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Bangladesh (2006)

Overview

Polity:

No polity available

Political Rights:

4

Civil Liberties:

4

Status:

Partly Free

Population:

144,200,000

GNI/Capita:

\$400

Life Expectancy:

61

Religious Groups:

Muslim (83 percent), Hindu (16 percent), other (1 percent)

Ethnic Groups:

Bengali (98 percent), other including non-Bengali Muslims (2 percent)

Capital:

Dhaka

Additional Info:

[Freedom in the World 2005](#)

[Freedom of the Press 2005](#)

[Nations in Transit 2004](#)

[Countries at the Crossroads 2005](#)

Bangladesh continued in 2005 to be plagued by lawlessness, rampant institutionalized corruption, and violent political polarization, all of which impeded the efficacy of its democratic institutions. Although the opposition Awami League (AL) ended its parliamentary boycott in 2004, it remained reliant on national strikes and other forms of protest action to impede the effective functioning of the coalition government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). For its part, the BNP continued to deploy army personnel to maintain law and order as part of an anticrime drive in which a number of human rights violations have taken place. Official harassment of journalists, human rights advocates, and leaders and supporters of the AL persisted throughout the year. In addition, the increased strength and influence of Islamist groups, as demonstrated by the coordinated detonation of nearly 500 bombs on August 17 as well as by other attacks, poses a long-term threat to Bangladesh's traditionally moderate interpretation of Islam.

With the partition of British India in 1947, what is now Bangladesh became the eastern part of the newly formed state of Pakistan. Bangladesh won independence from Pakistan in December 1971 after a nine-month war during which Indian troops helped defeat West Pakistani forces stationed in Bangladesh. The 1975 assassination of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by soldiers precipitated 15 years of military rule and continues to polarize Bangladeshi politics. The country's democratic transition began with the resignation in 1990 of the last military ruler, General H. M.

Ershad, after weeks of prodemocracy demonstrations. Elections in 1991 brought the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to power under Khaleda Zia.

The political deadlock began in 1994, when Sheikh Hasina Wajed's center-left Awami League (AL) began boycotting parliament to protest alleged corruption in Zia's BNP government. The AL and the BNP differ relatively little on domestic policy. Many disputes reflect the personal animosity between Hasina, the daughter of independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Zia, the widow of a former military ruler allegedly complicit in Mujibur's assassination. The AL boycotted the February 1996 elections, which the BNP won, but then forced Zia's resignation in March and triumphed in elections held in June. The BNP also marked its time in opposition by boycotting parliament and organizing periodic nationwide strikes.

In October 2001, the AL was voted out of office in elections marred by political violence and intimidation. A new four-party coalition, dominated by the BNP and including two hard-line Muslim parties-the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islami Oikyo Jote-was sworn into power with a convincing majority of 214 of the 300 seats in parliament. The AL initially refused to accept the election results and since then has intermittently boycotted parliament as well as organizing countrywide hartals (general strikes) and other forms of protest action to pressure the government to step down.

Faced with a continuing deterioration in law and order, in October 2002, the government deployed nearly 40,000 army personnel in an anticrime drive that continued in 2005. Although the policy was initially popular among Bangladeshis weary of rising crime rates and a general climate of impunity for criminals, both domestic and international groups have criticized the police and army for excesses committed during their operations.

Despite these measures, lawlessness coupled with the growing threat of Islamist extremism continued to plague most of the country. On August 17, 2005, nearly 500 small bombs were detonated in 63 out of 64 districts, targeting primarily government buildings, courts, and press clubs. Suspects arrested after the attacks reportedly confirmed that the coordinated attacks were the work of a banned Islamist group, the Jamiat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which had left leaflets at the scenes of some blasts calling for the imposition of Islamic law. The JMB and another group, the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), were banned in February, and although hundreds of activists were arrested, the groups' leaders, including the notorious Bangla Bhai, remain at large. Further bomb attacks on judges and courthouses took place in November. Analysts have voiced concern that the reluctance of the government to crack down on radical Islamist groups as well as the presence of Islamist parties within the ruling coalition government pose a long-term threat to Bangladesh's stability as well as its tradition of tolerance.

After a series of crippling AL-sponsored demonstrations and hartals held in early 2004 failed to dislodge the government from power, the party returned to parliament in June, ending a 20-month periodic boycott. However, in December 2004, the AL organized two nationwide human chains as a form of extra-parliamentary no-confidence motion, and other forms of antigovernment street protest occurred with increasing regularity in 2005. One of the main demands of the AL is that the "caretaker government" (CG) system, by which a neutral, nonparty, temporary government organizes each parliamentary election, be reformed; the AL has alleged that the BNP is actively trying to subvert the neutrality of the CG scheduled to be formed in 2006.

Political violence has also increased since August 2004, when a series of grenades exploded at an AL rally in Dhaka, leaving 22 people dead and hundreds injured, including several top party leaders. Although the government announced that an independent commission would investigate the attacks, the commission's impartiality was soon called into question, and the perpetrators of the bombings have not been brought to justice. In January 2005, another grenade attack at an AL rally left five people dead, including senior party leader

Shah A. M. S. Kibria. A number of AL political gatherings held in August were raided by BNP party members, who attacked the participants and ransacked the premises. Political tension, as well as the inability of the two major parties to reach consensus on policy issues, is expected to remain high in the run-up to the forthcoming elections.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Bangladeshis can change their government democratically. A referendum held in 1991 transformed the powerful presidency into a largely ceremonial head-of-state position in a parliamentary system. Elections are held at least every five years to elect the prime minister and members of the unicameral parliament, composed since 2004 of 345 members, of which 300 members are directly elected and 45 are female candidates who are nominated by political parties and indirectly elected by other members of parliament. The 1996 vote was the first under a constitutional amendment requiring a caretaker government to conduct elections. The most recent national elections, held in October 2001, were described as generally free and fair despite concerns over polling irregularities, intimidation, and violence. More than 140 people were killed throughout the campaign period in what was Bangladesh's most violent election to date.

Both major parties-the BNP and the AL-have undermined the legislative process through lengthy parliamentary boycotts while in opposition. In recent years, political violence during demonstrations and general strikes has killed hundreds of people in major cities and injured thousands, and police often use excessive force against opposition protesters. Party leaders are also targeted, and several died during the year after being attacked. Odhikar, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), reported that there were 526 people killed in political violence throughout 2004. Student wings of political parties continue to be embroiled in violent campus conflicts. Minority groups are underrepresented in parliament.

Endemic corruption, a weak rule of law, limited bureaucratic transparency, and political polarization have combined to undermine government accountability. The effectiveness of parliament is severely hampered by the fact that whichever party is in opposition routinely boycotts parliamentary proceedings. An Anti-Corruption Commission, which is authorized to conduct investigations and try corruption cases in special courts, was launched in November 2004. However, critics remain concerned that the new body is not truly independent, either politically or financially. The Financial Express noted in August 2005 that election financing was a major source of political corruption. Bangladesh ranked at the bottom of the 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Despite legal provisions for freedom of speech, media continue to face a number of pressures, the most striking of which is the high level of violence directed against members of the press and the impunity enjoyed by those who attack them. Journalists are regularly harassed and violently attacked by organized-crime groups, political parties and their supporters, government authorities, the police, and Islamist groups. Two journalists were killed during the year, and numerous others received death threats or were physically assaulted.

Many journalists practice self-censorship when reporting on topics such as corruption, criminal activity, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, or human rights abuses. Nevertheless, several were charged with sedition or contempt of court as a result of their writings in 2005. Although the print media are diverse, the state owns most broadcast media, whose coverage favors the ruling party. Political considerations influence the distribution of government advertising revenue and subsidized newsprint on which most publications depend. Access to the internet is generally unrestricted.

Islam is the official religion. Religious minorities have the right to worship freely but face societal discrimination and remain underrepresented in government employment. Violence against the Hindu

minority flared after the 2001 elections, when BNP supporters attacked Hindus because of their perceived support for the rival AL party. Atrocities, including murder, rape, destruction of property, and kidnapping, forced hundreds of Hindus from their homes, some across the border into India. Hindus and other religious minorities, such as Buddhists and Christians, continue to face occasional harassment and violence at the hands of orthodox Islamist political parties and their supporters.

In the last several years, according to a June 2005 report published by Human Rights Watch, the 100,000-strong Ahmadiya Muslim sect, which is considered heretical by some mainstream Muslims, also faced increased attacks from Islamist groups, including attacks on Ahmadiya mosques and homes, as well as killings, beatings, and economic and educational boycotts of Ahmadiyas. Bowing to pressure from such groups, in January 2004, the government announced a ban on the publication and distribution of the sect's publications, although this was temporarily suspended by the Supreme Court in December 2004.

While authorities largely respect academic freedom, research on sensitive political and religious topics is discouraged, according to the U.S. State Department's 2005 human rights report. Political polarization at many public universities, which occasionally erupts into protests and clashes between students and security forces, inhibits the ability of some students to receive an education. In March 2004, leading author and professor Humayun Azad was stabbed by suspected Islamist extremists on the Dhaka University campus.

The constitution provides for freedom of assembly, but the government frequently limits this right in practice. Demonstrators are occasionally killed or injured during clashes with police. Numerous world-class NGOs operate in Bangladesh and fulfill a wide variety of basic needs in fields such as education, health care, and microcredit programs. However, those that are perceived to have links to the opposition or that criticize the government, particularly on human rights issues, such as Proshika and the PRIP Trust, have been subject to intense official scrutiny and harassment since the 2001 elections.

A report published in August 2005 by Amnesty International noted that at least eight human rights defenders had been assassinated since 2000, and that numerous others have been injured or subject to other threats from attackers linked to criminal gangs or the armed factions of political parties. Others have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention at the hands of authorities in retaliation for expressing their views, and some have been tortured or otherwise mistreated while in custody. In February, two social development NGOs were firebombed by suspected Islamist groups, with at least eight workers injured, according to a BBC report.

Union formation is hampered by a 30 percent employee approval requirement and restrictions on organizing by unregistered unions. Employers can legally fire or transfer workers suspected of union activities. The law prohibits many civil servants from joining unions; these workers can form associations but are prohibited from bargaining collectively. Child labor is widespread.

The Supreme Court displays "some degree of independence" and often rules against the executive, according to the U.S. State Department. However, lower-level courts remain subject to executive influence and are rife with corruption. The government continues to delay implementing the separation of the judiciary from the executive as ordered by a 1999 Supreme Court directive. In 2005, judges faced increased threats and attacks from Islamist groups, which culminated in the killing of two judges in Jhalakathi by the JMB on November 14.

The judicial system is severely backlogged, and pretrial detention is lengthy. Many defendants lack counsel, and poor people have limited recourse through the courts. Prison conditions are extremely poor, and severe overcrowding is common. According to the New Delhi-based Asian Centre for Human Rights, hundreds of juveniles are illegally detained in prisons in contravention of the 1974 Children's Act. Prisoners are routinely subjected to physical abuse and demands for bribes from

corrupt law enforcement officials. Police frequently detain people without an arrest warrant, and detainees are routinely subjected to torture and other forms of abuse. The majority of police abuses go unpunished, which contributes to a climate of impunity.

As part of Operation Clean Heart, a government-initiated anticrime drive that began in October 2002, the army detained nearly 11,000 people, over 40 of whom died while in police custody. Legislation passed in February 2003 granted members of the security forces immunity from prosecution in civilian courts for the abuses committed during the operation. Further efforts were made to tackle criminal activity with the deployment of a new Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), composed of approximately 4,500 members of the armed forces and police, in March 2004. However, while some have praised the RAB's tough stance on suppressing crime, concern has been expressed by the European Union and others over the RAB's record on extrajudicial executions, either in custody or in shootout battles. According to local watchdog Odhikar, 168 alleged criminals were killed by security forces in the first five months of 2005.

Many of these forms of abuse are facilitated by the existence of legislation such as the 1974 Special Powers Act, which permits arbitrary detention without charge, and Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which allows individuals to be detained without a warrant. Authorities regularly detain thousands of political opponents and ordinary citizens (particularly prior to planned political agitation) and use serial detentions to prevent the release of political activists.

Amnesty International has highlighted a continuing pattern of politically motivated detentions, noting that senior opposition politicians and academics, journalists, and human rights activists critical of government policies are particularly at risk of prolonged detention and ill-treatment in custody. According to a 2002 UN Development Program report, almost 90 percent of "preventative detention" cases that reach the courts are judged to be unlawful. In April 2004, the high court directed the government to amend certain sections of the code within six months, but this directive has not yet been acted upon.

Tribal minorities have little control over land issues affecting them, and Bengali language settlers continue to illegally encroach upon tribal lands in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) with the reported connivance of government officials and the army. A 1997 accord ended a 24-year insurgency in the CHT that had sought autonomy for indigenous tribes and had resulted in the deaths of 8,500 soldiers, rebels, and civilians. However, as documented by the Asian Centre for Human Rights, the terms of the accord have not been fully implemented, tribal inhabitants continue to be forced off their land to make way for the construction of army camps, and refugees have been unable to reclaim possession of their lands on return to the CHT. The security forces have also been implicated in a range of additional human rights violations, including the suppression of protests and the arrest and detention of political activists on spurious charges. Indigenous peoples also remain subject to attacks from Bengali settlers, including murders, rapes, and the destruction of houses and other property, according to a 2004 Amnesty International report.

Roughly 260,000 Rohingyas fleeing forced labor, discrimination, and other abuses in Burma entered Bangladesh in the early 1990s; some 22,000 Rohingya refugees and 100,000 other Rohingyas not formally documented as refugees remain in the country. Bangladesh also hosts some 300,000 Urdu-speaking Biharis who were rendered stateless at independence in 1971, many of whom seek repatriation to Pakistan. In May 2003, a landmark high court ruling gave citizenship and voting rights to 10 Bihari refugees.

Rape, dowry-related assaults, acid throwing, and other violence against women occur regularly. A law requiring rape victims to file police reports and obtain medical certificates within 24 hours of the crime in order to press charges prevents most rape cases from reaching the courts. Police also accept bribes not to register rape cases and rarely enforce existing laws protecting women. The Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), a local NGO, recorded 322 acid attacks in 2004 and 210 in the first

nine months of 2005, with the majority being carried out against women. While prosecution for acid-related crimes remains inadequate, under the stringent Acid Crime Prevention Act of 2002, 36 people were convicted for acid attacks in 2004, according to ASF.

In rural areas religious leaders occasionally issue fatwas (religious edicts) that impose floggings and other punishments on women accused of violating strict moral codes. Women also face some discrimination in health care, education, and employment, and are underrepresented in politics and government. However, in May 2004, parliament amended the constitution to provide for 45 reserved seats in parliament for women. Trafficking in both women and children remains extensive, though the government has taken steps to raise awareness and to prosecute traffickers somewhat more vigorously.