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# BANGLADESH IN 2002

## *Imperiled Democracy*

===== Rounaq Jahan  
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### Abstract

The year did not bring any improvement in the way government and politics function in Bangladesh. Murder, intimidation, suppression, and harassment of political opponents worsened the atmosphere of vendetta and violence that has marked the country's politics in the past few decades. To tackle the deteriorating law and order situation, the government called in the army in October. The administration appeared to be adrift, caught in factional feuds within the ruling coalition. There were also signs of dynastic succession within the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The economy did not register any significant improvements. Relations with Pakistan improved but Indo-Bangladesh relations hit their lowest point in decades. Citizen disenchantment with political leaders continued to grow.

A year after winning a stunning electoral victory and gaining over two-thirds of the seats in parliament, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), admitted in a speech to the nation on October 10, 2002, that her coalition government had fallen short in delivering on its number one campaign promise: to improve law and order in the country. But she urged patience, and a week later, on October 17, called on the army to launch a nationwide drive to arrest criminals, recover arms, and restore order. This unprecedented move by a democratically elected government did not prompt the major political opposition, the Awami League (AL), to challenge the legality or prudence of the action. Instead, the party welcomed the army's role in curbing criminals but also cautioned against human rights violations, questioned the motive of the government, and stated that if the army were used in a partisan manner to suppress AL

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supporters, this would lead to damaging the reputation of the army.<sup>1</sup> During the month-long “Operation Clean Heart” (code name given to the army drive), scores of people reportedly died as a result of police and military interrogations. Civil society groups have raised questions about human rights violations. But the government stood firm, and in November the law and home ministers asserted that the army drive would continue indefinitely, or at least until the law and order situation improved.

In a country where citizens have witnessed the disastrous consequences of military regimes at different times and have waged long struggles to overthrow military rule, a call to the army by a civilian government to perform police functions is demoralizing. It is an open admission that the civilian administration is unable to cope with the first business of governance: establishing law and order. It is also an ominous sign for the future of democracy in Bangladesh.

Following a mass upsurge that overthrew the military regime of Ershad in 1990 and ushered in democratically elected governments, Bangladesh has witnessed three relatively peaceful free elections, in 1991, 1996, and 2001, all undertaken under caretaker governments. The two dominant parties—BNP and AL—had alternated power, with BNP winning in 1991, AL in 1996, and a BNP-led coalition again in 2001. While the dominance of two parties generally tends to create a stable political system, in Bangladesh the close contestation has created a deadlock. Neither party is willing to accept electoral defeat and serve as a “loyal opposition” in parliament. As a result, parliament has never functioned properly. Each election has been followed by prolonged boycott of parliament by the political opposition. The government in power has also indulged in acts of suppression and harassment of political opposition. Both parties have nurtured thugs and criminal elements to intimidate the opposition. Both have attempted to control government and non-government institutions by appointing partisan supporters to head key institutions. Media and civil society groups have long identified these problems plaguing Bangladesh’s fragile democratic political system, but political parties have ignored their criticisms.

The year did not bring any change in the way government and politics function in Bangladesh. The destructive confrontation between the government and the political opposition has continued. The administration has become even more embroiled in partisan conflict. The economy did not register any significant improvement. An alarming rise in violence and crimes, often committed by people with close ties to political parties, has increased citizen disenchantment with political processes. Most disturbing was the fact that

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1. “Army Swoops on Criminals,” *Daily Star*, Dhaka, October 18, 2002, <<http://www.daily-starnews.com/200210/18/index.htm>>.

political leaders were unwilling to recognize how their actions are threatening the very fabric of democracy.

## Politics and Administration

### *Vendetta and Violence*

The BNP-led coalition's electoral victory in October 2001 was immediately followed by violent attacks—killing, raping, looting, and destruction of property—against Hindus and many Muslim Awami Leaguers, by BNP supporters. BNP supporters also ousted AL supporters from control of various key institutions. Some institutions were grabbed in order to exert greater control over major constituencies (e.g., colleges and universities) and messages (e.g., radio and television); some were grabbed in order to extract money (e.g., bus and railway terminals). The disconnect between BNP's pre-election campaign to rid the country of crime, violence, and corruption and its post-election behavior of unleashing violence and supporting criminals and corruption, dismayed the civil society and media. Media and non-governmental organizations were particularly active in investigating and publicizing violence against Hindus. After initial denial, the government admitted the assault against the Hindus and moved to stop the atrocities. Though sporadic violence has continued, at least there were no major retaliatory attacks against the Hindus after the killings of the Muslims in Gujrat in India in the summer. This was a measure of success.

However, all through the year, violent conflict and murder of opponents between BNP and AL supporters continued. After the election, almost overnight the tables were turned: cases of graft, corruption, and other criminal acts filed against the BNP during AL's rule were dropped, and similar cases were brought against the Awami Leaguers. A few leading Awami Leaguers, including former ministers, were arrested and imprisoned. Several suffered brutal police attacks when they attempted to lead peaceful demonstrations. Corruption cases were filed against Sheikh Hasina, leader of the AL. Many of the AL workers fled their homes in fear. Such an atmosphere of vendetta and violence was hardly conducive to democratic contestation or to settling differences through dialogue.

Vendetta and violence plagued not only BNP-AL contestation: factional fights within BNP were also settled through murder and violence. Several BNP ward commissioners were killed by rival groups. Similarly, BNP and Jamaat-I-Islami supporters clashed in different regions of the country, even though Jamaat is part of the ruling coalition.

However, violence was not limited only to political contestation. It affected the everyday life of ordinary citizens. Armed thugs continued to terrorize business and civic life through extortion, kidnapping, murder, and

rape. A recent BBC report quoted Bangladesh police statistics that indicated an upward trend in crimes: on average 325 murders, 320 rapes, and 18 acid attacks a month were reported.<sup>2</sup>

According to many analysts of Bangladesh politics, a major impediment in curbing criminal elements is their links with the political parties, particularly the ruling elites. After a year of failures with police and joint police-paramilitia drives, the government finally turned to the military to fight crimes. But people are skeptical. Some doubt that the military would be able to find the major criminal figures or break the nexus between crime and politics. Some fear that the military would be entangled in partisan conflict and corruption.<sup>3</sup>

### *Administration Adrift*

Despite its massive electoral victory, the BNP-led coalition has not been able to move quickly with a coherent reforms agenda or policy initiative to fulfill campaign promises such as separating the judiciary from the executive, giving autonomy to state-controlled radio and television, establishing independent anti-corruption and human rights commissions, appointing an ombudsman, introducing a bill to provide for women's seats in parliament, and so on. Instead, the administration appears to be drifting and vacillating. It is suffering from indecision and lack of dynamism, as was the case with the previous BNP administration (1991–96).<sup>4</sup>

Several factors have contributed to this malaise in administration. First, to accommodate the coalition partners and various factions of the BNP, the size of the cabinet became bloated. In the 60-member cabinet, ministers often pull in different directions, which holds up decisions. Reform of local government is one example. Second, the decision-making process is not transparent. Often cabinet ministers complain that they have no power, that decisions are made "elsewhere" (presumably by people who are close to the prime minister).<sup>5</sup> The centralized decision-making slows even routine matters. Finally, the civil bureaucracy and mid-level managers have become extremely wary of taking initiatives or making decisions in an atmosphere of partisan witch-hunt. They would rather wait to implement orders from above than take any proactive measure.

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2. "One Year On," BBC World Edition, October 11, 2002, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/2320591.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2320591.stm)>.

3. "Army Fights Crime in Bangladesh," *ibid.*, October 17, 2002 <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/2335849.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2335849.stm)>.

4. "Rancor in BNP over Promises Not Kept," *Daily Star*, May 1, 2002, <<http://www.dailystarnews.com/20020501/n2050101.htm#BODY4>>.

5. *Ibid.*

*Dynastic Succession*

Two events in the summer of 2002 underscored the dynastic impulses of the BNP. First, on June 21, President Professor A.Q.M. Badruddoza Chowdhury had to resign after encountering criticism in the BNP parliamentary party meeting for not showing respect to the memory of the party's founder, Ziaur Rahman (Zia's widow Khaleda had inherited the party leadership and is the current prime minister). Though Professor Chowdhury is a founding member of the BNP and a nominee of the party for the post of president, he irked Zia loyalists for attempting to rise above partisan politics after he became president. Constitutional experts argued that the president cannot be impeached on the grounds of not showing adequate respect to BNP's founder, but Professor Chowdhury decided to avoid a confrontation with his party and resigned within 24 hours.

The second event was the emergence from behind the scenes of Tareq Rahman, eldest son of Khaleda Zia, to formally take over the leadership of BNP. Tareq Rahman reportedly masterminded BNP's successful election campaign and was the key decision maker after the elections, though he held no formal position. On June 22 he stepped forward and became the joint-secretary-general of BNP. Rumors were rife that this was a prelude to consolidating dynastic succession, that if BNP wins the next election then Tareq Rahman will take over as prime minister and Khaleda will become the president.

*Political Opposition*

The electoral defeat and the reign of terror unleashed by the BNP supporters following the election left the main opposition party, the Awami League, in shock, disbelief, and disarray. The AL rejected the election result, claiming massive rigging and fraud but it faced problems in substantiating its allegations, as the very apparatus overseeing the election—the caretaker government, chief election commissioner, and the president—were installed by the AL. The Awami League then fell back on two of its old and tried strategies of protest, although these had lost popular support. The party decided to boycott parliament and, breaking a pre-election promise, called *hartals* (strikes). The party also attempted to launch several peaceful street demonstrations but met with stiff police action and little popular support.

After eight months of protests outside the parliamentary building, the AL decided to join the parliament in June. However, its participation has been marked by repeated walkouts, because AL members were not allowed to speak there. The main opposition's absence has made parliamentary sessions dull and one-sided. Often there is lack of a quorum, since members of the ruling coalition frequently do not bother to attend.

However, the greatest challenge to the government was mounted in the summer, not by the AL but by nonpartisan students of Dhaka University and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). At both, spontaneous student protests erupted over the presence of criminal elements on campus. Students demanded a return to an academic atmosphere free from the presence of partisan and criminal elements tied to political parties.

At Dhaka University, the agitation was initially started by a small number of women students. When the protesting women faced police brutality, they were able to galvanize the support of the general student body and many civil society groups. After failing to control massive student demonstrations, the government yielded to some of the student demands and asked the vice chancellor to resign. In an attempt to contain student agitation, the university was closed down for nearly two months.

At BUET, the agitation started when a woman student was killed, caught in the crossfire between rival criminal groups attempting to seize bids for construction in the university. The killing of an innocent student mobilized the general student body. To contain the agitation, the university was closed down. Though the government has been able to contain their protests, students garnered popular sympathy and support as they represented grievances of ordinary citizens who have long felt frustrated by the political parties' continuing patronage of criminal elements and the deadly partisan bickering of the BNP and the AL.

## Management of the Economy and Environment

While the government admitted its lack of progress in improving law and order, it claimed success in managing the economy and the environment. On the economic front, the government's major claim was in macroeconomic management: increasing the foreign exchange reserves, improving revenue collection, and bringing down government borrowing. Foreign exchange reserves increased from \$1 billion when the AL departed to \$1.75 billion at the end of the coalition government's first year in office. Increases in remittances by Bangladeshi workers overseas were a major portion of this increase. However, exports fell, mainly because of a decline in the ready-made garment sector, which lost its U.S. market—almost 40% of the country's total export—after September 11, 2001. Economic recession in the U.S. and Europe hit Bangladesh's exports, and as a result, domestic job creation efforts suffered. Economic growth slowed down. The prices of many essential commodities increased. Foreign assistance continued to decline, yet the donors persisted in pressing the government to undertake structural reforms and curb corruption and criminals.

The government took no decision on the issue of gas exports, despite mounting international pressure from countries, including the United States, interested in gas exploration. Soon after coming to power, the finance minister made a statement, “Leaving gold and diamonds below the ground is no wealth,” which seemed to indicate that the government was ready to sell gas.<sup>6</sup> But following widespread protests, the government backtracked, appointing a commission to investigate Bangladesh’s gas reserves. The commission has come forward with conflicting reports and recommendations. So a year after assuming power, the government is still far from taking a decision on the issue, primarily because of opposition from powerful domestic constituencies.

In contrast to the gas issue, in the area of environmental management the government has taken some bold and quick actions. It banned the use of polythene bags, pollution-emitting auto-rickshaws with two-stroke engines, and old buses. All these measures have drawn support from the public.

## External Relations

The government faced two major challenges in external relations. First, following September 11, the government sought to maintain good relations with the United States administration, particularly as the BNP-led coalition has two Islamist parties—Jamaat-I-Islami and Islamic Oiyikko Jote—in the alliance. During the year, two major international media, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Time*, reported the activities of Islamic militants in Bangladesh. These reports, branding Bangladesh as a “hotbed” of radical Islamists, drew widespread protests from the government, civil society, and the domestic media, which argued that the Islamic militants were marginal and did not represent the majority of the population, who they said were tolerant and secular. But the Awami League, particularly party leader Sheikh Hasina in her speeches abroad, repeatedly tagged the two Islamist parties in the ruling coalition as Taliban sympathizers. The government in turn criticized the Awami League for tarnishing the image of Bangladesh abroad. However, the U.S. ambassador in Bangladesh came to the rescue of the government by questioning the basis of the reports and certifying the country to be a moderate Muslim nation.<sup>7</sup>

The second challenge of the government was managing its relationship with India. Historically, BNP has always had better relations with Pakistan and in the past often used anti-Indian rhetoric to boost popular support.

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6. “Bangladesh: Tackling Corruption,” BBC World Edition, October 4, 2002, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/2299601.stm>>.

7. “US Backs Dhaka over Al-Qaeda Claim,” *ibid.*, October 21, 2002, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/2346999.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/2346999.stm)>.

However, it did not play the anti-India card during the 2001 election campaign. India also did not display any immediate negative feelings toward the government when it took power. But relations with India gradually started to deteriorate. India held Bangladesh-based Islamist groups responsible for bomb attacks against the American Center in Kolkotta in January 2002. India also started to allege that Bangladesh was providing bases and training for separatist groups battling Indian troops in northeastern India. Indo-Bangladesh relations hit their lowest point in decades when, on November 7, Indian Deputy Prime Minister L. K. Advani publicly stated that after the change of government in Bangladesh, Pakistani military intelligence, the ISI, and al-Qaeda activists have increased their activities in the country.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, relations with Pakistan have improved as expected. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf visited Bangladesh in July and expressed pain at the excesses committed by the Pakistani military in the 1971 war. The government portrayed this Pakistani admission as a diplomatic victory, while the opposition complained that Pakistan had not explicitly apologized to Bangladesh for the genocide in 1971.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

During the first year of rule by the BNP-led coalition, political antagonism between the government and the AL grew, with no signs that accommodation might be reached through dialogue. Even the caretaker government's election referee role was jeopardized, with the Awami League continuing to question the neutrality of the last caretaker government. Political leaders of the two major parties have not yet found a way to engage in some give and take. The failure of the two political parties to peacefully negotiate their differences threatens the future of democracy in Bangladesh.

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8. "Dhaka Dismisses Advani Remark on Terror Link," *Daily Star*, November 8, 2002.

9. "Musharraf Feels Sorry for 1971 Events," *ibid.*, July 31, 2002, <<http://www.dailystarnews.com/200207/31/n2073101.htm#BODY2>>.