

Are we headed for a violent election year?

Continued violence in BNP events a worrying sign for all

Once again, the street has been stained with blood. Once again, batons have been charged, teargas and bullets fired, and brickbats hurled. In the latest episode of political violence on Wednesday, Munshiganj was witness to the return of a familiar terror that has engulfed the BNP's month-old countrywide agitation which began on August 22 protesting the price hikes of daily essentials including fuel and the deaths of several activists in police shootings. Only this time, it didn't seem like a one-party show. BNP activists seemed more prepared, more eager to ward off a marauding police force.

If this is a sign of things to come, we maybe once again headed for a very tumultuous election year, with the ordinary people ultimately paying the price. According to media reports, in the latest incident, the violence began, as it often does with opposition street programmes, with a face-off over forgettable reasons between police and BNP men holding rallies. After some heated arguments, police started to charge batons. The activists started to hurl brickbats. Police doubled down on countering them. Activists tripled down on resisting them. In the end, it turned into an hourlong bloody spectacle with at least 70 individuals injured.

It's unfortunate that even such ghastly details may cease to matter thanks to their repeated nature. Bangladesh, of course, deserves more from politics than strikes and sloganeering. But it also deserves more than a blunt, partisan response to political opposition based on grievances of the citizens. This is precisely what has been happening, however, as a rundown on the one month of BNP's countrywide movement shows. Reportedly, violent clashes have been witnessed in as many as 52 of its street events, with police and ruling party men collaborating in many cases. In 27 places, the houses, vehicles and business establishments of BNP men were vandalised. Multiple cases were also filed against them. Finally, in 18 places, section 144 was issued because of Awami League events overlapping with BNP's. The overlapping is of course orchestrated, a familiar strategy to foil opposition gatherings.

BNP leaders have recently signalled their willingness to match violence with violence. Several leaders have asked party cadres to join street events with clubs and rods to "defend" themselves against attacks. This can only mean an escalation which, together with ongoing provocations, must be avoided if we are to have any chance of a political consensus over the fate of the upcoming parliamentary election.

There is no denying that BNP, or any opposition party for that matter, has the right to peaceful assembly. The current strategy of Awami League to answer BNP's street mobilisation with force and provocations is not only in violation of its own pledge to allow opposition movement ahead of the election, but also a denial of an inalienable right guaranteed by the constitution. We urge the government and also the Election Commission to ensure all parties are given equal political space with the bigger goal of a fair and peaceful election in mind.

A shocking reality check in Dinajpur

Bring those involved in question paper leaks to justice

We are shocked to learn about question paper leaks during the ongoing SSC examinations in Kurigram's Bhurungamari upazila under the Dinajpur Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board. Reportedly, question papers of six subjects - General Mathematics, Higher Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Agricultural Education - have been leaked. And the mastermind behind this is the headmaster of Nehal Uddin Pilot Girls' High School, Lutfar Rahman, who also serves as secretary of the local exam centre. Police investigations have found that he, along with two other teachers of the school, were involved with the leak.

We shudder to think how teachers, who are supposed to be role models for their students, could be involved in such criminal activities. What kind of an example have they set for the young minds through these despicable acts? Details that have emerged of the activities of this group, led by Lutfar Rahman who has served as a headmaster for a decade now, are disturbing. All of them should be brought to justice immediately.

We also wonder what has happened to the measures taken by the authorities concerned after SSC question papers were leaked in 2018. During that time, it was decided that the "set" of question papers for any specific exam will be announced only before the commencement of the examination; use of mobile phone by exam officials would be banned during the exams; internet speed would be slowed down, etc. Are these measures still being implemented? These steps are needed to stop question paper leaks or any other exam-related irregularities. Moreover, according to the parents and guardians of local students, there is a gang active in Kurigram and Rangpur who sell question papers at a high price prior to such exams. The police should investigate the allegation and arrest the gang members.

Interestingly, while the Dinajpur Education Board has acknowledged the incident of the question paper leakage and later rescheduled four of the postponed exams, the students, guardians and teachers of the Bhurungamari upazila have alleged that apart from the above-mentioned six subjects, question papers of two other subjects also had been leaked. According to them, handwritten copies of question papers of English first paper, held on September 19, and English second paper, held on September 20, were sent to examinees and their guardians the nights before the exams through various messaging apps, including WhatsApp. These allegations should also be investigated by appropriate authorities, and if found to be true, those exams should also be retaken.

We hope the SSC examinees of Dinajpur will be able to recover from the leakage trauma and sit for their next exams without having to worry about the recurrence of any such nuisance. The responsibility to ensure this lies with the education board, the local administration and the police.

What does AL gain from unleashing violence on BNP?

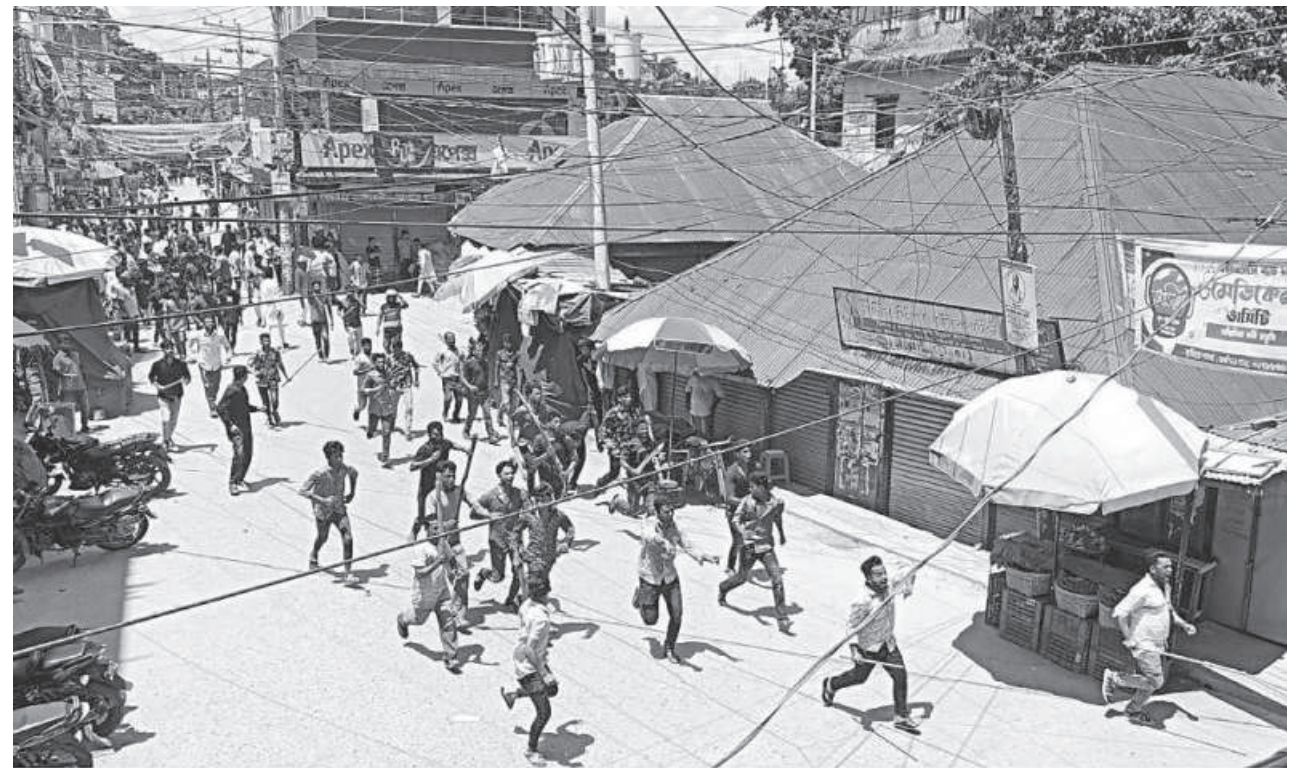


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Since mid-August, hardly a day has passed when newspapers have not published a photograph or a story depicting attacks by the members of the ruling Awami League on the members of its arch-rival, the BNP. These attacks have intensified following quite a few ministers' assertion that their party would not leave the streets for the opposition to occupy. It follows the BNP's serial agitation programmes across Bangladesh protesting price hikes, the ongoing energy crisis, and alleged corruption. The statements by ministers were clearly taken by the ruling party members as a signal for resisting any attempts by the opposition parties to organise protests against the government. Though the BNP is the prime target of such denial of public space, parties like the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and Gono Odhikar Parishad, too, have not been spared.

With exceptions, particularly if attacked by police, most of the recent reports suggest that the BNP has made no serious attempts to counter these attacks. Rather, unlike before, their supporters melt away, presumably to avoid probable harassment by police, including arrests and alleged



Political activists chase their opponents during a clash between Awami League and BNP supporters at a market in Cumilla's Nangalkot upazila on August 31, 2022.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Most of the recent reports suggest that the BNP has made no serious attempts to counter these attacks. Rather, unlike before, their supporters melt away, presumably to avoid probable harassment by police, including arrests and alleged extortions.

extortions. Another familiar pattern observed is that when supporters of the ruling party attack BNP activists, police either aid the attackers or remain as observers, instead of preventing such violent acts. These attacks are often indiscriminate, not making any difference between a young activist and a senior leader, men and women. Homes and vehicles such as cars and motorbikes of some leaders and party offices have been vandalised in random attacks.

It is hard to imagine how the leadership of the ruling party feels seeing those brutal acts splashed on newspapers or the video footage on TV screens. Feeling like the conqueror after each and every "successful" campaign to drive away alleged disruptors of the government's development mission could be one, and it may well boost the morale of the loyal followers. But those images are too distressing and disturbing for most citizens, making them feel more concerned and intimidated.

It is quite intriguing to understand what the Awami League is gaining from these attacks, other than defaming itself as a party that does not have faith in democracy, and hence resorting to denying space to opposition and dissent. Apparently, the BNP has opted a strategy for peaceful and non-confrontational protests, instead of the alleged violence for which they were much vilified in the past, in particular during their boycott of the 2014 election. Despite their denial, many of the incidents of arson on public transport and damages caused during that campaign were apportioned on

capital city thought that should not be allowed either. The images of senior BNP leaders being beaten and getting blood-soaked rather help them regain people's sympathy, almost instantly.

Images of Awami League activists brandishing locally made weapons run contrary to the claims made by ministers that the BNP is out to create anarchy and destroy stability. Saying something in public and doing the opposite in reality is not new or unknown in politics. But repeating from the same playbook eventually exposes the truth. People are no longer easily persuaded into believing the official narrative that the protesting opposition is responsible for disturbing public peace. And police action, especially falsely implicating hundreds of BNP men, appears as nothing but malicious harassment. Investigations by *Prothom Alo* found that people living abroad during the alleged troubles have been falsely named in the cases.

Confrontational politics always harms the aggressor the most, and in the current environment, it is the Awami League that has been seen in the offensive. Recent tweets by European

ambassadors expressing concern regarding attacks on the opposition also reflect how these attacks are viewed by our trade and development partners. These are signals to their respective capitals that the democratic future of Bangladesh is facing a serious threat, and violent suppression of protests would affect the environment adversely for the coming election. The possibility of an adverse impact

on the coming parliamentary election is not easy to rule out as senior leaders of the top two contending parties have been trading barbs over it. BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir has alleged that the ruling party wants a walkover and that's why there's so much provocation. On the other hand, Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader has questioned BNP's eligibility in elections. Some political observers have opined that back-to-back economic crises caused by the Covid pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, coupled with widespread corruption and a lack of accountability, have unnerved the government and the ruling party. The observers further say that the party in power is apprehensive of a popular mass movement, and that has prompted them to suppress any potential protest. The irony is that the Awami League, being the oldest party in the country, which thrived on organising mass movements, has forgotten the historical lesson that attempts to suppress protest only helps it grow, and is counterproductive.

Living on hope, devoid of reality



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

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Many of us believe and widely practise the cliché of, "Hopefully, this shall not happen to me" - or, more selfishly, "to my family." But merely hoping is often not good enough. The natural instinct of some of us is to ignore the mask-wearing rule even under severe Covid conditions. Those who contracted the dreaded illness had other issues, they argue. Just blow your nose in the morning and you are good for the day. In fact, you don't need the vaccine, either. My quoted friend, who did both, died from the disease.

We feel safe leapfrogging across a busy road after acrobatically scaling or going underneath the road divider - and not even in our sports gear - thinking, "The dead were not watching the traffic like I do." Others reassure themselves, "Drivers have eyes and brakes, don't they?"

We feel confident to construct six more floors above a building which has a foundation meant for a three-storey structure. Since, out of thousands of cases, only two such buildings (dishonestly vertically extended) have collapsed, we dare to profit from illegal ventures. Regulatory agencies, manned by real people, are also usually constricted during years of

construction by fiscal benefits, naughty people say.

"Lightning does not strike in the same place twice" seems to be the philosophy behind storing explosive and flammable chemicals. The hazard is so profitable that deaths appear justified. Tragedies at Dhaka's Nimtoli (in 2010) and Churihatta (in 2019) areas are a result of greed, not poverty. Before they can say, "This cannot happen here, because we are very careful," boom!

We risk the lives of the sick, too. Some of our hospitals are in such narrow buildings that there is zero possibility of lateral movement, and they are several storeys high with only one staircase. Means of escape are non-existent. The fire code requires bedded (immobile) patients to be moved across two doors into a safe room. There is none. After a fire, there will be none.

The rashness and downright stupidity of unqualified people offering medical services is another ultimate. Treatment is proffered by technicians or lesser mortals. We can hardly blame their patients, for that is the latter's best option in terms of affordability. The business attitude of proprietors of these kangaroo hospitals is: "A few

would die anyway, today or tomorrow." Even Aristotle dared not propound such a bizarre philosophy.

Quite needlessly, one may say, five innocent lives were lost when a crane driver's assistant, unqualified and without a licence, was given the key to move a girder. They were probably thinking, if at all, "What could possibly

No country in the world has as many incomplete, deferred, unread, forgotten and buried inquiries as ours. After some time passes, we have a knack to be soft on crime or the artistry to muddle up the facts. As if we are playing endless computer games. But, in life, there is no clandestine voice sombrely assuring, "You are dead. You have eight lives left."

happen? It's only a concrete mass that might just crush only one of the many cars that ply on that section. A safety barrier will inconvenience so many people. Tch, tch! Life must go on." That is technology laced with bravery.

About how an *anari* helper was allowed the control of the crane, and

more crucial questions, there are inquiries going on. No country in the world has as many incomplete, deferred, unread, forgotten and buried inquiries as ours. After some time passes, we have a knack to be soft on crime or the artistry to muddle up the facts. As if we are playing endless computer games. But, in life, there is no clandestine voice sombrely assuring, "You are dead. You have eight lives left."

Common sense, awareness, education, training, information update, implementation of a well thought out programme, and humbly learning lessons are important steps, albeit in varying degrees, in assuming and carrying out one's responsibility at any level of a real job. That applies to both individuals and members of a group or agency. Sloppiness or a slip at any link in the chain can, will and does spell anything from trouble to disaster.

Since human lives and valuable properties are concerned, it is crucial that government agencies wake up to their call of duty. Lack of manpower and other resources is an oft-abused excuse. You have to catch a few and impose a suitable penalty; the rest will fall in line. Instances where mobile courts penalise clinics, restaurants and hoarders are encouraging examples. Seatbelts for drivers and front-seat passengers were ensured by our police by imposing a few fines.

Our so-called daredevil gallantry, however, disappears when telling off corrupt politicians, businesspeople and civil servants. But more about that another day.