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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2014 - Country Case Study: Bangladesh – Political Violence

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A case study from the 2014 Human Rights and Democracy Report.

The build up to the 10th parliamentary elections in Bangladesh on 5 January was tarnished by serious levels of violence, intimidation, enforced general strikes, and transport blockades. The 18-Party Alliance, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), objected to the constitutionally valid electoral arrangements, and did not contest the election due to their concerns that the election would not be free and fair. Half of parliamentary seats were uncontested, and the Awami League won a second successive term. Election day was marked by violence: 21 deaths were reported, and over 100 school-based polling centres burnt down.

We repeatedly condemned all forms of violence and encouraged political parties to work together. On 6 January, the then FCO Minister for Human Rights, Baroness Warsi, deplored acts of intimidation and unlawful violence from all parties, and urged all of Bangladesh's political parties to work together to address political accountability. We also raised our concerns with both the government and opposition parties privately. Baroness Warsi raised concerns with visiting Bangladeshi ministers, as did former Minister of State for International Development, Alan Duncan, and former Parliamentary Under-Secretary for State for International Development, Lynne Featherstone, during visits to Bangladesh. All three ministers urged Bangladesh's political parties to work together to strengthen democratic accountability, and to build wider confidence in future elections.

After the elections, the BNP committed to peaceful protest, although political tension at the end of the year led to the re-emergence of widespread political violence. There were significantly fewer enforced general strikes and transport blockades in 2014 and, overall, the country experienced a period of relative calm. However, there has been no political dialogue between the country's two largest parties: the BNP and Awami League. NGOs report that impunity of all Bangladesh's law enforcement agencies continues to be a serious problem. NGOs condemned a post-election spike in numbers of reported extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances allegedly carried out by law enforcers. Allegations of involvement by the Rapid Action Battalion in the death of seven men in Narayanganj drew domestic and international criticism. Baroness Warsi called for prompt, transparent and impartial investigations when she met the Bangladeshi High Commissioner in May. As yet,

none of the three investigations established to find those guilty have delivered findings, and no charges have been brought.

The government has proposed revisions to the Foreign Donations Act (pending parliamentary approval) and a new Broadcast Policy, while some using digital media to criticise the government have been detained under the Information Communications Technology Act. This has generated concerns about civil society space, media freedoms, and government power to suppress criticism or dissent. The government has also restored parliament's authority to impeach judges, which, depending on how it is implemented, could compromise the independence of the judiciary.

Prime Minister David Cameron met Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 22 July. He noted our disappointment over the conduct of the election. Both agreed on the importance of an open society and political systems in which democratic political participation and media freedoms are respected.

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