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BANGLADESH IN 2004

The Politics of Vengeance and the Erosion of Democracy

==== Ali Riaz
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Abstract

The year 2004 was not typical for Bangladesh; unfortunately, it was worse than usual. The country's fragile democracy suffered serious reversals. Rising political violence and religious militancy, coupled with the government's vindictive attitude and the main opposition party's intransigence, have created an unstable environment that is likely to inflict still further damage on Bangladesh's democracy.

Hostility between the ruling coalition and the main opposition party, a spiraling trend of violence, the government's utter disregard for the rule of law, the diminishing importance of Parliament, the opposition's predilection for street agitation, and growing religious militancy have all delivered serious blows to democracy in Bangladesh. More than a decade after the nation embarked on its second journey toward establishing a peaceful democratic society, the events of 2004 have raised concerns, at home and abroad, about the future of democracy in Bangladesh. Some have even questioned whether Bangladesh should already be considered a failed state.

Politics

Hostility, Vengeance, and the Blame Game

The relationship between the main partner of the ruling center-right coalition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and the main opposition Awami League

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has always been acrimonious, but it worsened further in 2004 as both parties hardened their stance. The opposition's threat in April to unseat the government, led by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, through "unspecified means" was seen by the incumbent party as a challenge to its authority and prompted an increase in intolerance and political violence. Against this backdrop came an assassination attempt on the opposition leader in August (see details below). This incident, the most disturbing development in the recent history of Bangladesh, provided leaders of the two parties with an opportunity to close ranks. The Awami League, however, declined to cooperate in the hunt for the perpetrators, alleging that the attack was masterminded by the government. Instead, the Awami League tried in vain to build an alliance with other opposition parties to overthrow the government through street agitation. Within hours of the grisly attack, a blame game was underway. The opposition's suspicions were heightened when the Speaker refused to discuss the topic in Parliament on procedural grounds.

During the year under review, the government often resorted to violence and extralegal measures to silence opposition. Repression of the Awami League continued unabated. In March, when Badruddoza Chowdhury, former president and BNP leader, attempted to launch a new party, he and his supporters faced physical attacks and intimidation. Physical attacks on Chowdhury and former Foreign Minister Kamal Hossain, the leader of another party, continued throughout 2004. The government arrested thousands of innocent citizens on two occasions, in April and September, ahead of planned opposition rallies in Dhaka, violating the instructions of the High Court.

Religious Militancy on the Rise

Religious intolerance and militancy has increased dramatically. Various government measures provided tacit support to the Islamists, attributed to the presence of the Jamaat-i-Islami (Islamic Party) in the ruling coalition. In January, ceding to the demands of another Islamist partner of the coalition, the Islami Oikya Jote (Islamic United Front, IOJ), the government banned the publications of the Ahmadiyyas, a Muslim sect. The IOJ, in collusion with other small Islamist groups, desecrated and demolished Ahmadiyya mosques in various parts of the country.

In rural western and northwestern Bangladesh, a gang of Islamist militants, headed by a man calling himself "Bangla Bhai" (Bengali Brother), unleashed a reign of terror beginning in April. Press reports attributed at least 10 deaths to this gang, and various newspapers have described abductions and the imposition of Taliban-like rule in the villages. Despite the prime minister's call for Bangla Bhai to be brought to justice, police have made little progress, while a cabinet member and leader of the Jamaat-i-Islami denied the existence of any such individual.

*Deteriorating Law and Order and
"Extrajudicial" Killing*

Incidents of murder, abduction, bombing, and other criminal activities reached unprecedented levels, culminating in an assassination attempt on former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed on August 21 in an Awami League rally in Dhaka. The grenade attacks, evidently well coordinated and planned, cost 20 lives, including that of a senior leader of the Awami League. Hundreds were injured in the incident. Additionally, targeted attacks were made on a number of high-profile individuals, including the British high commissioner. The World Bank's country director left Bangladesh after receiving a death threat.¹ A member of Parliament and a former lawmaker, both Awami League activists, and two journalists were killed in broad daylight. A prominent writer, Humayun Azad, known for his critical views of Islamists, was attacked. Incidents of grenade blasts in shrines, cinema halls, and other public places have become common, and several arms caches have been discovered by police. In one instance, officers seized 10 truckloads of rocket launchers, hand grenades, AK-47 rifles, and 1.8 million bullets. But law enforcement agencies have failed to arrest the perpetrators, and the ruling coalition has blamed the violence on the opposition, without presenting any concrete evidence.

The attacks of August 21 sent a shock wave through the country and drew international condemnation. The FBI and Interpol sent investigators, while Scotland Yard sent a team following the attack on the British high commissioner. Their Bangladeshi counterparts allegedly failed to cooperate fully. The report by the government-appointed judicial inquiry committee, with a membership of one, hinted at the involvement of foreign forces and local collaborators without specifying any names. The report, submitted to the home ministry, has yet to be made public.² At least 111 custodial deaths have been reported, including 30 in police custody in suspicious circumstances. The government commissioned an elite security force in April called the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) to combat criminal activities. By late November, it had been responsible for the deaths of 61 people.³ The battalion claimed that most of the deaths had occurred in "crossfire." Human rights organizations have described these as "extrajudicial killings," demanding that they cease immediately.

1. She returned after a week, when the government instituted additional security measures for her.

2. "Judicial Probe Hints at Foreign Enemy Link," *Daily Star* (Dhaka), October 3, 2004, <<http://www.thedailystar.net/2004/10/03/d4100301011.htm>>, accessed October 4, 2004.

3. "2 More Killed in RAB 'Crossfire'," *New Age* (Dhaka), December 1, 2004, <<http://www.newagebd.com/2004/dec/01/front.html#10>>, accessed December 3, 2004.

Attacks on the press continued throughout 2004; by December, at least five journalists had been killed and 11 injured. Separately, the total number of deaths at the hands of law enforcement was widely estimated at 238. The government removed Inspector General of Police Shahudul Haque from office in December after his conviction for contempt of court.

The Administration, Judiciary, and Parliament

Influencing the Judiciary

Because of the lack of government initiative, efforts remain moribund to emplace a judiciary independent of the government and establish a commission for human rights. A three-member Anti-Corruption Commission with Justice Sultan Hossain Khan, a former High Court judge, as its chairman was established in November, more than eight months after Parliament approved an Act to establish the independent body. The move has been welcomed by many as a first step, but the appointment of three members whose past records show loyalty to the BNP-led government cast shadows of doubt on whether the commission will be able to work independently. Concerning separation of the judiciary from the executive branch, government policy seems to be one of procrastination.

2004 also gave double credence to broad allegations that Bangladesh's government severely manipulates the judicial process, including the appointment of 19 additional judges to the High Court in August. The Supreme Court Bar Association questioned the political background of the appointees and demanded that the chief justice cancel the appointments. More potentially volatile was the verdict on October 20 in the trial for the 1975 prison killing of four prominent leaders of Bangladesh, all members of the Awami League, during a coup d'état. The verdict has raised suspicions because four of the suspects, members of the BNP or its allies, were acquitted. Three junior military officers, now on the run, were sentenced to death. Eleven other former military officers, who had already been sentenced to death for killing Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh and Sheikh Hasina's father, were given life terms.

Non-functional Parliament Amends Constitution

The Parliament remained virtually non-functional because of the absence of the Awami League, the ruling party's unwillingness to allow any serious debate, and the partisan role of the Speaker. The Awami League returned to Parliament in June 2004, ending an 11-month boycott, and joined the parliamentary standing committees on various ministries 14 months after they were constituted. Meanwhile, Parliament had passed the 14th amendment to the Constitution in

May, which increased the number of seats reserved for women from 30 to 45, made provisions for allocating these seats proportionally to parties, and extended the retirement age for Supreme Court justices from 65 to 67 years. The amendment was immediately criticized by legal experts and rejected by women activists, who had been demanding direct election to the reserved seats, as opposed to selection by the parties. The timing of the change in retirement age for judges also raised a serious question, whether “it has been done with an eye to the make-up of the caretaker government that will hold the next elections.”⁴

Economy

Mixed Results with Danger Looming Large

A good harvest and increased export demand produced a bright outlook for the country’s economy at the beginning of the year. But political instability and natural disasters, in conjunction with the perennial problem of corruption, threatened economic growth. For the fourth year in a row, Bangladesh topped the list of the world’s most corrupt nations in the survey conducted by Transparency International.⁵ In July, Bangladesh experienced its worst floods for six years; hundreds were killed and at least 30 million of the country’s 130 million population were made homeless. The country was hit by another deluge of rain in September. The resulting floods, described by the U.N. as a “quiet disaster,” caused damage to property and infrastructure amounting to over \$2 billion. Owing to a lackluster response to the U.N.’s appeal for help, donor agencies settled for reallocating existing portfolios, rather than promising new funds.

On the positive side, foreign exchange reserves reached an all-time high of \$3.23 billion. This was largely because of two factors: a dramatic increase in remittance inflow (a 14% jump in the first quarter of the 2004–05 fiscal year) and growth in 2003 export earnings (16.10% over the year before). But these successes have been marred by increased government borrowing from private banks, the rising budget deficit, and a steep decline in foreign aid (50%), coupled with a very modest increase (2.39%) in foreign direct investment (FDI).

The rising inflation rate (6.06% in the first quarter ending in September) contributed to a rise in the cost of living. The expiration of the Multi-Fiber

4. “14th Amendment: Does It Add Value to the Constitution?” *Daily Star*, editorial, May 18, 2004, <<http://www.thedailystar.net/2004/05/18/d40518020126.htm>>, accessed October 23, 2004.

5. “Haiti and Bangladesh Top Corruption Report,” *International Herald Tribune*, October 21, 2004, <<http://www.iht.com/articles/2004/10/20/news/corrupt.html>>, accessed October 24, 2004.

Agreement (MFA) at the end of 2004 will likely deliver a devastating blow to the country's largest source of foreign currency earnings—the export-oriented ready-made garments (RMG) sector. It is estimated that 30%–40% of garment factories will close, and about 518,000 female workers are expected to lose their jobs.

Foreign Relations

Three Blunders

Imprudence, blunder, and ideology-driven tough talk plagued the government's foreign policy in 2004. The decision to nominate a controversial candidate for the post of secretary-general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the insistence of Bangladesh on an election, as opposed to negotiation, resulted in failure to secure the post. The post-election comment of the Bangladeshi candidate that his defeat was tantamount to a major victory for certain pro-Israeli blocs in the OIC irked some Islamic nations and hurt Bangladesh's standing within the organization.

This failure of diplomatic prudence was preceded by a blunder in Bangladesh's relationship with China. In March, in a departure from its avowed “one-China” policy, the Bangladesh government permitted Taiwan to open a “liaison office” in Dhaka. China immediately pressured the government to close down the office to avoid any retaliatory measures. The issue dragged on for almost three months before the office was finally shut down. Separately, Bangladesh-India relations took a tumble in September after Bangladesh Foreign Minister Morshed Khan alleged that India was harboring anti-Bangladesh militants and criticized unfair barriers to bilateral trade. His tactless criticism of the Indian prime minister for calling Sheikh Hasina after the August assassination attempt without also calling his Bangladeshi counterpart annoyed the neighboring country.

U.S.-Bangladesh Relations: Growing Unease?

Despite pressure from the U.S. administration to join its “coalition of the willing” in Iraq, Bangladesh's government stood by its earlier position that it would consider sending troops only if requested to do so by the U.N. The degree of U.S. pressure exerted is discernible from the high-profile visit of Donald Rumsfeld in June. He is the first U.S. defense secretary to visit Bangladesh since independence in 1971. Rumsfeld insisted, however, that he had not formally asked Bangladesh to commit troops to Iraq under a U.S.-led force.

Bangladesh's relationship with the U.S. nonetheless remained reasonably steady in 2004, although it grew uneasy. There are indications that the U.S. is worried about the deteriorating law and order situation. A memorandum of intent

(MOI) to protect U.S. interests in the country and cooperate with the U.S. in identifying groups working against U.S. interests was signed by both nations in May. In June, the U.S. listed Bangladesh as one of 10 nations failing to take preventive measures to stop the trafficking of women and children and threatened economic sanctions. The visits of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Torkel L. Patterson in March, September, and November to discuss various issues, including the U.S.-Bangladesh joint working group on counterterrorism, and of Joseph Cofer Black, the U.S. State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism, in September, are evidence that it is no longer business as usual in the two countries' relationship.

Conclusion

Developments in Bangladesh are worrisome. If the present trend continues, it will not be long before the nation's democracy becomes a casualty in the "crossfire" of partisanship. Bangladeshis have fought hard for democracy; they must now be vigilant to protect it.

Although jolted by the December 26 earthquake—water surged in rivers and lakes—Bangladesh was not hit by the ensuing tsunami. The country extended aid by air and sea to affected nations, and the government decided to link Bangladesh into future global disaster forecasting systems.