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State of Electoral Violence in Bangladesh 1991-2014

State of Electoral Violence in Bangladesh, 1991-2014
a report

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Abbreviation

CGS	Centre for Genocide Studies
CTG	Caretaker Government
AL	Bangladesh Awami League
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
MoHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
PPP	People's Party of Pakistan
CG	Caretaker Government
EC	Bangladesh Election Commission
CEC	Chief Election Commissioner
EEC	Electoral Enquiry Committees
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme.
TAF	The Asia Foundation
EWG	Election Working Group
PERP	Preparation of the Electoral Roll with Photographs program
NEP	National Election Program
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
BCC	Behavioral Change Communication
NGO	Non-governmental organizations

Executive Summary

The period from 1991 to 2014 was transformative and turbulent for Bangladesh politics and society. Within two decades and more, there were one mass upheaval, six general elections, six prime ministers, five amendments to constitutions, one military backed Caretaker Government (CTG) and countless violent clashes between state security forces, ruling party supporters and opposition political forces which led to a large number of deaths and injuries. Although Bangladesh got rid of autocratic regime in 1990, the electoral sphere suffered from recurring violence. In fact, Bangladesh has a long-standing history of electoral violence. The study is about mapping electoral violence in Bangladesh highlighting the empirical evidence from the field. Methodologically, it is based on document review, open access data from print media sources, and collection of ‘life stories’ or micro narratives. The study has reviewed last six general elections in Bangladesh to understand questions related to *why*, *when* and *how* electoral violence takes place. Micro-narratives of a cross-section of people numbering 140 have been collected in ten different areas identified as ‘red,’ ‘yellow’ and ‘green’ based on the level of violence in those areas in the last six general elections.

Data on electoral violence clearly show that there is an upward trend in the number of incidents of violence over a long period. The intensity and severity of violence has also increased. Regional disaggregation shows that incidents of violence are reported in all 64 administrative districts in Bangladesh. Electoral violence peaks before the period preceding the election years or during that time. This was evident from 1991 and 2014 in varying degrees depending on background of regions and actors. The study has identified the actors, types, causes and symptoms of electoral violence in the national elections of Bangladesh. It shows the key actors who are responsible or victims of electoral violence in the recent past. The analysis highlights the nuances of types and

causes of electoral violence regardless of the fact that there are some overlapping factors in understanding the types of violence and their causes.

The violence during the election period was particularly high in the urban regions. As far as actors are concerned, competition and rivalry between the two main parties, the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) historically drives such violence. During the national elections, most of the violence took place between members of political parties as well as members of the same parties. Electoral violence has been classified as attacks on election officials and properties; attacks on polling centers; physical assaults; mob violence and clashes; attacks on minorities; violence against women; and resource and money based violence. The causes that have been identified include confrontational politics; demarcation of constituencies; cases and detention against opposition supporters; illegal arms and drugs; godfather politics; gender based violence; inter-party intolerance; trial of war criminals of 1971; and intra-party clashes.

Spatially, the most vulnerable districts identified as red zones include Satkhira, Bagerhat, Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat, Dhaka, Narayanganj, Cumilla, Feni, Noakhali, Chattogram, Barishal, Khulna, Jashore, and Sunamganj. The least violent regions cover twenty-five districts in Bangladesh. Rest of Bangladesh is identified as medium or moderately violent zones. A unique finding of the study is symptoms of electoral violence, which include massive showdown; intimidation; hate speech; sabotage; visibility of strangers; and harassment of religious and ethnic minorities. The penetration of violence within the electoral sphere appears to have generated from two different political considerations - (a) violence as a form of political rivalry and (b) violence as a mode of political exclusion.

The study concludes with a range of suggestions for Election Commission to implement in short-term, medium term and long-term phases. General suggestions include introduction of smart and digital technology in election process; decentralization of the polling centers; institutionalization of pre-election debates; strict implementation of Code of Conduct; demarcation of constituency; and divisional parliament. The specific recommendations are voter education; effective role of Election Commission and the Law Enforcing Agencies; handing over the charge of Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) to eminent and non-partisan person during election; Early Warning System; dealing with hotspot; visibility of the Media; role of Election Commission in intra-party elections; more interactions between civil society and Election Commission; handing over a list of local miscreants to Election Commission; media and Election Commission; popular support for candidates' nomination; and introducing no-poster elections.



1

Introduction

Not sure whether violence prompted humans to take recourse to election or whether election resulted in violence, the relationship between the two is an old one, but not something that is intrinsic and cannot be eradicated. Indeed, if we were to look at history in this part of the world, a form of election or ‘electing’ the chief or *raja* by the community was present as early as the Vedic period (1500-500 BC). Noteworthy here is the fact that Gopala, the Pala king of early medieval Bengal, was elected by the feudal chiefs. In fact, some critics maintain that ‘democracy’ (and election being a central part of it) was invented in Bengal and not in Greece.¹ But then it never got institutionalized, and, indeed, not until the British left the Indian sub-continent in 1947 did election become an agreed means of having

governmental leaders. Bangladesh, however, had to wait for another 25 years, with the Pakistan military agreeing to hold direct elections based on the principle of adult franchise only in 1970. But once election was held it led to the breakup of Pakistan with two wings. The eastern wing, while getting the majority of the parliamentary seats was denied power to form the government by the Pakistan military and after suffering genocide at the hands of the latter and nine months of liberation war, emerged as Bangladesh in 1971.

Post-1971 Bangladesh, however, could not continue with elected governments for long (the military seized power in 1975), nor could it hold violence-free elections. Indeed, even after the return of civilian government in 1991

¹ Sohail Inayatullah, *Understanding Sarkar* (Leiden: Brill, 2002). See also, P.R. Sarkar, *Prout in a Nutshell*.

Translated by Acharaya Vijayananda Avadhuta (Calcutta: Ananda Marga Publications, 1988).

electoral violence continued and became the new normal. The consenting role of civil society also could not be reproduced. In fact, because of protracted protest for democracy and call for election, with members of civil society often engaged in violent campaign, the civil society itself ended up being polarized and violent. One cannot help being reminded here of the Jungian inter-generational reproduction of the archetype of evil and its presence in the minds of people as collective unconscious ready to emerge in the midst of chaoplexity. Paradoxically, as Jung maintains, we can ‘get out of the grip of evil if we befriend it.’²

This certainly would require construction of newer structures with the goal of reproducing an archetype of tolerance across generations. Electoral democracy, unfortunately, seems to be taking us in the opposite direction. And this is probably the reason why Mahatma Gandhi was against electoral democracy, calling it a ‘heartless doctrine’ because 51 percent of the people can impose its will on the 49 percent.³ The situation is even more dire now, with

Narendra Modi getting two-third of the parliamentary seats with 31 percent of popular votes and Donald Trump becoming President of the United States despite getting nearly three million less votes than Hillary Clinton. Politicians seem to have found ways to make best use of the ‘heartless doctrine’ even without a majority! But this would be the case if ‘democracy’ is limited to holding elections only. And there lies our hope! In fact, what is required for democracy to thrive and tolerance to take roots is *election plus*, with structures in areas ranging from political parties, education, religion, culture, gastronomy, including economy, devoid of singularity.

What is the experience of Bangladesh in all this? This report is mainly an attempt to respond to such a query. Mapping the last six national elections since 1991 following the return of the military to the barracks, it has first tried to identify the nature of electoral violence in different areas of Bangladesh at the time of the national election by scanning newspapers and marked them in three different colours, red, yellow and green, in the light of casualties,

² Carl Gustav Jung, *The Jung Reader*, edited by David Tacey (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 34.

³ Thomas Pantham, “Beyond Liberal Democracy: Thinking with Mahatma Gandhi,” in Thomas Pantham

and Kenneth L. Deutsch (ed.), *Political Thought in Modern India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1986), p. 330.

and then sought to understand them further by collecting micro-narratives or ‘life stories’ of a cross-section of people in the respective ‘coloured’ areas. Containing and mitigating electoral violence have certainly been issues of those witnessing and suffering from it, which, apart from researchers’ own assessment on the subject, have found their expressions in the micro-narratives. The report tries to highlight that as well.

The report is divided into five sections. First section is the Introduction. Second section deals with the history and overview of post-1971 national elections, including the institutions responsible for conducting and overseeing the elections. Third section highlights the methodology and rationale of the study. Section four is a comprehensive one, dealing with actors, types, causes, and symptoms of electoral violence. The concluding section deals with the issue of what is to be done.



People from all walks of life queue for hours to vote in the country's election in 1991. Photo: The Daily Star

2

History and overview of elections in Bangladesh

Four parliamentary elections were held in Bangladesh during 1971-1990. However, there were widespread disruptions in election schedules and at least three of these elections were held under military administrations and authoritarian regimes. It is important to note that the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh stipulates that elections to Parliament are to be held every five years.⁴ Before 1990s, none of the four parliaments were able to complete the tenures. Also, the parliament members were accused of corruption, weakness, and inefficiency. Electoral violence was rampant in some of these elections.

In March 1973, the first parliamentary elections were held in independent

Bangladesh. The Awami League won the elections with a huge majority. Approximately 1100 candidates contested for 300 parliamentary seats from 14 parties.⁵ There were incidents of electoral violence; the trend continued in the subsequent years, which, according to some critics, had “practically reduced elections to farces and shows of force in Bangladesh.”⁶ With the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with his family members by a group of military officers and civilian conspirators, the political scenario of Bangladesh changed. The cabinet was reshuffled; but it could not sustain itself for long. On 6 November 1975 the cabinet was dissolved. The dissolution was a consequence of formal military takeover by Major General

⁴Talukder Maniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh Revolution and Its Aftermath* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Books International, 1980), pp. 178-91.

⁵ See International Parliamentary Union, Elections of 1973, People’s Republic of Bangladesh, <http://archive.ipu.org/parline->

[e/reports/arc/BANGLADESH_1973.PDF](http://reports/arc/BANGLADESH_1973.PDF) (accessed 13 April 2018).

⁶ Ahmed Shafiqul Huque and Muhammad A. Hakim, ‘Elections in Bangladesh: Tools of Legitimacy’, *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter, 1993), pp. 248-261.

Ziaur Rahman (Zia) and the imposition of martial law. Zia, as the Chief of Martial Law Administration of Bangladesh, administered elections in February 1979. The opposition political parties continuously threatened to boycott the elections on grounds of lack of level playing field for them.⁷

Presidential elections were held in 1978. Zia won a 5-year term (76% vote) in June 1978 through a direct vote election under the martial law regime.⁸ In November 1978, his regime withdrew major restrictions on political party activities, which allowed political parties to participate in the second parliamentary elections in February 1979. An approximate of 30 political parties contested in the 1979 general elections.⁹ A total of 2,125 candidates, including 416 independents, contested for 300 seats. Zia's newly formed Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) won a two-third majority in Parliament with 207 seats.¹⁰

⁷ Mohammad Mohabbat Khan and Habib Mohammad Zafarullah, "The 1979 Parliamentary Elections in Bangladesh," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 10, 1979, pp. 1023-1036.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1023.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 1028.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1028. Huque and Hakim, *op.cit.*

Another major transformation took place in Bangladesh politics with the assassination of Zia and a military takeover by Lt. General H.M. Ershad (Ershad). The latter formed a political platform—*Jatiya* (People's) Party, and a pro-government platform was formed with five parties in July 1985.¹¹ A general election was held on 10 July 1986. The BNP, led by the widow of Zia, Begum Khaleda Zia, boycotted the polls on allegations of mishandling the pre-poll political situation by the ruling regime. There were incidents of unrest and chaos on the day of elections and several incidents of voting frauds and malpractices were registered by the opposition. The polling was suspended in 109 constituencies on the day of the elections. Re-elections had to take place in 37 constituencies due to various malpractice and electoral violence.¹² The *Jatiya* Party secured an absolute parliamentary majority.

¹¹ See International Parliamentary Union, Elections of 1986, People's Republic of Bangladesh, http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/BANGLADESH_1986_E.PDF (accessed 13 April 2018).

¹² *Ibid.*

Table 1: Tenure of the Parliament in Bangladesh

Parliament	Date of First Sitting	Date of Dissolution	Actual Term
10th Parliament	January 29, 2014	January 28, 2019	5 years
9th Parliament	January 25, 2009	January 24, 2014	5 years
8th Parliament	October 28,2001	October 27,2006	5 years
7th Parliament	July 14, 1996	July 13, 2001	5 years
6th Parliament	March 19,1996	March 30,1996	12 days
5th Parliament	March 05,1991	November 24,1995	4 years 8 months
4th Parliament	April 15,1988	December 6,1990	2 years 7 months
3rd Parliament	July 10,1986	December 6,1987	1 year 5 months
2nd Parliament	April 2,1979	March 24,1982	2 years 11 months
1st Parliament	April 7,1973	Nov.6, 1975	2 years 6 months

Source: Website of the Election Commission, Bangladesh.

In December 1987, President Ershad dissolved the parliament in the midst of an opposition campaign calling for his and his government's resignation. He imposed a nationwide state of

emergency in the same year. He promised to pave the way for fresh elections to receive the people's mandate. The polling date originally set for 28 February was postponed to 3 March.

The polling day witnessed large-scale violence and the major opposition parties—AL, BNP and Jamaat i Islami—boycotted the national election. Within this scenario, the ruling *Jatiya* Party secured its parliamentary majority of 251 seats (including 18 unopposed). The independent candidates won 25 seats and several minor parties shared the rest.¹³ All the major opposition political parties boycotted the elections, as they were convinced, that fair elections were impossible under the regime. Opposition parties accused the government of various electoral irregularities and misdeeds. The fourth parliamentary election was followed by an incessant string of strikes and demonstrations. It became evident that the JP formed by Ershad to garner support for his (then) quasi-military regime and establish legitimacy had not been successful.¹⁴

The section below briefly introduces the six parliamentary elections held during 1991-2014.

2.1 The 5th Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh

With the fall of Ershad regime in the backdrop of a mass upsurge in December 1990, Bangladesh held a free and fair election in 1991 that had been promised to the nation with the fall of President Ershad in December 1990. The resignation of HM Ershad on December 8, 1990, was followed by the assumption of power by Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as Acting President. The latter was tasked with the running of the state administration and the holding of a free and fair elections within a short frame of time. It was clear that the principal contestants in the election would be the Awami League and the BNP. In this election BNP won 140 seats, short of a majority, but well ahead of any other party. The BNP boosted its nominal strength by winning 28 of 30 reserved seats for women, which made 168 seats, a clear majority in the 330 seat Assembly. The remaining 2 women's seats went in favor of the Jamaat in return for which it offered support to the BNP. The

¹³ See International Parliamentary Union, *Elections of 1988, People's Republic of Bangladesh*, <http://archive.ipu.org/parline->

[e/reports/arc/BANGLADESH_1988_E.PDF](http://reports/arc/BANGLADESH_1988_E.PDF) (accessed 13 April 2018).

¹⁴ Haque and Hakim, *op.cit.*

Awami League won 88 seats, the Jatiya Party 35, and the Jamaat 18.¹⁵ Following the election, opposition parties alleged, that the election was rigged and unfair. This parliament passed the historic bill to abolish the presidential system and adopted the parliamentary system of government with the Prime Minister as the Head of the Government.

2.2 The 6th Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh

The 15 February election was rescheduled twice before it took place after the dissolution of the 5th parliament in November 1995.¹⁶ The election date was declared in accordance with constitutional provisions stipulating that elections must be held within 90 days of the parliament being dissolved. The election was marred by violence, a low turnout (10-15% of the approximately 56 million electorate), and new allegations of vote rigging by the BNP's

rivals.¹⁷ The boycott of the main opposition parties of the election was, however, reflected through a call for a nation-wide *hartal* (general strikes) after the day of election. The election was marked by political protests with demands for stepping down of the BNP government; elections to be held under a caretaker government; and the boycotting of the election. The violence started with boycott and later with the demand for the total nullification of the election results in the form of hartals, transportation shutdowns, temporary business and school closures, and violent clashes between rival political party activists and between activists and security forces personnel. In the election, BNP had a sweeping victory as their main rival, the AL, did not submit any nominations; it won 289 of the 300 seats. The Freedom Party won 1 and Independent candidates won 10 seats. In fact, there was no competition, since the major opposition parties did not contest the elections.

¹⁵ Syed Serajul Islam, Election and Politics in the Post-Ershad Era in Bangladesh, *Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2001.

¹⁶ Golam Hossain, Bangladesh in 1995: Politics of Intransigence, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36 No. 2, 1996.

¹⁷ Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) Report, *BANGLADESH, Parliamentary Chamber: Jatiya Sangsad, Election Held in 1996*, 1996. Available at: http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2023_96.htm (accessed on 15 April 2018).

2.3. The 7th Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh

The June 1996 election is one of the most significant elections in the history of Bangladesh as it took place under a neutral caretaker government. On June 12, national election was held in Bangladesh for the second time in less than four months. Only four parties - the AL, BNP, JP and the Jamaat - contested all 300 seats and the main contest was between the BNP and the AL. The voter turnout reached a record high of 73.19% of eligible voters in this election.¹⁸ Although no party won an absolute majority, the AL emerged as the largest single party, winning 135 seats and 37.47% of the vote. The BNP was the second with 104 seats and 33.34% of the vote. The JP got 29 seats and 16.10% of the vote. The major setback was for the Jamaat, which won only 3 seats while it won 18 seats in 1991 election. The Left parties also suffered a major defeat. One independent candidate won and joined the AL immediately after the election. Due to electoral irregularities, the Election Commission ordered re-polling in 27

constituencies, after which the AL ended up with 147 seats, the BNP a total of 116, the JP 32, the Jamaat 3 and the others 2 seats.¹⁹

2.4 The 8th Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh

The eighth parliamentary elections were held on 1st October 2001. Before the election the then Awami League government faced stark opposition from the other political parties. The government also faced political violence. On July 15, 2001 President Shahabuddin Ahmed swore in retired Chief Justice Latifur Rahman as the Chief Advisor of the new nonpartisan government.²⁰ Around 74,709,678 voters voted in the October 1 election. The country's 300 constituencies were contested by 52 parties. There were 1,933 candidates, 1,449 representing parties and the remainder running as Independents. The BNP-led coalition won 215 out of the 300 seats in the parliament and the AL won 62. Among the coalition partners, the BNP took 192 seats, Jamaat won 17, the JP (Naziur) got four, and Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ)

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰ M. Rashiduzzaman, Bangladesh in 2001: The Election and a New Political Reality? *Asian Survey*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2002.

won two. Of the other non-AL seats, Ershad's JP got 14; the Krishak Sramik League took one, and JP (Anwar Hossain Manju) won 1, with seven Independents securing the remaining.²¹ The Chief Advisor Latifur Rahman deployed the army to maintain law and order. He also tried to retrieve the hundreds of thousands of illegal arms allegedly stockpiled by the foot soldiers of all the major parties.

2.5 The 9th Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh

Since 2006 the opposition Awami League had accused the ruling BNP of systematically preparing to rig the elections. The former refused to participate in the 21 January 2007 election by putting forth the argument, that their demands had not been met and threatened more protest and blockade. Within this context, President Iajuddin Ahmed, with the army's backing, declared a state of emergency on January 11, 2007. He suspended political activity across the country after months of

political wrangling, transportation blockades, economic disruptions, street violence, and governmental paralysis.²² The pending January 22 parliamentary elections were also postponed and the sitting caretaker government (CG) was replaced by a nonpartisan CG whose officials were drawn primarily from the retired bureaucrats/civil society sphere. In effect, Bangladesh was then governed jointly by the CG led by its Chief Adviser, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, a former World Bank official who once headed Bangladesh's central bank, and the army led by the Chief of Army Staff, General Moeen U. Ahmed.²³

The Election Commission (EC), with the help of a delegation from the Bangladesh Army, completed the world's largest electronic database of voters, which includes over 81 million names. The EC engaged in an electoral reform dialogue with the various political parties in February, resulting in new ground rules to ensure financial transparency and accountability while also raising the ceiling of poll expenditures. These rules also seek to

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³ Devin T. Hagerty, "Bangladesh in 2007: Democracy Interrupted, Political and Environmental Challenges

Ahead," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, No. 1, January/February 2008.

permanently bar war criminals from contesting parliamentary elections. In response, the AL proposed major restructuring of its nomination process in order to make it more democratic. For its part, the BNP agreed to curb the power of its party Chairperson, while the Jamaat-i-Islami recognized the liberation war in its party constitution. Thus, the EC succeeded in pressurizing the various political parties to adopt democratic measures.

After seven long years, Bangladeshis voted once again to elect candidates from the two leading parties and their alliances. The AL and its allied parties claimed a landslide victory in the December 29 elections, with the AL alone winning more than three-fourths of the 300 contested seats. The AL won 230 seats alone and a total of 262 with its alliance partners. The second largest political party, the BNP, secured only 29 seats.²⁴ The election had voter turnout of 85%. The 9th Parliament had the highest number of women representatives, and women outnumbered men as voters in this election.

2.6 The 10th Parliamentary Election in Bangladesh

The 10th Parliament election was held on 5th January 2014. On demand of election to be held under the caretaker government BNP abstained from the election. Earlier the AL had scrapped the CG system for elections. Twelve political parties contested the election. 153 candidates were elected unopposed there were no candidates from the other parties in their respective constituencies. BNP, Jamaat and other political parties opposed this election and staged nationwide violent campaign.

2.7 Institutions

2.7.1 Election Commission

The Election Commission is established under Article 118 of the Constitution of Bangladesh. It consists of a Chief Election Commissioner and of any such number of other Election Commissioners, if any, as the President may from time to time direct. The President appoints the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and other Election Commissioners.

²⁴*Ibid.*

When the Election Commission consists of more than one person, the Chief Election Commissioner is to act as its Chairman. Under the Constitution, the term of office of any Election Commissioner is for five years from the date on which he/she enters in office. A person who has held office as Chief Election Commissioner is not eligible for appointment in the service of the Republic. The Election Commission is an independent constitutional body in the exercise of its functions and subject only to the Constitution and any other law. The Commission may authorize its Chairman or any of its members or any of its officers to exercise and perform all or any of its powers and functions under the law.²⁵ The Commission has the power to require any person or authority to perform such functions or render such assistance for the purpose of election as it may direct.

The Election Commission is supported by a full-fledged secretariat. The secretariat is obliged to execute its decisions and orders. A Secretary to the Government heads the

secretariat. The functions of the secretariat are, among others:

- (a) Preparation of electoral rolls for use in all national and local bodies elections.
- (b) Delimitation of parliamentary constituencies.
- (c) Reservation and allocation of symbols to political parties/candidates, when required;
- (d) Supervision of polling arrangements throughout the country on the eve of each election and appointment of polling personnel;
- (e) Printing and supply of ballot papers to all polling stations located all over the country;
- (f) Consolidation of all election results and their formal publication in the official gazette, as required by law; and
- (i) Constitution of tribunal for the disposal of election petitions and performance of such other functions in this regard as may be prescribed by any other law.

The Electoral Enquiry Committees (EEC) were established in 1994 at district level to

²⁵ Article 126 of the Constitution and Articles 4 and 5 of the Representation of the People Order, 1972.

prevent and control pre-poll irregularities.²⁶ Any interested person is able to address the EEC with a complaint. The EEC receives the case, evaluates it and then delivers a judgement. This is later sent to the Election Commission, which gives the final verdict.

2.7.2 Election Observer Groups

Both national and international non-government organizations have played a pivotal role as election observers to ensure that the elections are held in fair and transparent manner. Its role underlines the important inter-relationship between government, non-government, and international agencies before, during and after elections. Major international players include UNDP, whose long-term involvement had built up relationships with the Election Commission of Bangladesh. Among other international agencies, National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute are critically engaged in election monitoring during both national and local elections. The Asia Foundation (TAF)

has long been working with a broad range of civil society actors, allowed it effectively to build synergies across support programs. Two consolidated funds were set up in 2008 elections to support the local non-governmental organizations, one managed by TAF, focusing on domestic election observation by the NGO Election Working Group (EWG), and on the registration of excluded groups, and the other, managed by UNDP, included the major Preparation of the Electoral Roll with Photographs program (PERP).²⁷ NGOs and international donors jointly plan different scenario and analyze risks to help ensure that the elections remain on track and their support remain relevant and useful to ensure free and fair elections. Some international actors are involved in the pre-election activities that would indirectly influence a transparent and fair election. In 2008, donors undertook a National Election Program (NEP) to support and build effective capacity of 135,000 domestic election monitors.

²⁶ see The Representation of the People Order, 1972 , Chapter VII art. 91 (A).

²⁷ DFID, *Elections in Bangladesh 2008*. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67653/elections-bd-2008.pdf (accessed on 8 June 2018).

3

Methodology and Rationale

The study is based on document review, open access data, and collection of ‘life stories’ or micro narratives. The study has reviewed the last six general elections in Bangladesh to understand questions related to *why*, *when* and *how* electoral violence takes place. Micro-narratives of a cross-section of people numbering 140 have been collected in ten different areas identified as ‘red,’ ‘yellow’ and ‘green’ based on the level of violence in those areas in the last six general elections. This report is an analysis of data and information collected through newspaper scanning and micro-narratives in selected regions and secondary sources.

The study operationalizes the criteria of identifying three types of zones based on the magnitude of violence which is measured by the number of deaths as caused by election

violence in a particular district. In this context, ‘red’ zone represents areas where ten or more people were killed due to election related violence while ‘yellow’ zone represents areas where there are deaths in the range of 3-9 persons. ‘Green’ area is relatively peaceful as it includes zero to two deaths in a district during the period in question. Measurement of violence is based on two-tier process. First, research assistants have scanned electoral violence related incidents reported in four national dailies three weeks before and one week after the national elections held in the last six national parliamentary elections (1991, 15 February 1996, 12 June 2001, 2008 and 2014).²⁸ Later on, a consolidated frequency of violent incidents and number of deaths and injuries was considered to select 10 districts for field works.

²⁸ These newspapers include *Ittefaq*, *Prothom Alo*, *Janakantha*, *New Age*, and *The Daily Observer*.

Map 1: Electoral violence in Bangladesh, 1991-2014

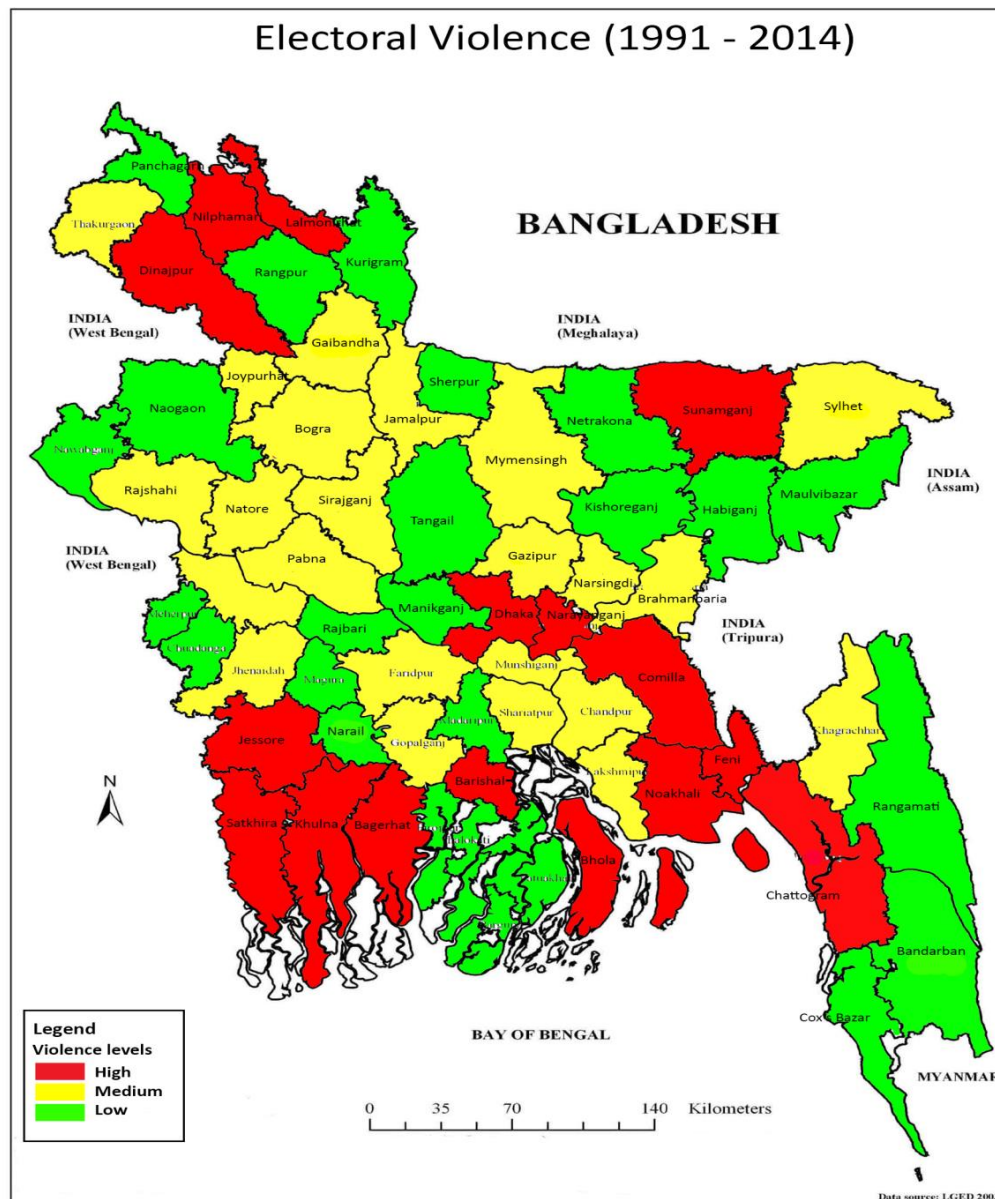


Table 2: Red, yellow and green zones for field areas in the study



1. Chattogram 2. Feni 3. Khulna 4. Satkhira 5. Bagerhat
6. Sirajganj 7. Sylhet 8. Mymensingh
9. Banderban 10. Jhalokathi

Field research was conducted in the ten districts of Bangladesh – Chattogram, Bandarban, Feni, Sylhet, Jhalokati, Sirajganj, Satkhira, Bagerhat, Narail and Khulna during April-May, 2018. These districts are divided into red, yellow and green zones. Five districts are from red zone, three from yellow zone and two from green zone (see, map 2). A total of 140 micro-narratives were collected from the people with diverse backgrounds to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena in the area. Among the respondents of micro-narratives there were 87 men and 53 women respectively. They were interviewed to make sure that the data remain unbiased and the perception of both is covered. At the same time, two workshops were held to develop instruments of data collection. The number of micro-narratives is distributed according to ‘red’, ‘yellow’ and ‘green’ zones. The primary focus of the field works was to understand scale of violence in the national elections and their triggers and symptoms.

3.1 Background and number of investigators

Considering the remoteness of the area and the time constraints, five teams were selected. The fieldwork has been supervised by two field

coordinators and research coordinator who have visited field areas. Each team was composed of two members. Before the fieldwork started, all team members were trained on how to apply the guidelines of micro-narratives, how to conduct sessions with the respondents in the field. The training included information about how to conduct an assessment, basics of election and violence, conflict issues etc. All team members had to appear in the mock interview using the guidelines. The team was engaged in collecting information from the randomly selected persons in the randomly selected areas.

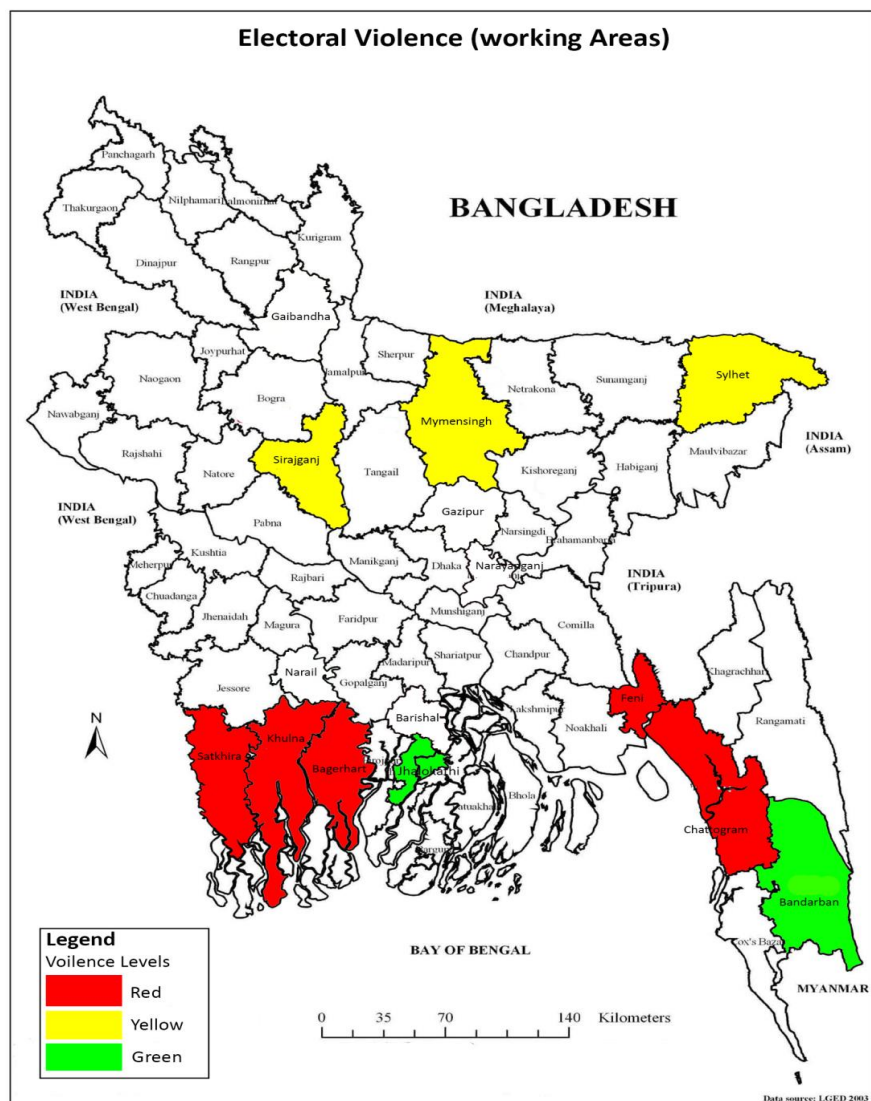
Target Group

- Adult males and females
- Key informants
- Local civil society

Data collection methods

- Document review: Published books, journals, and reports in the local and national newspapers
- Participant observations
- Narratives of respondents

Map 2: Electoral violence in selected field areas in Bangladesh



3.2 Background of respondents

Figure 1 shows that majority of respondents are aged between 40-50 years. The second highest number of respondents are aged in the

range of 30- 40 years. From gender point of view, 62% are from male while 38% from female participants.

Figure 1: Age distribution of participants

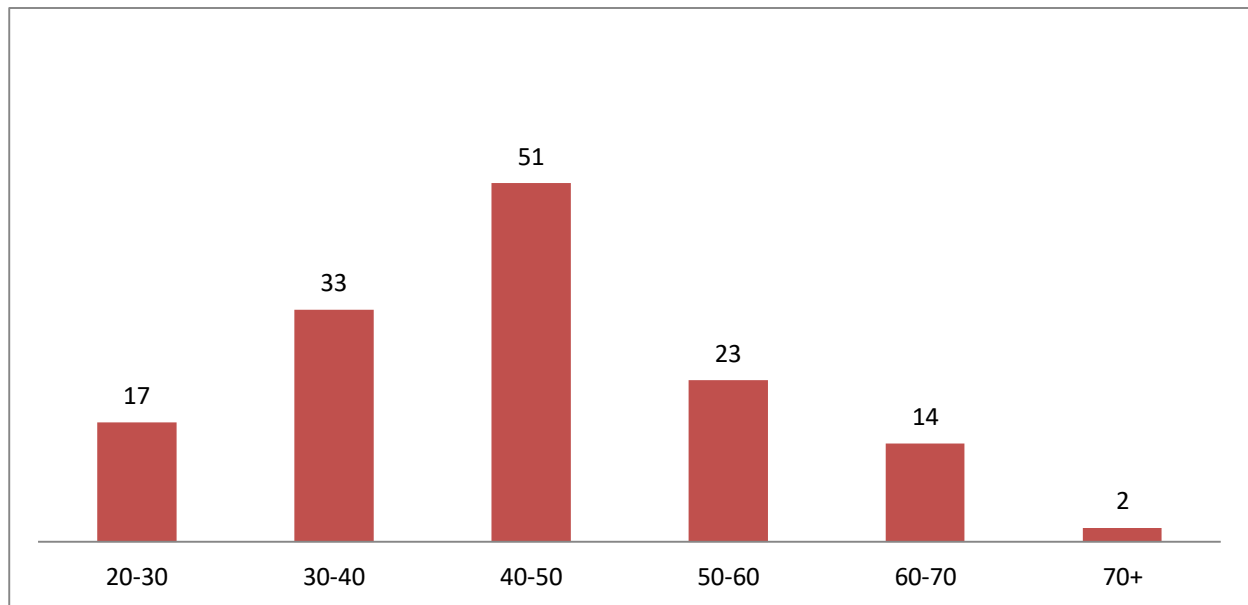
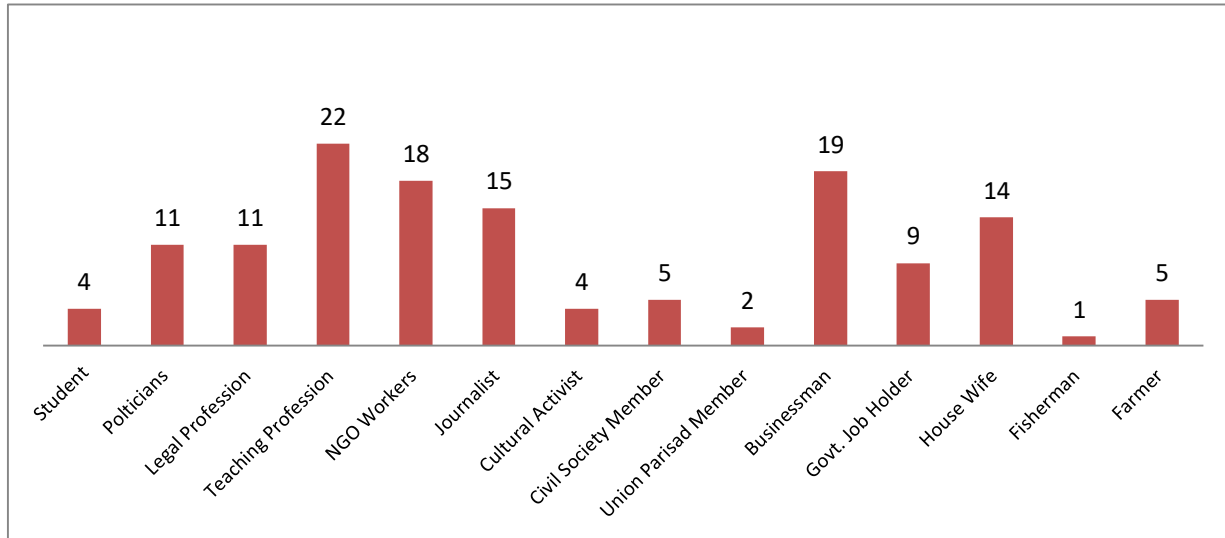


Figure 2: Professional backgrounds of participants



Rationale: Amid a festive and celebrative environment, the Election Commission of Bangladesh always faces a number of challenges in organizing national elections. Many of these challenges emanate from electoral violence ranging from intra-party to inter-party, personal to social. Violent incidents before and after the elections as well as on the Election Day have significant impact on the society. Indeed, it has been observed that some parts of Bangladesh are more violence-prone to national elections than others. It varies from thana to thana, upazila to

upazila, and district to district (see, map 1). In this context, it is critical to understand the roots of electoral violence. Academic research on electoral violence is very limited in Bangladesh. In fact, there is a knowledge deficit when it comes to our understanding of electoral violence and election management. This study addresses this lacuna and contributes to the discourse of mitigating electoral violence in Bangladesh. It may be argued that such a mapping of electoral violence would add to the knowledge system and also be of use at the policy level.



4

Actors, types, causes, and symptoms of violence

This chapter discusses the actors, types, causes and symptoms of electoral violence in the national elections of Bangladesh. The chapter examines the key actors who are either responsible or victims of electoral violence in the recent past. Furthermore, the discussion also highlights the nuances of types and causes of electoral violence regardless of the fact that there are some overlapping factors in understanding the types of violence and their causes. Discussion of symptoms at the end of this chapter is very critical as it is unique and offers an understanding of the major trends of violence in the national elections. Major findings of this chapter are derived from two primary sources—(a) media scanning and (b) micro narratives collected from 10 districts of Bangladesh. The methodology chapter has already discussed the details of it. In addition to this, the primary findings are supported by

the secondary sources of information on the subject matter. The chapter is organized into three major sections. Section 4.1 discusses the actors in electoral violence. Section 4.2 examines various types of the violence and unpacks the causes of the electoral violence. Finally, section 4.3 discusses the symptoms of the electoral violence based on the above discussions.

4.1 Actors in Electoral Violence

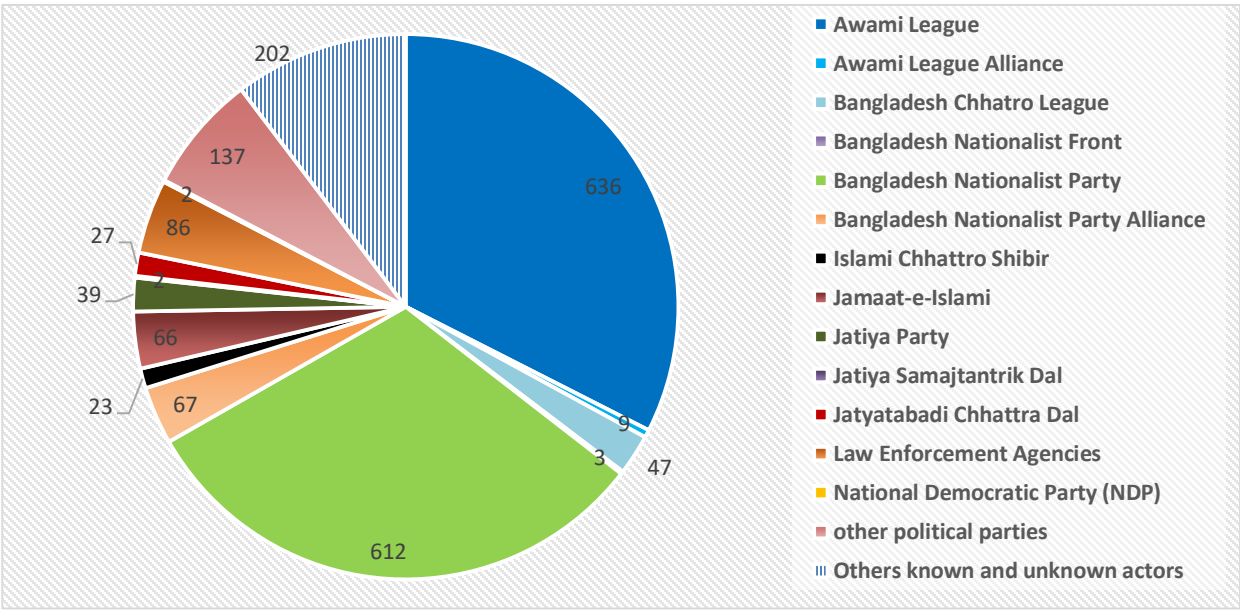
The actors of election violence are those who mainly create and sustain violent competition over voting and election process. Primarily, the party armed cadres can be attributed as actors of election violence. In reality, political parties with their ideologies, motives and organizations are responsible for orchestrating violence. This may include ruling or

opposition politicians, armed goons, students’ wings, religious fundamentalists, criminal groups, rent seekers and resource grabbers. Figure 3 shows that major political parties are involved with election violence in Bangladesh.

In the last six parliamentary elections both AL and BNP and their alliances have contributed to the major incidents of election related violence in Bangladesh as demonstrated in figure 3. Election violence in Bangladesh is a sub type of inter-party political rivalry between

two major political alliances. However, during the election, such violent acts were committed to create impacts on the process and outcome of the election. Violent acts have considerably influenced the process such as efforts to delay, disrupt, or derail a poll — and to influence the outcomes. The ultimate motive was to intimidate, physically harm, blackmail or abuse a political stakeholder in seeking to determine, delay, or to otherwise influence an electoral process.

Figure 3: Actors Election Violence in Bangladesh²⁹



²⁹ Bangladesh Peace Observatory Database on Election Violence (1991-2014).

4.2 Types of Violence

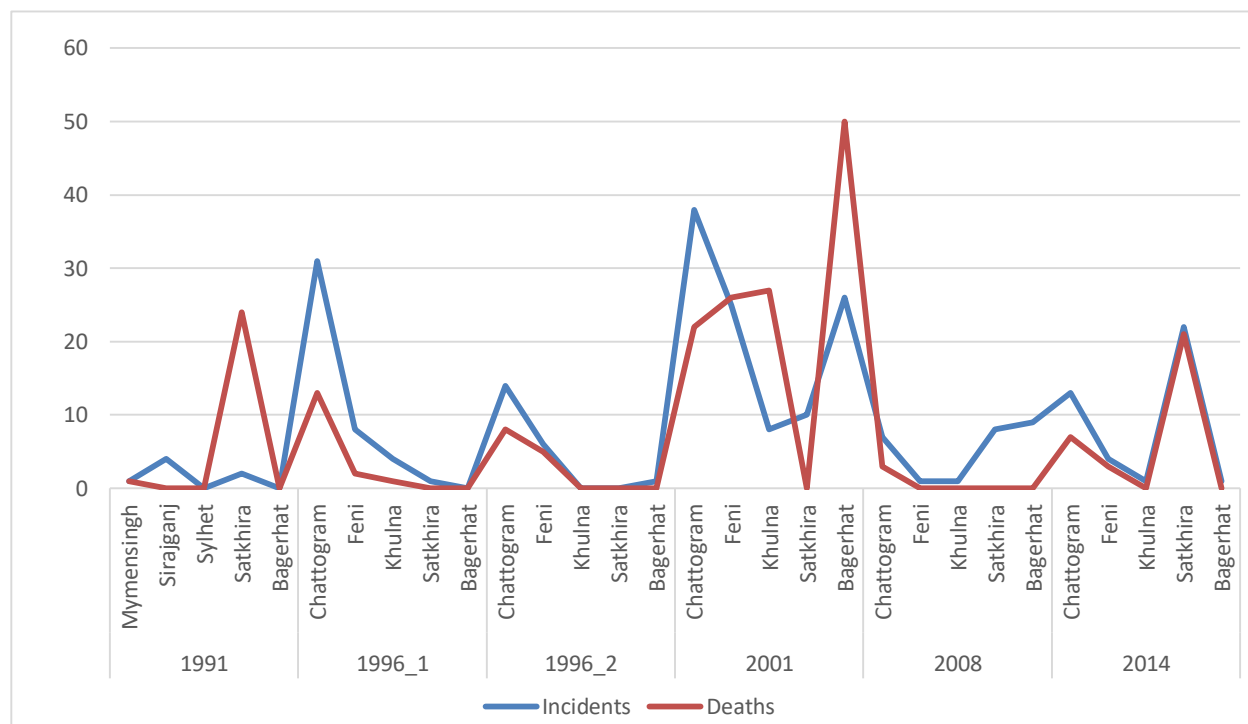
This section explicates the types of election violence in Bangladesh. Data show that various types of election violence in almost every districts of Bangladesh.

In 1991, Satkhira district was reported as the most affected region by election violence. From 1996 to 2014 election violence leading to high number of fatalities decreased in Mymensingh, Sylhet and Sirajganj. Therefore, these districts have moved out from the most violent red zone districts. Since 1996 Chattogram has remained as the most violent district in terms of the number of violent incidents. During the 15 February 1996 election, the number of reported violent incidents was over 35 in Chattogram resulting

in 15 deaths and over 600 injuries. In the 15 June election 1996, Chattogram had similar trend, however, the number of incident and fatalities decreased. Apart from Chattogram, Feni was the second most violent region.

In 2001 Chattogram, Feni, Satkhira and Bagerhat were the most violent regions in Bangladesh. Over 40 violent incidents were reported in Chattogram, which caused 22 deaths and over 600 injuries. In this period, the most violent region was Bagerhat. However, the number of incidents in Bagerhat was less (only 26) than that of Chattogram. But the lethality of violence was very high causing 50 fatalities and nearly 1100 injuries. The position of Feni is consistent as the third violent region where 25 incidents caused 26 deaths and over 300 injuries.

Figure 4: Trend of Violence in red zones in Bangladesh (1991-2014)³⁰



In 2008 national elections, the number of fatalities had substantially decreased. Only 3 cases of deaths had been recorded in Chattogram during the 2008 parliamentary elections. In terms of injuries Satkhira topped as the most violent region in 2008. The spiraling violence in Satkhira continued in the

2014 parliamentary election. Satkhira replaced Chattogram as the most violent region in Bangladesh. More than 25 incidents of election violence had been reported in Satkhira causing 21 deaths. Chattogram stood as the second

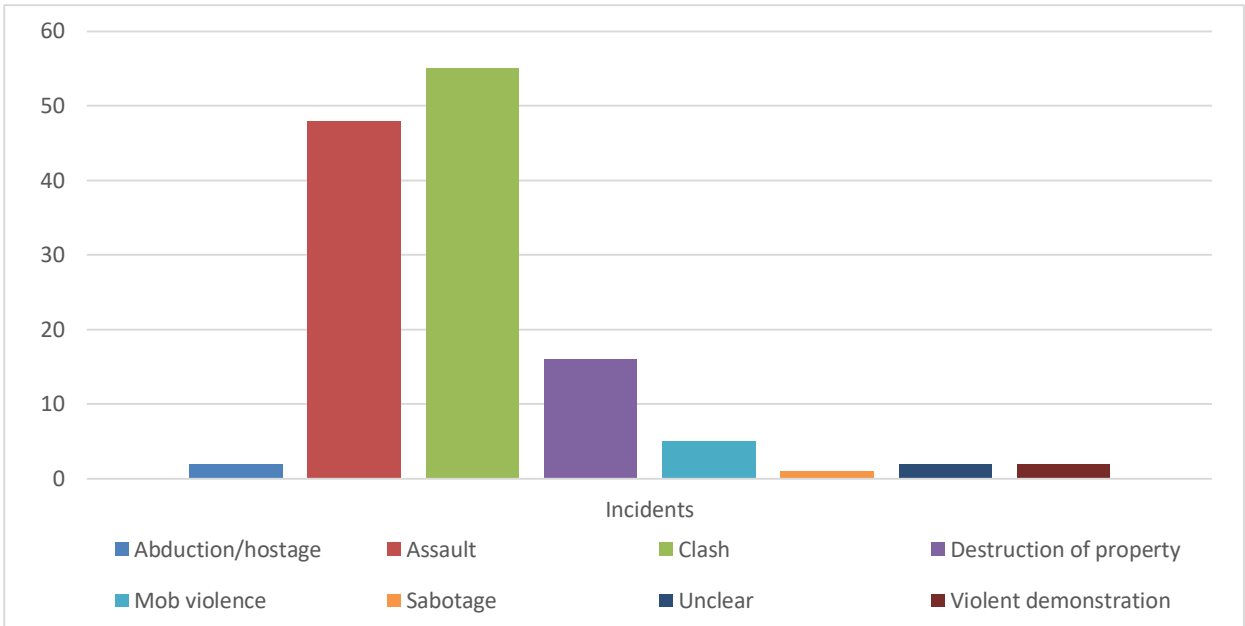
³⁰ Bangladesh Peace Observatory Database on Election Violence (1991-2014).

most violent region where 15 incidents caused 7 deaths and 32 injuries.

The trends of violence in (Figure 5) show that clash and assault are the most violent actions reportedly adopted by the various actors during

the parliamentary elections in Bangladesh. Destruction of properties was the third most violent action during the election. It has also been observed that a significant number of mob violence occurred in Bangladesh in this period.

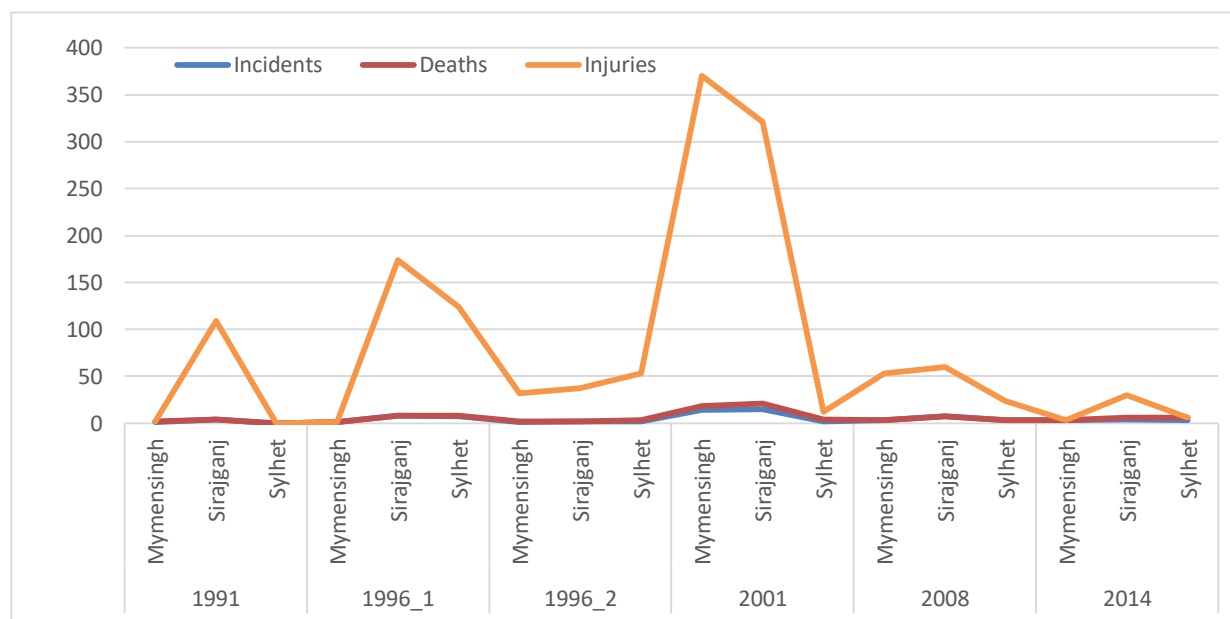
Figure 5: Types of Violent Incidents³¹



Mymensingh, Sylhet and Sirajganj are less violent zone during the election period in Bangladesh (see Figure 6).

³¹ Bangladesh Peace Observatory Database on Election Violence (1991-2014).

Figure 6: Yellow zones (in terms of incidents, deaths and injuries)³²



According to the Figure 6, three districts were peaceful in 1991 election. This trend has changed in 1996. In 1996, Sirajganj and Sylhet were the most violent regions in yellow category. In both districts only 8 incidents caused over 200 injuries respectively. The situation had completely changed in the 2001 parliamentary elections. Mymensingh, Sirajganj and Sylhet had faced violent

incidents causing on average 5-6 deaths. But Mymensingh and Sirajganj had the highest number of injuries i.e. 352 and 300 respectively. In the 2008 election no death was reported in these three districts. But in the 2014 election Sirajganj and Sylhet were reported for election related violence and deaths.

In the following section, we will discuss the major types of election violence in

³² Bangladesh Peace Observatory Database on Election Violence (1991-2014).

Bangladesh. This discussion is based on our secondary data and findings from the micro narratives from ten districts.

4.2.1 Attack on election officials and properties

The election officials and their properties were the targets of attacks during parliamentary elections in Bangladesh. Attacks on election officials and properties including ballot boxes, ballot papers and election materials were very high particularly during the two elections - 15 February 1996 and 5 January 2014. Chattogram, which is categorized as red zone,

shows high number of attacks on election officials and their properties in the 15 February 1996 elections. On 12 February 1996 over 50 persons including local election officers were injured by bomb attack in Kotwali Thana. Several crude bombs thrown at an election training session camp caused these injuries.³³ On the same day, the forces opposing the election attacked divisional election commission office in Chattogram. Data also show that Khulna (Meherpur), Rangpur, Naryanganj, Dhaka and Gaibandha were hotspots where attacks on election officials and their properties were carried out in the past. The following is a micro-narrative from a former election presiding officer:

³³ *The Daily Star*, 13 February 1996.

Box 1

“I was polling and presiding officer many times. If I openly tell all these then our political environment will turn into a different way. Don’t mind, I did the duty according to their command. I always try to fulfill my duty with full dedication. If I am weak, then the election will be weak. I think I am a responsible person. Election environment is not free from problems. I did not experience such situation in my center but these things happened in other centers of Dagonbhuiyan and other places of Feni. Hijacking, stealing ballot paper box, giving seal to ballot paper etc. happened at Dagonbhuiyan and other places. Sometimes there is no way to deal with the situation. I have never experienced such situation in my center but I have seen these in other centers. Political parties are always concerned about their power. Power, position, supremacy are their only issues. Stealing ballot paper, proxy votes, hijacking etc. were very common in past and still exists. Sudden fights, conflicts start during election. All parties want to establish supremacy. So conflicts and violence are the outcome of these. Now situation is changing. Opposition party was absent in the last general election.”

Md. Owaliullah Bhuiyan,³⁴ Head Master, Raghunathpur High School, Dagonbhuiyan, Feni

The attacks on election offices started well before the date of 10th parliamentary election in Bangladesh. In 2013, the Election Commission of Bangladesh urged the government to ensure safety of its officials. Miscreants had torched election offices in Narayanganj and threw bombs at Rajshahi Election Commission office.³⁵ Arson attacks on five election offices in Barisal, Munshiganj, Khulna, Jhenidah, Chuadanga and

Brahmanbaria damaged valuable documents and office equipment (*The Daily Star*, 29 Nov 2013). On the election day in 2014, opposition activists targeted electoral officials and attacked schools and other buildings serving as polling stations. According to Human Rights Watch, attackers killed three election officials and injured 330 other officials and law

³⁴ Micro narrative field study in Feni conducted in April 2018.

³⁵ *The Daily Star*, 27 November 2013.

enforcement agents on the Election Day.³⁶ The Election Commission suspended voting in 597 of 18,000 polling stations due to violence³⁷. A total of 553 schools and educational institutions were damaged in the 2014 parliament election.³⁸

4.2.2 Attack on the polling centers

Attack on polling centers to disband the peaceful environment as well as to create panic

among the voters is one of the major types of election violence in Bangladesh. Attacks on polling centers happened all over the country in the last five parliament elections since 1991. Recent data show the fact that in 2014 most violent attacks on polling centers happened in Feni, Nilphamari, Lakshmipur, Thakurgaon, Jessore, and Rangpur in terms of number of polling centers under attacks, deaths and injuries (Table: 2).

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, Democracy in the Crossfire: Opposition Violence and Government Abuses in the 2014 Pre- and Post-Election Period in Bangladesh, available at: (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014),

3, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2014/04/29/democracy-crossfire>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, 19.

Table 3: Attack on Polling Centers in 2014³⁹

Date	Source	District	Total Killed	Total Injured	Description of violence
5/1/2014	<i>The Daily Jugantar</i>	Nilphamari	2	45	Two killed and 45 injured in a clash between police and BNP alliance when the polling center was torched.
5/1/2014	<i>The Daily Jugantar</i>	Feni	2	17	Two killed and 17 injured in a clash between police and BNP alliance when the polling center was captured.
5/1/2014	<i>The Daily Jugantar</i>	Lakshmipur	1		One killed in a clash between police and BNP during attack on the polling center.
5/1/2014	<i>The Daily Jugantar</i>	Kurigram	0	2	Two injured in an attack on polling center by BNP alliance.
5/1/2014	<i>The Daily Jugantar</i>	Sherpur	0	2	Two injured in a clash between police and BNP alliance. The polling center was torched.
5/1/2014	<i>The Daily Jugantar</i>	Rajshahi	0	2	Several people injured in a clash between AL and BNP alliance. House and polling centres were torched and vandalized.
5/1/2014	<i>The Daily Jugantar</i>	Gaibandha	0		Voting at 62 polling centres of Gaibandha were postponed.
5/1/2014	<i>The Daily Jugantar</i>	Thakurgaon	0		Voting at 111 polling centres of Thakurgaon were postponed.
5/1/2014	<i>The Daily Jugantar</i>	Jessore	0		Voting at 50 polling centres of Jessore was postponed.
5/1/2014	<i>The Daily Jugantar</i>	Rangpur	0		Voting at 45 polling centres of Rangpur-4 was postponed.

³⁹ Bangladesh Peace Observatory Database on Election Violence (1991-2014).

Respondents of micro-narratives from Chattogram, Feni, Sylhet, Khulna, Satkhira and Bagerhat shared their similar experiences.

Box 2

“Normally election violence happens on the election day. When any candidate can predict that voters would cast more votes for their opponents, then they come to the polling centers and create problems. They prevent voters to register and cast their votes, spread rumors that law enforcers will come and storm in the centers and engage in violence with oppositions’ polling agents. Finally, they blast cocktails bomb to create panic in the center. When media and police arrive in the scene, they just disappear.”

Abu Taher from Chattogram Tigerpass⁴⁰

“Local administration should play strong and effective roles to prevent these goons from creating violence on behalf of their party candidates during election. Everybody loves his/her life so who cares about standing in front of the goons to prevent them. When they come with arms and cadres the administration remains silent and inactive. Sometimes when two parties have power parity then looting of ballot box is difficult. Then law enforcers take side of the preventers and prevent party cadres from looting ballot box. In Feni a local influential leader controls the nature of violence.”

Sujayet Chowdhury from Hathazari, Feni

In 2001 she was on duty in the vote centre as an agent in Chuadanga, Khulna and she was young. She got scared to see that how political supporters fight with each other outside the vote centre and try to convince people to vote for their candidate in many ways that involved persuasion, requests and even threats. But people gave their vote and she said proxy vote was also there and people knew how to erase the black mark that was given on the right hand’s thumb while casting votes. People used the sap of papaya to remove the black marks of the thumb and again came to give proxy votes, political workers mostly used the women who were in burka or simply made them wear burka to go into the centre.

⁴⁰ Micro narrative study in Chattogram conducted in April 2018.

NGO worker Farida from Khulna⁴¹

“As compared to the 2001 election, 2008 election was relatively peaceful in our locality. There was heavy security around the center. We saw AL, BNP and other parties’ cadres gathered outside the centers but they could not enter the premises because of the security. But in 2014 we saw heinous violence before the election. Jamaat-BNP cadres cut the road, destroyed bridges and blocked roads by felling trees in several villages in Satkhira where they believed AL has vote banks including Hindu villages just to terrorize them and prevented them to come to the polling centers on the Election Day. They also attacked on polling centers using arson, crude bombs and machetes. I have witnessed party cadres carrying illegal guns before 2001 election just to show their opponents to terrorize them but nowadays they are used quite often to kill or injure their opponents.

Md. Younus Ali, Kolaroa, Satkhira⁴²

4.2.3 Assault on political opponents

Assault on the political opponents during the elections is a major category of violence causing destruction of properties and loss of

lives in Bangladesh. The presence of godfather politics, organized criminal groups and party cadres creates an environment of deadly violence between political opponents. Figure 6 shows the extensity and intensity of the assault type violence in 10 districts.

⁴¹ Micro narrative study in Khulna conducted in April 2018.

⁴² Micro narrative study in Satkhira conducted in April 2018.

Figure 7: Assault on opponents in ten district⁴³

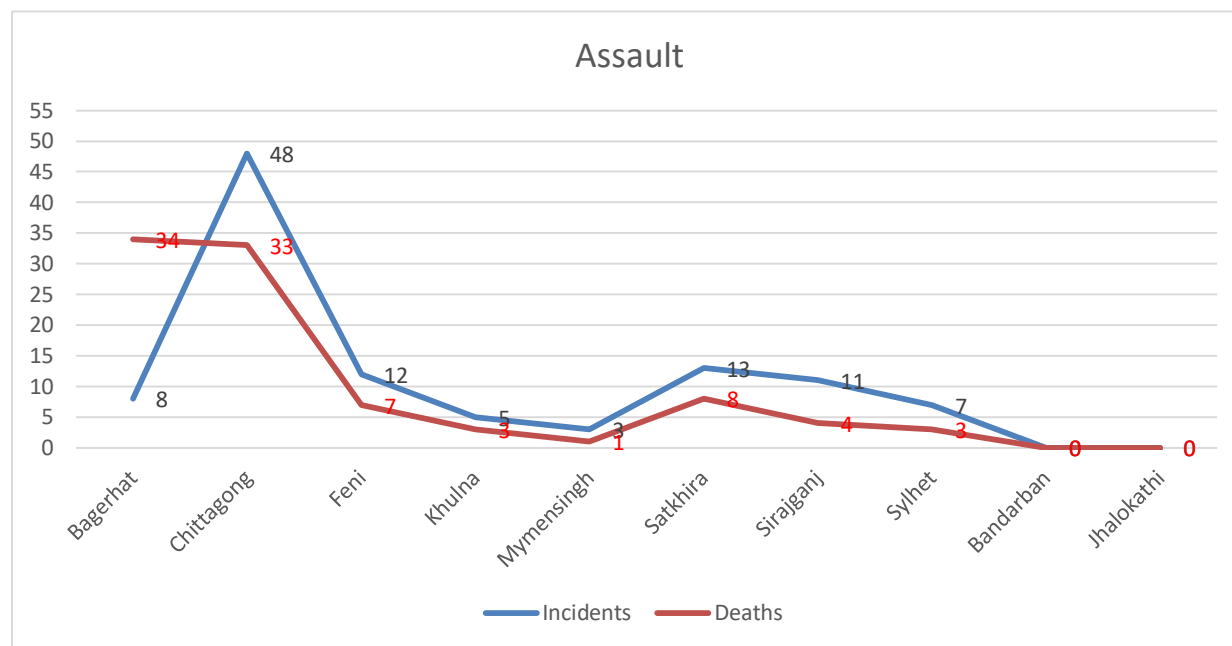


Figure 7 clearly shows that Chattogram, Feni, Bagerhat, Khulna and Satkhira are the top five districts where most of the political assaults were carried out during the last five elections. Chattogram is at the top where 48 incidents of

assault were reported causing 33 deaths and 420 injuries. Sylhet and Mymensingh had reportedly less number of assaults during the election while Banderban and Jhalokathi had no such reported incident.

⁴³ Bangladesh Peace Observatory Database on Election Violence (1991-2014).

Nature of assault on the political opponents during the elections

- *Isolated attacks (stabbing, beating, hacking) on party members who participated in election campaign;*
- *Terror bomb attack carried on opponents' homes and business offices injured and killed family members;*
- *Party members were beaten, tortured, abducted and killed after participating in election campaigns;*
- *Assault on party members, cultural activists, students and youth wings working during the election campaign;*
- *Mob violence on opponents' houses, shops and party offices.*

4.2.4 Physical assault on the opponents' election campaigns

The notion of mudslinging is a normal phenomenon in any election in Bangladesh. Election candidates use different issues to embark on verbal attacks on the opponents. These issues range from political, personal to family matters. The purpose of mudslinging is to appeal to the voters for the candidate who appears most preferable to him/her on whatever criteria that might attract the voter most.⁴⁴ In the last six parliamentary elections the trend has been similar. In this regard, based

on secondary and primary data, it is observed that Chattogram and Khulna have the most

frequent cases of such assaults among the contenders in elections. The most violent places in Chattogram district are Raozan, Hathazari, Rangunia, Cox's Bazar Sadar, Chandanaish, Kotwali Thana and Double Mooring Thana. Similarly, in Khulna, physical attacks on the opponents' election campaigns had been widespread. Micro-narrative respondents added that attacks on election campaigns has direct link with the local mastaan groups/goons who control several economic spaces such as: bus-tempo stand, rickshaw stand, slums etc.

⁴⁴ William L. Benoit (2009), Election outcome and topic of political campaign attacks, Southern Communication Journal, 69:4, 348-355.

4.2.5 Violence against minorities in elections

Attacks on the ethnic and religious minorities in the pre and post parliament elections are one of the heinous types of violence in Bangladesh. The principal reason for the anti-Hindu attacks in Bangladesh can be attributed to a perception of the minorities being sympathizers and supporters of a political party – AL. It is alleged that the supporters of the BNP and Jamaat targeted the Hindus for their alleged support for the rival Awami League and this became severe and systematic after the elections, particularly with attacks on Hindus and their properties. Several newspaper reports indicate that the worst affected areas have been Barisal, Bhola, parts of Pirojpur, Khulna, Satkhira, Gopalganj, Bagerhat, Jessore, Comilla and Narsingdi.⁴⁵ The districts of South and Southwest have faced it severely. A respondent from Sonagazi of Feni district narrated how two grassroots level workers of Awami League were killed by the then supporters of the four party alliance

government, which started the post-election violence against the Hindu minorities of the local area. According to him, “This [attack] happened not because of their religious identity, but mostly because BNP-Jamaat alliance alleged that Hindus supported AL and only casted their votes for them.”⁴⁶

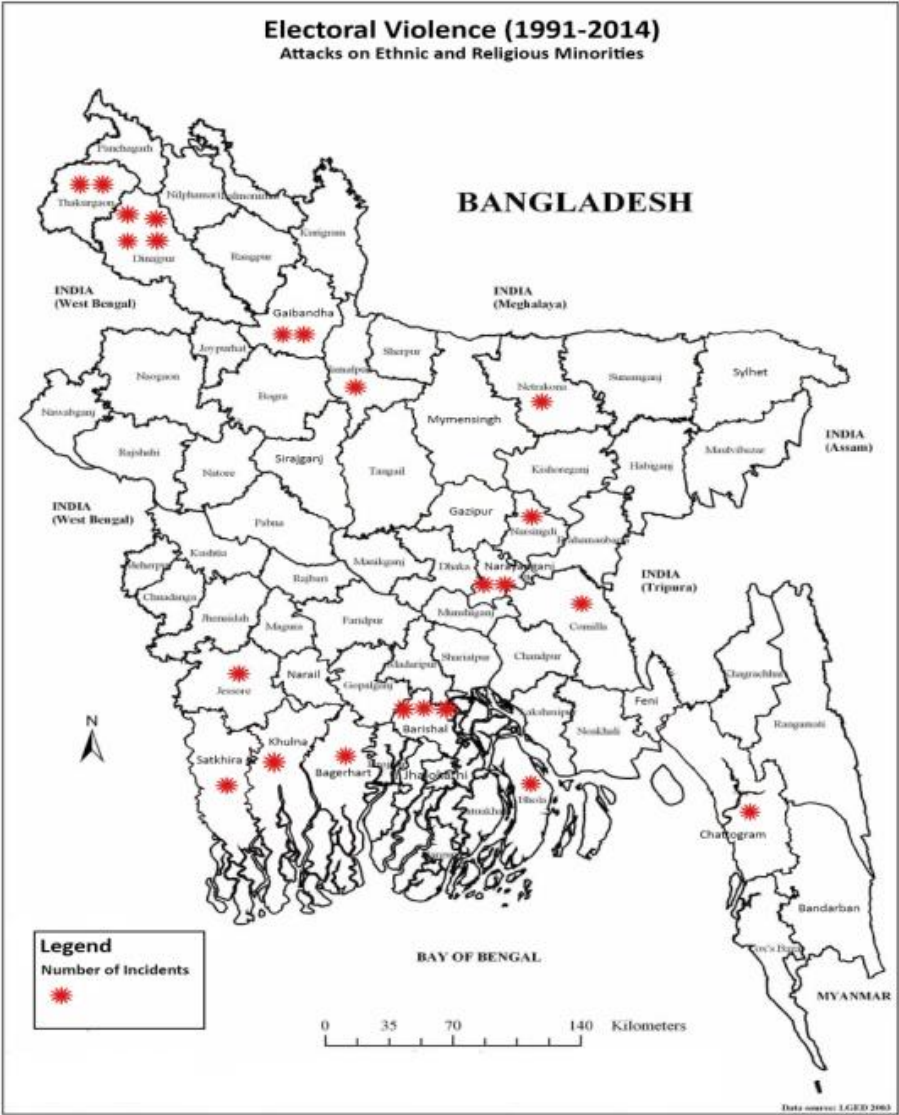
In Feni *sadar*, the first six months after the 2001 elections experienced large scale violence as the winning Member of Parliament, VP Joynal established his control over the constituency. Hindu minorities were tortured in Sonagazi as the number of Hindu voters is significant in Sonagazi and the AL candidate appeared to be a strong contender due to Hindu’s alleged support for him.⁴⁷ There are allegations of using the religious card in the elections. A respondent described how minorities had experienced threats and fear during the elections. Two of the respondents’ Hindu female friends could not go to public places as their mothers were scared and did not allow them to go out of home.

⁴⁵ See, map 3.

⁴⁶ Interview with Shafaytullah Shumon, Raghunathpur Union, 1 No. Ward, Dagonbhuiyan, Feni on 23 May 2018.

⁴⁷ Interview with Advocate Sameer Chandra Kaur, Lawyer, Judge Court Feni, Feni Sadar.

Map 3: Violence against minorities in Bangladesh⁴⁸



She says: “They did not go to their school and private tutors. Another Hindu boy in our area who used to support AL, police searched for him many times and he had to hide inside a mosque to avoid police harassment. They wanted to arrest them as they were Hindu.”⁴⁹ Khulna and Satkhira are also significantly affected. Most of the respondents from Khulna and Satkhira have vividly described how Hindu minorities faced violence in most of the upazillas. One respondent highlighted that a significant number of Hindu families had migrated to India due to persecution. In 2014, violence against minorities was visible in various constituencies of Bangladesh, particularly where they had significantly boycotted the election.⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch pointed the allegations against the BNP and Jamaat activists for a portion of the assaults.⁵¹ Narratives of this study also highlight how clashes and bombing took place in several areas of Sylhet. One of the respondents’ business center in the *sadar* was vandalized

along with 225 other establishments in the city center of Medina market in Sylhet.

It is alleged that the BNP-Jamaat led political activists largely targeted the Hindus after the national election of 2001. It is also evident that the Awami League also accuses Hindus, if their candidate was defeated in the elections. They faced violence from both sides due to the polarized politics of Bangladesh. A respondent from Feni observed, “in Bangladesh minorities are tortured under both AL and BNP regimes. They faced violence almost in all periods. They blamed the BNP government for their ill fates. On the other hand, they also faced troubles in the period of the AL because of illegal possession of their lands, and property.”⁵²

4.2.6 Resource-based violence in elections

National elections in Bangladesh reveal that the incidents of resource grabbing are one of the major crises, which is exploited by the

⁴⁹ Interview with Tarannum Chowdhury, Apprentice Lawyer, Lamabazar, Sylhet.

⁵⁰ Brac Institute of Governance Studies, *The State of Governance in Bangladesh 2013: Democracy, Party, and Politics*. Dhaka: BIGD, 2014.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch. *Democracy in the Crossfire: Opposition Violence and Government Abuses in the 2014 Pre-and Post-Election Period in Bangladesh*. New York: HRW, 2014.

⁵² Interview with Md. Jainal Abedin Rasel, Executive Director (CEO) *Sobuj Bangla*, Feni Sadar, Feni.

powerful local elites of the area. Capturing resources such as private land grabbing, illegal water bodies and *khas* lands used by marginalized people is common in the rural and urban areas. Elections are also used as an entry point for more resource grabbing. The winners will have unquestioned power to capture the resources, e.g. *khas* land of the government. The powerful elites usually target the poor and marginalized people. Religious minorities also face crisis as they were often threatened to leave their properties and later these were grabbed by people affiliated with the winning political elites. In the post-2001 national elections, respondents highlight some of these cases where the attackers targeted the Hindu families to occupy their lands. Violence against the religious minorities is intertwined with resource grabbing. In Satkhira, one respondent highlighted that the ancestral lands of Hindus are targets of political elites from both AL and BNP.

4.2.7 Gender based violence

There is a strong gender dimension of violence during the national elections of Bangladesh. It is often heard from the male elite politicians that the female of the household should vote as per the instructions of the senior male of the family or the community. Furthermore, women perceive more threats of physical and structural violence during the elections due to lack of adequate security provisions.

Women's participation in politics is still obstructed by certain conservative attitudes prevalent in the society. Despite having three prominent women leaders, Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia and Rowshan Ershad, who are at the highest levels in their respective parties and in the executive positions of the state, they entered into politics through their family connections.⁵³ It is also reflected in the local level politics as well. A respondent described how the university female students are participating more in politics. Nevertheless, this has not ended violence against women entirely. A 2017 IFES report observes that for

⁵³ Farah Deebe Chowdhury, "Problems of Women's Participation in Bangladesh Politics," *The Round Table*:

The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 98, No. 404, PP. 555-567.

women it is important that we consider psychological, sexual, and physical violence at home and in the public domain as electoral violence.⁵⁴ “These incidents are not normally reported and/or not understood as violence. These incidents are also difficult to prevent using traditional means to address electoral security, such as law and order measures.”⁵⁵

A respondent in her narratives observed that she gave her first vote in 1996, and noted that women are quite active and excited to exercise their voting rights. One of the respondents in the field was a polling agent. When she was trying to stop the arsons, the goons became more violent and later attacked her house in the evening. She had to leave her house and went to a relative’s place for a few days. Another respondent highlighted the issue of cyber-crime. This has replaced the incidents of physical sexual violence. Often the female candidates in the elections face unnecessary remarks.

⁵⁴ Silja Paasilinna, Sue Palmer-Wetherald, and Megan Ritchie, *The Effect of Violence on Women’s Electoral and Political Participation in Bangladesh*, Washington DC: International Foundation for Electoral Systems, March 2017, p. 4.

Women are gradually overcoming the situation. A respondent opined, “We also get involved in raising awareness about ensuring women’s political and social security as you can see that women are raped. Harassment of women in public bus is increasing in an alarming rate. Now women are also being conscious and they raise their voices against harassments, and that is why we also come forward to support them with legal aid. Social media also being vocal and I also write regularly in my blog to raise awareness against women harassment.”⁵⁶ It reflects the level of political awareness among young women.

4.3 Causes of electoral violence

4.3.1 Confrontational politics

Political confrontation between the ruling and opposition parties had direct impact on election related violence in Bangladesh. Mobilization techniques adopted by the oppositions mostly in the forms of protests and

⁵⁵ibid. p. 4.

⁵⁶ Interview with Md. Jainal Abedin Rasel, Executive Director (CEO) *Sobuj Bangla*, Feni Sadar, Feni.

violent street politics contribute to electoral violence in Bangladesh.⁵⁷ The party that wins the election monopolizes the state apparatus with ‘winner takes all’ attitude, leaving little scope for the losing party to take part in the process of governance, which leads them to be violent and destructive. During parliamentary election Bangladesh witnesses major bouts of violence due to the confrontational national politics in Bangladesh. Based on the field study, several respondents have opined that they first observed in 1996, during the one sided 15 February election, the most intensive violence. At that time, violence occurred between the ruling party, police and anti-election political parties.

Bangladesh also witnessed confrontational national politics in 2006 on the question of holding the 9th Parliamentary elections. The opposition AL accused the ruling BNP of systematically preparing to rig the elections. The AL organized a series of strikes, protests, industrial actions, and transportation blockades against the election moves. The confrontation between the ruling and opposition parties was focused on issues, such

as appointment of the Chief of Caretaker Government, appointment of Chief Election Commissioner, new voter list, removal of the then Chief Election Commissioner, and a host of other issues.

4.3.2 Demarcation of national constituencies

The constituencies often determine the patterns of violence. Sadar (city center) areas are more affected by the violence. In a relative sense, rural centers in the remote areas face less violent activities. However, in one narrative, the respondent observed that due to the development of transportation and road infrastructure, violence has penetrated into remote areas as well. Hired mastans can easily travel to remote villages to serve the purpose of the recruiter elite. In one narrative, it is also observed that people of the Char land are usually violent in nature, as they have to survive through physical fighting with each other. The same is reflected in the violence during the elections.

⁵⁷ Ferdous Arfina Osman (2010) Bangladesh Politics: Confrontation, Monopoly and Crisis in Governance,

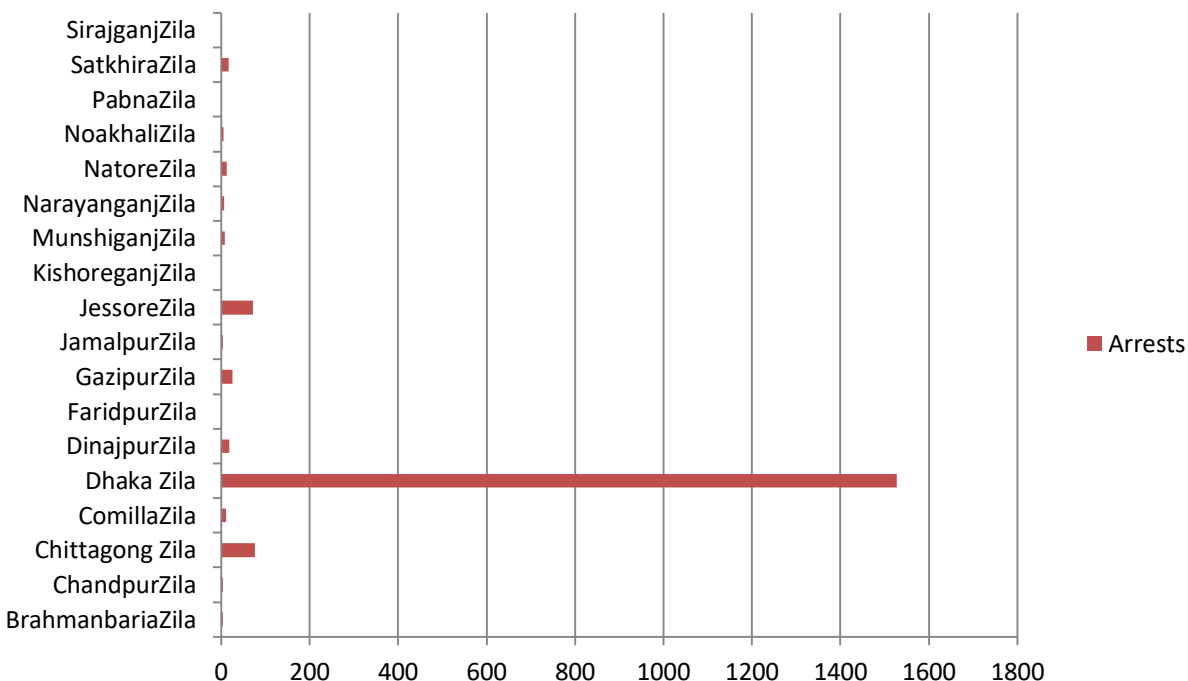
Asian Journal of Political Science, Volume 18, 2010 - Issue 3.

Furthermore, demarcation of electoral areas has also been identified as an issue to instigate violence in certain areas. During the election, some constituencies, or parts of a constituency are seen as ‘vote bank’ or ‘stronghold’ of a political party where that party hopes for a massive victory. Therefore, a change in the demarcation of a constituency would potentially impact a candidate’s support base in the constituency. This often instigates a crisis between the candidate and the Election Commission. Moreover, this may also help in formulating a candidate’s behavior and attitude towards the inhabitants of the constituency.

4.3.3 Cases and detention by law-enforcement agencies

Respondents also highlighted that the court cases based on unsubstantiated evidence against one’s political opponent and the role of the police in alleged illegal detention of the political opposition cause significant violence prior, during and post-election periods. It is usually the party in power which exploits the law enforcement agencies to suppress the leaders and activists of the political opposition.

Figure 8: Arrest of political opponents



In Khulna, a respondent from the opposition political group claimed that so many cases are filed in the lower and higher courts against the activists and leaders of his party; therefore, it becomes impossible for them to be in the field and coordinate the elections. A few other respondents, across different districts, discussed the role of the law-enforcement agencies in the elections. In most of the cases

they remained very critical of their inefficient role. It is also alleged that the police work closely with the government. Therefore, the incumbent government wants to exploit the situation and utilize a police force for political gains.

4.3.4 Illegal arms and drugs

Bangladesh is surrounded by India on three sides and Myanmar and a large portion of the country’s Southern border is surrounded by the Bay of Bengal. Given the geographical location of Bangladesh it is a suitable place for transit of illegal arms and drugs. Newspaper reports show that several bordering districts and zones are being used as arms and drugs entry points and transit through the country.

According to intelligence sources, there are at least 119 points on the border, which are used to smuggle these firearms. The majority of the arms shipments is entering the country via the border points in Chapainawabganj, Benapole, Satkhira, Comilla and Brahmanbaria.⁵⁸ According to the Dhaka Tribune report from 2012 to 2016 the numbers of cases filed on illegal arms have been rising at alarming rate. The report reveals:

Table 4: Cases under illegal arms act

Cases filed in last five years under the illegal arms act	
Year	Number of Cases
2012	1115
2013	1517
2014	2023
2015	2081
2016 (Jan-Oct)	1901

Source: Dhaka Tribune, “Use of illegal firearms on rise,” available at: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2016/11/13/use-illegal-firearms-rise/>, November 13, 2016.

⁵⁸ Use of illegal firearms on rise, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2016/11/13/use-illegal-firearms-rise/>

The proliferations of illegal firearms and explosives have now become widespread and easily available in the society. The end-use of small arms is not only confined to a specific cause or against a particular ethnic group or community but also used during election violence. Armed cadres are influential catalyst to the election related violence in Bangladesh. The underworld cadres groups also played

significant roles in pre and post-election violence on the issues of vote rigging, nomination business, foiling election campaigns of the opponents. Our newspaper resources suggested that widespread illegal small arms had been used in election related violence. The data table from the newspaper sources is presented below.

Table 5: Types of weapons used in election related violence

Types of weapons used in election related violence in 1991			
Tools of violence	Number of Incidents	Deaths	Injuries
Blunt weapon	21	24	197
Improvised explosive device (IED)	5	4	76
Sharp weapon	3	1	31
Small Arms	19	13	210
Types of weapons used in election related violence in 1996 (15 February)			
Tools of violence	Number of Incidents	Deaths	Injuries
Blunt weapon	23	5	314
Fire	13	4	77

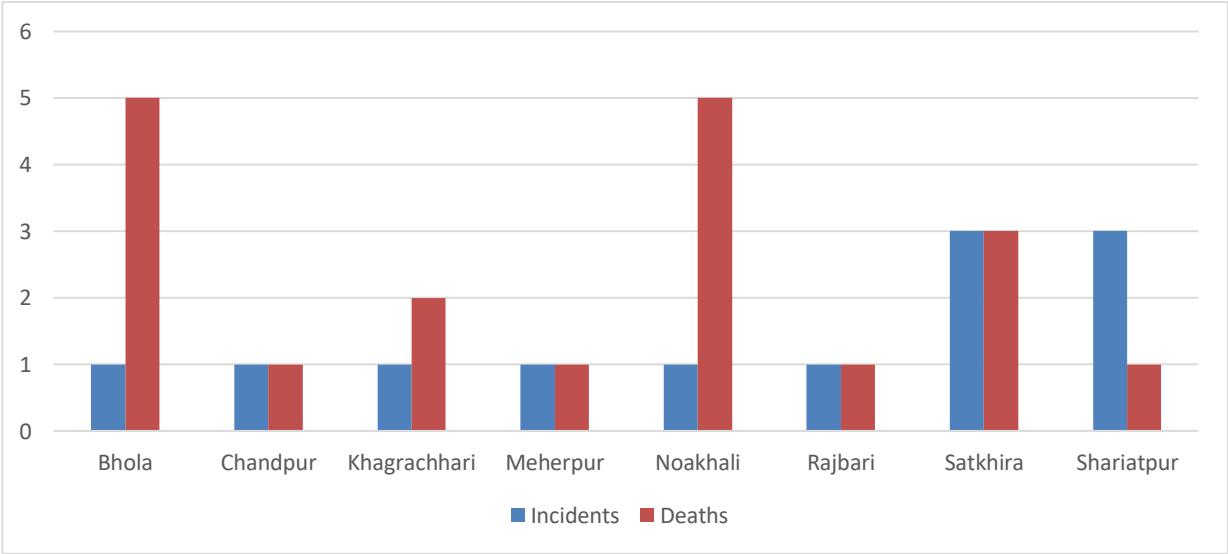
Improvised explosive device (IED)	30	7	473
Sharp weapon	1	0	3
Small Arms	56	20	641
Types of weapons used in election related violence in 1996 (12 June)			
Tools of violence	Number of Incidents	Deaths	Injuries
Blunt weapon	48	13	788
Fire	1	0	0
Improvised explosive device (IED)	7	2	67
Light weapons	6	3	28
Sharp weapon	11	8	47
Small arms	9	5	82
Types of weapons used in election related violence in 2001 (1 October)			
Tools of violence	Number of Incidents	Deaths	Injuries
Artisanal firearms	3	0	3
Blunt weapon	59	6	59
Fire	9	0	9
Improvised explosive device (IED)	34	51	34
Light weapons	6	3	6

Sharp weapon	20	7	20
Small arms	145	82	145
Types of weapons used in election related violence in 2008 (28 December)			
Tools of violence	Number of Incidents	Deaths	Injuries
Artisanal firearms	1	0	1
Blunt weapon	39	6	322
Fire	2	0	0
Improvised explosive device (IED)	1	0	0
Sharp weapon	16	4	92
Small arms	116	9	984
Types of weapons used in election related violence in 2014 (12 January)			
Tools of violence	Number of Incidents	Deaths	Injuries
Artisanal firearms	1	5	0
Blunt weapon	40	16	517
Fire	41	13	60
Improvised explosive device (IED)	45	38	406
Sharp weapon	24	20	30
Small Arms	76	37	2330

From the primary data from bordering districts of Satkhira, Feni and Chittagong, several respondents of the micro-narratives have

mentioned about the use of illegal arms and drugs in election related violence.

Figure 9: Gunfight at district level in Elections



Arun Sarker from Satkhira Sadar mentioned that Satkhira is a centre of arms and drugs smuggling. Here the number of drug and arms users have increased. Mainly political elites

created syndicate to control these businesses. They are always out of the control of law and order and change of regime. Nobody could harm them.

Box 3

“Because of the bordering area, Satkhira is a place for drug and arms smuggling. There is a nexus among politics-drugs and arms in Satkhira. They bring huge money, which is used to maintain cadres and private arms groups. These groups are used during showdown with individual candidate’s power and muscle during the nomination process. To buy nomination, leaders also use this black money. We have witnessed the sharp rise of the use of illegal arms during the election from 2001. Arms mostly arrived from India via border. These arms are used to capture polling centers and cast fake votes.”

Bidyut Khan from Kaliganj, Satkhira

“Because Satkhira is close to Indian border drugs and arms have found safer place in this district. Political leaders patronized these illegal smugglings and maintain balance between the police and smugglers. In return they get money and muscle supports from them during the election. He also mentioned that Tala-Kolaroa is famous route of smuggling. There is a cattle trade between India and Bangladesh in this border. When cattle arrive in this part of the border drugs and arms enter in disguise. There is sharp increase of cattle business just before the election because drugs and arms also enter during this time. Young generation has been addicted so they are dependent on the political leaders for petty cash. They are used as armed cadres during violence.”

Monoranjana Mandal from Tala, Satkhira

“In my opinion there are not more than five licensed pistols in Satkhira but in 2014 we saw thousands of such weapons in the hands of party members. In 2013 Jamaat has used thousands of small arms, explosives, petrol bombs and sharp weapons to attack AL people, police and election officials. I think that both BNP and AL are desperate to control this area so the next election will see new round of deadly violence. In election time arms are being used to intimidate opponents, capturing polling centers, vote rigging etc.”

Khaier from Kolaroa, Satkhira

“Drug and arms are rampantly available in Feni. They spread because of its location near Indian border. Indian border is just 3 miles from here. Heroine, yaba, phensidyl, etc. drugs are spreading day by day. Drug addiction increases crimes and decreases social value. Many godfathers are involved in drug business. High profile people are involved in this. Political environment is peaceful but these factors are degrading social environment. Himu from Mohipal, Feni said drug is another important causes of violence. It leads to increase in illegal activities and conflicts. Drug diminishes our sense of right and wrong. If I need money for taking drugs, I won’t be hesitant to go to BNP programs. A few days back one of our junior brother Shakil was killed. Shakil was innocent. It was the outcome of rivalry but it was not so severe. The murderers were addicted. We want justice for Shakil. Police said to wait as the legal process is still going on.”⁵⁹

Sameer from Feni Sadar

⁵⁹ Micro narrative study in Satkhira conducted in April 2018.

4.3.5 Mastanocracy

The existence of godfather-*mastan* system in Bangladesh leads to involvement of mastans in politics and election violence. *Mastan* or the organized crime syndicates are patronized by political persons under the protection rackets and get impunity; and in return they work as armed cadres for their political god fathers. They play a central role in many localities in Bangladesh providing central strength in the street level political events during the election. Mastans have been used for vote fixers during election. They have maintained relationships and linkages with high-level politicians, who benefit financially and offer political and judicial protection in return.

Some *mastans* have created wholly or partly legitimate businesses; others have entered politics directly and each has their own coterie of goondas. According to David Lewis, mastans in Bangladesh engage in everyday state i.e. play as political fixers, bullying political opponents and employ violence and or its threats. According to the survey

conducted in Dhaka slums, mastans are filling up the gaps between politicians and slum dwellers. During the election they are used to manipulate voters and mobilize vote banks in exchange for money, protection or even threats.⁶⁰ The respondents from Feni in micro-narratives study remarked that during 1990s Joynal Hajari reigned with a mix of brutality and also generosity in many cases and had spread ‘silent Terror’ among the people of Feni, which includes murder and acts on impulse.

Hazaris’ have dominated the area for decades and there are also a good number of BNP leaders and workers in Feni. Respondents from Feni mentioned that when Joynal Hazari was in power, political rivalry took place at different brutal level. There was a division among the locality or *Mohalla* according to which, party dominated a certain area. If anyone crossed the line or came to opponents area then it turned into violence to massacre of the party members. But there were no barrier to study in college, you can peacefully come to college but can’t dare to involve in politics

⁶⁰Arild Engelsen Ruud (2014), The political bully in Bangladesh on “Patronage as Politics in South Asia ed. by Anastasia Piliavsky, pp. 305-325.

openly against the ruling party in 1990s. While Rani from Dagonbhuyan, Feni said, “I observed the condition where proxy vote was given and many crucial election centers were being captured or invaded by Joynal Hazari’s people to manipulate the vote banks. Joynal Hazari solely controlled and dominated the Feni in 1990s and he was a hot headed arrogant man who rarely showed any respect towards common people or any other political leader in his area and shot open fire now and then.”

4.3.6 Erosion of inter-party tolerance

Local young leaders who lead different groups are affiliated with different political parties. They were active during the elections campaign. They worked for specific candidates. As they lived and did politics in the same locality, they maintained good relations among themselves. But in recent times that relations has faded away. One respondent from Chattogram, Mr. Mohubullah who is a shopkeeper near Polo-ground said,

This area is politically very sensitive because there is polling center in Railway Public School. In 1991 election, I saw this election was relatively peaceful. Mohiuddin stood from AL and

Noman Sahib contested from BNP. During the election campaign local leaders of BNP went from door to door for votes. They got the result as Noman won the election. But now there are some new people like Limon group who is a local Chatro League leader, he has no relations with BNP young leaders. This group is very aggressive and gives no space to others. They try to intimidate BNP leaders, show arms and sometime even beat them just to prevent them to organize any political events. In 1996 15 February election, I saw lots of violence. BNP arranged this election and we rejected. On the Election Day I together with my fellow party members went to railway public school center and snatched away the ballot box. Police fled away when we arrived in the center. We used charcoal to fire bullets to create panic among the police. We put live bullet in charcoal which blows out due to heat and create huge noise like bullet fire. That created panic among the guards. In the past, I saw both BNP and AL sat in election offices during the election and do election campaigns. That time it was a festive mood. Later we kept distance and built wall

between the offices. Now politics means fighting, there is no dialogue, no relations only fighting and capturing power.

Newspaper sources show the erosion of tolerance among the contesting political parties in election has caused major incidents of violence.

Table 6: Magnitude of inter-party violence

Inter-party election violence			
Elections	Incidents	Deaths	Injuries
5 th Parliamentary Election 1991	39	31	590
6 th Parliamentary Election 1996 (15 February)	56	18	1382
7 th Parliamentary Election 1996 (15 June)	51	27	979
8 th Parliamentary Election 2001	345	150	9174
9 th Parliamentary Election 2008	73	10	836
10 th Parliamentary Election 2014	77	41	2603

Now party members go to political procession and campaign only for money. They do not believe in political ideology. In his opinion the main cause behind the election problem is the image and power politics of the local goons. They try hard to help their candidate win. To this end they intimidate voters, opponents and create violence in locality to capture the field. On the election day, if they sense that their candidate will lose the election, then they attack the polling centers.

Advocate Samer Kumar said “There is violence in 1991 and 1996 elections. When I was a presiding officer, fighting, bombing, breaking ballot boxes etc. took place in election. These occurrences happened in Joynal Hazari’s period. At the time of Joynal Hazari, Nasir was openly shot at Trunk road in a procession (he strongly repeated the word-procession). Feni was known as ‘Lebanon’ because of fighting, torturing, shooting, killing, etc. These things happened in the periods of VP Joynal and Joynal Hazari.”

Himu from Feni said “*ek jongol e ki duti bagh thake*” (do two tigers live in the same jungle?). In 1991, Joynal Abedin Hazari came to power despite the victory of BNP. He was also an MP in 1985. He again came to power. During 1991

election, he wrecked and dismantled some of the election centres of BNP. He did not come to power through fair means. He was not elected for his popularity among people rather he could win because of his muscle power. Feni Steering battalion was more active from 1991. They were busy in looting, murder, extortion, repression of opposition party. Their shelter was Joynal Hazari’s home. Situation remained the same in 1996. Loss of life and things occurred at the time. Almost 63 student leaders from both AL and BNP died in 1991-1996 and 131 people from both party have died till 2001. More AL people have died than BNP.

The tools of mastans and goons are evolving in Khulna. Local goons in the past used Seven Gear knife. They do not use it, but they keep this to terrorize people. Now they have guns, explosives etc. So the thin line of peace has gone. When election is around, these local goons offer their muscle powers to the party candidates. They now engage in violence in the name of supporting their candidates. Drug dealing, spreading of influence, rent seeking, controlling shrimp cultivation, fisheries, bus and tempo stops are also behind election time violence. The group in power thinks that their result is uncertain so they need to keep their

control on these resources. Whereas opponent groups think that as they can be elected in the election they are equal now so they attack on their opponents.

4.3.7 Intra-party conflict

Electoral violence also occurred in the form of internecine factional conflicts within the political parties during the period of the study. Factional rivalry in the main political parties in Bangladesh has direct manifestation in violence during pre and post-election times. Respondents from the study areas have shared their concerns about the intra-party rivalry within the big political parties which lead to attacks, sabotages and even killing and disruption of public lives. The absence of intra-party democratic practices gives space to some leaders and their followers to commit violence and project powers to gain access to party patronage. Party patronage extends to securing leadership position, controlling resources and above all getting the party ticket to contest local and national level elections. To this end intra-party rivalry erupts when all want to show their power and commitment to the party. This intra-party rivalry becomes highly visible

during the nomination process in elections particularly during the parliamentary elections.

Firoz Alam, from Feni district said:

Intra party rivalry has been visible since 2008 election in Feni. The winning party AL has faced the rise of different factional groups in Feni since then. At the Union and Upazilla levels several factions have emerged with direct patronization of the local leaders. A peaceful election may not be possible to organize where violence won't be a part of this. In 1990s there were extreme violence and many people got killed especially in Lemua and Shonagazi. And now it has turned into internal conflict within the parties but the casualty figure is reducing whereas political revenge killing is still there. Like, a chairman of Fulgaji named Ekramul Haque got killed in broad daylight and there was a rumour that his own party members were involved in this killing mission.

The cadre-based politics adopted by the major political parties was one of the main reasons for the intra-party rivalry. Cadre-based groups active in local politics try to secure their leader's position in the party. To this end, they commit violence and demonstrate raw power. The second reason behind the intra-party rivalry is ensuring access to financial means through illegal/irregular activities.

Mohubullah, Chattogram said:

Now party members go to political procession and campaign only for money. They do not believe in political ideology. The main cause behind the election problem is the image and power politics of the local goons. They tried hard to secure their leader's nomination from the party. During the vote they try hard to intimidate voters, opponents and create violence in locality to capture the field. On Election Day if they anticipate their candidate will lose the election they then attack the polling centers and rig votes.

Saifullah Sumon, Feni Sadar, Feni said:

After 1996, both AL and BNP started 'cadre politics' which involved both physical and verbal violence. But today this tendency has spread. It gives rise to a new type of violence which involves factional competition over resources and power inside the party. Internal fighting within the party members for struggle for power is a regular issue now in Bangladesh. The more power someone captures the more enemies he/she makes. This brought the killing of Ekramul Haque who was the chairman of Fulgazi Union. He was killed by several men in broad daylight in the middle of the road in front of Bilashi Cinema Hall and more than 40 persons have been accused of being involved in this killing mission."

4.3.8 Capturing polling centres and vote rigging

Capturing polling centers and vote counting is a source of tension and violence in the post-election situation. Normally, presiding officer and his agent disqualify ballot paper if they find the paper has multiple seals or is sealed outside the borderline. In that case, this paper is going to be void. So after the vote all party members gather in front of the center to observe the vote count. They do not believe each other or the polling officers. At times, violence breaks out in some polling centers after the vote count and declaration of result.

Abu Taher from Chattogram Tigerpass area mentioned:

Normally election violence happens on the Election Day. When any candidate foresees that voters would cast more votes for their opponent, then they come to the polling centers and create problems. They prevent voters to register and cast their votes, spread rumors that law enforcers will come and storm in the centers and engage in violence with the

opposition's polling agents. Finally, the blast cocktails bomb are used to create panic in the center. When media and police arrive in the scene, they just vanish.

Describing her experience, Runa Akhter a school teacher in Sitakunda said:

In 2014, I was working as a presiding officer in Sitakunda Girls' School. On the Election Day I saw local AL young leaders came to our polling centers and asked us to just watch and keep quiet. Then they started casting votes. As BNP has no candidates, we did not find any BNP activists in the center. Therefore there was run-hit type violence in our polling center.

4.3.9 War Criminal Trials and resultant violence

The parliamentary election in 2014 was marked by widespread violence and countrywide terror attacks on government officials, minorities, political party members, secularist and cultural activists. There are deep divides between the ruling parties: AL and its 14 party coalition and BNP with its 18-party

alliance. Prior to 2013, BNP continued to boycott most sessions of the Parliament, preferring to pursue its demands through agitation and protests. Hartals (strikes) periodically resulted in shut down of the entire country for hours. Deaths from political violence increased from 169 in 2012 to 259 between January and October 2013. In November, almost 50 more people died in political clashes, 19 of them in one 71-hour hartal on November 26–29.

Another round of hartals called in early December resulted in 22 more deaths.⁶¹ This difficult political milieu deteriorated further over the war crimes trials. These were conducted under the International Criminal Tribunals (ICT) set up in 2009 to investigate and prosecute people charged with crimes that had been committed by the local collaborators of the Pakistani military during Bangladesh's war of liberation in 1971. The formation of the ICT, and the judgments they began to deliver in 2013, the BNP-led alliance maintained that the entire exercise was procedurally problematic, politically motivated.

On the issue of CTG, BNP and its alliance had staged massive protest and rejected the 2014 parliamentary election. The institution of a temporary, non-partisan CTG came about in 1996 because of the mistrust about the election time government and authority. By the Supreme Court ruling in 2011, the AL government abolished the institution of the CTG in 2011 through the 15th Amendment to the Constitution. The BNP protested vehemently and continues to do so. The 5 January 2014 general elections were followed by a yearlong ongoing challenge to the country's democracy. Leading up to the elections were protests, blockades, *hartals* (strikes), uncontrolled violence, and a boycott of the election by the opposition BNP. Running unopposed in most districts, the AL won 232 of the 300 parliamentary seats.

⁶¹ Bangladesh in 2013: Year of Confusions, Confrontations, Concerns Author(s): Ahrar Ahmad

Source: *Asian Survey*, Vol. 54, No. 1, A Survey of Asia in 2013 (January/February 2014), pp. 190-198.

4.4 Symptoms of Electoral Violence

This section briefly presents the various symptoms of election violence in Bangladesh. It is based on the primary and secondary data collected from newspapers and micro-narratives from 10 districts i.e. Chattogram, Feni, Sylhet, Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat, Jhalokathi, Sirajganj, Mymensingh and Banderban. These symptoms are the part of the everyday “contentious politics” or collective political struggle including recurring inter-party conflict, individual enmity, resource control, minority repressions and criminal offences in Bangladesh. The existence of inter-party tensions, mistrusts and thrust for gaining power and control over state authority leads to political non-cooperation and erosion of inter-party tolerance in Bangladesh which have direct manifestation in election violence.

Among the major trends, exchange of provocative words, slogans and threats are regular phenomena in election campaigns, during and in the post-election stages. Often exchange of words and slogans between two party processions broke into hit and run and violence. It spills over when one side starts burning properties and cars. On the other hand,

in many areas parties were restrained to engage in violence just to save their image among the voters during the election campaign. But on the day of elections that does not last. On the issue of tearing poster and festoon violence broke in many places. Major symptoms of election violence in Bangladesh are presented below.

4.4.1 Massive showdown

The major symptom of election violence according to our primary and secondary findings is massive showdown by the political parties in any given constituency. After the declaration of election schedule by the Election Commission, party cadres arrange massive showdown in the locality. The purpose of such showdown is to project their muscle power and intimidate potential rivals (opponent) candidates in election. Generally they stage motorcycle showdown with hundreds of cadres. Another purpose is to intimidate any potential intra party rival and independent candidates who do not have political backing by the big parties.

Farzana Siquiqua, Madina Market Sylhet:

Though there was no massive political violence in Sylhet during election but the influence of Jamaat Shibir is still strong in this area. Also BNP and AL party cadres are active in this area. They separately join meetings, organize showdown and procession program of their parties during election to show their party strength and power. They wanted to show the opposition party who they are and to what extent they can go. It creates panic among general and peace loving party members.

4.4.2 Hate speech

Exchange of provocative words, slogans and threats are regular phenomena in election campaigns. Sometime exchange of words and slogans between two party processions break into hit and run and violence. It spills over when one side starts burning properties and cars. On the other hand in many areas parties were restrained to engage in violence just to save their image to the voters during the election campaign.

Sejuty, Tala, Satkhira:

Politics has lost its ideology and morality. Now people do politics for gaining power and therefore they are spreading hatred towards their opponents. Jamaat-Shibir has strong presence in Satkhira. Also AL has gained power in this district. The major rivalry is between AL and Jamaat. On the issue of the future parliament election to be held in 2018, city AL has arranged a meeting in the city where city convener of AL staged massive showdown with around 1000 people. In this procession they started giving provocative slogans which led to violence between different factions of AL and Jamaat in the city.

Sudipto Chowdhury, Shahjalal Uposhohor, Sylhet:

In 2001, after election I felt like a member of minority when I came to SUST. I heard for the first time the word “Loghu” in a political meeting of BNP in 2001. This word was not there in 1996. This word came in 2001. The 2001 violence was devastating, it was

just like the riots of Gujrat. It was unthinkable and terrible. It was so heinous, they raped pregnant women. They divided us as *Muslim dol* (party) and *Hindu dol* (party).

4.4.3 Intimidation

Political rival groups, independent candidates and intra party factional groups are intimidated in several ways during the election period. This is considered as an important symptom of election violence. Intimidation includes fake case, verbal threats, massive showdown of cadres and arms and sporadic verbal threats to the opponents.

Sumon from Dagonbhuiyan, Feni:

In 2014, BNP boycotted the election and no nominations were submitted from the parties to compete. Other party filed the nominations but later withdrew it before the Election Day and without any opposition, Nijam Hajari was elected as the Member of Parliament from Feni 2 and another two seats also somehow

ended up on the side of AL in disguise of independent leaders. People of Feni know that those nominations were actually withdrawn because of force or threat given by Hazari's people who made sure that no opposition rally or meetings were held against AL during election. Now political parties, particularly ruling party changes the trends of violence by using different tactics in indirect way to evade the opponents and spread a silent terror to bring the opposition down.

Mr. Khayer from Kolaroa, Satkhira:

Because of inter-party conflict one party tries to trap opponent party members. In this case, they use police. They file false cases and put them on the run to leave their locality to avoid arrest. Ruling party in Satkhira uses police to arrest their opponents or force them to leave the locality.

4.4.4 Sabotage

During elections political parties sabotage opponents election campaigns which at times lead to electoral violence in Bangladesh. Distortion of candidates posters, wall graffiti, banners, festoons and vehicles are the major acts of election sabotage. It also includes call for public meetings in the same place and on the same date by rival groups. Several respondents said call for meeting in the same place and same date disrupts the peaceful environment of election. Local administration in response at times imposes 144 section to prevent election meeting for all parties in the locality. Another example of sabotage is building wall and fence between election offices and increase security of the party offices and prevent entry of any person who might have different political affiliation. These acts heighten tension among the party members which sometimes lead to violence.

Jahangir Alam from Kolaria, Satkhira:

All political parties create problem to sabotage their opponents' election campaigns. They try to distort festoon, posters and banners of the opponents to destroy peace and harmony in the area. They sometime break the vehicles and turn down rickshaw-vans which were used for election campaign.

Younus Ali from Satkhira:

During election we saw party cadres staged massive showdown and put their posters on the opponents' posters at night. That created tension among the rival candidates. Sometimes there were clashes between them on the issue of distortion of posters and festoons.

4.4.5 Visibility of strangers

Our respondents opined that during the election they have observed movement and visibility of young people in the locality. These persons were visible in party election meetings and gatherings. There was also mobilization of local mastan and rent seekers groups during the election. In many instances these cadres have been used for election violence.

Faruk Hasan, Bagerhat Sadar:

In 1996 election I saw young people came from Dhaka and Khulna city in Bagerhat. They were armed cadres of Chatro Dal and Chatro League. They came to participate in the election campaigns. They were fashionable, wearing sunglass and jeans. They had different walking styles. They moved together by motorbikes. They smoked in a different manner. They worked as a deterrent force, but at times they participated in violence in Bagerhat.

Abu Taher from Chattogram:

In our area several armed groups were active. They are named by their leaders i.e. Siraj Group, Bachhu group, Noman group, Babul, Shamim and Limon groups. They brought their cadres from Feni, Laksmipur during election in 1996 and 2001. They moved together and engaged in violence.

4.4.6 Harassing religious and ethnic minorities

Harassing religious and ethnic minorities is a major symptom of violence during the election period in Bangladesh. The existing social stratification leads to inherent societal abuse and discrimination based on religious affiliations in Bangladesh. This goes rampant during the election. There was harassment of minority girls and women, abductions, land and cattle grabbing happened in many minority areas during election. In all these harassment incidents minority status of the victims played a role. The perpetrators believe that minorities are being used as vote bank and can play

significant role in voting. When the election is close, harassment of religious and ethnic minorities increases in Bangladesh.

Md. Jainal Abedin from Feni Sadar, Feni:

In Bangladesh, minorities face difficulties during both AL and BNP regimes. They face violence in almost all periods. They blame BNP government for torture and violence. On the contrary, during the AL regime they have to struggle for their land, property, etc.

Kamal Uddin, Feni Sadar, Feni:

The post-election violence of Jamaat Shibir in 2001 continued

till 2003 and Hindu minorities were harassed, attacked and Hindu girls faced humiliation and remained insecure especially in Sonagazi.

Kanon Das from Baghbari Sylhet:

In 2014 there were few clashes and bombing, but nobody got injured. There was an arson attack in my brother's store, and 225 more stores in Govindaganj shopping centre before the day of the verdict of Kamaruzzaman's war crime trial and people suspect that Jamaat might be involved behind the arson.



5

Election as Celebration

Despite a less optimistic scenario on the types, causes, and symptoms of electoral violence in the earlier sections of the report, national elections are often observed as celebration for the voters, politicians, candidates, and the Election Commission. The amount of resources used in organizing national elections, the percentage of voter turnout on the day of election, the ratio of the participation of female voters, and the sense of empowerment of the voters, even if it is only for a day—all these factors highlight that national elections are widely celebrated across the country. Analysts, experts, and policymakers should not neglect this positive side of national elections in Bangladesh. The following factors highlight the celebratory aspect of elections.

5.1. Voter Turnout

Voter turnout in previous national elections suggest that the voters were very positive and remained excited in casting their votes on the

Election Day. The following table shows an upward moving trend of participation by the registered voters in the national elections from 1991-2008.

Table 7: Percentage of voter turnout

Year	Voter Turnout (%)
1991	55
1996 (12 June)	74
2001	74.88
2008	87

Source: IFES Website, http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2023_08.htm

From the narratives of the local population, it is also observed that elections bring a festive mood among the voters and they would like to cast their votes joyfully and responsibly.

Himu from Mohipal, Feni, for instance, narrated,

In our childhood, we were very excited about the elections. We used to follow the election campaigns and possessions. The party campaigners wanted to convince people to cast their votes in their favor. There were some minor conflicts, however, people went to polling stations to cast their votes.

Md. Ali Majed of Sylhet also observed,

The violence took place in some areas of my constituency between two major parties, however, these were not major incidents. There existed political rivals from the same family in my village. They might have campaigned against each other during the day, however, they have stayed together with peace during the night.

Tensions may have existed during the election campaign and often there were incidents when two opposite political groups gathered intimidating one another leading to conflicts but people ignored these events and participated in the elections in millions.

⁶² Farah Deebea Chowdhury, “Problems of Women's Participation in Bangladesh Politics”, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 98:404, 2009, pp. 555-567, DOI: 10.1080/00358530903151748.

5.2. Female participation during national elections

Bangladesh is one of the few democratic states which has a woman prime minister and a woman leader of the opposition in the national parliament since the revival of the parliamentary system of government in 1991. Women's participation in the electoral system is considered as a critical part of the parliamentary system in Bangladesh. The Constitution of Bangladesh offers a provision of 45 reserved seats for the women, elected according to the strengths of the political parties in proportion to their strengths in the parliament. The 9th Parliament had 6.33% directly elected women members and 18.55% women members from the reserved seats.⁶² This has a positive impact on the number of woman voters in the national elections.

A commentator at a national conference had pointed out that over 70 percent of women voted in the 1996 parliamentary elections, with women being actively engaged in the electoral process as voters and campaigners.⁶³ During the 9th national election in 2009, the total voter

⁶³ Centre for Policy Dialogue, *Political Participation of Women in Bangladesh*, CPD Dialogue report No. 37, 2000, p.3, available at <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN021439.pdf>. Accessed on 1 August 2018.

strength stood at 80 million. According to the voter list of the Election Commission, women comprised some 51% of the 81 million registered voters.⁶⁴ However, in 2017, the updated voter list counts 52.19 million male voters and 50.08 million female voters with an average increase of 2.7 million voters annually.⁶⁵

The narratives also highlighted how women were enthusiastic about casting their votes. According to Kanon Das of Sylhet, for instance,

When I was a teenager, I used to visit the polling centres with my mother and aunts. We were all properly dressed up with festive moods. I still remember an incident in the 1991 elections. Two rival groups started fighting at the outskirt of the polling centre. They were using local weapons, such as long sticks. At one stage, the police came and stopped them. The voting was stopped during the chaos for a few hours. However, my mother and other women waited until the voting resumed and left the place only after casting

their votes. It seemed normal during the elections.

Hosne Akhter from Khulna also observed that elections are festivals for both women and men. Homemakers and elder women in the families formed groups and went to cast their votes in their respective areas. She also told that she had hardly witnessed violence or chaos in Khulna during the elections in the recent years. “Everybody is known to each other in a small area”—could be a potential reason, as reflected in her narrative. This bars them to get engaged in a protracted conflict.

5.3. Voter: an empowered person for a day

The Election Day is not only a festive day for the voter but also a day of being empowered as the latter is in a unique positing of deciding the fate of the election! Before the election, popular media often portray how candidates embrace the voters irrespective of religious, class or ethnic affiliations. Voters are also aware of this attitude of the candidates and they make remarks, such as “we would like to enjoy this cordialness and access to you after

⁶⁴ UNDP, *Bangladesh returns to democracy*, 5 January 2009, available at <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/articles/2009/01/05/bangladesh-returns-to-democracy.html>. Accessed on 1 August 2018.

⁶⁵ Moinul Hoque Chowdhury, “Women voters much less than male voters,” *Bdnews24.com*, 3 Jan 2014,

available at <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2017/01/03/women-voters-much-less-than-men-in-bangladesh>. Accessed on 1 August 2018.

the election.” Ashraful Haque from Sylhet narrated that casting a vote in the election is a responsibility and it empowers him immensely by doing his duty for the society. He also mentioned that it gives him satisfaction when his favorite candidate wins the election.

Candidates often extend their arms towards the voters and embrace them, touch the feet of

elderly voters as a mark of respect and seek blessings from them prior to the election. This empowers the voters for the moment and inspires them to cast their votes on the day of the election. This also creates a system of accountability between the voters and candidates, with the former in a position of revolting against the latter.

6

What is to be done?

This section of the report offers a set of policy and action-related recommendations for the Election Commission. It categorizes the recommendations into general and specific set of actions for the Commission to be implemented in short to medium and long-term period. The recommendations are placed in consideration of the diversity of patterns of violence and its symptoms in the colored areas discussed in this report.

6.1 General Recommendations

1. Smart and digital technology: The Election Commission may use smart and digital technology. Digital technology and social media have the potential of creating awareness, monitoring, and responding to violence. However, the Commission needs to be aware of the risks of using digital technology in the context of Bangladesh where

a significant number of the population is uneducated and do not have access to digital technology. The use of digital technology and social media monitoring of violence should be considered as options in conjunction with other conventional reporting systems so that together they overcome inequalities in digital access and use.

2. Decentralization of the polling centers: In the study, it is observed that the polling centers are the critical place of violence during the day of the elections. Violence often goes viral when the news spreads that miscreants are attacking the polling centers. This study, therefore, proposes that a single polling center in any constituency should not exceed from more than 500-750 voters. This will discourage the miscreants to conduct violence as the impact of vandalizing one or a few centers will not be severe. Furthermore, the law enforcing agencies will move faster with the news of

primary violence one booth, hence, the vandalism will not sustain for long. In addition to schools in the current practice, the Election Commission should be able to use local religious institutions, banks, post-offices, other government offices as the polling centers. This is broadly practiced in most of the developed countries, such as the USA and UK. Bangladesh can also effectively increase the number of the polling centers to avoid the damages of violence in one or a few polling centers during the elections.

3. Institutionalizing pre-election debates:

Interparty intolerance in the local areas is a common observation in this study. The Election Commission should be able to institutionalize pre-election debates and dialogues among the candidates in the local constituency. The civil society organizations are already conducting similar activities in some areas. Nevertheless, the Commission should be part of this activity. They can conduct such meetings in collaboration with the local/national civil society platforms.

4. Code of Conduct: The Election Commission prepares a code of conduct for the candidates for different elections. The EC has updated the Code of Conduct for Parliament

Elections, 2008, ahead of the 10th parliamentary election which was scheduled on 5 January 2014. To stop the use of hate speech and aggressive languages by the candidates, this study proposes a strict monitoring mechanism in the Code of Conduct so that the codes are effectively implemented and monitored by a dedicated and committed workforce of the Commission.

5. Demarcation of constituency: This study proposes a scientific approach for the Election Commission in demarcating electoral constituencies in Bangladesh. It suggests that the Commission may need to follow some international practices and then contextualize this as it needs to be applied in Bangladesh. In the UK, a proposed constituency has to comply with two numerical limits. First, the constituency should not exceed 5% of the registered voters, and second, the area of a constituency must be no more than 13,000 square kilometers. In the case of Bangladesh, this study proposes an increase in the number of members of National Parliament from 300 to 500. Furthermore, the Commission can also demarcate each constituency with no more than 2 million registered voters on an average.

6. Divisional parliament: This study, as a long-term reform objective, proposes divisional parliaments in Bangladesh. Decentralization in the parliamentary governance is an utmost important observation, which will have a long-term impact in lessening the degree of violence. The study proposes that the Commission should be able to offer a roadmap of decentralizing the parliament according to 8 divisions of the state.

6.2 Specific Recommendations

1. Voter education: The Election Commission should continue specific programs to increase awareness of the voters as a regular activity. It should conduct a knowledge gap research to understand the need for education and design its intervention according to the findings of the research. The Commission, in collaboration with the local non-government organization, conducts such awareness and education programs for both old and new voters. For the new voters, it needs to use attractive behavioral change communication (BCC) methods, such as posters, street drama, songs, street arts and the like. Use of social and mainstream media will also be helpful in this regard. Voter

education should be incorporated in the long-term activity planning of the Commission.

2. Election Commission and the Law Enforcing Agencies: The Commission needs to exercise its legal power to offer directions to the law enforcing agencies during the time of the national and local elections. It should increase its human resources to effectively coordinate with the local administration and law enforcing agencies. Moreover, the new workforce of the Commission should be trained to monitor the task of these agencies in maintaining law and order and reducing electoral violence. The Commission ought to be able to offer appropriate directions to the police on how to avoid undue arrests or detention of innocent people during the elections. It requires a high-level of coordination between relevant ministries and security agencies. This needs to be conducted to avoid any political arrests or detention during the election period. Special mobile courts with magistrates under the jurisdiction of the Commission can be deployed three months before the election in the red areas (hot spots of electoral violence) who would monitor the situation of violence and bar undue arrests and detention.

3. Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA): In recent times, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, reiterated her stance to curtail down the size of the Cabinet and incorporate members of the parliament from the opposition to form an election time government as per the purview of the Constitution of Bangladesh. The Election Commission may want to propose that the responsibility of the MoHA might be given to an eminent and non-controversial political figure from the opposition or to a non-partisan eminent figure. The Commission should be able to advocate PM's idea in the long run for an effective and efficient use of law enforcing agencies during election time.

4. Early Warning System: The Election Commission should conduct a need analysis on developing an early warning system in the red, yellow, and green areas (and usual hotspots) of election-related violence. On the basis of the findings, it should be able to develop the early warning system by involving local actors, such as local youths, minority, NGOs, political leaders and others. They must be trained by the Commission to provide early information on any symptoms of violence in their respective areas using the most efficient form of medium.

The use of community/FM radio, TV channel, as mentioned earlier, and social media would be effective in this regard.

5. Hotspot: The Commission should be able to highlight the hotspots of violence. It may want to take the help of the leading database, such as the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO) of the Center for Genocide Studies, University of Dhaka, to identify red areas of violence using scientific and real-time approach. Hotspots should include areas of minority concentration, and higher patterns of general crime. More variables can be considered in identifying potential hotspots of violence prior, during and in the post-election time. The Election Commission must be able to devise a plan to observe the patterns of violence in the red hotspots from six months before the actual date of the elections.

6. Visibility of the Media: As part of the observation, the Commission may designate a team of journalists along with observers and arrange regular visits in the hotspots to cover the news of that area for the public media. The enhanced visibility of media persons as part of the embedded journalism in the hotspot will have a long-term impact in lessening the number and degree of electoral violence.

7. Election Commission in intra-party elections: As a long-term policy, the Commission should positively think about extending its role in the internal electoral processes of the political parties in Bangladesh. The Commission may play the role of an observer in the party councils to monitor the state of internal democracy in the political parties. Furthermore, they can also offer their observations as a suggestion to respective parties after the council. This observer status will promote the intra-party democratic culture and will indirectly influence in lessening the intra-party clash during their council votes and selection processes of party leaders.

8. Civil Society and Election Commission: The Election Commission must enhance its cooperation with the national and international civil society organizations. It should increase training opportunities for the local civil society to build their capacities in early warning systems to stop violence in advance. Moreover, in collaboration with the local civil society and other social groups, the Commission should be able to develop public awareness on specific areas, such as the

protection of women, minorities and other vulnerable groups in the society.

9. List of local *mastans*: The Election Commission should be informed about the updated list of the *mastans* and criminals at the local level. The local law enforcing agencies must be able to share this information well before the elections. In consultation with the local officers of the elections, these criminals must be barred from entering into the constituency a month before the actual date of the elections. Their movement will be monitored by the police and the Commission must receive an update on this.

10. Media and Election Commission: The Election Commission should primarily propose to set up its own Community/FM radio channel and in the long run it should be able to run its own TV Channel. The purpose of having its own media outlets is to offer real-time information to the citizens of Bangladesh. Having an own TV channel would be an expensive process, hence, the *Sangsad* TV channel of the BTV can be utilized by the Election Commission only during the time of the national elections when the parliamentary activities are dissolved and not aired in the TV. In addition, the Commission should be more

proactive in social media. It must actively use its Facebook and twitter accounts to spread news across the county to raise awareness among the citizens.

11. Popular support for candidates' nomination: The Election Commission should consider increasing the present requirement of the popular support for the candidates before they submit their nomination as a potential candidate for the elections. This will provide opportunities to honest and non-violent candidates from all parties involved in the elections. Moreover, only the popular candidates will be able to file nomination

papers with the backup of the popular support. The Commission should also enhance its scrutiny mechanism to stop any fraudulence in this regard.

12. No-poster elections: The Code of Conduct bars any colored posters in the elections. This study proposes that in the long run, the Commission should be able to amend its provisions to bar any kind of posters in the elections. The Commission will encourage the use of virtual platforms, such as online social media and private places to continue public relations for the candidates of the elections.



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