



Violence in Bangladesh Politics and its impact on Human Rights

Divisional Meetings Organised by Odhikar

at

Sylhet and Rajshahi Divisional Towns held on July 21, 2011 and September 17, 2011

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 realized.

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 face 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 formed his party the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and used the intelligence agencies to organize his government. Ziaur Rahman was killed by a failed military coup in May 1981 and Abus Sattar became the President for a short period of time till Lt. 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 first caretaker government, national elections were held and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)

came to power, however, the then BNP government and the Opposition Awami League were engaged in a bitter confrontational politics over various issues. Since March 1994 the Opposition Awami League, along with Jamaat-e-Islami and Jatiyo 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 demands; it caused massive acts of violence. Violence, bomb blasts, use of lethal weapons and mass arrests also took place during this period. In 1996 the Caretaker Government system was introduced and under these elections were held and the Awami League came to the power with its alliance. Even after the election 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 religious minorities groups. 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), the 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 unconstitutionally; 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 political situation between the two major political parties, Bangladesh Awami League (present government party) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have their horns locked. Since after joining the 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 the sheer personal interests, 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 the 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. Concerned People have been repeatedly appealing to them not to destabilise the political situation of Bangladesh, but none of the 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. Concerned people have been repeatedly appealing to them not to destabilise the political situation of Bangladesh, but none of the parties are paying any heed. Under these circumstances, as citizens of Bangladesh and as human rights defenders, our duty is to protest violent tactics and 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 human and civil rights of the citizens. In order to campaign for this change, Odhikar organised divisional meetings in Sylhet and Rajshahi Divisional Towns on July 21, 2011 and September 11, 2011 respectively under the topic, 'Violence in Bangladesh Politics and its Impact on Human Rights'.

Advocacy Meeting at Sylhet Divisional Town on July 21, 2011

On July 21, 2011, Odhikar organised a meeting in the Hotel Star Pacific, Eastern Dargah Gate, Sylhet. The meeting was presided over by Odhikar's Secretary Adilur Rahman Khan. A key note paper was presented by Odhikar's Director ASM Nasiruddin Elan. Badar Uddin Ahmed Kamran, Mayor, Sylhet City Corporation was the Chief Guest at the meeting. Also present were, Dilder Hossain Selim, Vice President, Sylhet District BNP; Advocate Abdul

Gaffar, General Secretary, Sylhet District, BNP, Md. Lokman Ahmed, General Secretary, jatiyo Shomajtantrik Dol (JSD), Sylhet District Unit; Advocate Bedanondo Bhattacharjo, President, Communist Party of Bangladesh Sylhet District; Advocate Emadullah Shohidul Islam Shaheen, President, District Bar Association; Md. Arif Mia, General Secretary, Gonotonri Party, Sylhet; Ahmed Noor, Secretary, Sylhet Press Club; Faruk Mahmud Chowdhury, President, Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik, Sylhet Committee; Aziz Ahmed Selim, Chief Editor Dainik Uttar Purbo, Sylhet; Rabindro Patro, Patro Shomproday Oikko Parishad (Ethnic Minority Community); and Advocate Shamima Shahriar, Vice Chairman, Jamalgonj Upazilla.



Photo: Badar Uddin Ahmed Kamran, Mayor, Sylhet City Corporation delivered his speech

Badar Uddin Kamran, Mayor of Sylhet City Corporation and Chief Guest of the meeting appreciated Odhikar's initiative to bring political leaders of different views at the same platform. He said that, in the past there was some decency in student politics which is absent now, however presently, in many cases these are quite absent. He condemned the grenade attack against the leaders and activists of Awami League. He said both the government and opposition must be responsible for their activities. He added that, those who did not sacrifice to uphold ideology in politics, cannot contribute to the people's welfare as Member of Parliament.

Dilder Hossain Selim, Vice President, Sylhet District, BNP and former MP, said that the bureaucrats are engaged in Bangladeshi politics, which causes a negative impact and prevent the

grass root politicians from coming forward and contributing. He said that, the Constitution of Bangladesh is conflicting and public awareness is essential.

Advocate Abdul Gaffar, General Secretary of BNP District Unit Sylhet, said, the working people suffer the most during political violence. In Bangladesh, politics is practiced in a negative way. The Awami League won a landslide victory in the 9th parliamentary election and had huge scope to get closer to the people, however, instead of doing so they are involved with confrontational politics and using RAB , police to torture people, he added.

Md. Lokman Ahmed, General Secretary, JSD, Sylhet District Unit said, on July 03, 2011, The National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power, and Ports called hartal (general strike), but the opposition did not extend their support, however the hartal was called for national interest. The hartal was called in protest against the government's agreement on gas exploration in the Bay of Bengal with the ConocoPhillips, a US based oil company. The production sharing contract is contrary to national interests. During the hartal police came down on the supporters, but none of the political parties condemned this, Lokman added. He also said all these parties provided support to plunder national resources. If this country cannot get rid of these plunderers, political violence and human rights violations cannot be stopped.

Bedanondo Bhattacharjjo President, Communist Party of Bangladesh, District Unit Sylhet, said, if India build the Tipaimukh dam, it will be a great disaster for the people of Sylhet. He said that, In Bangladesh the de-politization of politics is going on. The criminalization of politics and using politics for business are great problems for Bangladesh. He said that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was against black money; however he was assassinated in 1975. He expressed his regret over the president act of clemency to murderers. During the BNP regime, the then president gave clemency to one Jhantu. He asserted that, instead of 'street mafia' and 'state mafia' we need alternative political force too.

Advocate Emadullah Shohidul Islam Shaheen, President, Sylhet District Bar Association, said that, the BNP and Awami League both have the same kind of characteristics- both of them

believe in free market policy. The use of mobile courts during the general strikes, he mentioned that the executive body has given authority to change the schedule for the Mobile courts. So, they are misusing power by engaging the mobile court against people during hartal. Mobile Court 's schedule should be transferred from executive to the judiciary in order to stop misuse , he added.

Mohammad Arif Mia, General Secretary of Gonotonri Party of Sylhet Diatrict said, the police are used by political leaders. Among the parliamentarians a majority are non political people. To get rid of violence the real politicians should be in politics.

Ahmed Noor, President, Sylhet Press Club said that, during the state of Emergency freedom of expression was prohibited and journalists were tortured. Now, government and opposition are blaming each other- and we cannot get rid of this confrontational situation. The politics are now in the hands of business people. The politicians should be involved in politics, not business leaders. The government institutions should be kept out of politics.He stressed that The left wing political parties needed to unite.

Rabindro Patro, Patro Shomproday Oikko Parishad (an organization representing the partho ethnic group) said, during liberation war of Bangladesh, ethnic minority people of Bangladesh fought against Pakistani army. The minority communities rights should be ensured in the Constitution. He added, 'we do not want to see political violence'.

Faruk Mahmud Chowdhury, General Secretary- Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujon), a national NGO, said politicians are to be blamed for harassing each other. BNP earlier wanted justice regarding the killing of Siraj Sikder, who was killed during the Awami League regime of , but during their regime Mofakhaar, a left wing politician was killed, so now they are not claiming justice for the extra-judicial killing of Siraj



Sikder. Opposition parliamentarians, without joining sessions, are withdrawing salaries and allowance. The behaviour of political leaders are contradictory and shameful.

Aziz Ahmed, Chief Editor, Daily Uttor Purbo said after January 11, 2007, during the State of Emergency people of Sylhet were tortured by the army backed government, they were afraid to talk about the oppression. He said that during hartal (general strike) the political leaders and activists burn cars and buses and that these are human rights violations. He mentioned that the Smaller political parties could form bigger alliance.

Advocacy Meeting at Rajshahi Divisional Town, September 17, 2011

On September 17, 2011 Odhikar organised a meeting at Hotel Nice International at Gonokpara, Rajshahi. The meeting was conducted by Odhikar's Secretary Adilur Rahman Khan. Columnist and political analyst advisor of Odhikar Farhad Mazhar analysed the political situation of the country. A keynote paper was presented by Odhikar's Director ASM Nasiruddin Elan. The Chief Guest was AHM Khairuzzaman Liton, Mayor, Rajshahi City Corporation and Special Guest was Mizanur Rahman Minu, former Mayor Rajshahi City Corporation.

Other participants include, Mosaddeq Hossain Bulbul Member, Central Committee, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP); Nasrin Akhter Mita, General Secretary, District Mohila Awami League; Abul Kalam Azad, President, Rajshahi Metropolitan Unit Jatiyo Shomajtantrik Dol(JSD), Communist Party of Bangladesh; Abdullah Al Masud Shibli, General Secretary, Rajshahi Metropolitan Unit, JSD; Abul Kalam Azad, President, Bangladesh Communist Party, Rajshahi Metropolitan City; Murad Morshed, District Coordinator, Gonoshonghoti Andolon; Mohammad Zamat Khan, General Secretary, Rajshahi Rokkha Songram Porishod; Advocate Mohammad Jomsed Ali, General Secretary, District Bar Association; SM Ekramullah, Associate Professor, Political Science Department, Rajshahi University; Rajkumar Shaw, Director Adivasi Sangskritik Songstha.



Photo: AHM Khairuzzaman Liton, Mayor, Rajshahi City Corporation delivered his speech

Farhad Mazhar, Advisor of Odhikar, said that history may amply substantiates the fact that the struggle to establish rights sometimes may turn into violence. These are moments of radical rupture that must be distinguished from partisan violence that has infiltrated Bangladesh politics. The violence that we see have defies and denies all scope for negotiation, dialogue, strategic compromise and, most of all, respect to law and the peoples expectation for peace and stability. People must stand against partisan violence. Once we stand against the violence that destroy our political life, it will not be hard to defend principal or the ideology that one believes. The first principal of democracy is that every human being is 'born free'. Freedom should be the substance of the State and it must not destroy rights. The second principal is 'right to life'. State cannot take away the life of people and the third principal is right to security. The State must ensure the right to life and security of its citizens of. Through the practice of remand, people's rights are violated. He said, we need to continue dialogue, as it is the way to resolve the problems as they appear before us.

A H M Kamruzzaman Liton, Mayor, Rajshahi City Corporation, said that many countries are trying to get rid off political violence, and it is disheartening that we are not trying to find a way out from this situation. When there was tensions between India and Pakistan on the Kargil

issue in 1999, all Indian political parties sat together to discuss this national issue, however in Bangladesh, even in national issues, our political leaders cannot sit together, as they have no mutual respect. He said that, the new generation do not seem like this confrontational politics. In elections, when one party lost it says that election engineering has taken place; but if it wins, it says the election was free and fair ; this kind of mindset is not acceptable. Let us stop this attitude, he added.

Mizanur Rahman Minu, Former Mayor of Rajshahi said that in Bangladesh even bigger political parties were thrown out, as they indulged violence. Due to the strong political leadership, the Bangladesh became independent. Conversely, it is miserable that Bangladesh could not improve in a significant way in the economic and political spheres. However, other countries, who became independent, almost at same time as Bangladesh, succeeded economically, socially and politically. The criminalisation of politics must be stopped and justice must be transparent. He said it is possible to overcome confrontational politics through dialogue and understanding.

Nasrin Akhter Mita, General Secretary, District Mohila Awami League said that during



autocratic Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad's regime, Dr Milan and Nur Hossain were killed. After 2001 elections the religious minority community were abused, as they casted voted for Awami League. On

August 21, 2004 in an Awami League meeting, a grenade attack was committed which caused the death of many Awami League leaders and activists. All these are political violence, she

remarked. She said that, we need to get out from this violent situation; otherwise it will be a boomerang for all of us.

Mosaddeq Hossain Bulbul, Member, Central Committee, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, said people should be conscious about their rights. Blaming the BNP or Awami League would not help. If the Election Commission, Law Commission and Anti Corruption Commission do not have independence, the people of Bangladesh will be the hostage of the political parties. The institutions should be strong and independent. If the State controls the judiciary, rights cannot be established.

Abul Kalam Azad, President, Communist Party of Bangladesh, Rajshahi Metropolitan City, said that the major government institutions are not independent. As these institutions are not independent people are held hostage to BNP and Awami League. The Anti Corruption Commission, judiciary should work independently. If the government influence the judiciary, the right of the people cannot be established. In different regimes of Bangladesh, human rights violations occur, he added. He said, in 1974 the Awami League introduced the Special Power's Act (SPA). Those who protested against this were killed and became the victims of enforced disappearances. In 2001 during BNP regime 'Operation Clean Heart' was introduced and many people were killed by the state. If the progressive political parties jointly do not come forward against further acts of anarchy, the violence in Bangladesh politics will never end.

Abdullah Al Masud Shibli , General Secretary, Rajshahi Metropolitan Unit, JSD , said that in democracy the major powerful force is the Opposition. The duty of the Opposition is to criticise the government in order to uphold the interest of the people. But this practice is not visible in Bangladesh. After the independence of Bangladesh, most of the time, Bangladesh was under militarization. After that, through student's movement a democratic government came to power in 1991. Then business people, bureaucrats, army came into politics and are controlling politics . Even after retirement, they either join Awami League or BNP. Now a days, in administration, police officers are appointed in exchange of money. Another problem in Bangladesh is 'ego problem he stated. He said when corruption and other anomalies of the

government are criticised, due to 'ego problem', the government denies it. He gave the example of the Padma bridge project.

Mohammad Zamat Khan, General Secretary, Rajshahi Rokkha Songram Porishod, said that, during election, the leaders commit to the development of the country, however after winning the election they forget what they have committed. Even the Opposition boycotts Parliament, however the Opposition forgets that they are also elected by the citizens. Human rights violations are going on in a continuous manner. The country cannot be developed if the characters of the politicians are not changed.

S.M Ekramullah, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Rajshahi University said that the political leaders should change their attitude and should be respectful to each other. At various times they have used abusive language against each other, which creates violence.

Murad Morshed, District Coordinator, Gono Shonghoti Andolon said that, the two major political parties do not have any respect for human rights, because of ideological or cultural aspects, these two political parties are no different to each others. Confrontational politics are kept in force by the national and international vested quarters for their own interest, those who protest and work for democratic movement, are tortured by state apparatus.

Abu Bakar Ali, former President, Rajshahi Chamber of Commerce said that when a new government takes office every time in every institution a 'politics of grabbing' starts. As political leaders take money from influential people to win vote, after winning they become obligated to listen to their undue influence.

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