

## Stop the surge of violence urgently

Re-arrest criminal gang leaders, stop proliferation of illegal weapons

We condemn the recent spate of violence seemingly orchestrated as part of Awami League's "Dhaka lockdown" and nationwide "shutdown" programmes, in reaction to the International Crimes Tribunal's announcement of the verdict date in a case against Sheikh Hasina. In five days since Tuesday, more than 30 arson attacks—mostly targeting buses—and crude bomb blasts took place, with two deaths reported. Comments made by members of the AL on social media, alluding to the "success" of the programmes, indicate that the party has been involved in instigating these vicious acts. A driver was burnt alive and a passenger severely injured when a parked bus was set on fire in Mymensingh on Tuesday. Such acts are deplorable, suggesting that the AL, far from being repentant for its horrific role in the killing of over 1,400 people during the mass uprising, continues on a path of creating fear among citizens.

The violence has persisted, with several crude bombs detonated in Dhaka on Saturday, alongside arson attacks in three districts. According to a news report, police have arrested four activists of the AL and its affiliated bodies for allegedly engaging in these violent acts. Although law enforcement agencies are on high alert, with the government beefing up security in various locations, there is apprehension that further violence may occur following Monday's verdict in the case against Sheikh Hasina on charges of crimes against humanity.

While the absconding leaders of the AL, whose political activities have been banned, appear to be instigating the violence through their supporters, other factors have also increased the likelihood of violence ahead of the national elections. A report in this daily revealed how leaders of the underworld, either recently released from prison or returning from abroad, have become very active, resulting in the recent spate of killings, extortion, and armed clashes in general. Most concerning is that police have received intelligence suggesting that underworld gangs could be hired as "muscle" during the elections to intimidate voters and attack rival campaigners. The possibility that the AL may also employ these criminals to create chaos during the elections cannot be ruled out.

It is disturbing to note that several notorious criminals have been released from jails since the uprising, while others have dared to return from abroad to resume their activities and "reclaim territory." More than 1,300 firearms were looted from police stations during the uprising, many still unaccounted for. In addition, there has been a reported increase in illegal firearms entering the country through various border areas.

The government must, therefore, act swiftly to re-arrest identified criminals, initiate targeted operations to recover illegal firearms, and stop their influx across border points. Unless urgent steps are taken, violent crimes will continue, and the situation will become increasingly difficult to control.

## We need more women in politics

Meaningful democracy demands more than symbolic inclusion

It is frustrating that despite the promises of last year's July uprising, where women played a key role, they continue to be systematically sidelined from political power. Over the past year, their participation has also declined across various sectors. A recent discussion organised by a newly formed platform called Women in Democracy has again highlighted this troubling reality. Sadly, the July National Charter has also failed to address women's rights or their political participation in a meaningful way.

Patriarchal dominance has, in fact, intensified since 2024, as speakers at the event noted. Harassment of women in public and digital spaces has reportedly increased, but political parties have shown little interest in taking up this cause. Women who entered politics after the uprising also face an increasingly hostile environment, ranging from cyberbullying to social pressure. This is most evident in the ongoing debate over women's parliamentary representation. The Election Reform Commission had proposed 100 reserved seats filled through rotation-based direct elections, a system that could have given women genuine democratic legitimacy. However, the National Consensus Commission rejected this proposal, and the July National Charter retained only 50 reserved seats (gradually increasing to 100), mandating that parties nominate just five percent women in general seats (rising to 33 percent by 2043). When women constitute half of the population, can offering them only five percent representation in parliament truly be considered democratic?

Unfortunately, our political parties seem to remain largely indifferent to women's political participation. The BNP's nomination of only ten female candidates, including its Chairperson Khaleda Zia, for the upcoming national election is a case in point. Reports also suggest that no party has taken meaningful steps to end the long-standing suppression of women activists and leaders within their internal structures.

Direct elections are crucial because they grant women independence, visibility, and legitimacy, none of which symbolic quotas can deliver. At the national conference of the Forum for Women's Political Rights (FWPR) held on October 9, activists rightly demanded that all political parties be legally required to nominate at least 33 percent female candidates, gradually rising to 50 percent, through amendments to the Representation of the People Order (RPO). Because without binding legislation, parties will continue to prioritise rhetoric over real change.

The July uprising ignited hopes among people to end exclusion, discrimination, and undemocratic practices. Yet the reforms enacted since then have fallen short of creating the inclusive democratic culture that people demanded. We urge all political parties, particularly major ones like the BNP, to include more women in decision-making positions. Unless women's participation within parties and their representation in parliament increase significantly, meaningful change in our political culture will remain elusive.

# If the state cannot govern, violence will



Kazi A S M Nurul Huda  
is associate professor of philosophy at  
Dhaka University, and the Cmelikova  
Visiting International Scholar in  
Leadership and Ethics at the University of  
Richmond. He can be reached at [huda@du.ac.bd](mailto:huda@du.ac.bd).

KAZI A S M NURUL HUDA

Bangladesh is facing a crisis that extends far beyond the headlines. The show of violence unfolding in many parts of the country is not simply a failure of security. It is a sign that the moral foundations of political authority are weakening irrevocably. A society remains stable only when its citizens believe that disagreements can be settled through established means and institutions rather than fear. Once that belief falters, violence becomes a language through which political actors negotiate power. That shift is again visible in Bangladesh.

The burning alive of a bus driver in Mymensingh, the crude bomb and arson attacks in Dhaka and other parts of the country over the past week, with one person injured in the capital even on early Sunday morning, the targeting of religious and civic institutions, and the firebombing of Grameen Bank branches reveal a political landscape where violence is beginning to replace deliberation as the mechanism through which groups seek influence.

From the social media posts by Awami League, whose activities have been banned since May 12, it appears that they are partly responsible for this violence. A party that ruled for 15 and a half years through repression, enforced disappearances, and the slow corrosion of dissent now behaves like an underground network directing a "Dhaka Lockdown." Toppled by a mass uprising, it has no political or moral standing to behave as if it still commands the streets. Yet, AL dares to make lockdown calls, clearly understanding that it will trigger arson, blockades, and disruption at a moment when the country faces a fragile transition. To describe this as a "political programme" conceals the truth; it is an attempt to maintain relevance regardless of the cost paid by citizens.

However, others are also contributing to the volatility of the situation. Bangladesh is now operating in a political environment shaped by multiple actors, each responding to its own desired incentives. Several political forces, including BNP, NCP, Jamaat and other Islamist parties, student groups, and anti-Awami League coalitions declared that they would resist the lockdown call, creating a crowded and volatile civic space. Moving beneath this surface are criminal intermediaries, local strongmen, and

opportunistic networks that require no formal sanction from any party and thrive when politics spills onto the streets. At such a phase, violence stops belonging to any single organisation and becomes dispersed, strategic, and far more difficult to contain. If the February election falters or is pushed off course, it will inevitably benefit those who gain from prolonged

The previous regime normalised coercion as a central tool of governance. Its fall removed the government but not the political culture it created, resulting in a landscape where partisan networks, criminal groups, and disillusioned actors operate with impunity. The interim government's repeated assurances about the rule of law have not yet produced the social conditions that make law authoritative. A teenager was detained on suspicion, while the perpetrators responsible for arson, sabotage, and bomb attacks continue to slip away in most cases. Citizens cannot trust a democratic transition if the state cannot guarantee basic public safety. The days surrounding November 13, when Sheikh Hasina's trial verdict date was announced, exposed these vulnerabilities clearly.

and bombings can suppress voter turnout, undermine civic confidence, and restrict campaigning and public engagement. A vote conducted in fear is not a mandate. A referendum held under threat is not consent. A transition shaped by these forces loses its democratic character.

Bangladesh still has a path away from this precipice. The interim government must re-establish credible authority through visible and impartial enforcement. Those responsible for arson, sabotage, attacks on schools and religious sites, or the use of crude explosives must face consequences without regard to affiliation. Political forces must recognise that counter-mobilisation deepens the spiral of confrontation. The ousted party must not have the chance to use instability



PHOTO: COLLECTED

Violence in Bangladesh is beginning to replace deliberation as the mechanism through which groups seek influence.

instability.

The interim government must also confront the weaknesses it has allowed to persist. Its response to the apparently planned attacks in different parts of the country over the last week signals anxiety rather than control. While the security measures taken are understandable given the circumstances, they also reveal a government bracing for threats it struggles to deter. A state supported by the military, Rab, and BGB would not be repeatedly outpaced by small groups armed with improvised explosives if the investigative and intelligence capacity of law enforcers worked properly. Instead, their credibility continues to erode as selective enforcement and political calculation still shape institutional behaviour.

Some of the attacks also carry layered meaning. The attacks on Grameen Bank branches, which are woven into Bangladesh's global identity and linked to the chief adviser, are not an ordinary incident. When attackers can break windows, pour petrol, ignite flames, and disappear before anyone reacts, they are not only destroying property; they are testing the state's capacity to defend the institutions that express national identity.

The deepest danger lies in the collapse of deterrence. Violence spreads when perpetrators believe they will not be caught. Every stalled investigation, every unidentified gunman, or every night of evasion reinforces that belief. With the February election approaching, the moral and political stakes grow sharper. Fear, sabotage,

as a strategic resource.

This moment is not only about the February election. It concerns the future of the political community itself. Democratic institutions do not collapse overnight. They erode slowly and then suddenly. Bangladesh is approaching that threshold. Or perhaps it has already crossed it. If the state does not act with clarity, fairness and moral seriousness, the election will become symbolic rather than substantive. Real power will drift toward those prepared to deploy violence.

The work of political life is to preserve the conditions under which citizens can disagree without fear. That is the task before Bangladesh now. The stakes are nothing less than the survival of order, legitimacy, and the possibility of democratic governance.

## Identity wars across the border



Arman Ahmed  
is a research analyst specialising in geopolitics and international relations.

ARMAN AHMED

When Sheikh Hasina's long reign finally ended in 2024, Bangladesh found itself at an uncertain crossroads not just of leadership but also of identity. The void she left behind has seen the familiar symbols of Islamic politics resurface with increasingly assertive confidence. What was once confined to the periphery of religious activism is now finding its way into mainstream political conversation. And while this development owes partly to fatigue with what some view as Hasina's secular authoritarianism, it also carries the shadow of a larger regional transformation: the rise of Hindutva in India.

To understand this resurgence, one must first understand the paradox of Hasina's secularism. During the course of her rule, Awami League "transformed" secularism from an ideal of freedom into a rhetoric of control. It came to be associated with censorship, patronage, and the systematic weakening of any political opposition.

When power became contrast feels almost inevitable. If India is unashamedly Hindu, why should Bangladesh not be proudly Muslim? If our neighbours can blend faith with nationhood, why must we keep away from our own religious heritage? These are not militant questions; they are identity questions, but they are precisely the kind of questions that Islamist politics thrives on. The danger

image, provided a counter-narrative: faith as justice, religion as purity, and politics as moral restoration. But this internal crisis has been quietly amplified by what has been happening across the border.

As India wraps itself in the saffron robe of majoritarian nationalism, the ideological heat radiates beyond its territory. Bangladesh is often receptive or vulnerable to Hindutva's language of cultural supremacy, which asserts that India's soul is "intrinsically" Hindu and that minorities must either adapt or fade. Here, it stirs both anger and anxiety. Each time an Indian leader invokes the term "Hindu-Shashtra," or a television channel in Delhi debates "Bangladeshi infiltrators," the emotional boundary between the two nations hardens. And in that tightening, the call for Islamic identity in Bangladesh finds further strength.

For many young Bangladeshis, the contrast feels almost inevitable. If India is unashamedly Hindu, why should Bangladesh not be proudly Muslim? If our neighbours can blend faith with nationhood, why must we keep away from our own religious heritage? These are not militant questions; they are identity questions, but they are precisely the kind of questions that Islamist politics thrives on. The danger

is not in the question itself, but in the answers that populists are waiting to provide. The politics of reaction has long been a South Asian trait; we define ourselves by what we are not or what we stand against. In the 1970s, Bangladesh defined itself against Pakistan's theocracy. Today, it risks defining itself against India's Hindutva. The two stances mirror each other more than either side would admit. Each claims to protect faith from persecution, and each uses that fear to consolidate power. The saffron in Delhi feeds off the green in Dhaka, and vice versa. The border has thus become a mirror reflecting their extremes.

Social media has intensified this cycle. Hindutva-linked accounts amplify stories of "Hindu persecution" in Bangladesh, often distorted or fabricated, to fuel outrage at home. In response, Islamist voices in Bangladesh share clips of Indian mobs attacking Muslims, portraying them as proof that secularism is a lie and that only an Islamic order can ensure dignity. Each side validates the other's deepest suspicions in a digital duet of resentment.

None of this is to absolve Bangladesh of its responsibilities. The rise of Islamic politics here is rooted, to a large extent, in domestic discontent emanating from unemployment, inequality, corruption, and the absence of credible secular leadership.

But to ignore the external dimension is to miss half the story. Majoritarianism, like any ideology of exclusion, is contagious. When a community asserts religious supremacy, its neighbours feel compelled to do the same. In South Asia's fragile mosaic, identity insecurity spreads faster than ideology itself.

The tragedy is that both nations once shared a vision of pluralism where faith coexisted with freedom, and culture transcended creed. Bengal's history is full of saints, poets, and reformers who championed a syncretic ethos that bound Hindu and Muslim communities in a shared cultural life. Today, however, the bridges built over centuries are being dismantled, and increasingly replaced by walls of rhetoric and flags of faith. But identity imposed by fear and intimidation is no identity at all.

For Bangladesh, the path ahead is delicate. It cannot afford to let the failure of one secular elite hand victory to another form of absolutism. Nor can it remain blind to the ways regional politics shape domestic sentiments. True secularism must be rebuilt from within through justice, accountability, principled politics, and respect for faith, but without surrendering to it as a state.

For India, too, there is a warning. Hindutva's triumphalism may rally votes, but it corrodes the region's delicate balance. The more India defines itself by exclusion, the more it empowers its neighbours' exclusionary politics in return. A Hindu India and an Islamist Bangladesh are not opposites; they are reflections of the same insecurities, dressed in different colours.

South Asia does not need another partition of the mind. What it needs is an honest reckoning with the dangerous symmetry that has emerged across its borders. Until both nations learn that faith cannot be the foundation of citizenship and that pride cannot replace pluralism, the crescent and the saffron will continue to glare at each other, serving neither nation's future.