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The Troubled Democracy of Bangladesh: ‘Muddling Through’ or ‘a Political Settlement’?

Is democracy in Bangladesh on a reverse course? Is there a culture of intolerance being engendered by deliberate design? Will creeping extremisms create an inevitable schism within the nation? The paper provides valuable insights into the salient issues of politics in contemporary Bangladesh.

Ali Riaz¹

The domestic politics in Bangladesh, before and after the controversial elections held in 2014, has been marked by instability, heightened violence, blatant violation of human rights, growing extremism, flawed elections, and shrinking democratic space. The major opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is facing the most difficult time in its history. The party is in disarray due to its organisational weaknesses, the absence of strong leadership, and a spate of strategic mistakes. The ally of the BNP and the leading Islamist party, the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami (BJI), has practically been pushed to the underground since the beginning of the trials of

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its leaders in 2010 for “war crimes” committed in 1971. Frequent episodes of violence perpetrated by its members since 2013 are also a factor in this regard.

A Brewing Crisis

Bangladesh’s democratic transition, begun in 1991, has faced several shocks centred on one fundamental issue – the process of transfer of power from one government to another. The first of these shocks was felt in 1995-96 when the incumbent BNP faced street agitation led by the opposition Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) and its allies. Instead of seeking a compromise with the opposition, the BNP opted for a perceivably rigged national election which was boycotted by all opposition parties in early-1996. However, the resultant unrepresentative and short-lived parliament delivered a solution to the issue by incorporating a proviso in the Constitution, as demanded by the opposition parties. The new provision was designed to establish a non-partisan caretaker government to oversee each national general election after the completion of the five-year tenure of each elected government. Notwithstanding various shortcomings, this constitutional arrangement provided stability and delivered two free and fair elections in the next decade. After these elections, power did alternate between two major parties, the BNP and the BAL, until late-2006. At that stage, the then incumbent BNP’s appalling effort to manipulate the system to engineer an election in its favour sparked street agitation for months, led by the opposition parties. These caused a significant number of deaths and huge economic losses. The impasse led to the cancellation of the scheduled election in January 2007, proclamation of a state of emergency and the installation of a technocratic civilian caretaker regime backed by the military.

Two years of democratic hiatus ended with the parliamentary election held in December 2008. Posting a landslide victory, the BAL secured a two-thirds majority in the parliament. Three years later, using a Supreme Court verdict as the pretext, the ruling party amended the Constitution to remove the caretaker proviso. The full text of the verdict was yet to be written and signed, and the Supreme Court’s observation that "the election to the Tenth and the Eleventh Parliament may be held under the provisions of the above mentioned Thirteenth Amendment" was ignored. The opposition parties led by the BNP threatened to boycott the election if the caretaker arrangement

were not restored. Ahead of the election scheduled for January 2014, the country not only plunged into a political crisis but also experienced unprecedented violence from the middle of 2013.

Violence was unleashed in 2013 by the Islamist party BJI as well against the verdicts of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). The International Crimes Tribunal, established in 2010 (and another in 2012), was mandated to try those who were suspected to have committed war crimes during Bangladesh's War of Independence in 1971, in collaboration with the Pakistani Army. The BJI, which opposed the movement for independence of Bangladesh, and some of its leaders who allegedly participated in genocidal acts against the Bengali population in the erstwhile East Pakistan, were put on trial. The BJI, in turn, alleged that the tribunal was politically motivated, and demanded that it be scrapped. The BNP, until early 2013, maintained an ambivalent position towards the trial, saying that it supported the trial of war criminals but arguing that the tribunal, as constituted, lacked transparency and the process itself was inconsistent with international standards. As the tribunal began delivering verdicts in February 2013, the BJI activists reacted with violence after each verdict.

In one of the early verdicts the tribunal sentenced a BJI leader Abdul Qader Mollah to life imprisonment. Viewing that verdict as being lenient, and alleging a secret deal between the BJI and the ruling BAL, a group of youth began a sit-in protest in a public square called Shahbagh in Dhaka. The organisers demanded that Mollah be given capital punishment. The apparent grassroots-youth-uprising drew large support from various strata of society, but the agitation was soon co-opted by the ruling party and turned into a pro-government, anti-Islamist (particularly anti-BJI) movement. While the uprising, along with the arrests of BJI leaders since 2010, pushed the BJI to the margin. Various small Islamist groups resuscitated an umbrella organisation called the Hefazat-i-Islami (HI). This conservative alliance called for an imposition of Islamic laws, and the introduction of anti-blasphemy law. It alleged that the Shahbagh movement was led by atheists and was indeed an anti-Islamic movement. The group organised two huge demonstrations in Dhaka, the one on 5 May ended in violence, and the government forcibly removed the demonstrators in the wee hours of 6 May in a high-profile security operation.

Although opinion polls conducted throughout 2013 indicated a growing anti-incumbency sentiment, the BNP-led alliance boycotted the election, called for general strikes and blockades.

Despite a series of general strikes, heightened violence, boycotts by 28 parties (out of 40 parties registered with the Election Commission), and the international community's call for an inclusive election, the incumbent went ahead with a one-sided election on 5 January 2014. In late-2013, the movement launched by the BNP to halt the election failed to generate popular participation. Immediately before the election, the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, promised that negotiations would be held after that poll for deciding on another election, ahead of schedule, for the very next parliament. The condition was that the BNP should end its violent agitations and sever its alliance with the Islamist BJI. Soon after the 2014 election, the BNP did call off its agitation programmes. Subsequently, Khaleda Zia insisted that the BNP's alliance with the BJI was only tactical, not ideological, in its scope. The Prime Minister and the ruling BAL, however, reneged on their promise to hold negotiations for a fresh election, and declared their intention to serve a full-term until 2019.

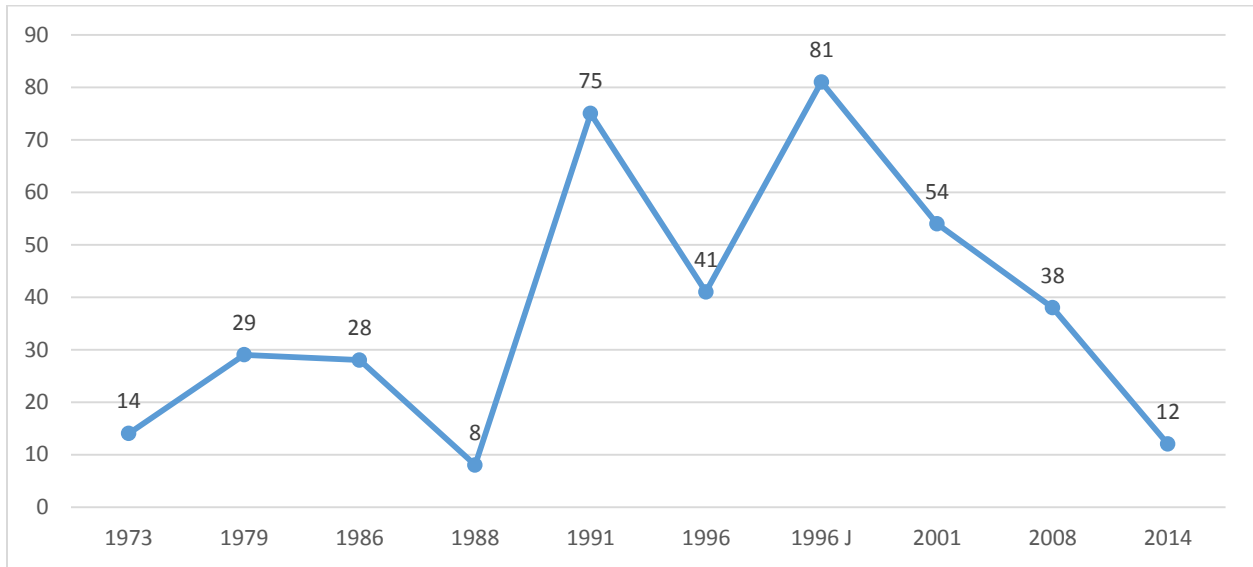
The 2014 Election

The 5 January 2014 election was unprecedented and historic on many counts; four aspects deserve to be noted: the number of participating parties, the number of candidates in the election, the number of candidates elected unopposed, and the voter-turnout.

The Participation of Parties

In the 2014 election, only 12 parties took part. The number is the lowest in the history of the country, except the fourth parliamentary election held in 1988. The 1988 election was held under the military regime of General Ershad and was boycotted by all major political parties including the BAL and the BNP. The 1996 February election held under Khaleda Zia's BNP regime was another which was boycotted by the BAL and all other major parties; yet on paper, 41 parties, mostly obscure entities, took part.

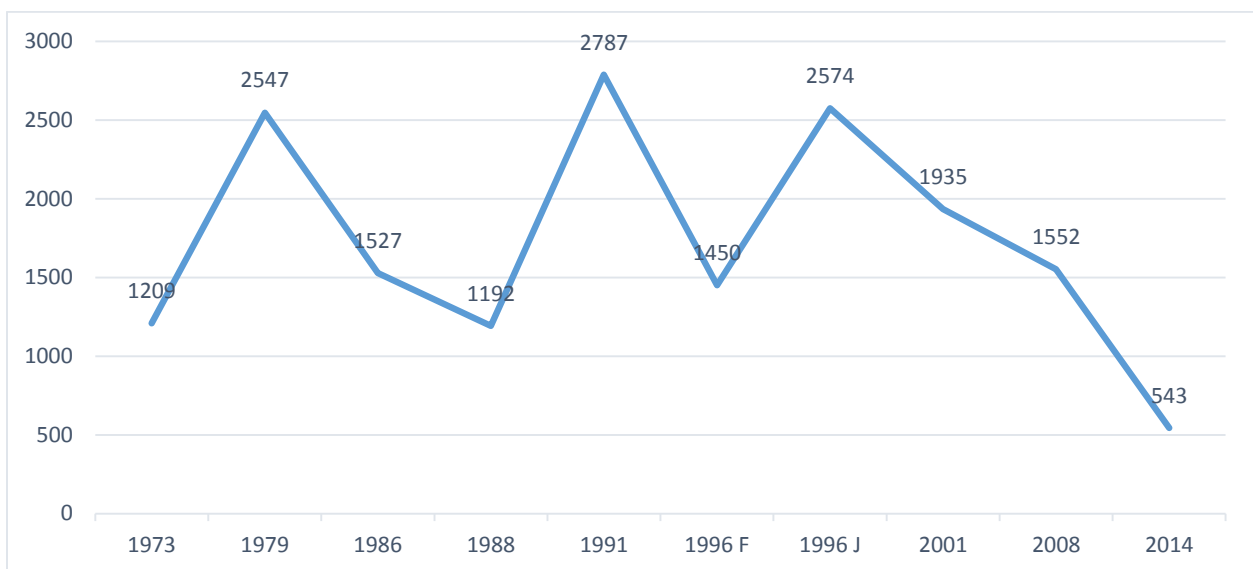
Figure 1: Participation of Parties in Elections, 1973-2014



The Number of Candidates

The 5 January 2014 election records show that there was little enthusiasm among potential candidates: only 543, one-third of the number of candidates in the 2008 election, ran for office.

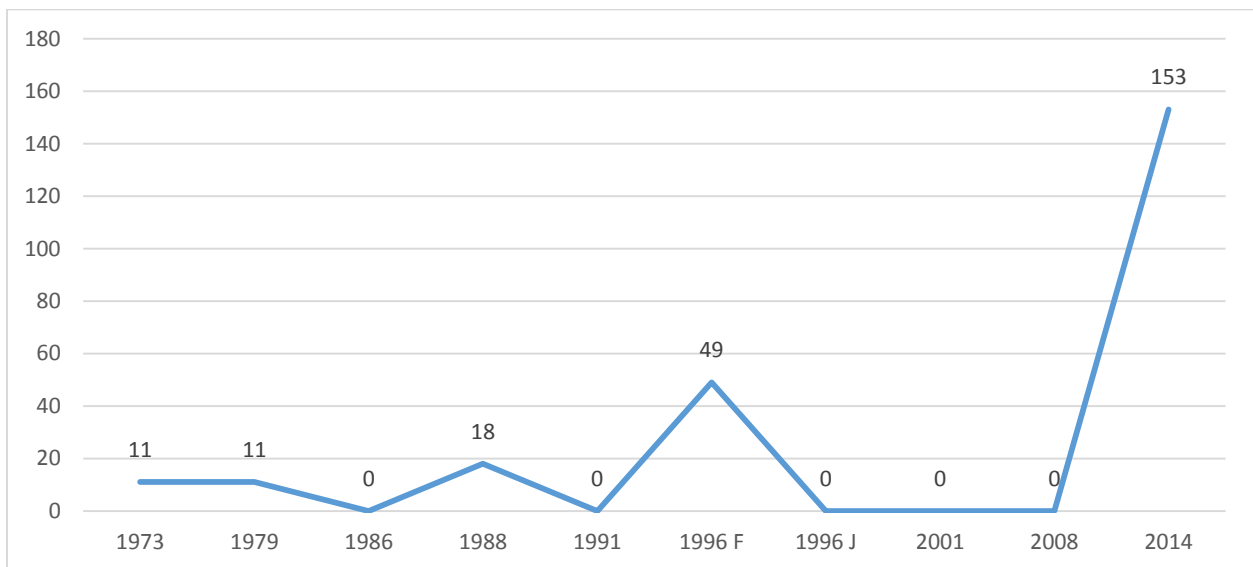
Figure 2: Number of candidates in Parliamentary Election, 1973 -2014



Candidates Elected Unopposed

The astounding aspect of the 2014 election was the number of candidates who were elected unopposed. More than half of the members of parliament – 153 out of 300 seats – were elected before Election Day. The ‘election’ of 153 candidates unopposed is significant because even in the one-party sham election of February 1996 only 49 candidates were elected unopposed and therefore the 2014 election superseded that unpleasant record. It practically disenfranchised more than fifty percent of the voters. Of the total 91.965 million voters, 48.027 million voters were excluded altogether.

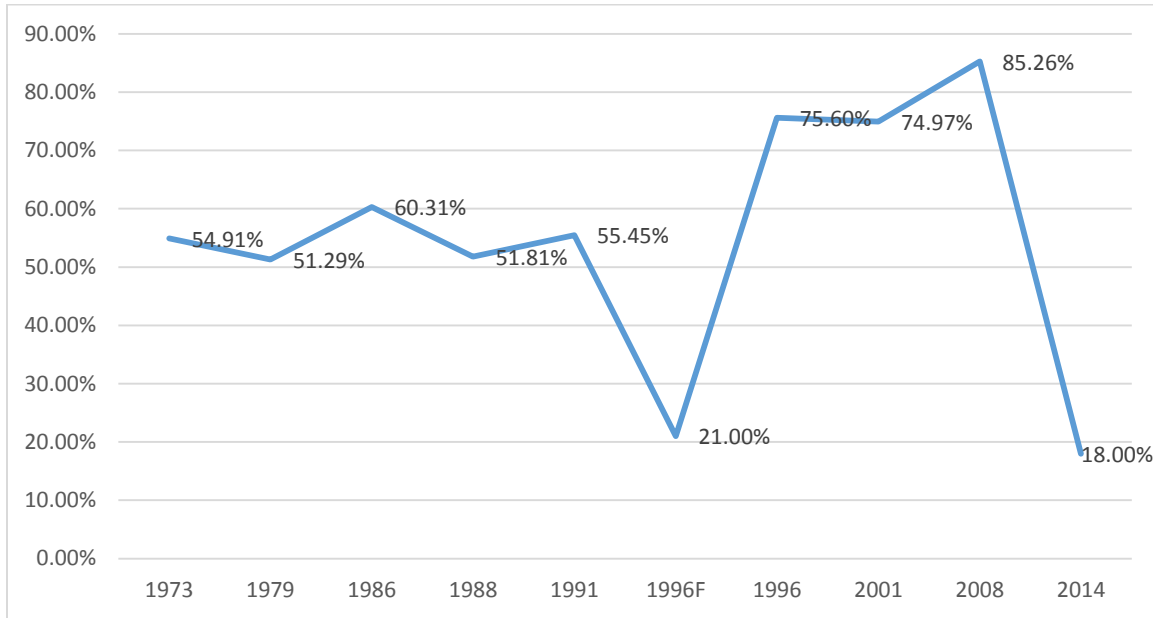
Figure 3: Candidates elected unopposed in Parliamentary Elections, 1973-2014



Voter Turnout

Official sources, including the Bangladesh Election Commission, claimed that the turnout was 39 percent. But this figure is contested by the local and international press. *The New York Times* suggested about 22 percent voter turnout. It is worth noting that in 50 polling centres no votes were cast. Considering that the election was held for 147 seats, a 39 percent turnout is about 18 percent of the total voters.

Figure 4: Voter turnout in Parliamentary Elections, 1973-2014



The country, however, enjoyed a year of relative calm in 2014 when the opposition remained subdued, being allowed only to hold limited activities; however, cases were filed against its leaders, including Khaleda Zia. It is against this background that the first anniversary of the controversial election arrived.

Ninety-one Days of Mayhem

A wave of violence began on 5 January 2015 when the BNP called for demonstrations to mark the first anniversary of the controversial election. The BNP called the demonstration to press for the demand for a fresh general election under a neutral government. The BNP-led alliance was denied the opportunity to hold a public rally and the BNP leader Khaleda Zia was confined at the party office; the BNP launched general strikes and imposed a countrywide blockade. Violence, which erupted, continued over the following ninety-one days. Numerous incidents of throwing homemade petrol bombs and burning public transport vehicles, especially buses with passengers inside, took place. The government and the ruling BAL blamed the BNP for orchestrating these incidents while the BNP alleged that they were carried out by the ruling party activists

themselves to defame the opposition movement. There is little doubt that the activists of the BNP and its ally the BJI were responsible for most, if not all, of these attacks.

Throughout those three months, violence gripped the country, claiming at least 138 lives and costing an economic loss of US\$ 2.2 billion. Although political violence is not unusual, the scale and nature of this wave of violence were unprecedented, even by Bangladeshi standards. Of those who lost their lives, 74 died in incidents of bomb attacks or burning vehicles, ten died in clashes with either law enforcement agencies (such as the police, the Rapid Action Battalion, and the Bangladesh Border Guards) or between supporters of the government and the opposition. At least 37 people were killed in ‘crossfire’/ ‘encounters’ – official descriptions used to justify extrajudicial killings by the law enforcement agencies. The government resorted to harsh tactics. The arrest of opposition leaders and the deaths of activists at the hands of law enforcement forces exacerbated the situation. At least 15,000 people, mostly opposition activists, were arrested and many of them have been detained without any charges.

The repeated episodes of violence in 2013 and in early-2015 are the result of the absence of trust among the major political parties, the lack of consensus on the *modus operandi* of holding an inclusive national election, and the dearth of institutions to protect the fundamental rights of citizens, including that of exercising the right to vote freely. Although the country appears to have returned to normalcy, the political uncertainty that bred the waves of violence and the flawed election in 2014 has not vanished. Instead, the current situation is akin to the past year, when the opposition parties, especially the BNP and its allies, were subdued and its leaders were incarcerated. As we are aware, appearances can be deceptive. The incidents of early this year show how quickly a quiet situation can descend into mayhem.

Is Democracy on Retreat?

The 2014 elections have delivered a de facto one-party parliament. Although the Jatiya Party (JP) led by a former dictator was coerced into participating in the election, and is designated as the official ‘opposition party’ in the new parliament, its members are also inducted into the cabinet and its chief is named as the Special Envoy of the Prime Minister.

In recent years, and particularly since the beginning of 2014, restrictions on freedom of assembly, movement and speech have shrunk the democratic space significantly. Unrestrained use of force on the part of the government was reciprocated by the opposition with violence, especially targeting the common citizens. The number of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances has increased significantly. The government has resorted to a high degree of surveillance. All of these together have created a culture of fear. Two phenomena deserve highlighting: extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.

According to human rights groups, extrajudicial killings by various law enforcing agencies have become commonplace since 2004, but the number has grown, and political activists are increasingly becoming the primary victims (as opposed to known criminals). In 2012, the number of individuals killed by law enforcing agencies was 91, it increased to 208 in 2013. In 2014, despite the absence of any anti-government movement, at least 154 people were killed, 54 of them died while in police custody. A human rights group, *Ain O Salish Kendro* (ASK), reports that in the first three months of 2015, law enforcement agencies have killed 64 people in separate incidents of ‘crossfire’. Another human rights group, Odhikar, reports 104 extrajudicial killings between January and June of 2015; 79 of those deaths were due to ‘crossfires/encounters/gun fights’.

While the numbers alone are disconcerting, even more disturbing is the tacit indemnification of the members of the law enforcing agencies for such acts. For example, at the height of the arson attacks on public transport vehicles, the Attorney General, on 3 February 2015, said the officers should instantly retaliate by shooting at those who throw bombs at transport convoys (New Age, ‘AG urges law enforcers to shoot at arsonists.’ February 4, 2015). In a similar vein, high ranking officials of law enforcement agencies made highly provocative comments. The Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of the Dhaka Range police, on 7 February, referring to suspected arsonists said, "Not only shall you fire at them but their family members too should be annihilated. I give you this order and the liability is mine" (Daily Observer, ‘Eliminate saboteurs, families: DIG Mahfuz,’ 8 February 2015).

The second phenomenon is abduction or enforced disappearance. It has increased dramatically since 2010. The Government denies any involvement either on the part of the police or the elite force called the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). According to the human rights group Odhikar,

there were 18 incidents of enforced disappearances in 2010, 30 in 2011, and 24 in 2012. According to another human rights group, *Ain O Salish Kendra* (ASK), 53 disappeared in 2013. In 2014, at least 88 people disappeared. According to the ASK, between January and March 2015, family members and relatives of the victims informed them that 25 people were picked up by members of law enforcement agencies. Another human rights organisation, *Odhikar*, said that between January and June 2015, 38 persons had disappeared; of them, eight were later found dead, and 20 were later produced before the court, and the whereabouts of 10 others were still unknown. According to information gathered by *Odhikar*, from January 2009 to May 2015, 206 persons disappeared; of them, 28 were later found dead and 66 were later produced before the Court or freed in different places. Still now, there is no information about the whereabouts of the others in this count.

The Opposition is in Disarray

The two episodes of violence, in late-2013 and early-2015, not only demonstrated the ruling party's resolve to deal with the political crisis with heavy-handed measures disregarding the fundamental rights of citizens, but also revealed the opposition BNP's abject failure to translate its dissatisfaction against the Awami League regime into popular mobilisation of dissent. In the immediate aftermath of the 2014 election, the BNP's organisational structure became demoralised and disorganised. Arrests of the central and local leaders throughout the year in 2013, combined with the month-long anti-election campaign, weakened the party. The actions of the party leaders, including Khaleda Zia, showed the BNP remained a step behind the ruling BAL's strategic manoeuvring following the 15th Amendment of the Constitution. Analysts of Bangladeshi politics expected that the BNP would engage itself in some introspection after the debacle. But instead, a year later, the BNP adopted the same tactics to launch a movement.

Four primary factors can be identified for the setback of the BNP, in 2013 and early-2015: (a) the party's lack of mobilising capacity – a reflection on the organisational weakness and the absence of strong leadership; (b) the party's alliance with, perhaps dependence on, the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI); (c) the adoption of violence as the only instrument of movement; (d) the party's lack of clarity on the issue of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). The fact that the party has not

appointed a permanent Secretary General in the past six years is an indication of the in-fighting and the lack of enthusiasm among a group of party leaders to participate in the movement. This was palpable in both instances. There are allegations, chiefly from the BNP activists, that many of the party leaders maintain surreptitious contacts with the ruling party. The role of Tareque Rahman, exiled son of Khaleda Zia, has become an issue of contention among the party leaders. Tareque Rahman, who is facing a number of charges in Bangladesh, was arrested and later sent to Britain under a parole for medical treatment during the caretaker regime. During the BNP regime between 2001 and 2006, he wielded enormous power and allegedly created a parallel centre of power. It is well-known that he maintains close contacts with the party activists and acts as the principal policy maker. This has irked some BNP leaders, as this has marginalised them from the decision-making processes. His belligerent tone is not only a reminder of his chequered political past, but also raises a question as to who is leading the party – Khaleda Zia or her son. In any case, ostensibly the decisions are made by Khaleda Zia and Tareque Rahman with little or no consultations with the party leaders and the members of the alliance.

The alliance with the BJI, which once proved to be enormously beneficial to the BNP and was an asset to the party, became its ‘Achilles heel’. Between 1991 and 1999, the BJI shifted sides between the BAL and the BNP on several occasions, and emerged as the ‘kingmaker’. In 2001 it became a member of the ruling coalition led by the BNP. It is facing a difficult situation since the war crimes trial began. Since the Shahbagh movement started in late-February 2013, particularly after the movement was co-opted by the ruling party, the BJI has been pushed to the corner. This is, in some measure, a making of its own. The party first re-emerged in 1976, but never addressed the question of its role during the War of Independence in 1971. Reform measures within the party, especially to address the issues of 1971, have failed to gain support, despite several attempts between 2000 and 2008. It is long overdue that the BJI acknowledges that its leadership bears some responsibility for its role in the genocidal acts in 1971. The ‘culture of denial’ might have allowed it to survive in the past decades, expecting that time will heal the nation, but it can no longer be the case once the wound has been opened. For a space within the Bangladeshi political landscape, the BJI has to confront this question in earnest. But as the BJI continues to drag its feet, the BNP continues to face the consequence.

The distinction between the BJI's movement against the war crime tribunal and the BNP's movement for the restoration of the system of pre-election caretaker government was completely lost in late-2013 due to the BNP's inability to highlight its demands and chart an autonomous path. The BNP's muted reaction or a dubious silence with regard to the verdicts of the ICT has failed to assure the Bangladeshi citizens that the trials will be continued if the party returns to power. The wavering position of the party on the International Crime Tribunal has cost it dearly.

The Growing Schism and Creeping Extremisms?

The political uncertainty and repeated episodes of violence have polarised the nation. Democracy, national identity and the role of religion in the public sphere have become wedge-issues dividing the nation down the middle. Of course, these issues can't be resolved for good; nations face these questions at different turns of history; but the democratic process should allow them to be debated rather than used as tools to fragment the nation. It is natural to have competing ideas, ideologies and tendencies in a society at any point of time. People engage in contestations, find ways to accommodate and learn how to coexist. In the course of nation- or state-building an issue or some issues take precedence, some remain unsettled. As the nation matures, citizens and the state gradually address unresolved issues. As elsewhere, Bangladeshi society has had its fair share of such contestations for decades. But in recent years these tendencies, ideas and ideologies have come to a head in Bangladesh. Proponents of various ideologies seem to have taken the path of destruction of the other side(s) and of themselves. To view political differences as enmity and to deprive the opponents of their fundamental rights or to adopt violence to resolve those differences engender a culture of intolerance that is injurious to the nation.

The rise of the Shahbagh movement that demanded capital punishment for those being tried by the International Crimes Tribunal for war crimes committed during the War of Independence in 1971, and the consequent reactions from the Islamists, especially the rise of the Hefazat-i-Islam, accentuated the divide within the society.

In the process of the emergence of these groups, two conflicting discursive frames have emerged; more importantly, these two frames have been trying to subsume any nuanced

understanding of the history of Bangladesh, the role of religion in the public sphere and the issue of delivering justice through the International Crimes Tribunal process. The organisers of the Shahbagh movement produced a discursive frame called the ‘spirit of liberation’ which is essentially a particular interpretation of history and the present political crisis; any critique of this was labelled as a marker of being an ‘anti-liberation’ element. They also branded any criticism of the processes of ICT as opposition to justice for the genocide victims, and the critics were portrayed as ‘genocide deniers’. Thus, the patriotism of the critics of this frame became suspect. The Islamists, particularly the HI, not only branded the Shahbagh an atheist anti-Islamic movement, but even its sympathizers were labelled as such. Challenge to the obscurantist agenda of this group was portrayed as an effort to demean Islam. In the eyes of the HI activists, the faith of its critics was suspect. A contrived division between ‘atheists’/ ‘anti-Islamic’ and ‘anti-liberation’/ ‘genocide denier’ was produced through the rhetoric of both groups. The ‘spirit of liberation’ and ‘Islam’ have emerged as litmus tests.

This kind of attitude, relentless belligerent posturing and extremist rhetoric have not only solidified the polarisation of the society but also provided a conducive environment for continued violence. The violence perpetrated by the BJI activists in 2013 after the verdicts of the ICT, and the execution of a BJI leader, significantly added to this environment. These atrocities not only resulted in deaths but also instilled fear within the society. These have revealed an ominous tendency among the BJI activists.

All these together allowed non-state actors to take advantage of the situation and pursue their radical agendas. It is good to bear in mind that, between the late-1990s and the mid-2000s, a number of Islamist militant groups proliferated in Bangladesh. Some audacious attacks were conducted by these groups, including the detonation of 450 homemade bombs simultaneously at various parts of the country. These groups, some with connections to regional militant groups, posed a challenge to the safety and security of the citizens. The brutal murders of the self-proclaimed atheist bloggers, Rajib Haider in 2013, and Avijit Roy, Washiqur Rahman, and Ananta Bijoy Das in 2015, responsibility for which was claimed by a group known as ‘Ansarullah Bangla 7’ (affiliated to a militant group, the Ansarullah Bangla Team- ABT), showed what these organisations are capable of. These attacks also demonstrate that political uncertainty, heightened violence and the absence of rule of law provide the environment within

which militants can fester and become a threat to society. These incidents also show that the country has become a dangerous place for those who dare to make critical comments about Islam. Freedom of speech, therefore, is restricted by both the Islamists, and through legal and extra-legal restrictions imposed by the government.

The Lessons Learnt?

There was a pause after the ninety-days of violence, in early April 2015 to be precise, as elections to the City Corporations in Dhaka and Chittagong approached. The sudden announcement of these long-overdue elections was viewed by many as a ploy by the Hasina government to distract public attention from the BNP's 'movement'; others viewed this as an opportunity for the BNP to move on from its by-then ineffective strategy of blockade and violence. It was expected by analysts that these elections would pave the way for all parties to return to constitutional democratic politics. But as the elections, held on 28 April, were marred by serious irregularities and blatant rigging, the opportunity was lost. Although it was far from a 'level playing field', the BNP's decision to participate was a welcome development. But, the BNP candidates, along with a number of others, boycotted the poll at mid-day of election, citing various incidents of irregularities. The hope for a compromise between the opposition and the government died with it. It was a quick walk back to 2 January 2015.

There are two takeaways from the series of events since the beginning of the year 2015:

1. The ruling party has realised that it is unrealistic and unacceptable to try to 'annihilate' the opposition either politically and/or physically and that there is little support within society for such extreme measures;
2. The opposition has realised that, notwithstanding the legitimacy of its demands for a fresh election, it had pursued tactics unacceptable to the citizens, failed to gather popular participation and lacked the mobilisation-capacity to overthrow the government by force.

The rigged local elections laid bare the weakness of the Election Commission once again. It was widely reported in the media that the election officials either connived with, or simply acquiesced in the actions of, the ruling party activists who were engaged in stuffing ballot boxes with fake votes. Members of the law enforcing agencies not only turned a blind eye to these acts,

but in some instances helped the ruling party activists. These incidents have caused irreparable damage to the standing of these state institutions in the eyes of the citizens. They have, like the 2014 election, provided credence to the BNP's claim that a fair election is not possible without a neutral caretaker government.

Three Scenarios

The question, then, is where does the nation go from here? As of now, there are three possible future scenarios; they are (1) muddling through; (2) go from 'flawed democracy' to authoritarianism; (3) 'a political settlement.' The first two scenarios emerge as default cases; therefore they are more reactive in nature, while the third scenario has to be created through the deliberate efforts of the principal actors, perhaps with the support of the international community and Bangladesh's regional partners. The political landscape under each scenario is elaborated below:

1. **Muddling through:** The failure of the opposition to make any dent on the ruling BAL's base or mobilise popular support in favour of their demands provides an incentive to the ruling party to pursue the 'business-as-usual' approach. That means, the current impasse continues, as the ruling party rejects the notion of any compromise or negotiations with the opposition; the main opposition BNP is further marginalised; and smaller opposition parties continue to operate within the limited space but fail to make any headway. The organisational weaknesses, the absence of leadership, and the incarceration of the key organisers make the BNP less relevant over time. This either encourages a fragmentation of the BNP, as the ruling party expects, or pushes a section of the party to adopt radical tactics. With the Bangladesh Jamaat-i-Islami already effectively pushed underground, more radical Islamist groups will vie for the space currently held by the BJI; disgruntled sections of the BNP activists may feel tempted to join the BJI or form radical organisations. Periodic efforts to launch an anti-government movement add political uncertainty. Under the circumstances, state institutions begin to lose their moral legitimacy; the government becomes reliant on the coercive powers of the state. The fringe militant groups find more opportunities to proliferate. The scenario, however, may

not continue for a long period, because these kinds of situations tend to become a slippery slope towards further erosion of democracy.

2. **From ‘Flawed Democracy’ to Authoritarianism:** With the gradual waning of constitutional opposition parties, including the *de facto* decimation of the BNP, the vacuum is likely to be filled by radical and extremist groups from outside the mainstream constitutional politics; proscribed militant groups demonstrate their force; these enable the ruling party to adopt harsher measures, impose restrictions on various forms of fundamental rights. These situations contribute to a deepening polarisation. Independent civil society ceases to exist. The nature of the state and the regime experience significant changes: authoritarian tendencies become palpable. Simmering discontent finds no outlet, consequently creating a possibility of a sudden collapse of the regime/state.

3. **‘A political settlement’:** “Premised on an understanding that democratic politics is built on the basis of compromise rather than one side achieving all its goals through deployment of superior force. ... [a] political settlement [among political parties and members of the civil society is reached] which recreates a more inclusive political order, underwritten by a fairly acquired democratic mandate [...]”.² To create this scenario, at least five steps are required in the short-run. They are:
 - a) Steps to ensure a ‘fairly acquired democratic mandate’ for governance.
 - b) Halting the erosion of fundamental rights, and restoration of democratic space for democratic constitutional parties; freedom of assembly, movement and speech guaranteed in the Constitution are adhered to in essence and to the letter;
 - c) Bringing an immediate end to the unaccountable and excessive use of the state’s coercive powers, including extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearance;
 - d) Unequivocal renunciation of violence, as a means to achieve political goals, by all parties, including the opposition parties; and
 - e) Strengthening of institutions to protect the fundamental rights of citizens, including the right to vote freely.

² Rehman Sobhan, “Is there any light at the end of the tunnel?” *Dhaka Tribune*, 20 February 2015

It must be underscored that these steps will only provide a temporary solution and will help towards creating an environment for addressing deep-seated structural problems that have so far erased or eclipsed the right method of peaceful succession of one government by another, the rightful role of opposition in state-governance, and the judicious settlement of the issue of war crimes.

Conclusion

After months of violence, the relative calm of the year 2014 provided an opportunity to the ruling party and the opposition to change course.

The ruling party had the opportunity to work with the opposition towards creating an inclusive political order and strengthening the state institutions, especially the Election Commission, to prove that a fair election could be held under an incumbent government. Unfortunately, the ruling party was preoccupied with consolidating its grip over the state apparatuses, and marginalising the BNP. The opposition parties, especially the BNP, had the opportunity for introspection, to rebuild its organisation, clarify its position on the ICT, reframe its relationship with the BJI, offer an alternative proposal with regard to a caretaker government for overseeing elections, and present a broader vision of governance by learning from the mistakes during its last tenure (2001-2006). But the BNP did not address these issues.

Both parties squandered the opportunity. The current situation may have created a second chance to address these issues. But, a failure to take advantage of the situation may push the country into a downward spiral towards a prolonged and unprecedented scale of violence; non-state actors including militant groups with regional and extra-regional connections might take advantage of the instability. This will also provide legitimacy to the extremist forces within the country, who currently grudgingly participate in mainstream democratic politics, and this might also frustrate those who want to see a peaceful transition. It is clear from history that, without inclusive democracy, authoritarianism is likely to grow strongly, inevitably leading to extremism, violence and prolonged conflict.

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