

'Bangladesh is a very interesting country to understand the link between violence and governance'

Dr. Bert Suykens, Assistant Professor with the Conflict Research Group (CRG) at the Department of Conflict and Development Studies, Ghent University (Belgium), is currently doing research on understanding the role of political violence in shaping governance and public order in Bangladesh. He talked to *The Daily Star* on the shape of political violence in Bangladesh

TDS: How do you define political violence?

BS: Our definition of political violence is very restricted. We tried to narrow the definition otherwise the data will be scattered. For this study we only count those events where political organisations were involved and in which at least one person got killed, abducted, raped or wounded, and property was destroyed.

TDS: What are your findings on political violence in Bangladesh?

BS: Political violence in Bangladesh is a variegated phenomenon. In democracy, it has been considered as a sign of an immature or even immoral political class. In our study, we are trying to offer a clearer basis to discuss this issue. We have prepared basic data on the prevalence of political violence, its regional distribution, the actors involved and the specific shape of hartal violence for the period 2002-2013.

In the first phase (2002-2013) we get one BNP, one Awami League and one caretaker regime. This represents existing variations of political governments. 18,309 instances of political violence were collected from four different newspapers during this period.

The data partly reflects the known distribution of violence, with large scale violence in 2006 and 2013, and a clear break in violence during the caretaker government from 2007 to 2008. In the single year 2013, around 30%-35% events of political violence happened in Bangladesh.

TDS: How do you analyse 2013 in your study period?

BS: In that single year almost 12,000 got wounded. The number of fatal casualties was 300. It propelled districts like Satkhira to the fore, yet to some extent it also aggravated existing trends. Before 2013, AL dominated and Jamaat-e-Islami (Jel) only accounted



for around 10% of events and wounded, and almost 6% of lethal casualties. Including 2013, the Islamist party accounts for one fourth of all lethal casualties.

TDS: Which are the districts more prone to political violence?

BS: If you look at regional distribution of the events, Dhaka is obviously dominant with around a fifth of all violence and wounded. Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi are in the middle position and Barisal, Sylhet and Rangpur are relatively less violent. But in terms of lethal casualties, Khulna division accounts for most. More than one fourth of casualties happened in this division. If you look at urban-rural divide, political violence happens more in the rural areas.

TDS: That is an interesting finding. Why is it so?

BS: People generally talk about big events in urban areas. But many violent events occur in rural areas. These are under-reported. There are day-to-day events like taking possession of someone's land, and family feuds which turn

into political conflict. Mega events like elections and war crimes trial also trigger violence in rural areas. Sometimes, political conflicts of urban areas spill into rural areas. Among rural districts, Kushtia, Pabna and Satkhira rank high.

TDS: Who are the most violent actors?

BS: By actors we actually mean those who are engaged in clashes. Major political parties AL and BNP and their student and youth wings dominate violent events. State actors, Jel and its auxiliary organisations and a number of (former) rebel groups follow in the list.

Yet, with regard to lethal casualties, state actors dominate, being active in over half of all violence in which fatalities occur.

TDS: What is the nature of violence where major political parties are involved?

BS: Violence between major political parties tends to be less lethal. There is a lot of violence, a lot of people got wounded (50% of total) in their conflicts but less people got killed. Among other parties, Jamaat's violence came to prominence in 2013, which was due to war crimes trials. They were heavily engaged in conflicts with ruling alliance and law enforcing agencies.

TDS: What factors do you attribute to political violence in Bangladesh?

BS: Elections, war crime trials are some focal points of violence. Even if you discount this kind of big events there are a lot of different causes for everyday violence. It might be over position in the party, intra-party conflict, possession over properties, tender and other day-to-day life events. You have also ultra left wing groups. You have CHT. There is no simple answer to the question.

TDS: Is there any link between the existing governance state and recurrence of political violence?

BS: I think Bangladesh is a very interesting country to understand the link between violence and governance. Bangladesh has achieved tremendous success in many development indicators. It is an interesting puzzle. The hard working people of this country must be given credit for the rapid progress. I can put a hypothesis. The political violence might be targeted at political parties, not the whole society. If you take the whole period from 2002 to 2013 you will not find many events where violence spread all over the country. If something happens in Mymensingh, it does not affect Satkhira, or vice versa.

TDS: What about nationwide events like hartals and oborodhs?

BS: In my study period, hartal violence accounts for over a quarter of all violent events and wounded, but is slightly less lethal (the present situation may be different). Hartal has dominated political violence in a number of years.

TDS: We see increasing involvement of youth in political violence. How do you explain it?

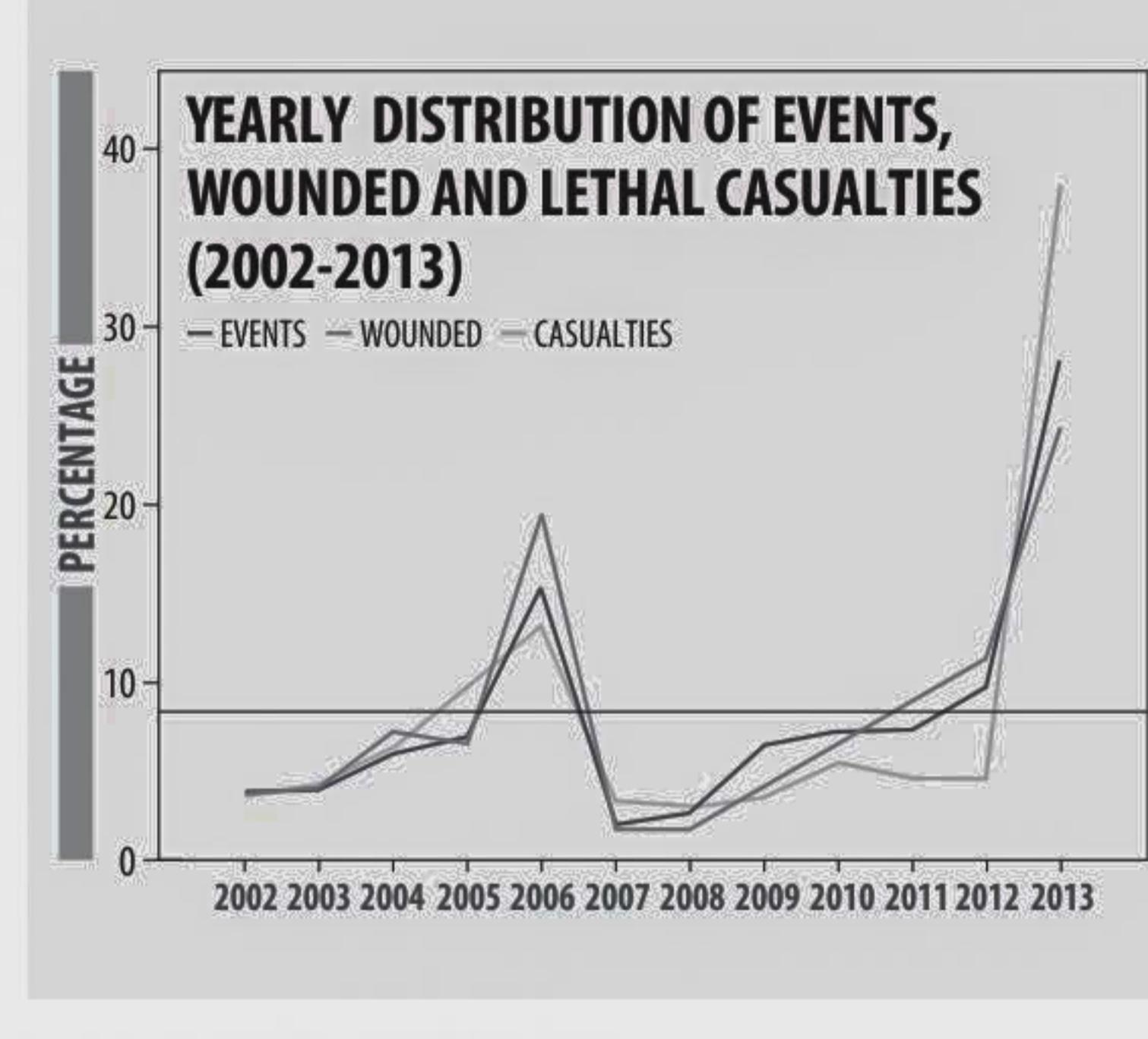
BS: It is a very important question. Student groups are often involved in intra-group conflict. For Chatra League, 40% of their violence is intra-group conflict while for Chatra Dal the percentage is around 30%.

TDS: Can we do any trend analysis of the current situation?

BS: First I must say, I would not talk about the present situation because I do not have enough data about it. I can only say about my studied period. If you look at the graph you will see it has continuous low numbers and sudden peaks. It shows that

political violence had been growing since 2001 and it reached its peak in 2006. Then it went down and remained relatively low during 2007-12. There is a general trend that after elections, violence goes down to very low level. In 2013, we experienced sudden increase in violence and it surpassed all the previous records of the studied period.

I would not say intolerance is increasing in the society. In the stud-



ied period, number of lethal casualties was relatively low. Many people got wounded but not killed. If you subtract the exceptional year 2013, violence was going down. If you take a long view, it is positive news for Bangladesh.

This year started as a violent year. We have to see whether it continues in the same pace. At this moment, it is really difficult to make any prediction.

However, to suggest putting on weight or more exercise to cure heartburn might be counterproductive. Analogously, to suggest that bolstering economic growth will eliminate poverty is akin to chanting the old discredited slogan, "A rising tide raises all boats."

Finally, before we search for the next magical tool, it is imperative to ask before we dedicate resources into it: how do we know it works? The new mantra is that all potential and promising actions must be assessed for efficacy before they are mass-produced or "replicated." Currently, many applied economists are redirecting their energy into a model popularised by the Poverty Lab which uses randomised control trials (RCT) to identify and isolate the poverty reduction effects of policy actions such as cash subsidies, food programmes, better teachers, or de-worming.

What makes RCT so important? We have a number of competing tools vying for our limited resources and RCT allows us to identify the most effective bundle that reinforce rather than negate each other as Kaushik Basu mentioned. Of the negative influences on poverty, natural hazards such as floods, cyclones, and drought have been found to create a poverty trap in three regions of Bangladesh: the north-west, the central northern region, and the southern coastal zones. Unless we treat extreme poverty with a holistic approach, Bangladesh in 2030 will still be one of the eleven countries with high numbers of people in poverty, high multi-hazard exposure, and inadequate capacity to minimise the impacts.

The writer, an economist, writes regularly on policy issues.

Why poverty action plans don't work

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

CAN we really banish poverty in Bangladesh by the year 2030? I do not question the loftiness of the goal of eradicating poverty or the sincerity of policy makers and the economists. However, what gives me reasons for concern is the lack of evidence on the efficacy of various anti-poverty programmes, and the limited amount of time left to meet the target, i.e., only fifteen years remaining. Complicating the scenario is the evidence from research that the mainstay of our economic programmes to eradicate poverty in the last two decades, viz., employment generation in the garments sector and microcredit expansion, may not deliver the goods for those who live in poverty.

According to Unicef data, at the end of 2011, 43% of our population lived below the international poverty line of US\$1.25 per day, and some preliminary estimates point out that, at the end of the year 2014, 38% of Bangladesh's population is living at an income level below the poverty line. Where do we go from here? According to United Nations report "The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet," all countries including Bangladesh would aim to end poverty in all its forms by 2030. The present regime has endorsed this goal, as evident from the statement delivered by the Finance Minister, A.M.A. Muhith, at Washington, DC in October 2014. "We have to move away from the focus on the bottom 40% that began in the early seventies of the last century to elimination of abject poverty by 2021 and poverty in its totality by



2030." Unfortunately, it is now increasingly being realised that we may fall much short of this target.

Let it be known that if we fail to eliminate poverty altogether, it is not for a lack of trying. Since Bangladesh's independence, we have embraced many programmes, some of which showed some initial promise: contraceptives, micro-lending, free education, rural electrification, Food for Work, etc. Many of these programmes were moderate to highly successful in the short term, and made significant contribution to raising our GDP growth rate and per capita income. However, in spite of the claim laid by some of these programmes to the mantle of "poverty elimination," evidence on their impact on reduction of poverty remains

unproven.

Let us consider a typical scenario, highlighted recently by Kaushik Basu, the current Chief Economist of the World Bank. He writes: "Consider, for example, a government policy in which subsidies, funded with newly printed money, are handed out to residents of 1,000 villages. This will not necessarily be a boon for the economy as a whole. Injecting money might improve the living standards in the villages receiving the funds, but doing so may well drive up the cost of food throughout the country, causing residents of non-subsidised villages to fall into poverty." Basu here makes an oblique reference to the now-discredited "Millennium Villages" initiative of Geoffrey Sachs, who wrote in 2005: "We can banish

extreme poverty in our generation ... (We) have enough financial resources on the planet to make sure, easily, that people aren't dying of their poverty."

Another factor is the wrong-minded search for the "silver bullet" to eliminate poverty. It is safe to assert now that studies and scientific research make it abundantly clear that poverty elimination is a complex and trial-and-error process. We tried the Grameen model of microcredit, but thirty years of experience shows that while credit does help, its role in eliminating extreme poverty is very limited. Studies in Bangladesh have frequently questioned its marginal effect on poverty. A group of economists working at MIT's Poverty Action Lab have attempted to isolate the impact of microcredit in six countries and their results indicate that "microcredit has failed to meet its expectations."

Similarly, another school of thought feels that education and better health can ameliorate extreme poverty. Recently, many countries have hailed

ICT as a tool of poverty eradication. Does the high rate of economic growth per se ensure elimination of poverty? Not quite. Economic growth is a necessary condition to create jobs, raise per capita income, and bring down the number of poor. But it is not a sufficient condition to eliminate poverty. It is very difficult to see that you cannot banish poverty without a direct onslaught on this curse. The analogy one can use is from the medical science. If you suffer from chronic heartburn, you can take a palliative to suppress it and offer temporary relief. But to banish it one needs to find the cause: diet, habits, health, and physical activities.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 23 Began to cry
- 24 Occupies
- 25 Compass creation
- 27 Wine choice
- 30 Skilled worker
- 31 Eden name
- 32 Shell game need
- 33 Trample
- 35 Jimmy Smits series
- 37 They're adored
- 39 New York city
- 40 Chutzpah
- 41 Bus units
- 42 Door sign
- 16 Spanish dishes
- 20 Sweet-heart
- 21 Cal spans
- 24 Work wk.'s end
- 25 Invent
- 27 Roma's nation
- 28 Unfold
- 29 Notas bright
- 30 Top grade
- 34 Unspotted spot
- 36 Do something
- 37 Lived

CRYPTOQUOTE

CRSBA S VABSNR TXV CGVJ

JTFDRN, CSFDAV MTVJN

TXV ERGVGEDAV GFK

HVSFYN TXD TXV HAND.

- DTJ GBBAF

1-3

1 XYDLBAAXR is

LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample,

A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc.

Single letters, apostrophes, the length

and formation of the words are all hints. Each

day the code letters are different.

- SUZE ORMAN

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: NO

ONE'S EVER ACHIEVED FINANCIAL

FITNESS WITH A JANUARY

RESOLUTION THAT'S ABANDONED

BY FEBRUARY.

- SUZE ORMAN

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

