because of their beliefs. Although Hindus appeared to be freer in towns to perform *puja* festivals this year, village gangs aligned to the ruling party were known to have attacked temples and demolish deities. The police guard was more evident at urban festivals. The *Ras Mela* festival, celebrated by the Buddhists, had to be canceled in a few villages because of intimidation.

The Ahmadiyas, a small Muslim sect, have been threatened with proscription, violence, destruction and occupation of their mosques by religious zealots working under the banner of the Khatme Nabuwat Movement. The government failed to revoke its ban on Ahmadiya literature, or to prosecute the vandals who attacked the mosques. In 2006, the police were able to prevent large scale violence, but in a few places zealots, despite police protection, went ahead to desecrate Ahmadiya institutions. Many secular civil society groups stood in support of the Ahmadiyas.

Right to livelihood

Corruption and mismanagement in the energy sector deprived large numbers in villages, or the poorer parts of towns, of electricity and water, which are essential for agricultural livelihoods. Instead of rectifying this, the administration allowed the police to fire on protestors demanding electricity, first in Kansat, in northern Rajshahi in April, killing five persons including a ten year old boy, and then in Sonir Akhra near Dhaka in May.

Plans by the Asian Energy Company (AEC) for open pit coal mining, which threatened displacement for hundreds of indigenous families in Phulbaria as well as more serious environmental damage, were resisted across the country. Again, the police shot at the demonstrators, and five persons were killed. The demonstrators demanded that the government cancel its agreement with AEC and protect their rights to their right to life.

A serious crisis surfaced in the export garment industries as workers' demands for reconsideration of minimum wages, which had remained stagnant since 1993, and safety conditions continued to be ignored. In May and June, this led to massive worker demos in the export processing zones in Savar and Ghazipur. An announcement that minimum wages were to be increased from the standard of Tk 930 in 1993 to Tk 1630 in 2006 brought few cheers from workers.

Defence of human rights

Defence of human rights has grown increasingly difficult with a breakdown of institutions, impunity of corrupt syndicates, and weaknesses in the justice system itself.

Freedom of expression: While several NGOs faced bureaucratic censors, journalists became the targets of violence instigated by business and political syndicates. Three journalists were killed, 72 reporters were subjected to assault and harassment by members of the ruling party, and cases were filed against 63 journalists.

In Kushtia, a powerful member of parliament assaulted a journalist for reporting his illegal activities, and threatened him into silence. Reporters and photo-journalists also became the target of police assaults during political demos. Freedom of speech and information thus came under serious threat.

In Kushtia, a powerful member of parliament assaulted a journalist for reporting his illegal activities, and threatened him into silence. Reporters and photo-journalists also became the target of police assaults during political demos. Freedom of speech and information thus came under serious threat. While eight electronic channels owned by powerful ministers and party members were licensed, the government, contrary to the directions of the Supreme Court, failed to allocate a terrestrial frequency to Ekushey Television.

A captive democracy

Political democracy has been hostage to a power play in which institutions have become dysfunctional. Parliament remained subservient to the interests of a narrow clique of political and commercial syndicates. The Awami League, the major opposition party, boycotted parliament for long periods on the grounds that the speaker repeatedly disallowed discussions on vital issues such as extra-judicial killings, religious militancy, worker unrest in export garment industries, and partisan appointments by the four party alliance government. Parliament failed to perform its function as a watchdog, and as a place for negotiation and dialogue.

The judiciary, the last resort for protection of constitutional liberties, was also affected by politicization. The Supreme Court's directives in 1999 for the separation of the judiciary have not been implemented by the executive. Threats to physical security became an added reason for judicial restraint. On November 12, a year after two judges were killed by a suicide bomber, the lower court judges asked for extra protection from the government.

The Anti-Corruption Commission has remained structurally inoperative since its appointment in 2005. Several bills that could have promoted the establishment of human rights institutions, such as a Human Rights Commission, or laws on freedom of information, gender neutral citizenship laws, or remedies for domestic violence have continued to gather dust in the Law Ministry over the last five years.

Now that national elections to parliament hang in suspension, the question in all our minds is how we can promote and protect our basic civil rights in the face of an impending collapse of political democracy itself.

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