

ORIGINS AND PITFALLS OF CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS IN BANGLADESH

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Bangladesh is a relatively young democracy that gained its independence in 1971. The re-establishment of parliamentary democracy in 1991 following years of military dictatorship and the introduction of a non-party caretaker government were important achievements of the country in its democratic journey. In recent years however, confrontational politics has become a serious threat to democracy and development in Bangladesh. It is no longer an internal issue; it has also become a major concern of international donors to Bangladesh and the region as a whole.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION in Bangladesh in recent years has raised doubts about the future course of democracy in the country. Bangladesh has witnessed nationwide strikes and parliamentary boycotts by the opposition party of the day, a spate of political violence and terrorism. In the Westminster system, Parliament is the focal point of administering state affairs, and is the central locus for all discussions and solutions to the problems the country faces. However, due to a lack of understanding between the ruling and opposition parties, there was no discussion on major issues faced by Bangladesh over the years.

Few would dispute that democracy is the best form of government (Hadenius 1997: 7). About 40 per cent of the states in the world may be classified today as democratic. Bangladesh too opted for parliamentary democracy at the time of its independence from Pakistan in 1971. However, an unstable political environment ensued in the 1970s and Bangladesh experienced autocratic military rule in the 1980s. Massive demonstrations against the military government and international pressure made it possible to re-establish parliamentary democracy in 1991. Just after parliamentary elections that year, unity among the political parties diminished and the 'politics of confrontation' began.

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The underlying cause of this confrontation was a local version of power politics. Neither of the two major political parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL), was willing to sit in the opposition. They adopted undemocratic and unconventional strategies to capture power. In order to establish their dominance, the two parties emerged as rivals in many organisations and educational and religious institutions at the local and central level. They adopted *hartals* (strikes), parliamentary boycotts and political violence in an effort to destabilise the ruling party at the time.

Bangladesh is still suffering from these 15 years of confrontational politics, which continues to inflict a serious cost on the country by giving rise to poor governance. In the wake of unstable politics, other sub-systems of the state, particularly administrative and economic sub-systems, are in disorder. In addition to the disorder created, confrontational politics has also become a major impediment to growth and development in Bangladesh, as was noted by Donald Camp, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia: 'Bangladesh's significant problems with corruption, increase in violent political attacks, poor governance and the opposition's *hartal* (strike) threaten democratic stability and impede economic growth' (*Daily Star* 2005b). Former World Bank (WB) President Paul Wolfowitz remarked that Bangladesh could possibly achieve 8 per cent GDP growth a year instead of the present 5 per cent, if corruption and confrontational political culture were contained (*Daily Star* 2005e).

Poor governance and confrontational internal politics have become a full-fledged concern of all international donors in recent years. From 23–24 February 2005, international donors to Bangladesh [WB, European Union (EU), Asian Development Bank (ADB), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Canada, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, Netherlands, Norway, UK, USA and Japan] met in Washington to discuss the situation of poor governance in Bangladesh. There, representatives of the EU took a tough stance, pressing donors to also take a hard line regarding aid because of the failure of Bangladesh to tackle Islamic militants, a deteriorating law and order situation, grenade attacks and violations of human rights. In the end, the donors decided not to end aid to Bangladesh, but they did agree to mount pressure on the government to improve governance (Inam Ahmed 2005).

This article explores the state of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh with a focus on the major consequences of confrontational politics in the country. The next section begins by giving a brief historical background of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh.

I PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY IN BANGLADESH: A BRIEF HISTORY

Parliament is the nucleus of a parliamentary democracy. Hence, the history of the genesis of democracy in Bangladesh can be understood by looking at the evolution of the Bangladeshi Parliament, the *Jatiya Sangsad* (JS). It consists of 300 members elected from single constituencies through direct election. A number of seats, which change

from time to time, are reserved for women nominated by the respective parties. The members of JS are designated as Members of Parliament (MPs). The JS in Bangladesh owes its origin to the British Parliament and was shaped during the British and Pakistan eras.

BRITISH PERIOD (1861–1947)

The Legislative Council of Bengal, which was constituted in 1861, was the first Assembly in British India. It had no representative character. The Governor, belonging to the Indian Civil Service, presided over the sittings of the Council. He was the executive head of the provincial government and was responsible to the Governor General, who was British. In 1919, the Government of India Act gave the Council a slightly democratic character. The Act provided for a three-year term unicameral Parliament consisting of 140 MPs, of which 114 were elected, and the remaining 26 officials and non-officials were nominated by the government. However, the Governor could dissolve the Parliament before the completion of its tenure (Nizam Ahmed 2003: 26). Its scope of operation was limited; it could legislate only on a few subjects (Nizam Ahmed 2001: 13).

The Congress and the Muslim League (ML), the two main political organisations at the time, considered the reform insufficient and inadequate. Their movement for further reform led the British ruler to enact the Government of India Act 1935 which boosted the formal authority of the Bengal Council. It granted autonomy to different Indian provinces. Under the Act, the size of the Assembly was enlarged from 114 to 250 members; also, the tenure was extended from three to five years. It vested the Assembly with the power to legislate on all provincial matters. Ministers were made responsible to the Assembly. According to Nizam Ahmed, the 1935 Act marked the beginning of 'responsible government' in Bangladesh (Nizam Ahmed 2003: 13).

However, there were still problems with the Assembly. The Governor was so powerful that he could intervene, veto and legislate on his own authority. The first election to the Assembly was held in 1937, and it held its first session on 7 April 1937 in Calcutta (now Kolkata). The next election of the Assembly was to be held in the early 1940s but due to World War II, it was postponed until 1946. The new Legislative Assembly had its first sitting on 3 February 1947.

PAKISTAN PERIOD (1947–1971)

On 14 August 1947, India was divided into two independent states, Pakistan and India. Bangladesh (then known as East Pakistan) joined Pakistan. A new Assembly called the East Bengal Legislative Assembly was constituted in 1947. ML dominated the Assembly between 1947 and 1954. During this period, it sustained no major defection from its ranks and provided a stable government in the province (Nizam Ahmed 2003: 74).

In 1954, ML lost the elections to the United Front (UF), an alliance of AL, Ganatantri Party (GP), Nezam-i-Islami Party (NIP) and the Krishok Sramik Party (KSP). The UF formed a new government in May 1954 under the leadership of KSP President Fazlul Haq. However, the Governor suspended the parliamentary government less than two months later, following a serious labour riot in the industrial areas of Dacca (now Dhaka) (Nizam Ahmed 2003: 31). The elected representatives were again given the chance to form a new government in June 1955. But between 1955 and 1958, six governments fell, one lasting only one day and another for just five days (Chowdhury 1980). Most of the parties, including AL, saw defections during the period, causing great political instability. Due to this situation, General Ayub Khan promulgated martial law in 1958 and dissolved all Legislative Assemblies. Party politics remained suspended for a long time.

In the meantime, a new Constitution came into effect in 1962. According to Article 155 of the Constitution, East and West Pakistan were divided into 40,000 election units. On average, voters elected one representative per unit. Those elected from both provinces became members of the Electoral College. They in turn elected the President as well as members of the Provincial and National Assemblies (Khan 1989: 33). The assemblies lacked legitimacy because of the indirect system.

The first general elections on the basis of universal franchise in Pakistan were held in 1970. AL won an absolute majority of seats in the National Assembly and secured all but 12 seats in the Provincial Assembly. Rather than handing over power to AL, the generals in Pakistan tried unsuccessfully to suppress a pro-independence movement in Bangladesh on 26 March 1971. After a nine-month war, Bangladesh emerged as an independent state on 16 December 1971.

BANGLADESH PERIOD (1971–TODAY)

After its independence, members of the previous National and Provincial assemblies of 1970 became Members of the Constituent Assembly (MCAs), which was entrusted with framing a Constitution. The new Constitution came into effect on 16 December 1972. The Constitution provided for a 300-member unicameral JS. Another 15 seats were reserved for a period of 10 years for women, nominated indirectly by elected MPs. The Constitution recognised the supremacy of the JS and proclaimed a parliamentary system. However, in January 1975, the ruling AL replaced the multi-party parliamentary system with a one-party presidential system, amending the Constitution for the fourth time.

In 1991, a parliamentary system of government was established by the enactment of the twelfth amendment to the Constitution. Under the Act, the Prime Minister became the executive head, and the President the constitutional head. Accordingly, the executive power of the Republic was to be exercised by the Prime Minister and his/her cabinet was to be collectively responsible to the JS. However, all executive actions of the government were taken in the name of the President. The fifth JS election

of 27 February 1991 ushered in a new era in Bangladesh, a remarkable feat for many reasons. First, the election was held under a non-party caretaker government (NCG).¹ Second, the election was fair. Third, the parliamentary form of government was re-established. Parliament and parliamentary committees became much more effective than previously. It may be mentioned here that the second, third and fourth JS elections were held under military rule and the JS was ineffective.

In recent years, a number of positive developments have taken place both in the House and in the committees. The seventh JS introduced Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQT) with a view to strengthening Parliament and ensuring governmental accountability.² The technique increased the opportunity for parliamentarians to ask questions directly of the head of the government. The most-recent JS provided for the reservation of 45 seats exclusively for women in Parliament through a constitutional amendment act in 2004. The first Parliament had 15 reserved seats for women and the second Parliament 30.

Jean Grugel, a scholar of democracy, observes that full democratisation cannot take place without women's participation in politics (Grugel 2002: 5). Emphasising the importance of women's participation in Parliament, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) council stated that the concept of democracy will only assume true and dynamic significance when political policies and national legislation are decided upon jointly by men and women with equitable regard for the intent and aptitude of both halves of the population (IPU 2005). The number of women parliamentarians in Bangladesh is drastically low (only six women candidates won the parliamentary elections of 1 October 2001). The single seat election system makes it difficult for women to compete with their male counterparts. Reservations will surely make room for more women participation in Parliament. While women's participation in Parliament is considerably low in many established democracies (in the Japanese Diet, out of 480 seats only 43 female candidates won seats in the House of Representatives during the 8 September 2005 elections), Bangladesh nevertheless is a glaring example.

Executive interference in Parliament hinders parliamentary sovereignty. The parliamentary standing committee on private members' bills and resolutions of the most recent JS denounced interference in its affairs by the speaker and the law minister and blamed them for making the committee dysfunctional (Liton 2005b). Members of the committee from the ruling and opposition parties decided to ask the speaker to initiate steps for making the committee functional and free from any interference by the executive. This type of harmony between ruling and opposition members may have far-reaching implications for parliamentary politics in Bangladesh.

II CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS: THE UNDERLYING CAUSES

Recently, the Parliament has come under fire from newspapers in Bangladesh for its failure to ensure the accountability of the executive branch (*Daily Star* 2005a; Liton 2005a, 2005c). Nizam Ahmed's study also found that the various parliamentary devices

are insufficient in ensuring a responsible government (Nizam Ahmed 2003: 117). The opposition has not been able to play its role in and outside Parliament owing to strategic weaknesses, lack of vision and to some extent, repression by the ruling alliance (Liton 2005d). At the same time, the unwillingness of the lawmakers of the ruling alliance to attend sessions and reluctance to discuss important issues in the House has led to the ineffectiveness of the last JS.

For all practical purposes, the Parliament faces serious challenges in performing its responsibilities. One of the main challenges is the existence of confrontational politics. Confrontational politics is a domestic version of power politics. From the perspective of political theory, the prime goal of a political party is to capture control of the state in a constitutional manner. Political parties in Bangladesh, however, have historically attempted to use unconventional means to become the ruling party. The opposition parties try to gain power by causing the downfall of an elected government before it completes its scheduled term in office. This practice has resulted in parliamentary boycotts, *hartals*, terrorism and political killings.

While the losing party in national elections in other democracies takes responsibility for its defeat and recognises the winning party (for example, the Japanese Lower House Election on 11 September 2005; US Presidential Election on 2 November 2004; Indian Lok Sabha Election on 10 May 2004; Parliamentary elections in New Zealand on 1 October 2005), often the losing party in Bangladesh tends to claim that the election was unfair. Stanley A. Kochanek writes: 'Like the AL's Sheikh Hasina in 1991, Begum Khaleda Zia has never accepted her defeat at the polls' (1998: 135). On 2 August 2001, Sheikh Hasina of the AL and Begum Khaleda Zia gave a public pledge to former US President Jimmy Carter that they would accept the results of the election and that the opposition party would not boycott Parliament (Hye 2001). However, soon after the elections, Sheikh Hasina expediently forgot the pledge and responded to her party's landslide electoral defeat in October 2001 by announcing a boycott of Parliament until a new election was held. She claimed that the polls were rigged and authorised a series of protest demonstrations even though international monitors said the voting was mostly free and fair (*BBC News* 2001). Confrontational political culture is deep-rooted in Bangladesh; its causes are, first, cult of personality leading to BNP-AL rivalry and second, patrimonial politics, a lack of democracy within party politics and politics of profit.

PERSONALITY CULT

The personification of the values of the war for liberation by BNP and AL is an important aspect of Bangladesh's confrontational political culture. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, one of the founders of the AL and father of AL's current President, Sheikh Hasina, was the most prominent leader who fought for Bengali autonomy in the mid-1950s in East Pakistan. AL won almost all the seats in the Provincial and National elections in 1970, but Pakistan was unwilling to hand over power to the democratically

elected party. Many people were killed in East Pakistan by a sudden military attack at midnight on 25 March 1971, which led East Pakistan to fight for its freedom. However, during the civil war, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was imprisoned in West Pakistan. After liberation, he returned to a newly independent Bangladesh and ruled the country until his assassination in 1975. After his death, Ziaur Rahman, late husband of BNP President Khaleda Zia and founder of BNP, assumed power over the country and led it until his assassination in 1981. Ziaur Rahman was a Major in the Bengali division of the Pakistani army. He was the effective military head of the regular military resistance during the war of independence. It is important to note that 26 March is Bangladesh's Independence Day. AL claims that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman proclaimed independence, while BNP suggests it was Ziaur Rahman. This is the first example of the role of the personality cult in Bangladesh's politics.

Since Bangladesh re-entered into the era of parliamentary democracy in 1991, the BNP (1991–1996, 2001–2006) and the AL (1996–2001) have both tried their best to portray their founders as the greatest. According to T. Maniruzzaman, Khaleda Zia invoked the name of her late husband Ziaur Rahman 87 per cent of the times in her election speeches during 1990–91 (Maniruzzaman 1992: 209–10). The BNP regularly observes Ziaur Rahman's birth and death anniversaries with extensive programmes. After ascending to power in 2001, the BNP proposed to spend 10 million taka for the renovation of Ziaur Rahman's tomb and initiated 30 million taka for his memorial. At the same time, the party proposed to suspend a plan of the AL ruling party to construct a memorial commemorating the war of independence. In 2003, Khaleda Zia conferred the highest national award on both Ziaur and Mujibur simultaneously, giving both Ziaur Rahman and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman equal respect—a move that was not welcomed by the AL.

AL also observes Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth and death anniversary as well as his homecoming with enthusiasm. After becoming Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina proclaimed an ordinance requiring that portraits of her father be placed in all government offices and schools, a move that was executed instantly. The AL removed a bridge that led to the small island where Ziaur Rahman's tomb is located, but because of the uproar from the BNP, the bridge was later re-opened. AL cancelled the National Solidarity Day, a public holiday established by Ziaur Rahman. In June 2001, at the end of its tenure, the AL passed the 'Father of the Nation Family Members Security Act' that was cancelled by the BNP within 50 days of its tenure. The BNP tried to disturb an opposition-led grand rally to be held at Paltan Maidan, Dhaka on 22 November 2005. Suffice it to mention here that when Khaleda Zia as opposition leader had tried to stage a long march, the then in power AL had placed truck blockades at some entry points to the city (*Daily Star* 2005f). There are innumerable examples of how the two major parties engaged in rivalry rather than seeking better strategies of economic development in order to address the country's abysmal poverty.

PATRIMONIAL POLITICS

Patrimonialism is the hallmark of Bangladeshi politics, especially in the BNP and AL. The country has a very poor tradition of cultivating leadership through democratic processes within the parties. After Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's death, Sheikh Hasina became the AL's president. Likewise, Khaleda Zia became the president of the BNP following Ziaur Rahman's death. Both leaders inherited the office of party chief through a culture of dynastic rule. Shameem Mahmud has described well the culture of party politics in the BNP and AL:

The tenure of both these leaders seems to be unquestionable, and perpetuating. There is no example in our recent political history that any leader of these two parties has braved to oppose any proposal or decision of their chiefs. They remain key sources of power in their parties. Other leaders could post only according to the sweet will of their chiefs. In fact, the danger of such personal leadership is that political institutions may not grow under such a personal system. Ironically, these leaders have been incessantly crying out for the establishment of democracy in the country (Mahmud 2004).

However, the reason patrimonial leadership is deep-rooted in Bangladesh is because the people are emotionally attached through patron-client relations to either Khaleda Zia and her late husband, or to Sheikh Hasina and her assassinated father. In a hierarchical organisation, such patron-client relations are perpetuated through a reciprocal system where followers work for their superiors or patrons with a view to gaining benefits, while the patrons provide material benefit or opportunities.

Politics is a profitable business in Bangladesh and it is the easiest and shortest way to becoming rich. There have been many student leaders who later became parliamentarians and ministers. Examples are also available of party supporters who gained much wealth and money by entering politics. Politics for profit ultimately leads supporters to engage in conflict to capture powerful posts at the local, national and organisational levels. The next section analyses the impact of this undemocratic and non-consensual political culture upon parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh.

III CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS: DECAY OF PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

Among the many negative consequences of confrontational politics in Bangladesh, *hartal*, parliamentary boycotts and a human security crisis are the main outcomes.

HARTALS: A MAJOR SOURCE OF ANARCHY

According to *The Economist*, it is the bitterness and lack of trust between the BNP and AL that has damaged the democratic process and encouraged the growth of

extremism (*The Economist* 2005). Rivalry between the two major political parties is often intense and violent and has many negative consequences.

Hartals, or strikes, is one of the unwanted results of confrontational politics in Bangladesh. The *hartal* culture originated in Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience movement against the British during the Indian independence movement. *Hartals* were also common during the language movement, a struggle that took place in 1952 for the right to use Bangla as the mother tongue during the Pakistan period. *Hartals* were quite common during the nine-year military regime under Ershad and they played an important role in his overthrow. The people expected a return to stable politics after the reintroduction of parliamentary democracy in 1991; however, since 1991 people have had to contend with party-led *hartals*. Table 1 shows the number of *hartals* observed in Bangladesh since 1991.

TABLE 1
Hartals Perpetrated to Falsify the Activity of Ruling Government

<i>Ruling Party</i>	<i>Period of Time</i>	<i>Days Hartal Observed by the Main Opposition</i>
BNP	1991–1996	416
AL	1996–2001	318
BNP	2001–2005	54

Sources: *New Age* (Dhaka), 28 June 2003; *Daily Ajkerkagoj* (Dhaka), 10 October 2005. (Calculations made by the author).

In 1998, Shah A.M.S. Kibria, then Finance Minister, stated that the country counts 3.8 billion taka (approximately US\$ 26.2 million) in losses for every *hartal* the opposition undertakes (Islam 2003). A UNDP study report reveals that the *hartal* culture results in a 3 to 4 per cent GDP loss, annually (*Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha* 2005). Under the UNDP study on *hartal* culture, more than 3,000 people from all walks of life were surveyed. Ninety-five per cent of the people surveyed believed that *hartals* damage the economy and society by hampering business activities, through lack of access to health and education facilities, damage to property and public buildings and loss of income. Nearly 55 per cent of those interviewed also felt that the strikes failed to have any impact on policy, while 70 per cent thought constructive alternatives to *hartals* did exist (*Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha* 2005). It is not an exaggeration to say that *hartal* politics is completely against the will and interest of the people.

The Japanese Ambassador to Bangladesh Matsushiro Horiguchi noted: 'There used to be good reasons for *hartals*—reasons like language movement—but these days there are too many *hartals*. The national economy is suffering' (*Daily Star* 2005c). Koji Nojima, Chairman of the Japan-Bangladesh Joint Committee for Commerce and Economic Cooperation mentioned *hartal* as the main reason for Japanese reluctance to invest in Bangladesh (*The New Nation* 2005). Regrettably, while foreigners correctly assess the impact of *hartals* on the national economy, Bangladeshi politicians are yet to realise it or do anything about the problem.

BOYCOTTING PARLIAMENT: THREAT TO PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

Since the re-inception of parliamentary democracy in 1991, a political culture borne of parliamentary boycotts by the opposition has posed a grave threat to parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh. The absence of an established opposition has created a serious obstacle in making Parliament effective. In turn, this has made the government unaccountable and unresponsive.

The most recent JS began its first session on 28 October 2001, just 27 days after parliamentary elections. AL, the largest opposition party in Parliament, responded to its landslide electoral defeat by announcing a boycott of Parliament unless fresh elections were held. It was not until 24 June 2002 that AL participated in Parliament's third session. Again, it started boycotting Parliament a year later, on 25 June 2003, because of an indecent remark by the State Minister of Housing and Public Works in Parliament about Sheikh Hasina, leader of the opposition in the House. AL lawmakers finally returned to Parliament on the fifth day of the 12th session on 9 June 2004, after an absence of 90 working days in the House, with a view to preserving membership in Parliament, as a rule provides that 'a member of Parliament shall vacate his seat if he is absent from Parliament, without the leave of Parliament, for ninety consecutive sitting days'. Since then, AL abstained from the parliamentary session till 2 December 2004, when they joined in the session for the third time. Again, Parliament faced a serious boycott problem by the AL on the grounds that the speaker did not accept AL's demand for adjournment of parliamentary activities on 31 January 2005 to honour Finance Minister Shah A.M.S. Kibria, who was killed by a grenade attack in a Public Assembly four days earlier. Table 2 shows the recent history of parliamentary boycotts in Bangladesh.

TABLE 2
Parliament Boycott from 1991–2005

<i>Ruling Party</i>	<i>Boycott Party</i>	<i>Parliament Boycott (Date/Day/Session)</i>
BNP (1991–1996)	AL	March 1994–November 1994 Parliament Dissolved: December 1995
AL (1996–2001)	BNP	Total Working Days: 382; Boycott: 156
BNP & its allies (2001–2006)	AL	Total Working Days: 373; Boycott: 222

Sources: *Daily Star* (Dhaka), 28 October 2005; *Daily Naya Diganta* (Dhaka), 28 October 2006. (Calculations made by the author).

The reasons for parliamentary boycotts since 1991 were mainly that the opposition was not given enough time to talk in the House and that they were disallowed to pass parliamentary motions in the House. In fact, the opposition's demands for adjournment motions are rarely honoured in the House. Table 3 shows the status of adjournment motions in the JS.

TABLE 3
Status of Adjournment Motions (1991–2006)

<i>Jatiya Sangsad</i>	<i>Notice Submitted</i>	<i>Notice Discussed</i>
Fifth (1991–1996)	1,704	0.20
Seventh (1996–2001)	4,450	0.00
Eighth (2001–2005)	2,530	0.00

Source: Bangladesh *Jatiya Sangsad*, Law Section-1. In the case of Adjournment Motions of Eighth JS, data includes 1st to 20th Session (October 2001 to February 2006). Dhaka: Parliament Secretariat, 2006. (Calculations made by the author).

Only one adjournment motion was discussed in the fifth JS. Most disappointingly, no adjournment motions were accepted in the seventh and eighth JS. In recent years, many incidents in Bangladesh have damaged life and property. Grenade attacks on the chief of the opposition at a public gathering and on the British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, the murder of a former Finance Minister by gunmen, suspicious killings, price hike of fuel and essentials, 17 August 2005's serial bomb blasts across the country and frequent ferry accidents are important among these incidents. The whole nation deserved a discussion on these issues and an explanation by the government, but no discussion was held in Parliament.

Both the ruling and opposition parties blame each other for making the Parliament dysfunctional. AL complains that the speaker of Parliament is not neutral and acts as a member of the ruling party. Conversely, the ruling coalition accuses AL of not truly believing in parliamentary democracy and making it effective. While paying an official visit to Dhaka on 14 January 2004, Joseph Crowley, a US Congressman said: 'Democracy is the rule of the majority but the minority party's right must be protected fully' (Cited in Zamir 2004). He also decried the fact that whoever comes to power in Bangladesh becomes the owner of everything and does not share with the opposition. Unless the majority understands that democracy is a participatory process where the minority is as important as the majority, it is impossible to make Parliament functional. Opposition members on the other hand should bear in mind that the speaker's decision to not let them speak is not an excuse to absent themselves from Parliament. According to Carl Schmitt, 'an opposition belongs to the essence of parliament and every chamber' (1985: 41). Thus, its absence is detrimental to the process. Similarly, the World Bank has commented: 'In all legislatures, it is the party or parties out of power—the opposition—that has the incentive to oversee government. The more government incompetence, malfeasance, or corruption is revealed, the better the opposition's chances of winning the next election' (World Bank 2005). Hence, one observer has correctly noted: 'The main concern of the donor countries should be how to make opposition politics constructive for democracy' (Hosein 2005).

HUMAN SECURITY CRISIS

Human security is a relatively new concept, which appeared first in the 1994 *Human Development Report*, an annual publication of the UNDP. According to the *Human Development Report*, human security means 'protection from the threat of disease, hunger, unemployment, crime, social conflict, political repression, and environmental hazards' (UNDP 1994: 22). There is an imperative for focusing on improving democracy's capacity to address the underlying sources of human insecurity (IDEA 2006: 39). Regrettably, democracy in Bangladesh is battling with a confrontational political culture, which causes a human security problem by giving rise to political and other violence. For instance, major political parties engaged in violence throughout the country when the parties failed to come up with a consensus on the appointment of the chief advisor of the interim NCG, in which at least 12 political activists died and almost 2,000 were wounded (*Daily Star* 2006). Severe and frequent political in-fighting has had an adverse impact on the daily lives of the people. Suffice it to say that state authorities are responsible for protecting the safety and lives of citizens and the promotion of their welfare (ICISS 2001: 13). It is worth mentioning that the task becomes easier for the state authorities when the ruling and opposition parties cooperate with each other.

Confrontational politics is paralysing the country's economy, destroying the main democratic institution—the Parliament—and endangering lives. The central role of Parliament and its members should be both to produce a government that can be entrusted with the livelihood, property and rights of the people, and to monitor the government and its legislative process to ensure that the government is self-regulatory (Motohisa 2002: 56). The essence of Parliament lies not only with regulating governmental functions but also with promoting good governance. Parliament explores the scope for MPs to discuss the deterioration of law and order, violation of human rights, terrorism, civil service reform, privatisation and decentralisation. Through these discussions they can offer suggestions for the betterment of the country.

An effective Parliament can generate at least three benefits. First, parliamentary effectiveness can be promoted by avoiding parliamentary boycotts and street demonstrations and by ensuring the active participation of MPs. If political parties practice parliamentary politics, it will reduce *hartals* and parliamentary boycotts to a great extent. Second, law and order will improve because political parties will not be involved in *hartals* and violence as a mechanism of protest; rather they will opt for parliamentary debate on issues of importance. Third, because the cabinet is collectively responsible to the Parliament, the government will come under scrutiny. Government responsiveness to its administrative lapses will surely help it to take the initiative to improve human rights and the law and order situation.

Jean Blondel mentions four indicators that determine the high status of legislatures: parliamentary immunity, parliamentary inviolability, procedural independence, and freedom of meeting (Blondel 1973: 31). According to the Bangladeshi Constitution,

Parliament is the highest law-making organ of the state. Article 75(1)(a) empowers the Parliament to frame its own Rules of Procedure. Article 78(3) provides immunity for the Members of Parliament for whatever they say or do inside Parliament and/or in Committees. As per article 78(1), the validity of the proceedings in Parliament shall not be questioned in any court. Theoretically, Bangladesh's Parliament is strong enough to discharge its solemn duties. What is badly needed in today's Bangladesh is a unified effort of both the ruling and opposition parties to make it functional and effective.

IV CONCLUSION

Historically, the government and the opposition in Bangladesh have confronted each other more on the streets than in the JS, inflicting a serious cost on the country. In a parliamentary democracy, the Parliament is in fact the only national forum to hold discussions on any national issue. The Parliament serves as a forum of public debate and opinion. In short, an effective Parliament is an important tool in rooting out corruption, promoting democracy and good governance, and hastening development. As the public in general and international donors in particular are becoming increasingly impatient with confrontational politics and the worsening governance situation in Bangladesh, the nation deserves the practice of standard parliamentary norms such as respect for contrary opinions and consensual politics by political parties. But democratic norms and values will be reflected in the behaviour of politicians at the national level only when they practice democracy inside the party itself. That is why the speaker of the Bangladeshi JS urged politicians to practice democracy within the parties first (*Daily Star* 2005d).

T.G. Masarky has said: 'Democracy is for me discussion, and therefore, compromise' (Quoted in Stern 1997: 19). The foundation of democracy consists of a political culture marked by solidarity, mutual understanding and tolerance for contrary opinions. Therefore, it will be correct to say that the future course of democracy in Bangladesh will depend on the political parties working together to solve the serious problems facing the nation.

END NOTES

1. NCG is a new system of government introduced in Bangladesh in 1991. The main purpose of introducing this type of government is to ensure free and fair Parliamentary elections. According to the system, after the expiration of its tenure, the Parliament will be dissolved, NCG will enter upon office of Prime Minister and discharge its duties as mentioned in the Constitution till the date a new Prime Minister enters office after the constitution of the Parliament. It is composed of the Chief Advisor and not more than 10 advisors. It is hoped that under this system, the ruling party will have no chance of influencing elections and rigging the vote. For details, see Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Chapter 11A, Articles 58B, 58C, 58D, 58E, accessed on 29 October 2005 from <http://www.pmo.gov.bd/constitution>.

2. The Prime Minister's Question Time (PMQT) was introduced in early 1997. In accordance with a decision made by the Business Advisory Committee (BAC), an all-party committee responsible to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina answered the questions of MPs in the seventh Parliament for 30 minutes every Tuesday.

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