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Electoral Authoritarianism and Violence: Mapping Electoral Violence in Bangladesh, 2014–2015

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ABSTRACT

In 2014 and 2015, Bangladesh experienced widespread electoral violence, boycotts, opposition exclusion, partisan administration, criminalisation, state-led repression, and authoritarian tendencies, which were marked by a new type of violence and never before has there been in the history of Bangladesh politics such a prolonged, continuous blockade-hartal programme related to elections. This paper analyses the trends and dynamics of electoral violence in Bangladesh during 2014–2015. Using data from national newspapers, the paper maps 4,518 election-related violence incidents and examines how these events reflect deeper political transformations. Instead of merely quantifying violent episodes, the study interprets how electoral violence operates as a mechanism of control, coercion, and regime durability within an electoral authoritarian framework. The findings reveal that the strategic use of violence by ruling elites not only suppresses opposition participation but also legitimises authoritarian rule under the excuse of democratic elections. By connecting empirical trends to theories of electoral authoritarianism, this study contributes to understanding how democratic institutions are instrumentalised for autocratic ends. It concludes that strengthening intra-party democracy, reducing criminalisation of politics, and depoliticising state institutions are essential to breaking the entrenched cycle of electoral violence in Bangladesh.

JEL Classifications: D72, D74
Keywords: Career Election, violence, electoral violence, electoral authoritarianism

INTRODUCTION

Elections are often seen as the heart of democracy. They give citizens the chance to select their representatives and hold them accountable. However, in many developing democracies, elections have become a means of conflict and pressure instead of competition and agreement. This paradox, in which democratic practices coexist with authoritarian tactics, has attracted significant attention in comparative politics and studies of democratisation. Scholars like Schedler (2006) and Levitsky and Way (2010) refer to this situation as

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electoral authoritarianism. In these regimes, the appearance of democracy is maintained through regular elections, but its real meaning is undermined by manipulation, repression, and violence. Since 2013, political violence in Bangladesh has received increasing scholarly and public attention, especially because of its strong connections to electoral events. These incidents of violence are not isolated; they have become a part of the political culture of Bangladesh. This violence manifests in both the pre- and post-election periods and spans from the local to the national level. The electoral cycles of 2014 and 2015 were a crucial turning point. During these years, widespread violence, exclusion of the opposition, and partisan control of state institutions revealed the weakness of democratic practices. The events of these years highlighted that electoral competition in Bangladesh had transformed from a method of representation into a source of conflict. Coercion, intimidation, and state repression were employed to maintain political power. Thus, the electoral violence during this time should not be viewed simply as a breakdown of law and order; it reflects the country's deeper shift toward an electoral authoritarian system.

In the first quarter of 2015, around 262 people were killed and, 5381 were injured in 1859 political violent events in Bangladesh. Moreover, local elections also became partisan in 2015 (on October 12, 2015 cabinet approved the drafts that allowed political parties to nominate candidates in local elections) which brought a significant amount of election violence. However, studying election violence in Bangladesh remains complex, frequently sensationalised, and generalized. The majority of studies, writings, and reports on election violence are event-driven, judgmental, and often interpretations of interpretations. In this backdrop, this paper attempts to contribute to this gap, mapping out political and electoral violence in 2014-2015 and connecting with electoral authoritarianism.

This study aims to map electoral violence in Bangladesh in 2014 and 2015. It intends to provide a holistic exploration of the process of political and electoral violence in Bangladesh. The overall objectives are twofold: i) the first objective is to understand the trends and dynamics of election violence in Bangladesh, 2014- 2015. To achieve this objective, extensive analyses were conducted on violent political events by studying newspaper reports and analyses, and ii) the second objective is to understand how authoritarian practices embedded in electoral processes—such as use of state security forces to oppress the opposition, durbittayon (criminalisation of politics), and intra-party conflicts which contributed to sustaining violence and undermining the democratic aspirations of citizens.

The analysis of this study is qualitative in nature. For the analysis of the election violence, the primary data were collected from four national newspapers, three Bengali (Dainik Ittefaq, Dainik Inqilab and Prothom Alo) and one English newspaper (Daily Star). While selecting the newspaper, wider coverage and political/ideological bias of the newspapers were considered. Ittefaq is the oldest running newspaper in the country and one of the most circulated. It is known for having a very extensive focus on local news (Suykens and Islam, 2015). Inqilab is more conservative and has a more Islamist outlook. Prothom Alo and the Daily Star are published by the same publishing house, but their scopes are quite different. Prothom Alo is famous for its liberal and progressive position and remains one of the most widely circulated newspapers. The Daily Star is a leading English and progressive daily. To

build the database, newspaper reports were carefully turned into events through a step-by-step process. For an incident to count, it had to meet two conditions: first, it needed to involve violence—such as someone being injured, killed, raped, abducted, taken hostage, or property being destroyed; and second, it had to be political in nature—meaning that at least one political party, allied group, or rebel faction was directly involved. The events were then entered into Microsoft Excel and analysed using SPSS 22.

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

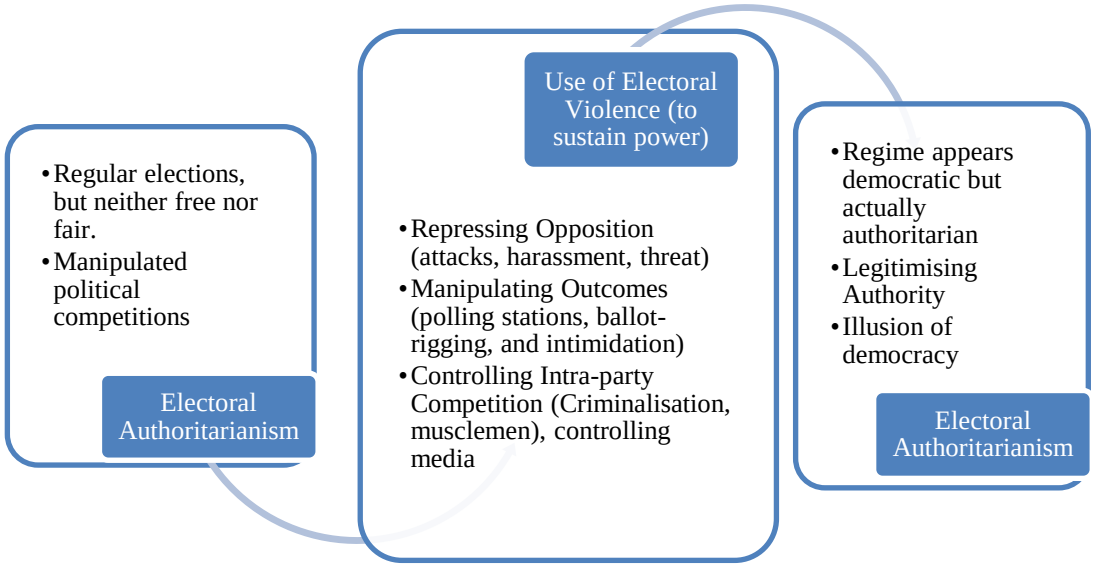
The edifice of the modern political system is the institution of elections. In fact, elections are vital to the successful operation of the political system that we may consider as the crucial element of defining democracy. While democracy has been defined as "a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (Schumpeter, 1950) among politicians to acquire the power to decide policies, the organisation and the quality of elections matter significantly. Elections are designed to be the means of expressing the popular will and selecting representatives through a free, fair, and competitive process (Daily Star, 2015). Elections are characterised by periodicity, inclusiveness, competition, and transparency, which allow for the legitimate transfer of political authority (Dahl, 1971; Diamond, 1999). Elections serve to provide a non-violent resolution of tensions within a society through which voters are mobilised to select political representatives. The purpose of the whole elected process is to produce a legitimate government (Nwolise, 2007), to ascertain the popular will, to decide policies, and to bring the decision-makers under popular control (Mayor, 1960). An election serves two main purposes- ensuring popular consent and participation in public affairs, and peaceful transfer of power (IFES, 2012).

The concept of electoral authoritarianism is election-centric (Schedler, 2006). Authoritarianism refers to a political system in which power is concentrated in the hands of a single ruler, dominant party, or small elite (Linz, 2000; Geddes, 1999), while political pluralism is severely limited (Diamond, 2002; Przeworski, 2019), individual freedoms are restricted (Levitsky & Way, 2010), and institutional checks and balances are weakened or absent (O'Donnell, 1994). According to Levitsky and Way (2010), in modern authoritarian systems, elections are conducted regularly, but they are mainly manipulated, showing repression and patronage to maintain power, which distorts the boundary between democracy and authoritarianism. In such regimes, elections basically serve as instruments of legitimacy rather than genuine competition (Schedler, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010). The opposition parties are often suppressed through coercion (Fjelde & Höglund, 2012; Gandhi, 2008), and the control of media and civil society further constrains pluralism (Diamond, 2002; Nathan, 2003). According to Juan J. Linz (2000), authoritarian regimes are characterized by "limited, not responsible, political pluralism; lack of an elaborate guiding ideology; absence of intensive or extensive political mobilization; and a leader or small group exercising power within formally ill-defined limits."

Electoral violence includes "all forms of organized acts or threats – physical, psychological, and structural – aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during and after an election with a view to determining, delaying, or otherwise influencing an electoral process" (Albert, 2007). *International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)* describes electoral violence as "any harm or threat to any person or property involved in the

election process, or the process itself, during the election period" (IFES, 2012, Rak, 2018). Election-related violence is special as it involves the strategic intent and practical consequences of a violent act designed to in some way affect the process of elections (Sisk, 2008). When perpetrated to affect an electoral process, violence may be employed to influence the process of elections — such as efforts to delay, disrupt, or derail a poll — and to influence the outcomes: the determining of winners in competitive races for political office or to secure approval or disapproval of referendum questions (GATIMU, 2015; UNDP, 2009). Electoral violence undermines free and fair elections, weakens democratic legitimacy, and may serve to consolidate authoritarian control or manipulate competition (Schedler, 2006). Electoral violence is a tremendously thriving phenomenon in Bangladesh.

FIGURE 1. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE



Source: Prepared by the author

BACKGROUND OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH

The political history of Bangladesh is checkered with agitation, demonstrations, protest rallies, general strikes, and other similar manifestations of anti-government movement (Quadir, 2003). Every regime, whether civilian or military or quasi-military, experienced movement against itself by opposition forces (Hakim, 1993). These movements got many more dimensions during the period of the election. As a result, election violence in Bangladesh has a long historical background and has become institutionalized as a "political norm" (Amundsen, 2013; Alamgir, 2011; Moniruzzaman, 2009; Sattar, 2008). The following table 1 focuses on the overall history of the electoral violence in Bangladesh.

Table 1: National Elections in Bangladesh (1973 to 2014)

Election Year	Events (pre-Election)	Parties	Candidates	Elected Unopposed	Election Postponed (Centres)	Turnout (Percent)	Winner	Casualties (Election Day)
1973	85	14	1209	11	56	55.6	AL	13
1979	122	29	2547	11	63	51.3	BNP	18
1986	221	28	1980	0	284	66.3	JP	32
1988	19	8	1192	18	23	51.8	JP	7
1991	NA	75	2787	0	30	55.5	BNP	1
1996 (Feb-15)	NA	41	1450	49		26.5	BNP	10
1996 (June 12)	NA	81	2574	0	123	75	AL	12
2001	144	54	1939	0	90	75.6	BNP	5
2008	82	38	1567	0	NA	87.13	AL	1

Source: Kazi S. M. Khasrul Alam Quddusi, 'Election in Bangladesh: Who after Caretakers?', Social Action, Vol. 63 (July- Sept. 2013), p. 275; Md. Shahabul Haque & Md. Bayezid Alam, Alliance Politics of Bangladesh: 1954- 2014, Abosar Publication, Dhaka. 2014. P. 256; Daily Star, 5 January 2014

*NA= Not Available

Bangladesh's political arena has long been dominated by two major political parties—the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and their political feud continues to shape the country's democratic trajectory (Riaz, 2016; Lewis, 2011). Competition between these two parties has been characterised by deep-rooted mistrust, personal antagonism between their leaders, and a persistent unwillingness to accept poll defeat (Islam, 2015; Rahman, 2019). The BNP boycotted the elections in January 2014, arguing that they would be rigged by the AL (BBC, 2015), which was in power, in the absence of a caretaker government. As a result, pro-government candidates ran unopposed in more than half of parliamentary districts (153) (The Daily Star, 2014), and AL won an overwhelming victory. More than 21 people were killed on election day (*Kaler Kantha*, 2014). In local upazila elections, which started in February 2014, a repeat of the same form of violence.

The result is that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party was effectively excluded from mainstream politics, causing a sharp rise in fierce protests by activists in the party and that of

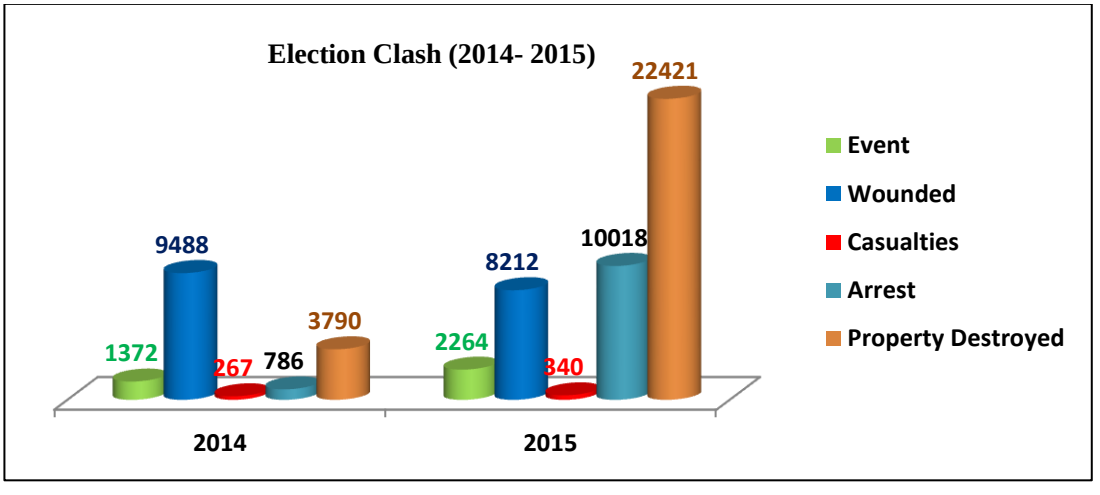
its political ally, the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party. It came to a head when on 3 January, 2015, police prevented Khaleda Zia, the leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, from leaving her Gulshan office (Morrison, 2015) and subsequently refused to allow the party to organise a rally it had planned on 5 January 2015 under the banner, "Murder of Democracy Day". Khaleda Zia then announced a non-stop 'blockade' of the roads, railways and waterways leading into Dhaka, the capital (Lunn, 2015), and this resulted in the arrest of several senior BNP leaders, including Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, the party's acting secretary general, on 6 January. Khaleda Zia called for Sheikh Hasina, the then prime minister, to resign and call fresh elections (The India Today, 2015). Prime Minister Hasina has said her government will remain in office until her term ends in 2019 (*Guardian*, 2015). Zia and her party responded by calling for a transportation blockade and general strike (NY, 2015).

Opposition activists, supporters, and hired hands picketed the roads and set fire to vehicles. Day after day, the situation became more vulnerable, and the level of violence, arson attacks, bombing, torching, burning, and killing increased and spread all over the country. Violence was reported in April and December 2015 when the City Corporation Election and Municipality Election were held.

MAPPING ELECTORAL VIOLENCE, 2014-2015

Electoral Violence during 2014 and 2015 was concentrated during a few key months. Figure 2 presents the data on events, injuries, and deaths, offering a broad picture of how widespread and intense the violence was during this period. The violence related to the 10th parliamentary election also continued in the first quarter of 2015. The months when local elections were held were also more violent than other months in this time period. The overall dataset shows 3636 single incidents of violence connected to the conduct of elections, resulting in 17700 wounded, over 607 casualties, and 26211 properties destroyed.

FIGURE 2: OVERALL TRENDS OF ELECTION VIOLENCE IN 2014- 2015



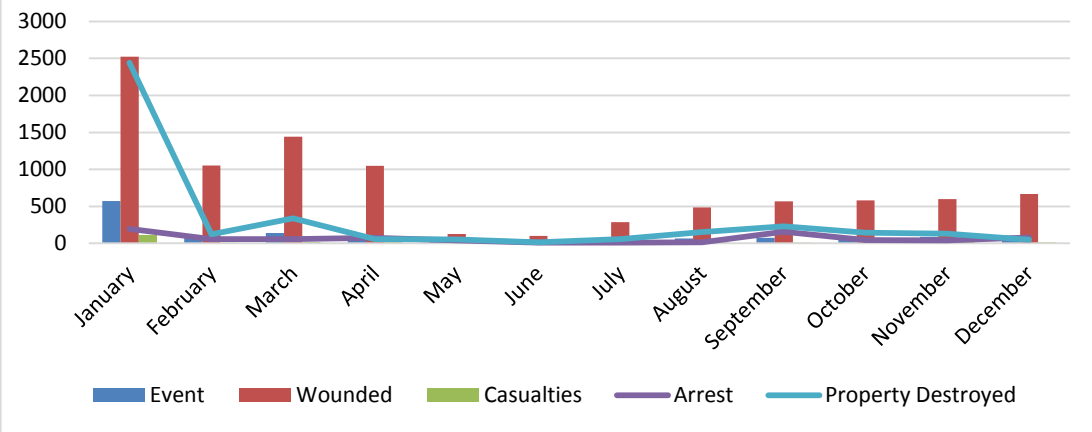
The analysis identified several types of violence related to election violence in 2014 and 2015. These include:

- Blockade and hartal-related protest activities,
- Arson attack on people and vehicles (attacking passenger or local public transports, especially buses, where people were set on fire with petrol bombs and Molotov cocktails, the torching of trucks and other vehicles carrying essential supplies such as food, and arson targeting passenger ferries.)
- Rail networks were also sabotaged, leading to train derailments that killed and injured numerous passengers.
- Bomb blasting (petrol bomb, cocktail, crude bomb, homemade bomb)
- Attack on political rallies and processions relating to the election
- "Durbitta" (a rising number of criminal engagements in violence)
- Rising number of intra-party clashes between candidates nominated by the parties and rival candidates
- Journalists were the prime target in city and municipality elections
- Ethnic and minority religious groups became victims during election time
- Innocent common people who are not connected with politics were the main victims and suffered the most.

Electoral Violence in 2014

The year 2014 started with a high number of violent events, and January was the most violent month this year, much higher than other months. The main reason is the occurrence of the parliamentary election. Local elections also started in February, and this made the first quarter of 2014 more vulnerable. In the third quarter, the sixth and seventh phases of the Upazila Elections and some by-elections in Barisal-5 and Narayanganj-5 for parliament. Between May and June, by-elections in 103 Union Parishads also took place. These elections created a lot of tensions and resulted in many violent events. In the third quarter, a total of 180 violent events produced 1343 wounded, 32 casualties, and 437 properties destroyed.

FIGURE 3: ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN 2014



In the last quarter of 2014, a high number of non- lethal casualties (see figure 3). From October to December, the Municipality election was held. 17 Municipalities by-elections for different posts, 3 Upazila elections, 83 Union Parishad by- elections, along with Narayanganj's Rupganj Union Parishad were also held. In the last quarter of 2014, there were 208 violent events resulting in 1851 wounded, 37 casualties, and 327 destroyed properties as a result of election violence.

Local Elections and Violence in 2014

In contrast with the national election, the Election Commission conducted local elections and arranged the country's 4th Upazila Parishad Elections. The Election Commission announced dates for five phases, but due to extreme irregularities and violence, many Upazila elections were postponed. Upazila elections were held in 487 Upazilas in seven different phases with a very high number of non-lethal casualties.

TABLE 2: UPAZILA ELECTIONS AND VIOLENCE IN 2014

Upazila Election	Date	Number of Upazila	Irregularities in Voting Centres	Postponed	Election Boycott (Candidates)	Violent Events	Wounded	Casualties
First Phase	19 February, 2014	98	65	0	0	17	107	1
Second Phase	27 February, 2014	115	100	34	0	20	272	0
Third Phase	15 March, 2014	81	200	26	42	28	301	4
Forth Phase	23 March, 2014	91	400	32	37	24	326	7
Fifth Phase	31 March, 2014	73	100	19	65	39	668	4
Sixth Phase	19 May, 2014	13	171	2	NA	2	7	0
Seventh Phase	21 September, 2014	5	NA	NA	3	5	22	0

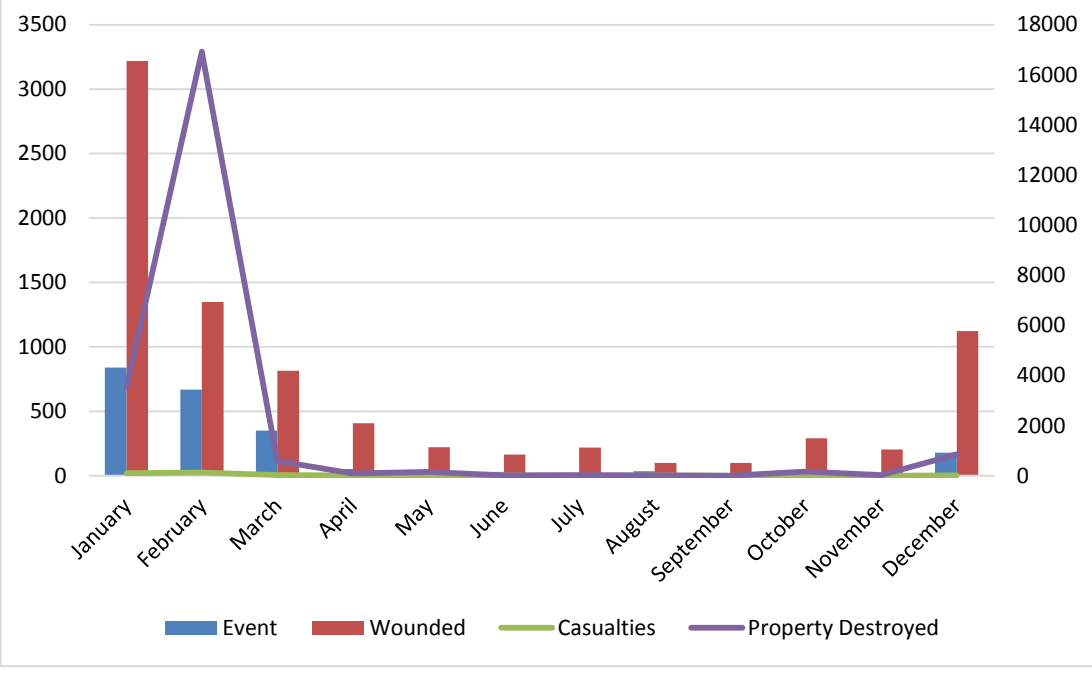
In February, a total of 109 violent events resulted in 1051 wounded and 10 casualties. Third, fourth, and fifth Upazila elections in 245 Upazilas were held in March, which produced 139 events of violence. In March, 1440 wounded, 19 casualties, and 338

properties destroyed. Stray incidents of violence, vote rigging, stuffing of ballots, and capturing of polling stations (The Daily Star, 2014) were reported in many upazilas. Voter turnout was very low as panic over violence gripped the voters.

Electoral Violence in 2015

In the first quarter of 2015, the number of violent events, casualties, wounded, and destruction of property broke all the previous records of violence in Bangladesh. We can categorise the violence in the first quarter as post (national) election violence. It is also notable because it was sparked on the first anniversary of the election. Politics in Bangladesh became a blood sport during the period from January to March 2015. In the early days of 2015, political tensions and violent acts started in Bangladesh, and never before in the history of Bangladesh politics has there been such a prolonged, continuous blockade-hartal. Never have so many people had to die, never was there so much sabotage, never before had there been such political programmes on the weekends or national holidays. In the name of politics, the lives of common people have been placed under constant threat (Hossain, 2015).

FIGURE 4: OVERALL ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN 2015



In April and December 2015, the number of violence and wounded were also very high. The reason for this is that in April and December City Elections were held in Bangladesh. In April, City Corporation Elections were held in North Dhaka, South Dhaka and Chittagong City Corporation, and in December, Municipality Elections were held in 234 Municipalities. In addition, by-elections were held in Magura-1 for their 10th parliament seat, ward 7 councillor by-election in Sylhet City Corporation, 3 municipality elections, Union Parishad elections in 9 Parishads, and Union Parishad by-elections in 213 parishads were

held in the period of March to June. From July to September, all the elections were by-elections, including a councillor for ward 4, Narayanganj City Corporation, 4 Municipality by-elections, 2 Upazila by-elections, and Union Parishad elections in 105 parishads. Across the entire year, election violence was observed. A total of 2264 violent events were recorded in 2015, including 8212 wounded, 340 casualties, and 22421 properties destroyed in 2015.

In April and December 2015, the number of violence and wounded was also very high. The reason behind this scenario is that, in April and December, City Elections were held in Bangladesh. In April, City Corporation Elections in North Dhaka, South Dhaka, and Chittagong City Corporation, and in December, Municipality Elections in 234 Municipalities were held. Besides, by- election in Magura-1 for 10th parliament seat, 7 no. word councillor by- election in Sylhet City Corporation, 3 Municipality Election, Union Parishad Election in 9 Union Parishad, Union Parishad by- Election in 213 Union were held from March to June. In July to September, all the elections ere by- elections, including a councillor for 4 wards, Narayanganj City Corporation, 4 Municipality by-elections, 2 Upazilas by-elections, and Union Parishad elections in 105 Unions. So, the whole year 2015, we observed lots of elections and election-related violence. A total of 2264 violent events were recorded with 8212 wounded, 340 casualties, and 22421 properties destroyed in 2015.

ANALYSIS OF ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH, 2014-2015

In Bangladesh, electoral violence is neither uniform nor static; it has evolved over time, following distinct patterns shaped by political dynamics (Islam, 2015). During general elections in Bangladesh, violence usually takes four main forms: direct physical attacks, psychological fear, violence targeting women and children, and election-related economic violence. No one connected to the electoral process is fully safe from these threats. Voters, election officials, candidates, aspirants seeking party nominations, political activists, community leaders, election workers, journalists, civic educators, and even those responsible for providing electoral security have all been targeted. The purpose of such violence is clear— to silence, control, or limit people's participation in elections, depending on the roles they play in the process.

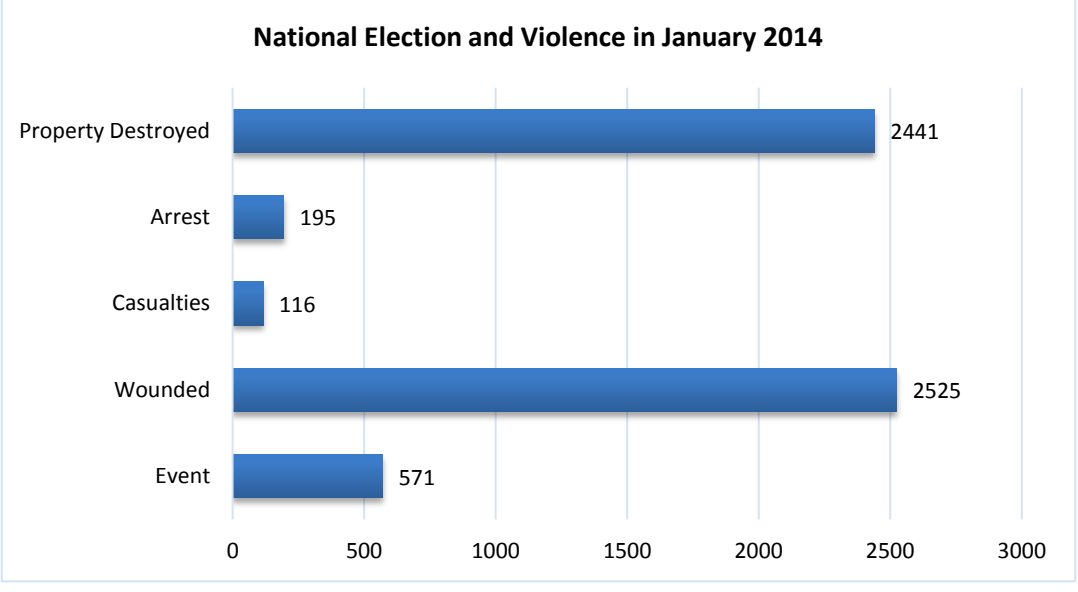
National Election- Less Contesting, High Violence

Unlike most other elections in the past, on 5 January 2014, the 10th Parliamentary election was held in a dull and less festive atmosphere. 390 candidates from 12 political parties participated in the election (BEC, 2015) by only 4.39 crore voters, meaning more than half of the country's 9.19 crore voters did not cast ballots. Before the election at least 100 polling centres in 23 districts (out of 59) were torched while an assistant presiding officer was beaten to death by opposition activists. The main opposition party boycott the election, and that resulted in 153 candidates being elected unopposed, where the ruling AL won 123 of the total 300 seats before the election. Voter turnout was very low. In at least 41 centres in 11 districts, not a single ballot was cast. 130 houses of the minority community were vandalized after the vote. According to M Sakhawat Hussain,

> *"This election and its result would remain as an inglorious chapter in the glorious history of Bangladesh Awami League… in fact no one could claim to be gainer out of this election; rather the biggest loser is democracy. The other loser, perhaps a bigger one is the Bangladesh Election Commission."* (Hussain, 2014)

Aljazeera reveals that more than 200 polling stations were set on fire. Voting was suspended in 539 polling centres in the wake of violence, according to the Election Commission. 31 candidates withdrew from the race. Of the polling centres, 27 alone were in Lalmonirhat, 4 in Jhenaidah, 2 in Satkhira, and 1 each in Feni, Cox's Bazar, Sylhet, Chuadanga, Dinajpur, Naogaon, Rajshahi and Sirajganj. All those centres were set up in BNP- Jamat dominated areas. The post-election scenario was more ominous. Just after Election Day (6 January), around 65 violent events were reported, with 518 wounded and 12 casualties. The whole month of January, which was the top violent month in 2014, all the violence were connected with national election.

FIGURE 5: VIOLENCE IN NATIONAL ELECTION 2014



In total, 31 days of January, around 571 election violence events occurred in the pre and post-election period and on election. It should be noted that this election was the most violent in the history of Bangladesh. In total, 116 people died, 2525 people were injured, and 2441 properties were destroyed.

Authoritarian Control through Violence on Common People

People in Bangladesh celebrate their democratic rights by casting votes in a festive mood. But during the 10th parliamentary election, the mood was characterised by fear, anxiety, indifference, and apathy. Common people became the main victims of the election. The database focuses on 39 violent events where violent non-participant or the common people who had no connection with politics became victims in the January Election, which resulted

in 199 wounded and 7 casualties. Minority groups suffered the most. The first area attacked after the election was Malo Para of Abhoynagar at Jassore, where approximately 400 Hindu Villagers were forced to leave their homesteads, which were looted, torched, and vandalised (The Daily Star, 2015). The attacks were then repeated in Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogra, Lalmonirhat, Rajshahi and Chittagong (*Prothom Alo, 2015*). Ethnic and minority religious groups were also became victim in violence. There were 40 violent events where ethnic and religious minority groups were targeted, and that resulted 194 wounded, 12 casualties, and 421 instances of property destruction.

Contrasting Celebrations of "Democracy Restoration" and "Democracy Assassination"

The year 2015 started with political violence related to the conflicting celebrations of the day of "democracy restoration" and the day of "democracy assassination" by the major political parties and their alliances. The two major political parties defined 5 January in different ways and observed the day with different types of celebratory events. But the output was the same – violence – which led to more than three months-long blockades, political uncertainty, and extreme violence.

The blockade started on 6 January 2015 when Khaleda Zia, the leader of the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), called for her supporters to blockade the country's roads, railways, and waterways to protest what she considered an unfair 2014 general election. From 6 January 2015, there had been non-stop blockades all over the country by the BNP-led 20-party alliance, which continued till the second week of April 2015. In the 90 days of the Blockade (6 January to 6 April) 1990, violent events resulted in around 4786 people being injured, suffering burns, and 318 people died.

Fear by Fire: Arson Attack and the Use of Bombs as Tools of Intimidation

Petrol bombs and arson attacks became a new element of violence in 2015, to create fear and bring people's lives to a standstill. Mainly, long-distance buses, trucks, and public transportation were the main targets of these sorts of attacks. The number of arson attacks in the first four months of 2015 alone was nearly triple the amount recorded during all of 2014. There were 1347 reported incidents of arson attacks and bombings that caused 3395 injuries and 180 casualties in 2015.

Controlling Media, Silencing the Watchdogs, and Violence Against Journalists

An attack on journalists is an uncommon type of violence in election history. Around 24 journalists were injured, beaten, and harassed on Election Day. At some places, their cameras and vehicles were vandalised, mobile phones and important documents like photographs were taken and deleted from the mobile. They were threatening to leave the polling centre. A journalist went to collect news and took a photograph of fake voting. Then he was caught by that group, and his mobile was taken and his pictures deleted. Later, he was able to get back his mobile with the assistance of the police. Another reporter was stuck in a room by the ruling party as he took a picture of their illegality. Later, he was released when his colleagues came to rescue him. A further incident took place in Chittagong, where a reporter went to collect news, and he was attacked and injured by the ruling party. Police and ruling party activists did not allow journalists to get into the polling centre. Many

journalists were beaten and assaulted physically (Jugantor, 2015). From the database, a total of 59 events were found where Journalists became victims, resulting in 271 wounded in 2014 and 2015.

State Security Forces Involvement in Electoral Violence

State security forces resorted to indiscriminate use of force, including extrajudicial killings, gunfights, and shooting. At least eight suspected arsonists, whose family members claim they were innocent (The Independent, 2015), were killed in alleged gunfights with law enforcement personnel, mainly the Bangladesh Police and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), between 5 January 2015 and 5 February 2015 in Dhaka alone (ACHR, 2015). The State Security Forces were also involved in clashes with political parties, picketers, and criminals in 2015. Two candidates running for chairman in a Union Parisad election clashed with police, killed 1 in the Rangpur polls. More than 40 police officers were injured in different clashes in the first quarter of 2015. Blockaders also targeted the security forces and threw bombs into their cars, buses, and other vehicles.

In 2015, the state security force like Police, RAB, BGB, White uniform police, and Ansar, were involved in 372 violent events. Most of the events, they played their role as actors in clashes. In the events where state security forces were directly involved, 2706 were wounded and 126 casualties.

"Durbitta"- Rising Criminal Involvement in Electoral Violence

A "*durbitta"* is a person who has committed a crime. In a general sense, crime means violating the law, regulation, or anything harmful that destroys human society or resources, or creates problems in human life. In the first quarter of 2015, there were a large number of newspaper reports that focused durbittas as the main violent actor. But who are the durbittas and what is their goal is a big question. During the election period, the number of durbittas involved in election violence was also very high. In a general sense, criminals have their personal motivations, which are personal and basically economic. But when their involvement is found in an election, it turns into political motivation. In some cases, when reporters do not dare publish the specific identity (especially when the media is controlled by the ruling party), they usually use the term "Durbitta" to hide the original political identity. It is a new trend of politics in Bangladesh, the "politics of Durbitta". From the dataset, 867 events were coded where "Durbitta"- unidentified or unknown and known criminal participated in the violent event as an actor, and 1292 wounded and 262 casualties were recorded.

Violence as a Mechanism for Entrenching Authoritarian Rule

The findings validate that electoral violence in Bangladesh 2014–2015 was not incidental; it was used strategically to strengthen authoritarian control by the ruling Awami League (AL). Following the opposition's boycott of the January 2014 elections, the state and its affiliates instrumentalized violence to eliminate political rivals, demobilize dissent, and ensure unchallenged dominance. The State security forces engaged in systematic repression, like extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary arrests targeting leaders and activists of the opposition parties. Violence served as a deliberate tool for the ruling elites to manage political competition, limit political participation and opposition efforts, which lent

the regime a veneer of electoral legitimacy amid de facto one-party rule. By excluding the opposition and using systemic and institutionalized coercion, they created an environment where real political competition was totally impossible. In this period of time, politics of Durbitta, criminal networks, and local musclemen became crucial actors in the electoral process. Ruling elites increasingly outsourced coercion to these groups to silence dissent, intimidate voters, and weaken opposition campaigns. These practices maintained an illusion of democratic processes while undermining their true significance. Elections, although officially held, were marked by intimidation, ballot tampering, and oppressive tactics, turning them into tools of authoritarian legitimacy rather than platforms for fair competition. Ongoing violence against non-participants, ethnic, and minority groups highlighted the regime's dependence on fear for governance. Ultimately, violence served two purposes: it indicated the weakness of the authoritarian regime and acted as a method for consolidating power, keeping the illusion of democracy alive while cementing undemocratic practices. This cycle shows how crucial coercion is in electoral authoritarian regimes and emphasizes the unclear lines between democracy and authoritarianism.

DISCUSSION

Electoral violence fosters impaired checks and balances, undermining trust in the Election Commission, judiciary, and law enforcement institutions. When political activities are criminalised, and local administration becomes politicised, the incumbent regime is able to generate an election process that is staged and allows the active dismantling of institutions to continue under the guise of democratic elections. The results are consistent with Schedler's (2006) definition of electoral authoritarianism. While elections exist, electoral authoritarianism is sustained through capturing electoral institutions. The Bangladesh case studies expand this theory to show that authoritarianism can also be established through the normalisation of electoral violence. Levitsky and Way (2010) emphasised that hybrid regimes are occupations of the democratic-dictatorial overlap, and this study empirically demonstrates that sustained violence complicates the boundaries of hybrid regimes. The data also indicated that electoral violence did not affect all citizens, and the violence disproportionately affected citizens who did not engage in the electoral process, minorities, and journalists, demonstrating how authoritarian regimes utilize fear to hold power. In this sense, the utilisation of organised coercion converts the electoral process into a process of intimidation. The findings suggest that authoritarianism in Bangladesh is maintained utilising three interconnected mechanisms:

(i) institutional capture,

(ii) systemic coercion, and

(iii) legitimacy through managed elections.

These dynamics illustrate how the convergence of institutional capture, systemic coercion, and managed electoral legitimacy not only entrenches authoritarian rule in Bangladesh but also redefines the very functioning of electoral democracy into an instrument of controlled political dominance.

TABLE 3: LINKING CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS WITH DISCUSSION

Conceptual Dimension	Analytical Discussion (Findings in the Bangladesh Context in 2014-2015)
Electoral Authoritarianism (Schedler, 2006)	The study confirms that electoral violence in Bangladesh operates within an electoral authoritarian framework where institutions such as the Election Commission and judiciary are captured to sustain regime control under the appearance of democratic competition.
Hybrid Regime and Democratic Façade (Levitsky & Way, 2010)	The findings illustrate that Bangladesh's hybrid regime has blurred boundaries between democracy and authoritarianism. Elections exist formally, but their substance is hollowed out by manipulation and coercion.
Normalisation of Violence	Violence has become institutionalised as a routine political tool, used to suppress opposition and intimidate non-participant citizens, minorities, and journalists. This normalisation converts the electoral process into one of fear and control.
Institutional Capture and Systemic Coercion	Authoritarian consolidation in Bangladesh is maintained through control over state institutions and coercive apparatuses, reinforcing a cycle of impunity and repression.
Legitimacy through Managed Elections	Regular but manipulated elections provide the ruling elite with both domestic and international legitimacy while sustaining autocratic control.
Erosion of Democratic Trust	Recurrent violence and manipulation have diminished citizens' confidence in the democratic process, leading to voter apathy and political alienation.

In terms of policy, combating electoral violence necessitates the strengthening of intra-party democracy, the decriminalisation of political competition, and the depoliticization of security forces. Without these institutional changes, violence will continue to be a deeply entrenched characteristic of electoral politics and a continuing factor to subvert the democratic aspirations of citizens.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of electoral violence in Bangladesh are hardly studied or are less noticeable, except for some media and after-election reports, mainly by election observers and activists. But election violence is the key form and framework of political violence and electoral authoritarianism. Without a better understanding the determinants, dynamics and triggers of election violence, it is hardly possible intervening effective programs against electoral violence.

This paper has presented an overview of electoral violence during 2014 and 2015 and provides basic data to understand the shape of election violence, but many questions remain unanswered. The findings focus on blockade and hartal- related protest activities, arson

attacks on people and vehicles, the sabotaging of rail networks resulting in the uprooting of trains, killing and hurting passengers, bombs (petrol bombs, Molotov cocktails, crud bombs, and homemade bombs), attacks on political rallies and processions relating to elections were common types of electoral violence in 2014 and 2015. These two years also experienced an increasing number of attacks by "durbitta" (known criminal elements or organised crime syndicates). Another important feature is the increasing number of intra-party clashes over candidate nominations and between rival candidates. The victims were mostly non-participants (people who were not part of protests or hartals). This paper also recommends further research on understanding the dynamics behind the organisation of elections and violence, the dynamics and role of different actors, law and security forces, Ansar forces, and so-called party agents and volunteers.

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