971. Senior leader, Ameer Motiur Rahman Nizami was arrested in 2010 (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

In November 2012, BNP tried to bring down the ruling party by strikes and started a number of series street protests and movements. Since that time street protests have been consistently organized by opposition parties which adversely affected the daily life of the people. Various steps were taken by the ruling party AL to stop the street fights. The ruling party also adopted violent ways to stop rival parties. Like AL supporters attacked Jammata people who protested. Later on, Jammata shibbir rally was attacked by AL supporters. These killings were unique since the country's independence. A 17-year son of the ruling party-affiliated party supporter died and Jammata-e-Islami was blamed for that. Since February 2010 police had been ordered not to organize any meetings, demonstrations and protest rallies of Jammata and Shibbir in any place of the country. Some media reports revealed that attacks on Jammata and Shibbir was preplanned. in the clash between jammata and shibbir and security forces, eight policemen were killed and the other 267 were injured badly. At that time Satkhira had become the noxious place for AL activists during the protest called by eighteen party alliances.

### Tenth Parliamentary Election and Violence

Boucek (2009) commented that the unnecessary focus on factional interest in a political party might reflect "weakness of the party as an institution" by promoting 'rent seeking' behavior and focus is being shifted from the collective interest of the party. This is termed the degenerative form of factionalism. The increased number of politically motivated violence from 2006 to 2013 was at its peak in the 2014 election.

The situation became worsened after the tenth parliamentary election. Between 1 January to 26 January 2014 fifteen people were killed in gunfights. Later on local government elections numerous violent incidents organized by opposition parties resulting deaths, arson, lethal killings and bomb blasts, etc. 2015 municipal election also witnessed violence and coercion (Daily star, March 24, 2016).

As it discussed earlier that political violence was spread by both government and opposition parties. General elections of the tenth parliament were held on January 5, 2014. The day faced widespread violence which was initiated by the opposition to oppose the NCG abolition amendment the leader of the opposition Khalida Zia on October 2014 announced a number of strike (generally termed as hartals), abarudh (traffic blockade), protests, stumbling transport links to the capital. These steps taken by the opposition adversely impacted the country's economy. Schools were also remained closed during that time period and fresh products and milk forcefully dumped due to the bad transportation (HRW, 2014).

The opposition blamed the government for spreading violent activities. By the end of December, according to the media and other human rights groups, about 25 people died and 97 were hospitalized. On the eve of January 4, 100- 150 BNP- Jammata supporters attacked Polling stations and officials were also attacked on 'Molani cheprikura Government Primary School (a polling station)', in which the presiding officer Zobaidal was killed and others were injured. Except for the above incident, officials stated that a dozen schools were torched by the opposition that were used for polling. According to media that cited Election Commission explained that 3 polling officials dead and around 330 officials and law enforcement officials injured on January, 5 (ibid). Attacks were made on minor communities also. Numerous homes and shops owned by the Hindu community were torched by the opposition because traditionally the minor community voted for AL. On the Election Day, Malopara (the hindu fishing village) in Jessore district arrantly attacked and when human rights watch went for interview people blamed BNP and Jammata. Petrol bombs were used by opposition groups. Attacks were further increased after the trial of Islamist war criminals and doubt on the issue if Islam had legal status in a democratic system. In December 2014 Jammata-e-Islami (JI) and its student wing (Islami Chattra Shibir) organised protests in the country. Crude bombs were used after Abdul Quader Mollah, a JI leader was sentenced.

Therefore Religious violence is also a challenge for the country. The opposition parties that have a connection with religious parties attacked minorities at the time of the election because they consider that community groups are vote banks for AL. In post-2014 election, several Hindu houses and temples were vandalized and they were targeted to have a connection with the execution of Islamist war criminals. Amnesty international reported almost 300 Hindu homes and shops and about 60 temples were torched from February to April 2013.

As Sharmat (2017) cited harrison's article 'A New Hub of Terrorism? In Bangladesh, an Islamic Movement with Al-Qaeda Ties is on the rise' stated that the strategic location of Bangladesh is becoming a new hub for terrorist activities after found pieces of evidence of killings and bomb blasting of numerous radical groups such; as JMB, JMJB, HuJI-B, etc. Recent two killings of professor AFM rezaul Karim Siddiquee on 23rd and a gay activist on 26 April 2016 show the increasing incidents of Islamic militancy in the country (Sharmat, 2017).

The country suffered enormous nuances, and economic losses at the end of long-lasting hartals, blockades, and bandhs. At the same time declining characteristics of business institutions and workers from the institutions, agriculture and transport sectors also adversely affect the country's economy. Hartals are structured by opposition parties and some interest groups who are called as a type of protest against the government. It is not a new phenomenon in South Asia. Roots of hartals can find out in the colonization period when it used as a civil disobedience but in contemporary Bangladesh it is called a tool for fulfil the opposition party's interest. In the terms of economy, hartals are very costly because of the traffic blockades, shut down of industries, roads, ports and other public and private enterprises. After the reintroduction of democracy in 1991, the number of hartals incidents increased and significantly increased during pre-elections or shifting of the power (CPD, 2013).

## Conclusion

The longstanding rivalry between two major political parties AL and BNP is the vital reason for to spread of violence in the country. It is also said for these parties that adversely affect the political life of the country. The third-party Jammata-e-Islami which is a religious party and ally of the BNP also play significant role to increase violent activities. Actually politics in Bangladesh is coined a 'winner take all game' so the two major political parties which emerged after 1991, are barely seen to cooperate on important domestic or national issues. Even the governing party uses the nation's House as a party agency and oppositions are hardly ever allowed for putting up their complaint or suggestions in parliamentary sessions which provoked them to walk outside or boycott the assembly that further turning to protests. It has been more than 40 years of Bangladesh's independence, but the parliament is still in a dysfunctional state. Therefore the uncompromising behavior of both parties leads to political conflicts and has become the key feature of politics.

The new feature of violence came into contact when factional conflicts increased in the contemporary period. For instance around 35 percent of total violent activities are reported by factional politics. Therefore violence is linked with personal rivalry, and historic antagonism between party leaders and has been spreading through parliamentary boycotts, strikes, traffic blockades, and arson by both parties. These violent activities adversely impact the socio-economic development of the county. For the socio-economic and political development, violent activities should be stopped. Democratization of parties and their responsibility toward the country should be understood by them. There should be space for opposition parties and opposition parties should understand their constructive role in strengthening the democratic process.

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