

Only political will can break cycle of violence

Nur Khan Liton in an interview with the Star

ARAFAT RAHAMAN

Years of political hostility and the misuse of state agencies have kept political violence alive in Bangladesh, and only a newly elected government with the goodwill to act can break this cycle, said human rights activist Nur Khan Liton.

In an interview with The Daily Star, he said political hostility has become entrenched through long-standing practices such as false cases, harassment and intimidation.

Such practices have persisted across administrations and shaped citizens' relationship with politics, deepening mistrust between people and the state, said Liton, a member of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearance.

According to the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS), political violence between September 2024 and September 2025 left at least 160 people dead and over 8,000 others injured in 1,047 incidents.

Intra-party clashes accounted for the highest number of fatalities, with 85 deaths in BNP fighting alone.

Another 34 people were killed in BNP-Awami League confrontations, and two in clashes involving the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami.

Liton said citizens expected improvement after the August 5 political changeover, but the continuation of harassment, intimidation, and politically motivated cases under the interim administration showed "how deeply rooted the problems are".

He said many believed political violence and the misuse of legal mechanisms to corner opponents would decline after the shift, but that expectation did not materialise.

The rights activist said political violence cannot be viewed merely as clashes between rival groups; it is tied to deep-rooted hostility between parties and institutional habits that have built up over years. Tensions and distrust have grown to a point where political competition has become adversarial rather than constructive.

"To stop this violence and bring back a fresh breeze into politics, all political parties must work together to resolve the distances and conflicts among themselves," he said.

Unless parties take responsibility to reduce hostility, he warned, political violence will continue regardless of who

holds power.

This requires clear instructions that violence, harassment, and intimidation will not be tolerated, and that cases will not be used as instruments of political pressure.

He said the responsibility to take the first steps lies especially with the next elected government, which will have the authority and strength to initiate changes that an interim government cannot. This must begin with ending harassment through false or fabricated cases.

"Opponents must not be subdued through fabricated charges," he said, adding that such cases also drag in ordinary citizens, draining their resources, time, and dignity.

The rights activist said institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission and any police oversight bodies must be able to operate independently. For meaningful reform, these bodies need an environment free from fear and political pressure.



Independence, he stressed, is not optional but essential.

Reforms, Liton added, cannot be one-off. "Reform activities should be kept timely and ongoing," he said, noting that years of entrenched practices cannot be undone through short-term measures. A continuous reform process is needed to rebuild public trust.

Looking ahead, Liton said democratic stability depends on ending political violence.

Without strong political will, he warned that the country risks falling into yet another cycle of fear, hostility, and suppression.

"Only then can Bangladesh move beyond a politics sustained by fear and hostility. Whoever comes to power must take responsibility and show the will to change," Liton told this correspondent.

Put rights issues at the heart of polls pledges

Odhikar's Elan urges political parties

ARAFAT RAHAMAN

Bangladesh now needs a government prepared to confront long-standing issues such as custodial torture, extrajudicial killings, and border violence instead of repeating earlier patterns of inaction, rights activist ASM Nasiruddin Elan has said.

In a recent interview with The Daily Star, he stressed that human rights must be central to election pledges and that the next administration must demonstrate from the outset that it is serious about ending these violations and ensuring accountability within law enforcement agencies.

According to Odhikar's latest report, at least 40 people were victims of alleged extrajudicial killings, and 35 Bangladeshis were killed allegedly by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) between August 9, 2024, and September 30 this year.

Most extrajudicial deaths occurred in custody rather than in "crossfire", while border killings continued with little change in pattern, said Elan, director of the rights body.



He said the recurring custodial torture and persistent BSF shootings show no meaningful improvement in internal reforms or border protection.

The overall pattern over the past year mirrors that of the previous 17 years, with most killings happening inside police stations, during remand, or while in the custody of joint forces.

Elan noted that the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013 remains largely unenforced, as victims or families often lose the motivation to pursue cases, rendering the law ineffective.

Responsibility for custodial deaths ultimately lies with the government in power, he said, but the roots of the problem run deeper. Years of political influence over law enforcement have fuelled allegations of enforced disappearance, torture, and other abuses. Actions by certain agencies during the July uprising further eroded public trust.

Reforming a force shaped by long-standing impunity is difficult, he said.

Reports persist of individuals being tortured or threatened with false cases

unless they pay large bribes -- practices that continued from the previous administration. Although the frequency may have dropped, "the mindset within the force has not changed and genuine accountability remains missing", Elan said.

"The interim government faced political divisions and instability, limiting its ability to deliver the reforms people expected. This is why the next elected government must take early and decisive steps."

According to him, those steps include ending extrajudicial killings, stopping torture in custody, and ensuring proper forensic investigations in every allegation.

He warned against using the police as a political instrument again. "Recruitment and deployment have long been shaped by partisan considerations. If a new government maintains that pattern, the same crises will return," he said.

Elan also questioned the need for multiple specialised security units with no clear mandates. In a democracy, a well-trained, accountable police force should be enough to maintain order. "Special forces often take on political responsibilities rather than serving public interest," he added.

He pointed out that fabricated cases remain a serious issue, used for political or financial gain. Officers responsible for false arrests must be held liable to end the practice, he said.

On border killings, he blamed a long-standing subservient foreign-policy approach, deepened under the previous Awami League government, which allowed Indian border forces to act with significant impunity. Children, teenagers, and women were among those shot dead, he said. He also noted that push-ins from India have increased since the July uprising.

According to Elan, such incidents send intentional signals of dominance, and their recurrence shows Bangladesh has yet to demand accountability effectively.

He urged the next government to pursue foreign policy "with its head held high" and raise border-killing cases in international forums when necessary.

"Killing unarmed civilians is a grave human-rights violation and cannot be justified by claims of illegal border crossings. The proper remedy is a legal process," he said.

As the nation heads toward the polls, Elan said the next government faces a defining test: whether it will finally address custodial torture, extrajudicial killing, and border violence, or continue the patterns of the past.

"The public has waited a long time. This time, the commitments must be real."

DIGITAL ABUSE

The new frontier of rights violations

NAZIBA BASHER

Every generation inherits new rights to defend. This Human Rights Day, Bangladesh confronts a frontier expanding faster than laws or institutions can manage: the digital world.

What once promised connection and empowerment has become a terrain where women face hostility, humiliation, and targeted abuse. Digital abuse is no small inconvenience. It violates privacy, dignity, bodily autonomy, freedom of expression, and equal participation.

The UN, including UN Women and UNDP, states clearly that "online harassment is violence -- and a human rights violation".

With artificial intelligence in the mix, people no longer need personal content to weaponise a woman's image. A single photograph is enough.

As Supreme Court lawyer Priya Ahsan Chowdhury noted, "With AI, it has become very easy to create fake or sexually suggestive images -- even if offenders don't have any personal photos."

THE SCALE OF THE CRISIS

Last December, social media was flooded with an AI-generated photocard dragging Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan and actress Mehazabien Chowdhury into fabricated controversy, falsely showing Mehazabien in an "environment-friendly condom dress" and implying the adviser had endorsed it.

Such distortion is part of a larger pattern.

The Violence Against Women Survey 2024 shows that 8.3 percent of women, particularly young and urban women, have already faced technology-facilitated violence. A NETZ Bangladesh study found 78.4 percent of young, digitally active women encountered harassment ranging

from threats and coercion to the non-consensual use of their images.

These numbers represent lives shaped by fear of what someone online might do next.

For women in the public eye, abuse often begins the moment they post a photograph or opinion. Actresses such as Rafiath Rashid Mithila, Ashna Habib Bhabna, Nusraat Faria, and Azmeri Haque Badhan have spoken about the unrelenting stream of sexualised insults they receive.

When Bhabna once captioned a photo "99:" to highlight the number of abusive comments she got in a week, some replied with "Tasted 99, one more will make a century" or "Is 99 your body count?"

Women in sports face similar vitriol. Cricketer Rumana Ahmed said negative comments and rumours affect performance, especially when strangers invent stories about her personal life during even brief dips in form.

Shooter Kamrun Nahar Koly described targeted trolling before competitions and harassment from fake accounts that may even be linked to people within sports communities. "Not knowing who is behind the attacks makes the pressure even heavier," she said.

Footballer Ritu Porna Chakma recalled drawing a match and immediately being told to "give up football" or "go and become a TikTok". "One bad game, and they say things that can be quite unbearable."

LAWS EXIST, PROTECTION DOESN'T Bangladesh's Cyber Protection Ordinance 2025 criminalises AI-generated or manipulated sexual images, but protection remains largely theoretical.

Investigations often stall because forensic capacity is limited and metadata is missing. Many survivors withdraw complaints due to stigma; many never file

one at all.

Offenders, meanwhile, adapt faster than institutions.

Police officials, including AIG (Media) AHM Shahadat Hossain, acknowledge that shame and fear prevent many women from seeking justice. The gap between legal text and lived experience grows wider each year.

NOT JUST A WOMEN'S ISSUE

Digital harassment is often minimised as something women should ignore or manage alone. But this is no trivial matter to just "ignore".

It undermines autonomy, restricts movement, distorts career paths, damages mental health, and forces self-censorship -- it denies women full participation in public and private life.

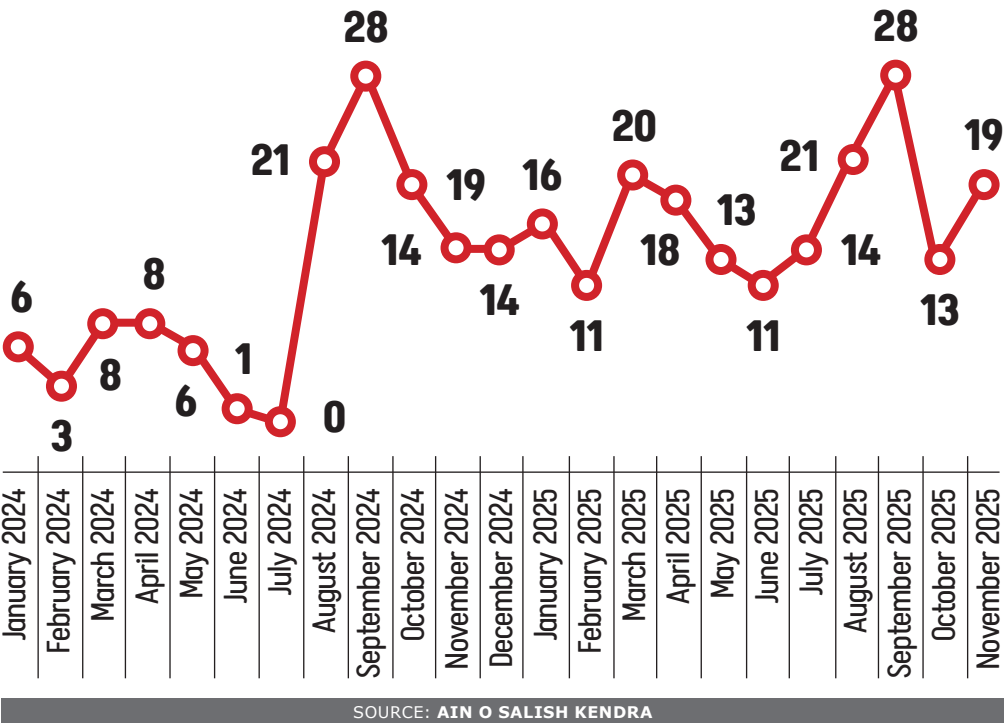
The right to exist online without humiliation is now as fundamental as the right to walk down a street safely, and when technology becomes a tool for silencing women, it becomes a human rights issue.

Meaningful action requires more than symbolic laws. Bangladesh needs stronger forensic capability, faster content removal across platforms, survivor-centred reporting systems, and better training for police and judges. But what it needs more is a cultural shift that refuses to blame survivors and recognises digital safety as inseparable from gender equality.

Until every woman can step into digital spaces without fear of being hunted, mocked, manipulated, or erased, our commitment to human rights will remain incomplete.

(The Daily Star's reporter Nilima Jahan, Sports reporters Samsul Arefin Khan and Anisur Rahman, and Arts and Entertainment reporters Sharmin Joya and Rakshanda Rahman Misha contributed.)

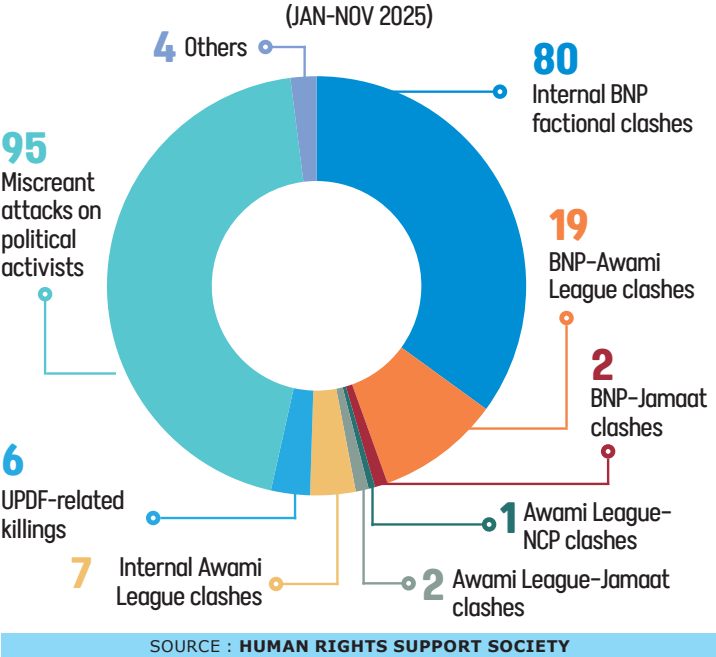
Rising deaths due to mob violence



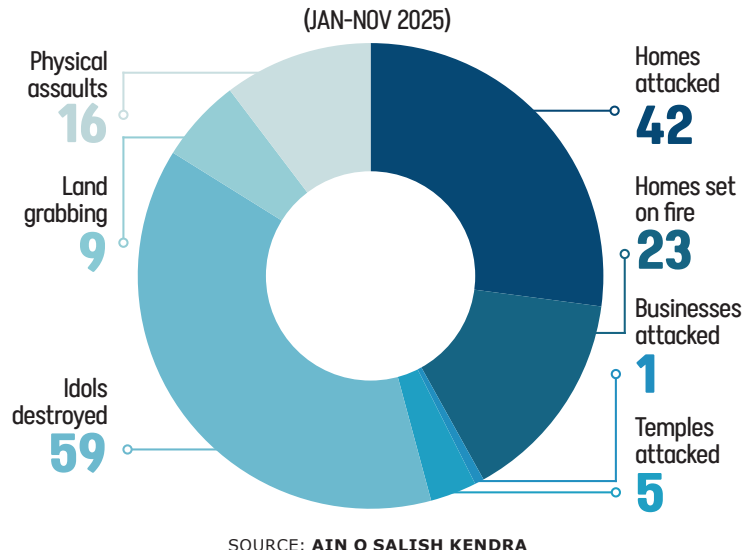
Human Rights Day and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Human Rights Day is observed annually around the world on December 10. It commemorates the anniversary of one of the world's most groundbreaking global pledges: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This landmark document enshrines the inalienable rights that everyone is entitled to as a human being -- regardless of race, colour, gender, religion, sex, language, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. The Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 and sets out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected.

POLITICAL ACTIVISTS KILLED



Types of Attacks on RELIGIOUS MINORITIES



Political parties must tolerate

FROM PAGE J1 of the anti-discrimination movement reflected in the current political consensus or in different parties' demands? How are inclusive practices being built?" she asked.

She noted that although disinformation campaigns and "gross lies" have been spread about the state of minorities, "the lies being told does not mean there are no underlying facts".

"A consequence of that is, when we see attacks on indigenous people, women or

religious minorities, we see a denial or dismissal -- a minimisation of their ordeal."

Hossain also criticised the failure of political parties to take strong action against mob violence. "Unless political parties set some red lines, we will see these shifts -- in intolerance, discrimination and exclusion -- becoming more deeply entrenched."

She said it is imperative to stop dividing and excluding people from participation in public or political life or access to opportunities,

based on political or religious belief or other identity.

"Promises of constitutional and institutional reform will mean little unless we see political actors play a strong role to call out and change the culture of violence and denial that we have seen in the past.

"This means political parties need to stand up against the reiteration or reflection of past practices, to break the cycle of revenge. Will this happen?"