

Political Parties and Human Rights Violations

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Amnesty International is concerned that past governments in Bangladesh have failed to introduce effective mechanisms for administrative accountability. This failure has facilitated misuse of state institutions by some politicians. It has also undermined the rule of law and weakened constitutional safeguards protecting respect for human rights. Successive governments have routinely ignored human rights abuses by their own supporters, or supporters of allied political parties, allowing the perpetrators to be shielded by a climate of impunity. At the same time the police force, often poorly trained and under-resourced, together with a judicial system burdened by a serious backlog of unresolved cases, has in practice denied access to justice to the victims of human rights violations and their defenders. Amnesty International believes that the political parties have an important role to play in ensuring that the cycle of impunity for human rights violations, which has long prevailed in the country, is addressed by the new government as a matter of urgency. All political parties need to take determined steps to address deep rooted barriers to effective human rights protection in Bangladesh. Politically motivated misuse of institutions of the state, including the police and the judiciary, and the frequent use of violence against political opponents, has had a grave impact on respect for human rights. Evidence of an increase in human rights abuses purportedly committed in the name of political or religious ideology, is of growing concern. In addition a high incidence of extreme poverty and the inability of so many Bangladeshis to enjoy adequate access to basic economic and social rights, including health, food and shelter highlights the need for human rights to be at the heart of the proposed agenda of all political parties and of the future government.

Amnesty International has for long been highlighting aspects of these problems in its documents on Bangladesh. Amnesty International believes that political parties can play a major role in strengthening and nurturing elements of reform that are critical to the protection of human rights. These include respect for freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and the robust rejection of any threats to the independence and impartiality of the judiciary. In addition all political parties should encourage the continued participation in, and contribution to human rights protection of Bangladesh's vibrant civil society, including the legal fraternity and non-governmental organizations, especially those working on behalf of the rights of women.

The following issues are elaborated in the report 'BANGLADESH -Briefing to political parties for a human rights agenda' (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA130122006?open&of=ENG-BGD>).

1. Political parties - defenders of rights or perpetrators of abuses?

Amnesty International remains concerned about reports that indicate a persistent pattern of human rights abuses perpetrated by members of the main political parties including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Awami League and Jamaat-e-Islami. When in opposition, Bangladeshi political parties have often expressed their concern about human rights violations inflicted on their members. Such violations have included: arbitrary arrests at the instigation of the ruling party officials; use of the police

force to torture or ill-treat members of opposition parties; and the filing of politically motivated criminal charges against opponents. However, the same political parties have often remained silent in relation to human rights abuses reportedly carried out by their own members. Abuses by political parties have usually been carried out by the “student” wings of the major parties. These groups include: Bangladesh Chatra Dhal (BCD), affiliated to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party; Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL) affiliated to the Awami League; and Islami Chhatrashibir, affiliated to Jamaat-e-Islami.

When their parties are in government such “student” groups, who reportedly keep and use fire arms, can become unchallenged perpetrators of human rights abuses reportedly under the patronage of their party leaders.

The involvement of such armed “student” and other groups in the political process is believed to be one of the major causes of continued high levels of political violence, including patterns of killings and serious injury in Bangladesh. Political parties have pledged, but failed, to disarm their own “student” groups.

2. Political violence

In recent years, escalating levels of politically-motivated violence, including several waves of bombings, combined with a lack of appropriate action by the authorities have threatened to push Bangladesh to the edge of a human rights crisis. Targets of the violence have included Sufi places of worship; opposition rallies, cinemas and other cultural venues, and court buildings. The violence has claimed many lives and resulted in the destruction of property. It has generated a sense of fear and insecurity amongst the public.

Suspected perpetrators of much of the violence have been individuals allegedly affiliated to Bangladeshi Islamist groups. There have been persistent allegations that some of these groups have had links with politicians within the ruling coalition parties, who have reportedly helped shield suspects from proper investigation and prosecution.

Although the government has taken action in recent months to address the problem, there is a widespread perception that in many instances, the perpetrators and those instigating the violence have been allowed to evade justice.

Examples of political violence are:

- The Mymensingh cinema blasts.
- The Shahjalal shrine blast.
- The August 2004 grenade attack.
- The January 2005 grenade attack.
- The August 2005 bombings.

For a more detailed description read the above mentioned report and other documents in Amnesty's electronic library on Bangladesh.

3. Electoral violence

Political parties have a major role to play in stemming violence in the run up to the general elections. Targets of such electoral violence include any person seeking to participate in the electoral process, but in the past they have most frequently been: activists from the political parties; members of parties opposed to the outgoing ruling parties; and minority communities.

Bangladeshi history has shown that minority communities are particularly vulnerable to, among other forms of violence and discrimination, electoral violence. The memories of attacks against members of the Hindu minority during the 2001 general elections, which including killings, beatings, rape, and looting of property, continue to linger. Amnesty International urges all political parties to actively support steps aimed at protecting those most at risk of electoral violence.

Attacks on minority communities, including Hindus, Ahmadis, tribal people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and elsewhere and Christians, continue to be reported. Such attacks are carried out with impunity.

3.1 Hindus

As stated above, following the general elections of 1 October 2001, hundreds of Hindu families were subjected to violent assaults, including rape, beatings and the burning of property. They were reportedly attacked by supporters of the BNP which won the majority of seats in Parliament, because of their perceived support for the Awami League. Hundreds of Hindu families reportedly fled to India. The police failed to take effective measures to protect the Hindu community. Some arrests were made but most assailants were not brought to justice. So far, there has been no independent and impartial investigation into these attacks.

While the government has taken action since 2001 to protect members of the Hindu minority in the main cities, during their festivities or in times of escalated tension between Hindu and Muslim communities in neighbouring India, members of the community in Bangladesh, particularly in the rural areas, continue to be at risk of attacks.

3.2 Ahmadis

The current campaign of advocacy of hatred and violence by some Islamist groups against members of the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh is a serious threat to freedom of religion and expression. Anti-Ahmadi agitators have reportedly been involved in a catalogue of human rights abuses which have remained unaddressed.

While the Government of Bangladesh has acted to prevent the crowds from entering Ahmadi mosques, its failure to bring to justice those responsible for these attacks has severely undermined safeguards in international human rights law and the Constitution of Bangladesh for freedom of religion, thought and conscience.

3.3 Chittagong Hill Tracts

The tribal people of the Chitta-gong Hill Tracts (CHT) have for a long time been the targets of massacres, arbitrary detention, torture and extrajudicial executions, notably during the years of armed conflict (mid-1970s to 1997). The signing of the peace accord between the Government of Bangladesh and tribal representatives in December 1997 appeared to provide assurances that their civil and political rights as well as their economic, social and cultural rights would be respected. However, eight-and-a-half years after the signing of the accord, the Government of Bangladesh has failed to implement fully some of the most crucial provisions of the accord. These include the rehabilitation of all returned refugees and internally displaced families, settlement of land confiscated from the tribal people during the conflict, withdrawal of non-permanent army camps from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and transfer of power within the provisions of the peace accord to the local CHT administration. Tribal people continue to be the targets of mass attacks by Bengali settlers apparently aided by army personnel acting with impunity. The

government has apparently failed to prevent these abuses or to bring those perpetrating them to justice.

4. Human rights defenders

The failure of successive governments in Bangladesh to stop abuses against people seeking to promote and defend human rights in the country has encouraged such abuses to persist. In a report published in August 2005, Amnesty International highlighted the arbitrary arrest, torture and filing of unfounded criminal charges by government agents against those who speak out on human rights abuses.

Human rights defenders include journalists, writers, academics, staff from non-governmental organisations and lawyers. Although the instances of the arbitrary arrest of human rights defenders have decreased over the past two years, politically motivated and apparently unfounded charges brought against scores of human rights defenders in the past remain pending.

Human rights defenders have also been routinely subjected to death threats, physical attacks and sometimes unlawful killings or extrajudicial executions. Perpetrators are individuals or groups usually linked to armed criminal gangs, political parties, Islamist groups or mercenary gangs thought to be linked to local politicians. The government's inaction has led to a climate of impunity in which physical harassment, torture and deaths have in many instances not been investigated and neither have the perpetrators been identified and brought to justice in fair trials. The authorities have a duty to take action to prevent and punish human rights violations committed by their agents and protect people against attacks committed by armed gangs.

Over a dozen people who have spoken out against human rights abuses in Bangladesh have been killed since 2000 by assailants believed to be linked to armed criminal gangs or armed factions of political parties. Scores of others have been seriously injured, some permanently, and require ongoing medical attention. Several journalists have had their fingers or hands deliberately damaged to prevent them from writing.

5. Violence against women

Violence against women is reportedly widespread throughout Bangladesh. It includes physical assault, rape, dowry related burning and killing of women, and acid attacks. According to media reports, in the first quarter of 2005 alone, more than 1,900 women were allegedly subjected to violence, over 200 were killed allegedly following rape, over 300 women were allegedly abused for not meeting their husbands' dowry demands and over 100 were trafficked. The NGO, *Acid Survivors Foundation* said that at least 166 incidents of acid attacks involving 210 victims - 138 of whom were women - took place in the first nine months of 2005. There are also disturbing reports about the recurrence of fatwa (religious edicts) related to flogging in the country after a relative lull in recent years. Bangladeshi media continue to report new cases of violence against women. Social stigma, police refusal to act on most reports of violence against women, and a lack of legal and community support for the victims prevents many of them from seeking justice. Preventing violence against women requires active support from all sections of society, including the government, political parties, the society at large and state institutions.

6. Torture

Widespread and persistent torture and other ill-treatment has been routinely ignored by successive governments and major political parties since Bangladesh's independence. For too long torture and ill-treatment inflicted by the police and army personnel on political prisoners or suspected criminals has been accepted as normal behaviour by government agents. The government should take determined action to protect everyone against torture and ill-treatment as a matter of urgency.

Victims of torture and ill-treatment include children, women, the elderly, political opponents, as well as criminal suspects. Methods of torture include; beating with rifle butts, iron rods, bamboo sticks, hanging by the hands from the ceiling, rape, "water treatment" in which hose pipes are fixed into each nostril and taps turned on full for two minutes at a time, the use of pliers to crush fingers, and electric shocks.

7. Possible extrajudicial executions

Police and other security personnel have continued to engage in what appears to be extra-judicial executions. Hundreds of people have reportedly died in recent years in what the government has portrayed as deaths in crossfire between the special security force known as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and suspected criminals. There are concerns that the deaths, which have usually occurred in desolate locations after the arrest of suspects, have been deliberate killings by the RAB. There has been no independent investigation into these deaths, and no one has been brought to justice for them.

8. Possible excessive use of force

Over a dozen people were killed in protests relating to electricity shortages in the northern town of Kansat in April 2006 after police fired live ammunition with AK47s, rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the crowds. There has been no independent investigation into these killings and no one has been brought to justice. □

[Source : Report : The Experts' Meeting on Democracy and Human Rights in Bangladesh. The European Parliament, October 10, 2006]