



'Violence in Bangladesh Politics and its Impact on Human Rights'

Divisional Meeting - Chittagong Division

April 20, 2013

On April 20, 2013 Odhikar organised a meeting titled 'Violence in Bangladesh Politics and its Impact on Human Rights' at Hotel Favour Inn International at the Old Railway Station Road in Chittagong. The meeting was presided over by Odhikar's Director, ASM Nasiruddin Elan. A keynote paper was presented by Programme Officer Mohammad Ahsanuzzaman. AKM Belayet Hossain, Vice President of Metropolitan Awami League in Chittagong and Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, Former Minister and President of Metropolitan BNP in Chittagong were both special guests at the meeting. Also present were Rezaul Karim Hashmi, Coordinator of Odhikar; Raja Miah, President of Revolutionary Workers Party in Chittagong; Mazharul Hoque Shah Chowdhury, Former MP of Chittagong; Mahfujul Hoque Shah, Director of Chittagong Chamber of Commerce; Belayet Hossain, Central Committee Advisor of Jatiyo Shamajtantrik Dal; Abu Sufian, Vice President of Metropolitan BNP in Chittagong; Hasan Maruf Rumi, Coordinator of Gono Shonghoti Andolon; Advocate Abul Hashem, Public Prosecutor of the Chittagong Judge Court; Md. Shahnewaz, General Secretary of Metropolitan Reporters Union; Monowara Begum Moni, Councilor of Chittagong City Corporation and Rehana Kabir Ranu, Councilor of Chittagong City Corporation. Human rights defenders and journalists were also present and took part in the discussions.



Figure 1 (from left) Rezaul Karim Hashmi, Coordinator of Odhikar; Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, Former Minister and President of Metropolitan BNP; ASM Nasiruddin Elan, Director of Odhikar and AKM Belayet Hossain, Vice President of Metropolitan Awami League

Mr. AKM Belayet Hossain, Vice President of Metropolitan Awami League in Chittagong said that after World War II, the United Nations came up with UN Conventions which was signed by all the member countries. It basically mentioned the basic rights of a human being. It is mentioned article 21 of this Convention that peaceful meetings can be arranged but no one can be forced to join that meeting and those who would create violence could be arrested, but cannot be tortured. Democratic practice in this country was not consistent in the last 42 years. The main reason of politics is to serve the country and its people. But in this country, people cannot trust the politicians and the politicians also do not trust the people. The civil society is also divided into political divisions but they were supposed to be unified at national issues to solve national crises. He suggested Odhikar make the general population aware of political violence and tell them to raise their voice. It would be an effective method rather than advising the political figures of Chittagong, as people are the most powerful in Bangladesh.

Mr. Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, former Minister and President of Metropolitan BNP in Chittagong said that the country is going through a crisis. No one knows where the country is headed. This kind of situation arises when the fundamental rights are violated. These rights are the most basic elements of democracy. An elected government should not behave like an autocratic government. The government should focus on ‘Public Reasoning’, that is what the people are thinking. He invited the government to behave responsibly. He said that the government cannot, in general, blame others without proper investigation. Religion-sensitive issues should be handled carefully. They should not be swapped by tagging the issue with Jamaat-e-Islam or Hefazat-e-Islam. Another issue that he addressed was dividing the nation into against- liberation and pro-liberation. He said that liberation is for all the people of the country No citizen was against the liberation of the country. It is a matter of glory for the nation. This issue should not be used cheaply. If the government believes in democracy, it should let others speak. He gave the example of South Africa, where the people were divided on racial issues and now they are uniting to move the country forward. The government should let its institutes function freely. He added that, presently, the productive young generation is not interested about politics and the young generation who are interested with politics are not productive.



Figure 2 Participants of the meeting

Rezaul Karim Hashmi, Program Coordinator of Odhikar said that the picture that has been portrayed in the keynote paper of Odhikar's report is not good for any country. Odhikar tries to focus on some issues of human rights violations like political violence, extrajudicial killings, torture, disappearances etc. The documentation team tries to collect facts and figures from around the country, especially from the human rights defenders from 40 districts out of 64. Then the fact finding teams investigate the issues, prepare report and place it in front of everyone. It does not mean that the figure shows the actual situation rather the situation is even worse. There are people from different parties with different opinions and of different religion. Odhikar always considers everything from a human rights perspective. He said that even when he was a student, he observed different opinions or ideology but at the end of the day, those political activists had a friendly relationship and respect for each other as human being. Now-a-days these friendly relationships are missing and causing violence as the practice of human rights is missing.

Raja Miah, President of Revolutionary Workers Party in Chittagong thanked Odhikar for organising a programme based on such an important topic. He said that the people of Bangladesh are going through a period when political violence is a serious problem. The society is divided into several classes and the government is at the top of the class and occasionally engaged in repression and torture. The political parties can resolve this problem by sharing opinions between them in a democratic manner. The current scenario is like that all the political parties gather under the shade of two major political parties and try to defeat each other, as a result, various forms of violence takes place. The strikes (hartals) by the opposition parties are usually very violent as their aim is to come to power again. Recently the government showed its brutality by using harmful pepper spray.



Mazharul Hoque Shah Chowdhury, Former MP of Chittagong said that Bangladesh was born in 1971 through a liberation war. He said that he joined in the liberation war and fought for the country. However 42 years after the liberation, political violence continues to exist in the country. Due to the lack of proper leadership and vision, the country is facing political violence. The country is circling between two parties. He believed that after the liberation, the country needed a national revolutionary



government, not a parliamentary democracy as the country was founded by arms struggle like Vietnam. There is a lack of reflection of the objectives of liberation war. The dignity of the leaders of political parties has degraded. In all political parties leaders are not recognised for their work. They are recognised for their posters, billboards or misappropriating government wealth. Afterwards, some of them are nominated for the parliament, becoming a MP and even a minister. This country is not safe from this kind of politicians, he added. A state without political violence

cannot be expected from them. A social movement is required to solve this situation and select leaders who truly work for the people. If the leaders are not honest then it cannot be expected that their party would stop political violence. The political scenario is forcefully stuck in the circle of two parties. To stop the students' politics, student election has been halted in the different educational institutes. This system refrained the real leaders to be in politics. Politics is not taught to the new generation, instead it is taught how to give slogans for their leaders blindly. They are also taught how to do violence as well. This practice is suicidal for a country and so, politicians are losing their dignity. National unity is required to solve this problem. Awareness should be raised as well.

Mahfujul Hoque Shah, Director of Chittagong Chamber of Commerce said that he cannot see democratic practices within the political parties in Bangladesh. As a businessman, he found that the readymade garments sector is currently facing terrible problems due to frequent strikes (hartals). One of his foreign friends told him that the two leaders of BNP and Awami League possess a lot of power which is even beyond the kings of ancient times. It is shameful that since 1991, most of the MPs have agreed on the issue of boycotting parliament and avoiding their responsibilities but they shamelessly use the power of importing tariff-free cars. He was also ashamed to mention that some of the politicians who are selected for being a MP or even a minister have no experience or knowledge about the country, its demands, or its goals as they were trained only for pestering or vandalising public properties. Religion is also used for political achievements and to fool the people of the country. The government should arrange a dialogue for the caretaker government and opposition parties should also control their activists and stop the unwanted situation of the country as soon as possible.



Advocate Abul Hashem, Public Prosecutor (PP) of the Chittagong Judge Court said that caretaker government created political crises in the country by harassing the political leaders during 2007 and 2008. Student elections are being halted, which is considered a failure for the political parties. He demanded that the government should arrange student elections. He said that it is a constitutional right to call for strikes, however, the major condition is that they should be peaceful. The policy makers of some parties, who are committing vandalism and violence should be told to make alternative options to violence. The opposition should look for an alternative method of protest such as the human chain. The army should not be called to control the country. He said that, it is not acceptable that children and women are kept at the front of rallies. It was not good for the rule of law that strikes are called against the verdict of court decisions against war criminals. Instead, an appeal could be placed to the higher court.

Mr. Belayet Hossain, Central Committee Advisor of Jatiyo Shamajtantrik Dal (JSD) said that now-a-days, human rights are violated at every step. There are lots of human rights organisations

working in the country but still human rights has not been established. We became an independent country by overcoming colonisation, but the attitude and practice of political subservience exists. He said that there is a conspiracy going on nationally and internationally to make Bangladesh a failed state. The two large political parties possess a lack of democratic practices. The democracy that takes away the life of one's child or fails to provide safety is not a democracy. He commented that religion might create disturbance to the harmony of the country. There is Jamaat-e-Islami as well as Hindu-Buddho-Christian Parishad who instigates communalism. So religions should be kept separate from politics. Now-a-days political activists do not have an educational background on politics. The competition to claim power is causing violence. The ruling party has more than two-thirds of the seats of the parliament but they are struggling to run the parliament. The parliament is filled with businessmen who entered the parliament to earn more money. Self-intension should be expressed by politicians to overcome this crisis.

Mr. Abu Sufian, Vice president of Metropolitan BNP in Chittagong quoted the famous Persian poet, Sheikh Sadi and said that greed destroys humans like rust destroys iron. Everyone expects that the society and the state be peaceful. However, it is observed that violence is spreading in the society at large. As a citizen, he feels sorry to see the general population getting hurt due to the violence of strikes (hartals) but the role of the government hurts him even more when they decide to repress the opposition parties more aggressively. In recent times at Bhujpur, 5000 people and at Banskhali, 10000 to 12000 people were charged as criminals for violence. He questioned the intention of the government; whether the government wants to put all the people of the country in prison. This kind of violence was definitely unwanted by any citizen but the government should understand why these kind of incidents took place where people, including children, old people and women participated in the violence by knowing the consequences of the incident. When the government restricts peaceful rallies or meetings of the opposition, these kind of incidents occur. He stated that recently, the 'Gonojagoron Moncho' and 'Hefazat-e-Islam' arranged peaceful meetings as the government showed patience on these issues. If the government would have reacted react violently then they would have received a violent response as well. The demand for a caretaker government should be accepted by the government and that would reduce the violence, as it is a demand from the people of all level.

Hasan Maruf Rumi, Coordinator of Gono Shonghoti Andolon said that this nation has a long history of violence from the time of the colonial period. These colonial states introduced violence to this region. There is no indication in the Constitution regarding the position against the war criminals which was a very important issue for the country. The force that was against the state has to be abolished politically in order to ensure human rights. After general clemency to the war criminals, they were allowed to continue their political activities. Later on, they were supported and nurtured by both BNP and Awami League. BNP recently supported the



undemocratic force ‘Hefazat-e-Islam’ which demanded to implement 13 issues. In the name of democracy, there is nothing but a power change between the two major political parties; who look for benefits instead of leading the country properly.

Jahedul Karim Kochi, Vice President of Federal Reporters Union said that recently, the daily Amar Desh newspaper was closed down and acting-editor Mahmudur Rahman was arrested for violating the rule of law. A case was also filed against his 80 year old mother for proposing a press of another daily newspaper to print the newspaper. The judgment of the Supreme Court was ignored and Mahmudur Rahman was sent to remand for 13 days. The press of the newspaper was closed down. Few days before the incident, the office was attacked and looted by a mob from the ‘Gonojagoron Moncho’ who were escorted by the police. This is violence, he added. So violence from the opposition as well as the government has to be considered. The government needs to be tolerant as they are in power and has to take responsibility for all the incidents. The ruling party’s leaders like Mahbubul Alam Hanif, Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, Abul Hossain or Suranjit Sengupta has to answer to the people for their corruption. The people are frustrated because of the government as well as the failure of the opposition party. He also mentioned the corruption in the Padma Bridge issue, in Hallmark group, etc. There were also incidents at Bhujpur in Fatikchhari of Chittagong where Awami League had questionable activities which is not printed in newspapers or shown on television. He added that the majority of the media are also controlled by the Government and owned by ruling party leaders. He stated that he was a freedom fighter but the questionable trials of war criminals hurt him when he sees that the court had to change the verdict after being pressured by the ‘Gonojagoron Moncho’ which is against the rule of law.

Rehena Kabir Ranu, Councilor of Chittagong City Corporation said that as a responsible citizen and responsible politician, she thinks that politics is corrupted not only by BNP and Awami League, but that everyone has to take some responsibility of this. She added that if the political violence leads to a civil war, then the danger won’t leave these parties, it would affect everyone in the country. She also warned that democracy was hampered by religious fanatics.



Monowara Begum Moni, Councilor of Chittagong City Corporation said that the repression of the government has lead the political situation to a violent state. It was also observed that the police receive promotions for repressing opposition party leaders. The Government was also found in two-faced behaviours when they allowed Hefazat-e-Islam to organise meeting and later on announced strikes to restrict them from organising meetings. Later on at Lalkhan, goons from the ruling party attacked the activists of Hefazat-e-Islam brutally.



Programme Schedule: Chittagong Divisional Meeting

Venue: Hotel Favour Inn International, Old Railway Station Road, Chittagong

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

Serial No.	Session		Time
1	Registration		9.30-10.00
2	Welcoming Speech of the moderator	ASM Nasiruddin Elan, Director, Odhikar	
3	Paper Presentation	Md. Ahsanuzzaman, Programme Officer, Odhikar	
4	Discussion	Rezaul Karim Hashmi, Coordinator, Odhikar	
5		Raja Miah, President, Revolutionary Workers Party, Chittagong	
6		Mazharul Hoque Shah Chowdhury, Former MP, Chittagong	
7		Mahfujul Hoque Shah, Director, Chittagong Chamber of Commerce	
	Tea break		11.00-11.15
8	Discussion	Belayet Hossain, Central Committee Advisor, Jatio Shomajtantrik Dol	
9		Abu Sufian, Vice president, Metropolitan BNP, Chittagong	
10		Hasan Maruf Rumi, Coordinator, Gono Shonghoti Andolon	
11		Advocate Abul Hashem, PP, Chittagong Judge Court	
12		Jahedul Karim Kochi , Vice President, Fedaral Reporters Union	
13		Monowara Begum Moni, Councillor, Chittagong City Corporation	
14		Rehena Kabir Ranu, Councilor, Chittagong City Corporation	
15	Open Discussion and Questions	Participants	1.15-1.30
16	Special Guest	AKM Belayet Hossain, Vice President, Metropolitan Awami League, Chittagong	
17	Special Guest	Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, Former Minister and President of Metropolitan BNP, Chittagong	
18	Lunch		1.45-2.30