

DHAKA TUESDAY FEBRUARY 24, 2009

From our archives

# Politics of confrontation: Retrospect and prospect

AKBAR ALI KHAN

**B**ANGLADESH is an odd mix of opposites. It is indeed a strange paradox that a nation which is singularly homogenous by every measure (such as race, language etc.) could be so divisive in its politics. It is baffling that persons who are individually rational and mild like the Bangladeshis could be so irrational and violent in their collective behavior. Despite successful completion of their terms by three consecutive democratically elected governments, extreme political instability marked by conflict and violence haunts Bangladesh today.

World Bank ranks 213 countries and territories on the basis of six governance indicators. As table-1 shows, Bangladesh's performance is most appalling by two indicators: political instability and corruption. However, Bangladesh's Achilles heels lie in political instability. She is classified in the category of worst 6.6 percent countries by this indicator. Bangladesh's political instability is a more difficult dilemma than the intractable problem of corruption. Her standing in corruption (lowest 7.9 per cent) is slightly better than her ranking in political instability (lowest 6.6 percent).

As Table-1 indicates, Bangladesh's performance has declined by every measure of good governance between 1996 and 2005. These indicators are not entirely independent of each other; they are mutually reinforcing. However, political instability has most spill-over effects on other indicators. In fact, it is the key to large slide in governance in Bangladesh during the last decade.

The nature of political instability in Bangladesh is, however, different from that of other democratic countries. Usually, political instability in most democratic countries arises from the inability of a single political



all areas of governance. It creates a Darwinian world of the survival of the fittest where the poor, the weak and the disadvantaged are ruthlessly abused. In developing countries like Bangladesh, political instability is the greatest threat to human rights.

While the costs of political confrontation are evident, the cures are not. In fact, the prescriptions for cure depend on the diagnosis of maladies. There is, however, no consensus on what generates and sustains political instability in Bangladesh. There are five main approaches to political confrontation syndrome in Bangladesh

- Lack of Social Capital
- Dynastic antagonisms
- Inadequacies of the Constitution
- Patron client relationship
- Prisoner's dilemma

### Lack of social capital

Throughout history, political instability has been endemic in Bangladesh. Political fragmentation and instability had been her historical destiny. During the period 500-1150 A.D., a ruling dynasty in Eastern and Southern Bengal lasted less than eighty years. In the first century of Muslim rule, the average reign of a ruler was 5.5 years, during the period 1342-1575, it was about nine years. There were also bouts of political anarchy. For example, Khalimpur copper plate records that anarchy prevailed in Bengal in the first half of the eighth century. In ancient Bengal, anarchy is described as matsanya or fish like condition where the bigger fishes devour the smaller ones. The imagery of matsyanaya graphically describes the sufferings of poor and marginal people in political anarchy.

In the sixteenth century, the first Moghul Emperor Babur wrote, "It is a singular custom in Bengal that there is little of hereditary descent in succession to the sovereignty. Whoever kills the king and succeeds in placing himself on the throne is immediately acknowledged as king; all the amirs, soldiers and peasants instantly obey and submit to him, consider him as being as much as their sovereign as they did their former prince and obey his orders implicitly. The people of Bengal say, "We are faithful to the throne, we are obedient and true to it". Abul Fazl, the Mughal historian, aptly described Bengal as Bulghakhana or House of Turbulence.

Khan (1996) attributes political instability in Bengal to weakness of grassroots institutions in rural settlements in Bangladesh region owing to what is now described in the jargon of social science as lack of social capital. A moot question in applying this theory to contemporary situation is whether historical deficiency of social capital is also valid now. However, Khan's hypothesis is supported by recent research on social capital in Bangladesh. A study conducted in 1980s by Prof. U.A.B. Razia Akhter Banu suggests that level of interpersonal trust was quite low in Bangladesh. She reports that only 4.5 per cent respondents in rural areas and 2.5 per cent in the urban areas indicated high levels of trust on others. The corresponding figures in the USA are 37 per cent in rural areas and 44.9 per cent in urban areas. Pippa Norris (2002) of Harvard University reports that a survey in the 1990s show that mean score of social trust in Bangladesh is 0.20 while the same score for Norway is 0.65; for USA, 0.35, for China, 0.50; and for India,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 61

Table-1  
Ranking of Bangladesh among 213 countries by governance indicators

Governance Indicator	Ranking of Bangladesh in percentile rank in 1998	Ranking of Bangladesh in percentile rank in 2005
Voice and Accountability	Lowest 41.5%	Lowest 31.4%
Political stability/ No violence	Lowest 26.9%	Lowest 6.6%
Government Effectiveness	Lowest 38.3%	Lowest 21.1%
Regulatory Quality	Lowest 39.4%	Lowest 14.9%
Rule of Law	Lowest 26.4%	Lowest 19.8%
Control of corruption	Lowest 40.2%	Lowest 7.9%

Source: Kaufman, Daniel, Aart Kraay and Massimo Mastruzzi. Governance Matters V: Aggregate and Individual Governance Indicators for 1996-2005. (Mimeo). World Bank Washington D.C., September 2006.

Table-2  
Average No. of hartals (including local and national) in Bangladesh, 1947-2002

Period	Average No. of hartals per year
1947-1958	1.5
1959-1966	1.0
1967-70	12.7
1971-74	12.0
1975-1986	14.4
1987-1990	81.6
1991-1994	72.0
1995-1998	93.0
1999-2000	110.6

Source: UNDP. Beyond Hartals. Dhaka: UNDP, 2005.

Table-3  
The relationship between % of votes received and % of seats won in Bangladesh Parliament, 1991-2001

Party	Election of 1991		Election of 1996		Election of 2001	
	% of votes	% of seats	% of votes	% of seats	% of votes	% of seats
(a) Awami League	30.08	29.3	37.46	48.6	40.03	20.6
(b) 4 party alliance including AL	33.67	33.33	---	---	---	---
(a) BNP	30.81	46.6	33.81	38.6	40.97	64.3
(b) 4 party alliance including BNP	---	---	---	---	47.04	72.0
Jatiya Party (E)	1.92	11.60	16.40	10.6	7.25	4.26
Jamaat-i-Islami	12.13	6.0	8.26	1.0	4.28	5.6
Independent and others	11.47	2.47	4.13	1.2	1.36	3.14

Source: Karim, Waresul. Election under a Caretaker Government. Dhaka: UPL, 2004.

party to muster a workable majority in the Parliament. In Bangladesh, elected governments have sufficient majority to complete their tenure but they fail to enforce good governance. Political instability in Bangladesh results not from the failure of the unlettered electorate but from the failure of political parties and their leaders. It is driven by agitational politics which challenge the ruling government through *andolons* (movements) and *hartals* (strikes). *Andolons* (movements) are usually launched by national parties and distributional coalitions or special interest organisations or collusions (such as trade unions and Associations) which are in many cases affiliated to political parties (Rahman, 2006). The agitations of distributional coalitions are not unique to Bangladesh (Olson, 1982).

Political instability in Bangladesh is nurtured by bitter conflicts and violence. What makes political instability confrontational and destructive are hartals (strikes), aborodhs (blockade), and gheraos (siege). The most popular weapon in agitational politics is hartal. The term hartal is derived from Hindi terms hat and tal (which implies locked market). Hartals in South Asia could be traced back to the seventeenth century Gujarat where traders used to resort to closure of shops in protest against the excesses of government functionaries (Habib, 1995, 256). It is not, therefore, surprising that hartal was turned into a political weapon throughout South Asia by Gandhiji who was himself a Gujrati. Hartals

are not at all new to Bangladesh. What make them unique today are their frequency and their destructiveness. Table-2 presents trends of hartal in Bangladesh.

Table-2

Table-2 suggests two striking tendencies. First, the incidence of hartals in post-independence Bangladesh is much higher than the comparable figure in pre-independence Bangladesh. Between 1947 and 1970, there were 67 hartals in the erstwhile East Pakistan. The average number of hartals per year (about 71) in Bangladesh during last two decades exceeds total number of hartals in East Pakistan in 23 years. Ironically, political violence is more endemic in Bangladesh today than in colonial East Pakistan which fought a sanguinary struggle for independence against a brutal enemy. Secondly, the number of hartals per year shows a trend of continuous increase every year since 1979. In addition to nation-wide strikes, local hartals are also proliferating. During the period 1971-2000, about 22.5 per cent hartals were national and 77.5 per cent were local.

Opinions vary on the costs of hartals. According to an estimate of World Bank, total economic losses on account of hartals during the period 1995-1999 stood at \$10 billion; the average cost of a national hartal being \$50 million. This amounts to loss of 4.5 per cent of GDP per annum during 1995-99. UNDP (2002) estimates hartal cost at 3 - 4 per cent of GDP per annum on

an average during 1991-2000. These estimates appear to be exaggerated because about 40 percent of GDP are not directly affected by political unrest like hartal (such as agriculture, fisheries, mining, construction, electricity, gas, real estate and health). Three percent loss of GDP resulting from work stoppage in sectors which constitute only 60 per cent of GDP would amount to loss of the entire productions in these sectors of at least 18.2 days in a year. The average number of national hartals during 1995-2000 was 27.6. UNDP's estimate of three percent GDP loss from hartals implies that at least 65 per cent of GDP in affected sectors on a hartal day is lost. This estimate seems to be highly blown up. Particularly, the losses resulting from strikes are compensated by the private sector by substituting holidays as working days and by working secretly during strike. Furthermore, the intensity of hartals is much less in small towns and villages than in big towns. The static losses of hartal per year are likely to be in the range of 0.5 to 1 percent of GDP (assuming average loss of 10 to 20 percent in affected sectors throughout the entire country on hartal days). However, these are direct losses. They do not take into account declines in investment resulting from the erosion of confidence of both domestic and foreign investors. Political instability forces the economy to travel along a trajectory that is less conducive to growth. The ills of hartals are not confined to economic losses only. Political instability undermines