



‘Violence in Bangladesh Politics and its Impact on Human Rights’

Divisional Meeting - Barisal Division

January 21, 2012

Introduction

On December 16, 1971 Bangladesh was born after a nine month long battle against the military-bureaucratic State of Pakistan. In the nationalist discourse of Bangladesh, the Pakistani rule is seen as ‘colonial’ in nature and the rise of national consciousness is explained essentially in terms of racial antagonism between the ‘Bangalees’ and ‘Pakistanis’. The economic explanation is provided by the well known ‘two economy theory; the essence of the argument is that the ruling class of Pakistan consciously pursued an economic policy that was different for the two wing of Pakistan and the Eastern wing was exploited by the Western wing.

In the more popular and democratic narrative, it is the particular form of capitalist ‘development’ policy that was followed by the ruling class of Pakistan which was an alliance of feudal landlords and the military generals who sought capitalist transformation; as a consequence they reinforced feudalism in the Western wing and systematically repressed the rising middle class; and their language and cultural legacies in the Eastern part. In contrast people envisaged a democratic transformation that could unleash the productive capacity of the agrarian economy and could build up the necessary economic, social and political institutions to constitute a democratic Bangladesh by uprooting feudalism with all its remnants and encouraging entrepreneurship and economic leadership. However, the democratic visions were largely defeated because of the immediate necessity of the national liberation imposed by the Pakistani ruling class. As a result the hegemony of the populist and narrow nationalist discourse prevailed. The dream of the people of Bangladesh for a democratic, prosperous and socially just polity and society is yet to be realised.

The future of the peoples of Bangladesh lies in their ability to revisit history dispassionately and critically. There is a need for political commitment to transcend rhetoric and populism to engage in the reality of the competing global world for

political and economic survival. The country has already passed 41 years of independence but the political situation is still unstable, confrontational and precarious.

Bangladesh faced militarisation; and still faces political turmoil, a confrontational political environment, criminalisation of politics and massive discrimination in the economic and social front. The first three years of rule by the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was marred by repression of the political opponents and rise of the new elite through accumulation of plundered resources. This era is also known for the introduction of the single party system. After the coup of August 15, 1975, which killed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family members, except two daughters Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana, a section of Awami League leaders usurped power and Khandker Mushtaque Ahmed, a close aide of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the President. He was overthrown by a counter coup led by Major General Khaled Musharraf on November 3, 1975 and his regime was also overthrown on November 7, 1975 by a Sepoy mutiny which released the detained former army Chief Major General Ziaur Rahman; who then took control of the country. A multi party system was reintroduced and Ziaur Rahman used his intelligence agencies to form and organise his party The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the government. Ziaur Rahman was killed in a failed military coup in May 1981 and Abus Sattar became the President for a short period of time till Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad took over power from him on March 24, 1982.

Through the sacrifice of many lives (from 1982 to 1990), in 1990 the autocratic military rule of Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad was overthrown. In 1991 under the interim government, national elections were held and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) came to power, however, the then BNP government and the Opposition, Awami League, was engaged in a bitter confrontational politics over various issues. From March 1994 the Awami League, along with Jamaat-e-Islami and Jatiya Party, started a movement to demand holding elections under a neutral Caretaker Government. During this time, the BNP government showed rigidity in accepting the Opposition's demands; it caused massive acts of violence, including, bomb blasts, use of lethal weapons and mass arrests. In 1996 the Caretaker Government system was introduced and under this elections were held and the Awami League came to the power with its alliance. Even after the elections, however, clashes, violence, repression on Opposition activists and political chaos

continued. In 2001, the BNP won the election under the 'Caretaker Government'. Just after the election, massive human rights violations took place, especially against the member of the religious minorities. In 2006 at the time of the preparations for the next Parliamentary Election, a massive conflict erupted between the BNP led Four Party Alliance and the Awami League led Grand Alliance, on the question of selecting the Chief Adviser to the 'Caretaker Government'. During this time, people were beaten to death in the streets of Dhaka City.

During the unstable regimes of the two major political parties (Awami League and BNP), incidents of custodial torture, mass arrests and other human rights violations took place, allegedly committed by the law enforcement agencies.

On January 11, 2007, the military, under the blanket of a 'Caretaker Government' came to power by taking advantage of the volatile political scenario of Bangladesh. The unelected 'Caretaker Government', instead of arranging elections within 3 months, unconstitutionally remained in power for about two years and created a major political crisis. During this period a State of Emergency was imposed and all political activities were stopped and human rights violations took place, including torture in custody, repression on journalists and political activists etc. On December 29, 2008 a general election was held and on January 6, 2009, the Grand Alliance led by the Awami League formed its government.

As in previous times, the confrontational situation is high between the two major political parties, Bangladesh Awami League (the present government party) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) who have their horns locked. Since after joining office, in the last two -year period, according to information gathered by Odhikar, from January 06, 2009 to December 31, 2011, 595 persons were killed and 40,599 persons were injured in political violence. 968 incidents of internal violence in the Awami League and 271 in the BNP were also recorded during this period. In addition to this, 98 persons were killed and 15,421 were injured in internal conflicts of the Awami League while 12 were killed and 3,245 were injured in BNP internal conflicts.

In many of the cases, violence occurred due to sheer personal interest, such as tender manipulation, extracting extortion, taking bribes etc. It is to be noted, instead of upholding political ideology, many of this acts of violence have occurred due to criminalisation of politics.

The two major political parties are again locked in conflict over the introduction of the Caretaker Government which the ‘controversial’ Chief Justice Khairul Haque declared illegal through a judgement. Concerned people have been repeatedly appealing to them not to destabilise the political situation of Bangladesh, but none of the political parties are paying any heed to this. Instead of practicing a healthy democratic environment, criminal activities under the shelter of political power prevails, just it was in the past, in different educational institutions. At present, the activists of the front organisations of the major political parties are engaged in occupying seats in the university and college dormitories without following the rule of the institutions; arranging admission for students who can pay them extra money; and are engaged in tender manipulation and other illegal activities. As a result violent bloodshed occurs in the educational institutions and the general students are becoming the ultimate victims.

However, it is not just the educational institutions that suffer. Due to the confrontational politics and partisan role, virtually all sectors are affected and institutions cannot run properly. Due to this, the country suffers instability.

By blatantly violating fundamental human and civil rights, the major political parties prove that they do not respect democracy and human dignity. The introduction of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution is a particular example that shows that whatever remained as ‘democratic rights’ is also in peril. In this case, mere elections are not the solution. The people of Bangladesh must be made aware of the necessity for a new democratic constitution. Reconstituting a democratic state, having historical achievements of principles of democracy and respecting internationally accepted norms of human rights as its foundation; is the order of the day. The task of the human rights defenders is to create awareness for this objective. However, the two major political parties are in conflict over the caretaker government. They are concerned only with how to outwit the opponents to gain the political power; and none are addressing the fundamental issues related to human rights. Under these circumstances, as citizens of Bangladesh and as human rights defenders, our duty is to protest violent tactics and aggressive behaviour and appeal again and again for restraint and a refrain from violence.

Odhikar urges the major political parties to stop partisan conflict and violence and concentrate on resolving the issues between them in a peaceful manner and through dialogue and respect for the rights of the citizens. In order to campaign for this

change, Odhikar organised divisional meeting in Barisal Divisional Town on January 21, 2012 under the topic, 'Violence in Bangladesh Politics and its Impact on Human Rights'.

Advocacy Meeting at Barisal Divisional Town on January 21, 2012

On January 21, 2012, Odhikar organised a meeting at Celebration Point of Barisal Town. The meeting was presided over by Odhikar's Secretary Adilur Rahman Khan. A key note paper was presented by Programme Coordinator Taskin Fahmina. Talukder Mohammad Yunus, Member of Parliament- Barisal-1 and Mojibor Rahman Sarwar, Member of Parliament – Barisal -5 were both Special Guests in the meeting. Also present were: Professor Hanif, Educationist and Senate Member, Barisal University; Afzalul Karim, Joint Convener, Barisal City Awami League; Dr. Mizanur Rahman, Member Secretary Barisal Nagorik Samaj; Abdul Hye Mahbub, General Secretary, Jatiyo Shomajtantrik Dol (JSD); Ebaidul Haq Chan, Former President of Barisal Chamber and Commerce and General Secretary of BNP Barisal district; G.M. Babor Ali, Bureau Chief Amar Desh; Anisur Rahman Swapan, The New Age; Manobendro Botbal; President, Barisal Press club; Abul Kalam Azad, President, Communist Party, Barisal; Harun-Ar- Rashid Mahmud; Divisional Coordinator, Gono Shonghoti Andolon; Jesmin Akter, Biplobi Nari Shonghoti, and Farhad Hossain, Jatiyo Mukti Council. Human rights defenders and journalists were also present and discussed in the meeting.



Talukder Mohammad Yunus, MP (AL) Barisal-1, said that we need political coexistence. If we strengthen our national parliament through discussion and mutual decisions, then democracy also will be strengthened. He said that we all have mistakes. He added that we can criticise BNP and Awami League but this confrontational political position will never help us to proceed. He emphasised on political tolerance. He added, the Supreme Court abolished the Caretaker Government System; however, it has given provision for the Caretaker Government system for the next one or two terms, so if the opposition would place the Caretaker Government issue in the Parliament, instead of in the streets, through debate and discussion perhaps a political consensus could take place. He said that we need to proceed by taking consideration of national issues and should be united. This is our country. People of Bangladesh will not forgive us if we are involved with clashes and confrontation.

Advocate Mojibor Rahman Sarwar, MP (BNP) - Barisal -5 said that our political history is not praise worthy. In 1947 we had independence based on religion, but it did not give us rights. In 1971, Bangladesh became independent, but the poor and deprived still did not enjoy liberty. We could only stop Pakistan's fascism in 1971. He questioned whether the Government, which was formed in 1972, was able to uphold democracy. He observed that the Government could not change article 70 of Constitution, which bars politicians to express their own view. We need to change some laws, he said. He observed that during BNP regime, RAB was formed and crossfire killings took place, Awami League in their election manifesto stated they will stop crossfire, but they failed. If somebody is abducted a case may be filed in a police station, however, if somebody is a victim of enforced disappearance, it cannot be filed in a police station. Laws to combat enforced disappearance are needed. Limon was maimed; Ward commissioner Chowdhury Alam disappeared during the present regime. Indian BSF is killing Bangladeshis indiscriminately. The President gave clemency to Biplob, an accused murderer. He said that for political issues we may not have the same consensus. The Caretaker Government was scrapped by the Honourable Prime Minister; even many Awami League politicians had support for a Caretaker Government. He mentioned that the Awami League and BNP should stop arguing about Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman's role during the war of independence.



Nurjahan Begum a women's rights activist from Mahila Parishad, said that the politics of Bangladesh has deteriorated a lot. Healthy politics is not practised in Bangladesh.

Farhad Hossain, from Jatiyo Mukti Council stated that due to lack of ideology of Bangladeshi politicians, the politics of Bangladesh has become confrontational. Killing in the border by Indian BSF, crossfire, disappearance are now common. Without political consensus, this situation cannot be changed.

Abul Kalam Azad, President of the Communist Party of Barisal unit Bangladesh stated that the United States is the guardian of the Awami League and BNP. Through divide and rule, the US ensured imperialism. He commented that criminalisation is embedded not only in politics but everywhere.

Manobendro Botbal -President, Barisal Press Club, said that among political parties of Bangladesh, there is no democratic practice. Candidates are not elected by vote; they are selected by a central committee. He observed that many people welcomed the army backed caretaker government in January 11, 2007. If there were provision of a 'no vote' option, the political leaders would possibly act positively.

Professor Hanif, educationist, senate member, Barisal University said until Political and economic freedom is achieved, the situation cannot improve.

Abdul Hye Mahub General Secretary, Jatiyo Shomajtantrik Dol (JSD) said, the State systematically violates human rights. He commented that political violence can be

reduced; however the precondition is to eliminate acts such as plundering of resources and nepotism.

Dr. Mizanur Rahman, Member Secretary, Barisal Nagoril Samaj said that in the two major political parties BNP and Awami League, the practice of democracy is absent.

Programme Schedule: Barisal Divisional Meeting

Venue: Celebration Point Conference room, Police line, Barisal,

Topic: Violence in Bangladesh politics and its impact on human rights

Sl. No	Session		Time
1	Registration		9:30am-10am
2	Welcome speech by the Moderator	Advocate Adilur Rahman Khan, Secretary, Odhikar	10am-1.30 pm
3	Odhikar paper presentation	Taskin Fahmina, Programme Coordinator, Odhikar	
4	Discussion	Nurjahan Begum, Mahila Parishad	
5		Farhad Hossain, Jatiyo Mukti Council	
6		Mobassher Ullah, Human Rights Defender	
7		Jesmine Akter, district coordinator, Biplobi Nari Shonghati	
8		Harun Ar Rashid Mahmud, Gono Songhati Andolon	
9		Abul Kalam Azad, President Communist Party, Barisal District Unit	
10		Manobendro Botbal, President Press Club, Barisal	
11		Anisur Rahman Sawpan, The New Age	

12		GM Babor Ali, Buerau Chief, Amar Desh	
13		Ebaidul Haq Chand, former president of Barisal Chambers and Commerce and General Secretary, BNP Barisal District Unit	
14		Abdul Hye Mahbub, General Secretary JSD, Barisal District Unit	
15		Dr. Mizanur Rahman, Member Secretary, Barisal, Barisal Nagorik Samaj	
16		Professor Hanif, Educationist, Senate Member, Barisal University, Barisal	
17		Afzalul Karim, Joint Convener, Barisal City Awami League	
18	Special Guests	Advocate Mojibur Rahman Sarwar, MP- Barisal-5	
19	Special Guests	Talukder Mohammad Yunus, MP, Barisal-1	
20	Open floor	Participants	1.15-1.30 pm
21	Lunch		1.30-2.30 pm
22	Meeting with Human Rights Defenders	Challenges to overcome	2.30-4.30 pm