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Conflict analysis of Bangladesh

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Questions

- *What are the medium and long-term drivers of conflict and instability in Bangladesh?*
- *Where is conflict most likely to escalate and between which groups?*
- *What are the main conflict/stability threats to Bangladesh's transition to middle-income status?*

Contents

1. Summary

This rapid literature review examines the root causes and dynamics of conflict and (in)stability in Bangladesh. Key findings include:

Conflict profile

Bangladesh has a violent political culture, and has experienced widespread political violence, especially around elections – this is a feature of its increasingly authoritarian democracy. Political violence often sees the political, the youth and student cadre of the parties clash; while the targets of political violence are largely low and mid-ranking political party members (Hassan & Nazneen, 2017, p.206).

Social, ethnic and religious conflicts have flared when exploited for political purpose, but are mostly latent (BTI, 2018, p.27). The last decade has seen a new phase of Islamic radicalisation and violence; increased violent targeting of minorities; the continuation of gender-based violence; and violence against labour rights protests and human rights activists (Odhikar, 2019). Extremist groups pose challenges to the state's monopoly on the use of force (BTI, 2018).

Economic profile

Bangladesh is generally heralded as an economic development success story. It passed from being a low-income country (LIC) to a lower-middle-income country (LMIC) in 2015. It is classified as a Least Developed Country (LDC), but in its 2018 triennial review, for the first time it met all requirements to graduate out of LDC status. It could graduate from LDC status in 2024. Bangladesh's Millennium Development Goals (MDG) achievements were remarkable, but it faces significant challenges to eliminating poverty and to climb further to be an upper-middle-income country (UMIC).

Conflict and (in)stability – causes and actors

Social cleavages - Bangladesh has a fairly homogenous population – being majority Bengali; and a majority being Muslim, with a history of harmonious social relations and strong sense of national identity. The most important schism is on the issue of the role of religion in politics and national identity. There is tradition of vocal civil society activism.

Environmental challenges - Bangladesh is one of the world's most disaster prone countries, and most at risk from climate change.

Economic challenges and governance - To move closer to UMIC status, Bangladesh needs to accelerate growth to seven percent of GDP and above. Economic diversification, moving labour to more productive sectors, creating new sources of growth, and general productivity gains are key areas for improvement. Making growth more inclusive and reducing poverty by creating jobs and supporting rural development are key challenges. Bangladesh has achieved growth and poverty reduction despite having some of the worst governance and anti-corruption scores in the world. This is partly due to its 'competitive clientelism' where rent-sharing occurs across political divides (Hassan & Raihan, 2017, p.97). However, the main risk to economic stability is its poor institutional and governance landscape.

Political challenges – elections, political violence, and party politics - Rivalry between the two main political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has dominated Bangladeshi politics since 1991. Election-related unrest has led to deadly political violence. Human rights abuses allegedly carried out by the authorities include: extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, beating and harassment of opposition groups. These have become more frequent as partisan tensions have escalated. It has paralyzed civil and economic activities (BTI, 2018). Parliamentary elections in December 2018 were marred by widespread allegations of election irregularities and political violence. Violence is used by the politically affiliated to gain access to economic benefits and privileges (BTI, 2018, p.27). Complex gendered violence also occurs around election and democratic processes - including psychological, economic, sexual and physical violence.

Political settlement - Bangladeshi politics has undergone a significant transformation since its 1971 independence, including periods of prolonged military rule (BTI, 2018). Since the flawed 2014 election, the Awami League has essential controlled parliament, leading to further centralisation, partisan tendencies, and authoritarianism (BTI, 2018). It exhibits "partyarchy" and dynastic rule, which stymie regime succession and democratic consolidation, and fosters political instability as violence becomes a constitutive feature of the political settlement around regime succession (Hassan & Nazneen, 2017). The key schism in Bangladeshi politics is the divide between those that see national identity as tightly related to religion (Islam), and the other side that see national identity as tied to ethnicity and use of the Bengali language (Rahman, 2019, p.173; BTI, 2018). Elites drive this polarising divide with their competing views of the foundation myth of the nation, but not on ethnic or socioeconomic divisions (Rahman, 2019, p.173).

Yet despite Bangladesh's divided and contentious party politics, both parties have exhibited strong commitment to a long-term development agenda, with remarkable economic and development outcomes, relative to the region (World Bank, 2016, 2018). Public support for democratic governance is high.

Justice and corruption - The realities and perceptions of injustice in the criminal justice system, and human rights violations, are fuelling distrust in the police and judicial system. This includes the lack of implementation of laws, impunity of law enforcement agencies and corruption. Law and order problems are compounded by corruption.

The Rohingya crisis - Bangladesh now hosts nearly one million Rohingya refugees. The refugees live in hastily built and severely overcrowded camps, and humanitarian and Bangladesh government aid agencies are severely strained (e.g. with healthcare and education gaps). Extreme overcrowding particularly affects health, vulnerability to environmental shocks, and women and girls. The natural environment is under pressure - especially fragile forest and land resources - and the camps face significant risks from floods and landslides during the monsoon season.

Bangladeshis are broadly supportive of the government's decision to allow Rohingya refugees into the country. However, the crisis has already put an immense strain on the half a million Bangladeshis who live in the Cox's Bazar District, with rising tensions with host communities (Loy, 2019). While the Bangladeshi macro-economy has shown resilience to ongoing accommodation of the refugees, without resolution, the situation threatens to deepen as a protracted and multi-dimensional crisis (World Bank, 2018. p.25). The Bangladeshi government has kept its borders open, and provided humanitarian aid with generous support from humanitarian agencies; however, its stance is that the Rohingya must return to Myanmar (World

Bank, 2018. p.25). This has meant it has limited initiatives that might integrate the Rohingya. The Rohingya crisis could upset the secular/religious balance in Bangladeshi politics.

Extremism - A contemporary phase of violent extremism in Bangladesh occurred from 2013-2017, and saw the brutal murders of a number of secular bloggers, liberal academics and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) activists. These attacks, and the more widespread threats against religious minorities and secular actors, can be seen as a trend towards the "Islamization of public life". The groups responsible for current extremism include: Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen (JMB), Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), affiliates of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and Islamic State (ISIS). The literature identifies political drivers of this violence as: long-standing rivalry between the Awami League and the BNP, especially the targeting of BNP ally Jamaat-e-Islami. Additional drivers include: the authorities' repression, human rights violations, heavy-handed responses to dissent, and long-standing problems of weak governance and corruption. Domestic drivers are most significant. However, there are some international drivers – e.g. the presence of transnational terrorist groups such as ISIS and AQIS (Idris, 2017a). The new armed Rohingya insurgency on the Bangladeshi-Myanmar border could become important (IPAC, 2017, p.2).

Chittagong Hill Tracts conflict - The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) indigenous community continue to experience widespread discrimination, and violence and abuse. This is portrayed as a law and order problem rather than a political problem (BTI, 2018, p.31).

The Bangladesh-India border - Border disputes over recent decades have seen cross-border skirmishes and killings between or by the border security agencies (Bhardwaj, 2016). Despite a 2015 agreement between the Bangladeshi and Indian governments, the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) are accused of continuing to violate human rights in the region (Odhikar, 2019).

Literature base

This paper is based on a rapid literature review, and is thus illustrative of the key issues and is not comprehensive of every issue. There is a lot of literature that explores the many different issues that contribute to conflict, political violence and (in)stability in Bangladesh across academic, think tank, policy and practitioner sources.

This query draws on the concepts of "conflict analysis" within international development policy and practitioner literature, and the DFID, FCO & MOD definition of "stability". This paper understands "conflict analysis" as a structured process of analysis to understand conflict that focuses on the conflict profile, the actors involved and their perspectives, the causes of conflict, and the dynamics of how these elements interact (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012; Herbert, 2017). It understands stability as: 'characterised in terms of political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which human rights and rule of law are respected, basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all' (DFID, FCO & MOD, 2011, p.5).

2. Conflict profile

Bangladesh has a violent political culture, and has experienced widespread political violence, especially around elections – this is a feature of its increasingly authoritarian democracy. This type of violence, and political instability, dates back to independence in 1971,

with historic fluctuations, and is centred around the key divide between the two main political parties and competition for political office (Midgley, 2018). **'Politically motivated strikes and blockades – or hartals as they are known locally – are all too common, especially around elections' (Midgley, 2018).** Figure 1 shows peaks of conflict events around elections – with Parliamentary elections in December 2018 and January 2014 seeing huge spikes in the number of riots, increases in the number of protests and an increase in violence against civilians around December 2018. The contested 2014 elections led to the 2015 political crisis (see Section 4), with a huge spike in riots, and an increase in protests (relative to the level in the period before).

Figure 1: Conflict events in Bangladesh 2010-2019[1]
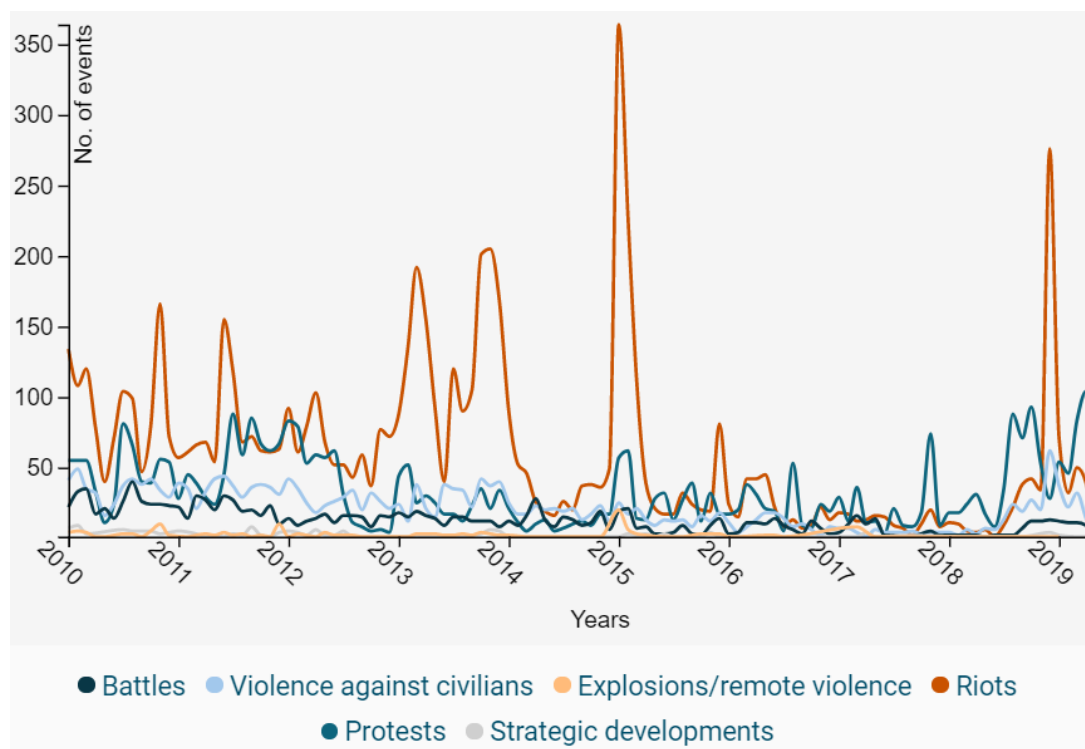
Source: ACLED, 2019a

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[1] Figures 1 and 2 present graphics of conflict events from ACLED (2019a) based on its dataset - which is publicly available at https://www.acleddata.com/data/. ACLED tracks reported political violence from four main types of sources (ACLED, 2019b, p.33): (1) Local, regional, national and continental media reviewed on a daily basis; (2) Reports from NGOs or international organisations used to supplement media reporting; (3) Selected social media accounts, including Twitter and Telegram; and (4) Information and data provided through partnerships with local conflict observatories in hard-to-access cases. The ACLED (2019b, p.6) codebook explains its methodology in further depth and that this data has its limitations – e.g. biases in the media coverage are not corrected for, and hard to reach areas are less covered. ACLED's fundamental unit of observation is the "event". 'Events involve designated actors – e.g. a named rebel group, a militia or state forces. They occur at a specific named location (identified by name and geographic coordinates) and on a specific day… ACLED currently codes for six types of events and twenty-five types of sub-events, both violent and non-violent, that may occur during a period of political violence and disorder' (ACLED, 2019b, p.6). The six types of events are: battles, explosions/remote violence, violence against civilians, protests, riots and strategic developments.

Figure 2: Actors by event frequency
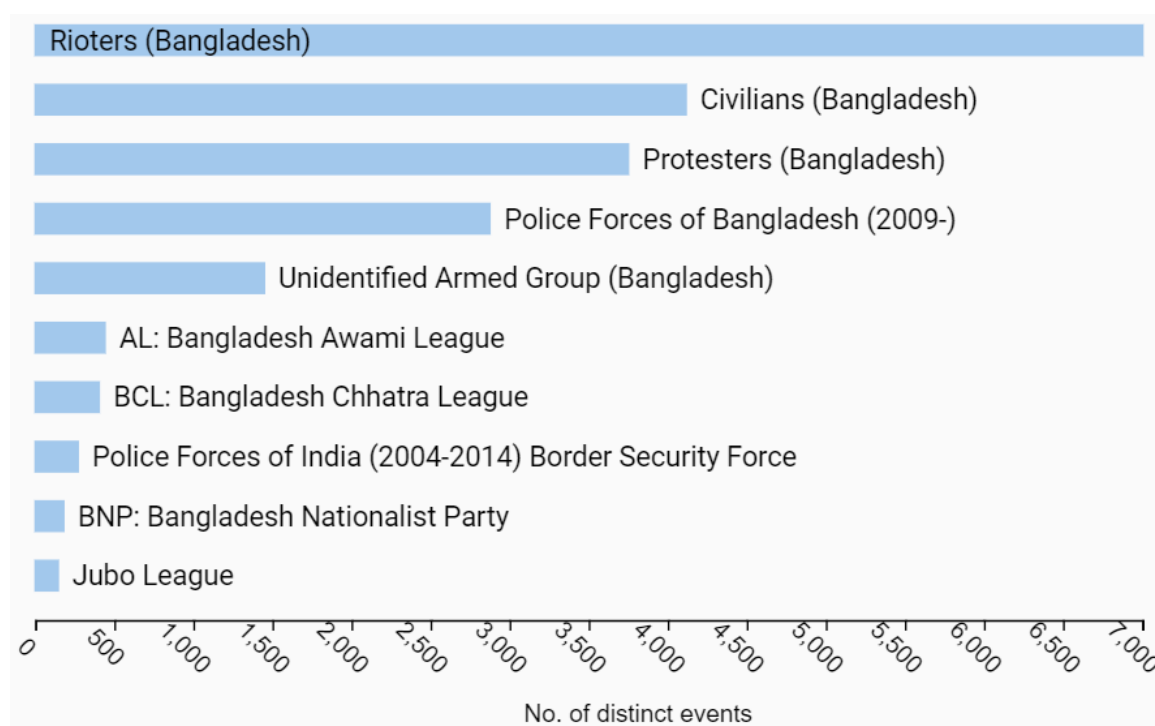
Source: ACLED, 2019a

Political violence in Bangladesh usually: involves armed clashes between the political, the youth and student cadre of the parties; and targets largely low and mid-ranking political party members. Both parties have used general strikes and transport blockades for political gain, when in opposition. The ruling party has also used police and security agencies to arrest and harass opposition party activists and leaders. (Hassan & Nazneen, 2017, p.206).

'Social, ethnic and religious conflicts are mostly latent in Bangladesh and have flared only when exploited for political purpose' (BTI, 2018, p.27). Examples of this include: violence against religious and LGBT minorities; violence against secular actors; gender-based violence (e.g. rape, sexual harassment, dowry related and domestic violence – this can also be related to party political violence); and violence against labour rights protests and human rights activists (Odhikar, 2019). While the state generally has a monopoly on the use of force across the country, this has been challenged by extremist groups (BTI, 2018).

Section 4 explores the main challenges and actors related to conflict and (in)stability.

3. Economic profile

Bangladesh is generally heralded as an economic development success story, compared to most other South Asian economies. Its economic performance is 'quite strong' with growth of 6.3% per year since 2007; it has experienced stable exchange rates; and benefits from a steady flow of remittances (BTI, 2018; Midgley, 2018; Asia Development Bank (ADB), 2016; Bhattacharya, 2018). Bangladesh has seen a rapid rise in its GNI per capita, particularly since 2002 (see Figure 3). Its most recent Gross National Income (GNI) was measured at USD$1,470 in 2017 (World Development Indictors, World Bank).

Bangladesh passed from being a low-income country (LIC) to a lower-middle-income country (LMIC) in 2015 (Risse, 2018), as the LMIC classification is for countries that have GNI's per capita within the range of: USD$1,006-$3,955 (according to the most recent OECD-DAC's list of ODA recipients, which is updated every three years).[2] However, while meeting the LMIC GNI requirement, Bangladesh is actually classified as a Least Developed Country (LDC), a category that supersedes the LMIC category, and that is based on GNI per capita and also the human assets index (HAI) and economic vulnerability index (EVI).

Bangladesh is classified as a LDC, but in its 2018 triennial review, for the first time it met all requirements to graduate out of LDC status (UN/DESA, 2018). This means it could graduate in 2024, if it maintains its rankings on the criteria (Risse, 2018). This would be a significant achievement, comparatively only five LDCs have graduated since 1971 (Botswana, Cabo Verde, Equatorial Guinea, the Maldives, and Samoa) (Risse, 2018).

Figure 3: Bangladesh's GNI per capita (Atlas method (current US$)) from 1973 to 2017
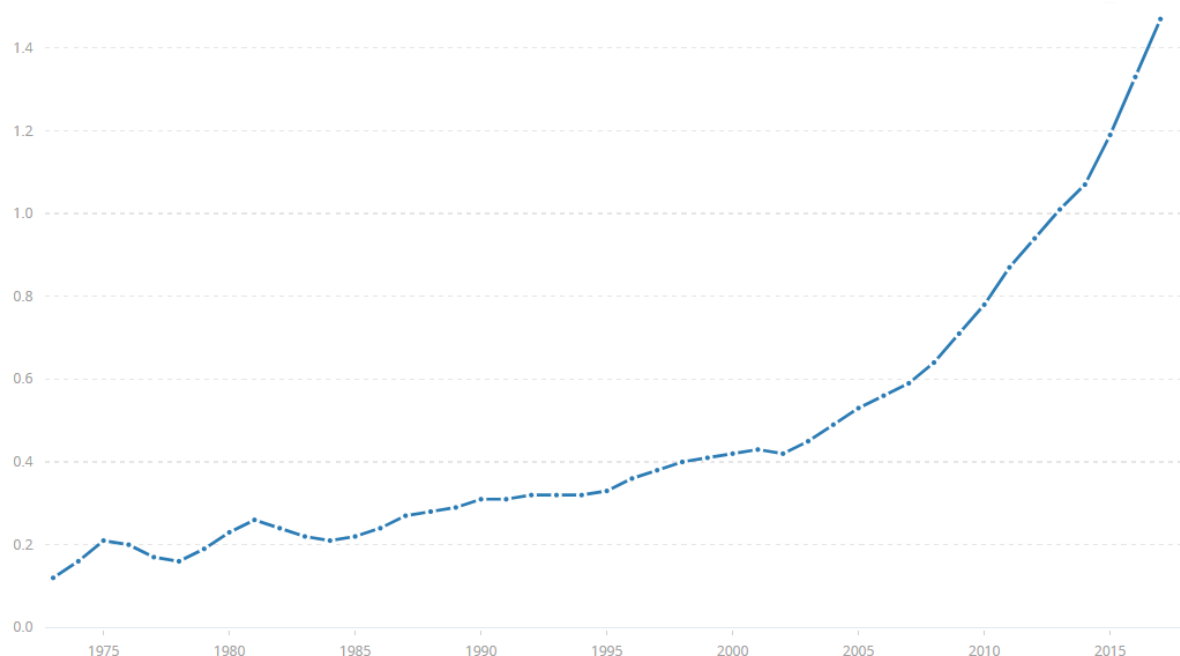
Source: World Development Indicators database, World Bank, accessed 13/05/2019.[3]

Bangladesh performed 'spectacularly' in progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) goals, but poverty continues to be a major problem (BTI, 2018). Achievements include: halving poverty (falling from 59 percent in 1991-92 to 25 percent in 2015); narrowing the gender gap; significant progress in access to health and basic social services; falling fertility and maternal mortality rates; increased gender equity in primary and secondary schools; and improvements in child immunisation and life expectancy (World Bank, 2016, p.i; BTI, 2018; Bhattacharya, 2018). Important drivers of poverty reduction are: increases in labour income,

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[2] http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/DAC_List_ODA_Recipients2018to2020_flows_En.pdf
[3] The World Bank data is based on World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files. License : CC BY-4.0.
https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.CD?end=2017&locations=BD&start=1973&view=chart

agricultural productivity, female labour force participation, and remittance transfers (World Bank, 2016, p.i).

Bangladesh 'is on the middle-income highway' however, it faces significant challenges to eliminating poverty and to climb further to be an UMIC (World Bank, 2018, p.18; World Bank, 2016). Section 4 explores the main challenges to economic stability and development.

4. Conflict and (in)stability – causes and actors

Social cleavages and challenges

Bangladesh has a fairly homogenous population – being majority Bengali; and a majority being Muslim (90 percent of the population), with a minority of Hindus (around 9 percent), and a small number of Christians and other religions and ethnic minorities (World Bank, 2016, p.1). Thus, ethnic conflict has not been a feature, instead the norm has been harmonious social relations with strong cultural bonds and national identity.

The most important schism is on the issue of the role of religion in politics and national identity (the "foundation myth of the nation") – with one side seeing national identity tightly related to religion (Islam), and the other side seeing national identity as tied to ethnicity and use of the Bengali language (Rahman, 2019, p.173; BTI, 2018). This division has been contended since independence, and has become more polarised, particularly since 2010 and 2013 (Rahman, 2019; BTI, 2018). See below for more on this. More generally, Bangladesh has become a much more religious society and Bangladeshis have become more confident and comfortable expressing their Islamic identity (manifested in their dress and forms of speaking) (Idris, 2017a).

Civil society

Bangladesh has a tradition of a vocal and active civil society, however civil society space is closing (BTI, 2018). In terms of the CSO landscape, BTI (2018) explains that:

- Several 'self-help' groups are active on governance, culture and gender issues.
- Many large development NGOs participate in generating awareness about government policies, likely impacts, and mobilising public opinion against discriminatory laws
- In the recent past, civil society groups rallied public opinion against terrorism, religious fundamentalism and against attacks on minorities.
- Civil society activism helps in educating and mobilising public opinion in an organised way

There appears to be around 250,000 civil society organizations,[4] however, only 50,000 are thought active (BTI, 2018).

The government is increasing its scrutiny and control over CSOs and the media through laws and other measures (e.g. the new Digital Security Act) (Civicus, 2018). The conditions for

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[4] For a list of local organisations working on conflict and peacebuilding in Bangladesh, see - https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/bangladesh/

human rights defenders and journalists are very bad, and appear to be worsening. Civicus (2018) describes the government as launching a 'systemic assault on civic freedoms'.

Environmental challenges

Bangladesh is one of the world's most disaster prone countries (World Bank, 2018b). It is located along the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta, and with a population of 160 million, it is the world's most densely populated delta (ibid). 'More than 80 percent of the population is potentially exposed to floods, earthquakes and droughts, and more than 70 percent to cyclones. On average, the country experiences severe tropical cyclone every three years, and about 25 percent of the land mass is inundated with flood waters every year. Severe flooding occurs every 4-5 years and covers 60 percent of the land mass' (ibid). The Rohingya refugee camps face particularly acute risks of monsoon floods and landslides (World Bank, 2018, p.25). Notably, the economy showed resilience to repeated flooding in 2017 (ibid). However, unfavourable weather conditions could slow poverty reduction further among agricultural households (ibid). This is significant as 'agriculture provides nearly half of all employment and supports over 70% of the population' (ADB, 2016, p.9).

It is also one of the countries most at risk from climate change due to its location in a river delta with low-lying floodplains, as identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (ADB, 2016, p.4). Projected 'changing rainfall and water flow patterns—coupled with prevailing poverty, high population density, and reliance on livelihoods that are weather sensitive—can affect food security, rural livelihoods, public health, and access to infrastructure and social services' (ADB, 2016, p.4). ADB (2016) identify reducing vulnerabilities to environmental degradation and climate change as one of five key challenges for Bangladesh.

Economic challenges

To move closer to UMIC status, Bangladesh needs to accelerate growth to seven percent GDP and above (ADB, 2016). Economic diversification, moving labour to more productive sectors, creating new sources of growth, and general productivity gains are key areas for improvement (ADB, 2016). However, this is also an area where Bangladesh has made less progress (Moazzem & Arno in Bhattacharya, 2018). E.g. the agricultural sector is the biggest employer (44 percent in 2015), but a relatively lower contributor to GDP (making up 16 percent of GDP), and from 1995-6 to 2015 the share of employment decreased only by 7 percent (ibid). Conversely, the average level of growth in the share of labour in the industrial sector was only 0.4 percent a year (increasing by 7 percent from 1995-6 to 2015) (ibid).

Making growth more inclusive and reducing poverty by creating jobs and supporting rural development are key challenges (ADB, 2016). While GDP and GNI have improved, and there has been a general decline in inequality, inequality in rural areas has remained more or less unchanged between 2000 and 2010 (World Bank, 2016, p.i). As 70 percent of the population live in rural areas, this is significant (ibid). Even if its economy continued to grow as rapidly as it has since 2000, the poverty rate would only fall to 15-20 percent by 2030, still short of the goal of eliminating extreme poverty by 2030 (ibid).

The main risk to economic stability is widely identified as Bangladesh's poor institutional and governance landscape (e.g. World Bank, 2018, p.18-22). While the main risk related to conflict is the social and economic risks of the Rohingya refugee crisis, especially if it continues and becomes a protracted crisis, finds the World Bank (2018, p.25).

Governance

Bangladesh has had a paradoxically successful economy, despite having some of the worst governance and anti-corruption scores in the world (the so called 'Bangladesh paradox') (Khan, 2017, p.3; Bhattacharya, 2018). Economic factors that have contributed to this include: the growth of the labour-intensive garments and textiles sector, growth of remittances, stable growth in agriculture, and Official Development Assistance (ODA) inflows (Khan, 2017, p.3). Underpinning this was the development of 'competitive clientelism' in the 1990s, where rent-sharing occurred across political divides (Hassan & Raihan, 2017, p.97). The largely ordered deals (rather than disordered), provided investors with certainty that the deals would be delivered, thus creating a stable environment for investment (ibid, p.28). However, the cost was high levels of corruption (Khan, 2017, p.3).

'This pattern of growth is unlikely to continue without limit as rapid productivity growth has to be achieved and political stability has also been challenged by the re-emergence of single party rule after the controversial 2014 elections. The current governance arrangements are inadequate for meeting these challenges', finds Khan (2017, p.3). The ADB (2016) identify increasing transparency and accountability by addressing institutional and policy weaknesses as one of five key economic challenges (ADB, 2016). The World Bank (2018) highlights that the focus on elections weakened the chances of domestic governance reforms

Political challenges

Elections, political violence, and party politics

Two political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have dominated Bangladeshi politics since the 1991 return to electoral democracy (World Bank, 2016, p.1). Rivalry between the two leaders - the current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and opposition leader Khaleda Zia - is often at the root of its dysfunctional democracy (BTI, 2018). Power alternated between the two parties in the 1990s and 2000s, and since 2009, the Awami League has held power, winning a third term in the contested December 2018 election. Despite its challenges – coups, periods of military control, and election irregularities - it is one of the 'most stable democracies in South Asia', according to Rachman (2019, p.174).

Election-related unrest has led to deadly political violence - with spikes in riots, long periods of general strikes (hartals) and transport blockades around elections, as Figure 1 above shows (World Bank, 2016, p.1). E.g., more than 500 people died around the 2014 elections, and 100 died following the 2015 anniversary of the 2014 elections (World Bank, 2016, p.1). At least 17 people died over the 2018 election period.[5] Related human rights abuses allegedly carried out by the authorities include: extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, beating and harassment of opposition groups. These have become more frequent as tensions with the BNP have escalated; opposition leaders and activists constitute a significant proportion of the victims of such abuses (ICG, 2016, p.10-11). ICG (2016) notes that the government appears bent on using law enforcement machinery to silence legitimate dissent and criticism.

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[5] See - https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-politics/bangladesh-opposition-boycotts-oath-calls-for-new-election-idUSKCN1OX0D7

Election violence has resulted in an 'ever-deepening sense of disillusionment with state structures and institutions that fail to prevent these disturbances' (Midgley, 2018)

It has also 'often paralyzed civil and economic activities' – e.g. the 2015 wave of political violence caused heavy economic loses – this includes the election related violence, and also violence committed by the Islamists (BTI, 2018). Overall, it is estimated to have cost Bangladesh US$ 2.2 billion (or about one percent of GDP) (World Bank, 2016, p.1). Daily economic losses to industrial sectors were estimated at: Bangladeshi taka (BDT)[6] 8.4 billion (for the garment industry); BDT 3 billion (transport); BDT 1 billion (manufacturing sector); BDT 2.9 billion (agriculture); BDT 2.5 billion (real estate); and BDT 2.1 billion (tourism) (BTI, 2018, p.3).

Parliamentary elections in December 2018 were marred by widespread allegations of election irregularities and political violence – including stuffed ballot boxes, casting fake votes, voters being forced to vote for the ruling party candidates, 'capturing' polling centres, arrests, forcibly ousting of polling agents and voter intimidation (Odhikar, 2019). 'International election monitors were not issued accreditation and visas within the timeframe necessary to conduct a credible international monitoring mission' (US Department of State, 2018). There was a rapid escalation of political violence in December 2018 as the election campaign intensified, including: arrests, widespread surveillance, and a crackdown on free speech (HRW, 2018). Thousands of people were arrested for making critical comments of the government and for other allegedly spurious reasons, including senior members of main opposition parties, and opposition activists. E.g., BNP leader Khaleda Zia, was convicted and jailed in February 2018 on corruption charges (HRW, 2019). The BNP has boycotted elections in 2014 and 2019 due to what it identifies as systematic election fraud.

There are strong links between political affiliation and economic benefits through patronage, and violence is used to control resources (BTI, 2018). The competition within the Awami League has also escalated, e.g. with violence used at the local level to gain roles in the party. Meanwhile, in some places, religious cleavages are exploited to perpetuate influence, and planned attacks by groups with connections to the government are conducted to make political points or grab properties' (BTI, 2018, p.27).

Complex gendered violence also occurs around election and democratic processes - including psychological, economic, sexual and physical violence, finds a study based on focus groups (Paasilinna, et al, 2017). Women's political participation is limited by the fear of political attacks, prompting some families to limit their participation. Women candidates, political activists and voters have faced harassment, assault and intimidation. And some women are perpetrators of electoral violence through carrying out intimidation within the home, and slandering candidates in the public sphere. The focus group participants identified systemic sources of electoral violence as: (1) patriarchal cultural norms and interpretation of religion; (2) Bangladesh's violent political culture; and (3) weak implementation of laws (ibid).

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[6] To put this into context, in January 2015 the BDT to USD conversion rate was 78.21 (data extracted via https://freecurrencyrates.com/en/exchange-rate-history/USD-BDT/2015/cbm on 13 May 2019).

Political settlement

Bangladeshi politics has undergone a significant transformation since its 1971 independence, including periods of prolonged military rule (BTI, 2018). Its political settlement has evolved in four phases, explains Khan (2017, p.22-23):
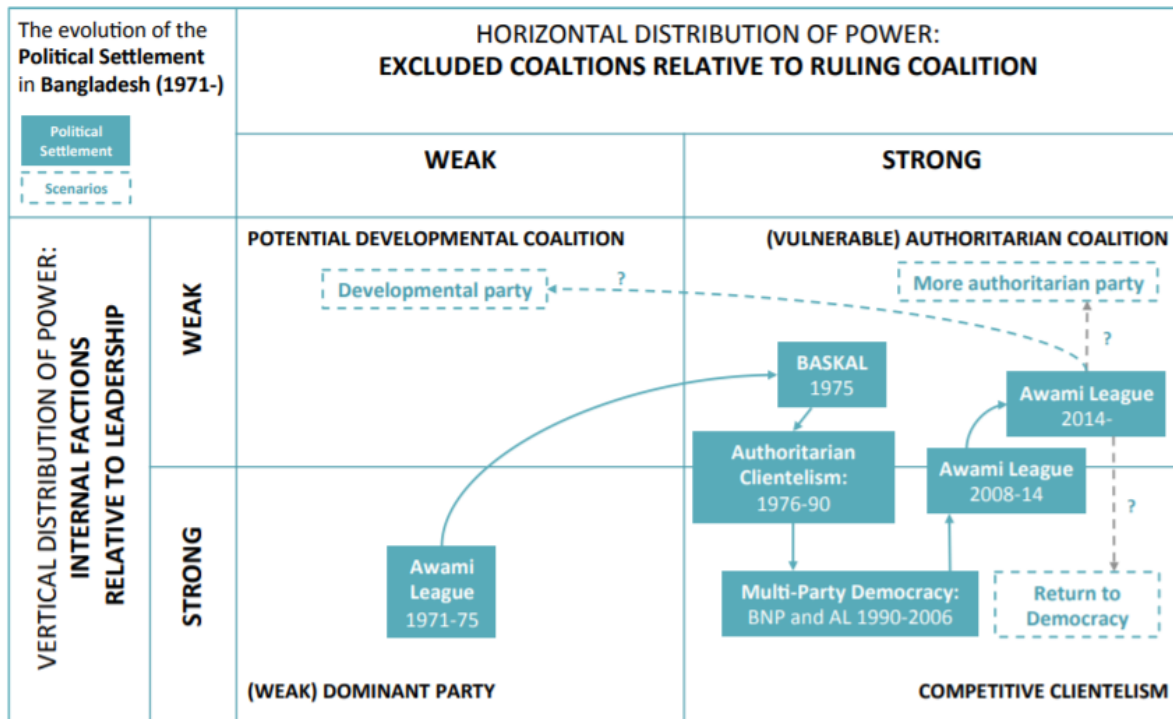
(1) 1971-1975 – over this period the Awami League moved from being a dominant party (initially inclusive of almost all major political forces in the country) to a vulnerable authoritarian party (where it failed to manage internal political competition and attempted to create a one-party state). This ended with the then President's assassination by disgruntled army officers.

(2) 1975-1990 – this period 'saw a managed return to multi-party politics under parties led by ex-military rulers. This was a hybrid period, with characteristics of both vulnerable authoritarianism and competitive clientelism'.

(3) 1990-2006 – this period of 'competitive clientelism' saw all-powerful political factions have a reasonable chance of getting to power and accessing political rents. Political predictability led to improvements in private investment. 'High levels of corruption and apparently weak governance coexisted with high levels of private investment, export growth and accelerating growth rates'

(4) 2008-2017 – with the election of the Awami League government, there has been an 'evolution of the political settlement away from competitive clientelism towards an effective one-party system'. This is a system between competitive clientelism and vulnerable authoritarianism, 'where a ruling coalition stays in power by enforcing electoral rules of its own choice and restricting the organisational freedoms of the opposition'.

The move to a dominant party system has further intensified since the December 2018 election. A dominant party system is one that has successively secured election victories and whose defeat is unlikely for the foreseeable future (Hassan, 2019). Hassan (2019) identifies five broader features of the state and politics in Bangladesh:

- Partyarchy – the political parties de facto monopolise political process, state institutions, civil society)

- The major parties are catchall – as they represents all classes and social groups

- There is a de facto party-state as: the lines between the state and the party are blurred; and as the ruling party's de facto partyarchal has a monopoly over state agencies, constitutional bodies and vast sections of the of the civil society associations. And de facto power is concentrated in one supreme leader

- There is a high degree of personalism pervading state, politics, private sector and civil society

- A recent consolidation of dominant party system

Figure 4 depicts these four phases according to political settlements theory – the dotted lines indicate possible scenarios from 2017 (Khan, 2017).

Figure 4: The evolution of the political settlement in Bangladesh 1971–2017

The evolution of the **Political Settlement** in **Bangladesh (1971-)**		HORIZONTAL DISTRIBUTION OF POWER: EXCLUDED COALTIONS RELATIVE TO RULING COALITION	
Political Settlement / Scenarios		**WEAK**	**STRONG**
VERTICAL DISTRIBUTION OF POWER: INTERNAL FACTIONS RELATIVE TO LEADERSHIP	**WEAK**	POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENTAL COALITION — Developmental party	(VULNERABLE) AUTHORITARIAN COALITION — More authoritarian party — BASKAL 1975 — Awami League 2014-
	STRONG	Awami League 1971-75 — (WEAK) DOMINANT PARTY	Authoritarian Clientelism: 1976-90 — Awami League 2008-14 — Multi-Party Democracy: BNP and AL 1990-2006 — Return to Democracy — COMPETITIVE CLIENTELISM

Source: Khan (2017, p.22).

Since the flawed 2014 election, the Awami League – and specifically the Office of the Prime Minister - has essentially controlled parliament, leading to further centralisation, partisan tendencies, and authoritarianism (BTI, 2018; US Department of State, 2018). This control continues through to the bureaucracy (which is highly politicised), and local governance institutions (especially following the introduction of political parties in the chairman election (BTI, 2018, p.12).

Bangladesh is now exhibiting "partyarchy" and dynastic rule, which stymie regime succession and democratic consolidation, and fosters political instability (Hassan & Nazneen, 2017). "Partyarchy" is a political institutional form, whereby 'political parties monopolise the formal political process and politicise society along party lines' (Coppedge cited in Hassan & Nazneen, 2017, p.206). Hassan and Nazneen (2017) argue that:

> 'alternating partyarchal domination between the two major parties allows the ruling elites to instrumentally use the state agencies to suppress political opposition and extend their tenure in power. It also leaves little space for the opposition to use any alternative means but violence to contest the terms of the elite settlement around regime succession…[therefore] the use of violence becomes a constitutive feature of the political settlement around regime succession'.

The key schism in Bangladeshi politics is the divide between those that see national identity as tightly related to religion (Islam), and the other side that see national identity as tied to ethnicity and use of the Bengali language (Rahman, 2019, p.173; BTI, 2018). The polarisation of this divide is 'elite-driven, hinging mostly on competing views of the foundation myth of the nation', not on ethnic or socioeconomic divisions (Rahman, 2019, p.173). It has evolved from being an ideological divide, to also encompassing political and societal polarisation

(ibid). Rathman (2019) finds one of the drivers of this polarisation in Bangladesh's underdeveloped party system.

This schism is reflected in Bangladesh's constitutional history (BTI, 2018, p.6). In the 1972 constitution, Bangladesh was declared a secular country based on Bengali nationalist identity. After the 1977 coup, a constitution amendment changed this to Bangladeshi nationalism with an emphasis on Islamic identity. In 1988, Islam was declared a state religion, excluding more than 12% of Hindu minorities from the concept of nation-state; and the 2011 constitutional amendment restored the secular constitution, but kept Islam as the state religion (ibid). Militant Islamists continue to question the basis of the nation-state and its identity (ibid).

Yet despite Bangladesh's divided and contentious party politics, both parties have exhibited strong commitment to a long-term development agenda, with significant economic and development outcomes, relative to the region (World Bank, 2016, 2018)**.** Successive governments have maintained 'macroeconomic stability, and made efforts to liberalise trade, reform the financial sector and limit interference in business' (World Bank, 2016, p.1).

Public and civil society support for democratic governance is also strong and they vote in large numbers (BTI, 2018; World Bank, 2018; Rachman, 2019). However, it appears that elites, despite their pro-democratic rhetoric, appear to have 'a rather instrumental understanding of democratic procedures and do not accept core democratic principles' (BTI, 2018, p.12).

Justice and corruption

The realities and perceptions of injustice in the criminal justice system, and human rights violations, are fuelling distrust in the police and judicial system (BTI, 2018). This includes the lack of implementation of laws, impunity of law enforcement agencies and corruption (ICG, 2016, Odhikar, 2019). E.g., nearly half of the women and children became victims of harassment in the police station at the time of filing rape cases (Odhikar, 2019, p.34). As a result, ordinary citizens resort to the tendency of taking the law into their own hands, e.g. public lynching has increased (ibid). Injustices in the criminal justice system are also creating grievances and thus opportunities for extremist groups (ICG, 2016, p. i-ii). E.g., 'Politicising the police and using elite forces, particularly the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), to silence political dissent, are laying the seeds of future violence' (ICG, 2016).

Law and order problems in Bangladesh are compounded by corruption. Khan (2017) warns that far-right populists and violent extremists are making inroads amidst growing public concern over corruption and political kleptocracy. The situation in Bangladesh has improved from the period 2001-2005 when it was ranked the most corrupt country in the world, but corruption remains a big problem (USAID, 2012, p.5). 'Average Bangladeshis resent how bureaucrats and government officials swindle the state and how a culture of impunity disallows citizens from seeking redress to legitimate grievances' (ibid). This resentment can be another driver of extremism (Idris, 2017a).

The line between organised crime and politics can be thin, as is demonstrated by the ruling political party and police taking direct control over the activities of urban gangsters (e.g. extortion, controlling illegal businesses and mediating access to services) (Jackman, 2018).

The Rohingya crisis

There are an estimated 3.5 million Rohingya worldwide, they are an ethnic Muslim minority practicing a Sufi form of Sunni Islam. Pre-August 2017, an estimated one million Rohingya resided in Rakhine State in Myanmar.[7] Myanmar's discriminatory and violent practices towards the Rohingya date back to the 1970s and have led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands – mostly to Bangladesh, and also to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.[8]

Bangladesh now hosts nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees, following the August 2017 wave of violence and genocide against them in Myanmar, and from previous waves of displacement from the 1990s onwards. An estimated 300,000 Rohingya refugees were in Bangladesh in 2013, this decreased to 210,000 in 2017, prior to the recent wave; and 700,000 have arrived since August 2017 (World Bank, 2018. p.25). The deportation of Rohingya people from India between December 2018 and 16 January 2019 saw an estimated 1,300 Rohingya refugees arrive in Bangladesh (Odhikar, 2019). The refugees are concentrated in two Upazilas of Cox's Bazar District: Ukhia and Teknaf.

The refugees live in hastily built and severely overcrowded camps, and humanitarian and Bangladesh government aid agencies are severely strained (HRW, 2019). Some of the biggest challenges to human development and security in the camps are: healthcare gaps; overcrowding; unmet needs and restrictions on women and girls; gaps and restrictions around education; rising tensions with host communities; funding gaps; high pressure on the environment and services; and camp vulnerability to floods and monsoons (Loy, 2019; World Bank, 2018).

Healthcare gaps have emerged as medical care needs have shifted from emergency care for bullet and knife wounds, mass vaccinations and clean water to longer-term needs (Loy, 2019). Major gaps in service include: treatment for chronic diseases; care for sexual violence survivors; mental health and psychiatric services; treatment for non-communicable diseases, as well as malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV; women and girls' health needs are "critically underserved" in the camps; and health facilities are unevenly distributed with some more distant settlements going without (ibid).

Education gaps include more than half a million Rohingya children and young adults that have not had formal education since August 2017. The Bangladesh government has restricted formal education to limit the Rohingya's integration, hoping they will return to Myanmar. Education is limited to informal classrooms for primary school only run by NGOs and community groups, and these groups have been slow to finalise the curriculum. Criticisms have been levelled at the quality of the education, the lack of long-term planning, and lack of coordinated advocacy to get the government to change its rules (Loy, 2019).

Extreme overcrowding particularly affects health, vulnerability to environmental shocks and women and girls. An extreme lack of space in the camps (less than 10 square metres per person in some areas) heightens health risks from poor hygiene and sanitation, and means there's not enough room for classrooms, storm shelters or comprehensive evacuation plans for the upcoming cyclone and monsoon season (Loy, 2019). Women and girls' protection needs are 'critically underserved' in the camps (ibid). And the lack of space particularly affects them as they

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[7] See - https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis
[8] See - https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis

are pressured to stay in their homes, which are just very small plastic shelters (ibid). 'International organizations alleged some Bangladeshi border guard, military, and police officials were involved in facilitating the trafficking of Rohingya women and children, ranging from "looking the other way" for bribes allowing traffickers to access Rohingya in the camps to direct involvement' (US Depaertment of State, 2018, p.24).

The environment is under pressure - especially fragile forest and land resources - and the camps face significant risks from floods and landslides during the monsoon season. This highlights the urgent need to upgrade infrastructure (World Bank, 2018. p.25).

Bangladeshis are broadly supportive of the government's decision to allow Rohingya refugees into the country (Felix-Joehnk, 2017). Massive demonstrations in support of the Rohingyas have been held in several cities in Bangladesh (Lintner, 2017). Grassroots campaigns have sprung up across the country to collect donations for the refugees: 'there is great sympathy for the Rohingya's tales of persecution and abuse in largely Buddhist Myanmar' (Alam, 2017).

However, the 1 million refugee population has already put an immense strain on the half a million Bangladeshis who live in the Cox's Bazar District; and rising tensions with host communities have seen the initial support and welcome dwindle, suggest aid groups, the government and a survey (Loy, 2019). Some locals have seen their incomes fall, and prices rise, as they compete for increasingly scarce resources and services (Malley, 2018). The refugees' presence could play into communal conflict or aggravate political divisions, especially around elections (Malley, 2018). A funding gap has meant that social cohesion interventions have been limited (Loy, 2019).

While the Bangladeshi macro-economy has shown resilience to ongoing accommodation of the refugees, without resolution, the situation threatens to deepen as a protracted and multi-dimensional crisis (World Bank, 2018. p.25). Cox's Bazaar is a traditional tourism destination within Bangladesh, but the refugee influx will negatively impact tourism revenue to the area (Cookson, 2017b). Economic losses due to the refugee crisis will be countered to some extent by the influx of foreign aid workers (Idris, 2017b). Ongoing refugee needs could undermine Bangladesh's fiscal balance, as 'the impact on the national budget and national external and domestic debt is significant' (ibid). Humanitarian needs still outpace funding, and donor fatigue could increase pressure on the budget (ibid). Criticisms of the humanitarian effort include: a focus on short-term goals, without planning for a future when funding wanes; that local NGOs and aid workers have been left out of planning; and that international aid groups have not built skills in the local organisations (Loy, 2019).

The Bangladeshi government has kept its borders open, and provided humanitarian aid with generous support from humanitarian agencies; however, its stance is that the Rohingya must return to Myanmar (World Bank, 2018. p.25). This has meant it has limited initiatives that might integrate the Rohingya (such as education), it has obstructed the construction of more substantial infrastructure, and it has not developed policies for the medium- or long-term (ibid; Malley, 2018). The Bangladesh government tried (but failed) to negotiate the refugees return to Myanmar, causing friction between Bangladesh and Myanmar. It almost forcibly returned some refugees to Myanmar, but stopped 'almost certainly in response to international pressure' (Malley, 2018), and as the Rohingya refused to go (Loy, 2019). One plan was to relocate 100,000 refugees to an island in the Bay of Bengal called Bhasan Char – however this island faces worse risks of floods and tidal surges (particularly in monsoon and cyclone seasons), and refugees would face even more limited livelihood opportunities and

freedom of movement there (HRW, 2019). Rakhine State is not safe for return (Loy, 2019), and given the uncertainties around repatriation, 'the crisis impact on host communities and the rest of the country could intensify' (World Bank, 2018, p.25).

The Rohingya crisis 'could upset the very precarious balance between secularism and religion in Bangladeshi politics' (Felix-Joehnk, 2017). Hefazat-e-Islam has its headquarters in Chittagong, in the area of Bangladesh adjacent to Rakhine in Myanmar, from where the Rohingya have fled. The movement has called for the liberation of Rakhine, and has threatened to wage 'jihad' on Myanmar 'if the army and its associates do not stop torturing the Rohingya Muslims' (Felix-Joehnk, 2017). Felix-Joehnk (2017) argues that the Rohingya crisis is giving Hefazat-e-Islam a greater role in Bangladeshi national politics, and putting liberalism under threat. However, there is little evidence that Islamist political parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami are benefiting from the crisis.

Extremism

A contemporary phase of violent extremism in Bangladesh occurred from 2013-2017, and saw the brutal murders of a number of secular bloggers, liberal academics and LGBT activists. The targets have widened to include religious/other minorities - including Shias and Hindus – and the attacks have become more sophisticated. Bangladesh also experienced a period of extremist violence from 1999-2005, which was curbed by a government crackdown on Islamist groups (Idris, 2017a). However, both of these phases are somewhat exceptional, with Bangladesh more historically being a tolerant, plural, and syncretic society (Macdonald, 2016; BTI, 2018).

These attacks, and the more widespread threats against religious minorities and secular actors, can be seen as a trend towards the 'Islamization of public life' in Bangladesh (BTI, 2018, p.7). Macdonald (2016) warns it is becoming a 'breeding ground for violent extremism'.

The groups responsible for current extremism include: Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen (JMB), Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), affiliates of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and Islamic State (ISIS) (see Box 1 for more details) (Idris, 2017a). Organisations involved in spreading extremist Islamist ideology include Hefazat-e-Islam coalition (a loose Islamist platform, composed of Islamist organisations, based at 25,000 madrasshas) and Jamaat-e-Islami (ibid; Nazneed, 2018). JMB, the ABT and the AQIS, want to enforce their vision of an Islamic state, to stage an Islamic revolution and capture state power (BTI, 2018, p.31). They reject democracy seeing it as a Western imposition – 'co-opting them is not a possibility' (BTI, 2018, p.31).

Hefazat-e-Islam have called for limits to women's mobility, women's interactions in the public sphere, and the control of women's dress and economic participation (Nazneed, 2018, p.195). Nazneed (2018, p.196) explains how the coalition uses binary framings of women's agency and identity (e.g. 'religious/moral/good/traditional/authentic' versus 'secular/immoral/bad/modern/Western) to influence women's rights and the interpretation of the relationship between Islam and women's empowerment in Bangladesh.

> **Box 1: The main groups involved in extremism in Bangladesh**
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> - Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen (JMB) – formed in 1998 and banned in 2005, the group seeks to establish a Bangladeshi state governed by Islamic law. JMB is affiliated to ISIS, and has strong ties to the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) political party.
> - Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) – formed in 2007, ABT was banned in 2015. It has claimed responsibility for at least seven murders of liberal writers including Ahmed Rajib Haider. ABT reportedly has a hit list of 84 'atheist' bloggers, of whom nine have so far been killed (ICG, 2016, p.7). Though affiliated to AQIS, it spreads both pro-ISIS and pro-al-Qaeda material.
> - ISIS – formally announced its presence in Bangladesh in November 2015 but is believed to have been trying to recruit Bangladeshis since 2014. Despite evidence of ISIS activity in the country, the government has repeatedly denied it has a formal presence, preferring to blame local groups for attacks such as that on Holey Bakery in 2016.
> - Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) – founded in September 2014, AQIS seeks to wage jihad in order to establish governance by Islamic law (CEP, 2016, p.4). Bangladesh is one of a number of South Asian countries[9] it operates in; its Bangladeshi branch is known as Ansar al Islam. The latter has claimed responsibility for the murders of several secular activists, and was banned by the government in 2017.
>
> Source: Idris, 2017a

The literature clearly identifies political drivers of this violence as: long-standing rivalry between the Awami League and the BNP, and the former's determination since winning the 2009 elections to repress all political opposition, as creating the space for extremist groups to flourish. Specifically, the Awami League's targeting of BNP ally Jamaat-e-Islami has generated a violent backlash from Islamist groups (Fazli, 2016a; Idris, 2017a). 'The role of Islam in Bangladeshi politics is highly contested and presents a focal point of past and current violence' (Macdonald, 2016).

Additional drivers include: the authorities' repression, human rights violations, and heavy-handed responses to dissent (extrajudicial killings, illegal detention, torture, etc.), this includes actions by the specially set up force - Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) (an anti-crime and anti-terrorism unit in the Bangladesh Police) (ICG, 2016). The shrinking democratic and civic space to express this anger has prompted people to turn to extremism (Idris, 2017a). Civil society actors, that could counter extremist ideology, like media and human rights groups, are also being silenced by a government intolerant of any criticism (ibid). Long-standing problems of weak governance and corruption are also drivers as 'radicalization and institutional dysfunction are closely connected' as the 'increasingly authoritarian secular state provides radical Islamists a compelling grievance around which to recruit and mobilize' (Macdonald, 2016).

The government has inadequately responded to the murders of the secular bloggers and activists, by: a) failing to provide protection when many reported facing death threats; b) a failing

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[9] Others are thought to be Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Burma and Kashmir (CEP, 2016: 4).

to condemn the murders; c) tending to blame the victims; and d) failing to capture or prosecute those responsible for the murders. These contribute to violent extremists believing they can act with impunity. The Awami League's 'obsession' with crushing the BNP has led it to blame extremist violence on the BNP and Jamaat, undermining efforts to find the violent extremist groups actually responsible. It has also been reluctant to acknowledge the presence of AQIS and ISIS in Bangladesh.

Domestic drivers are most significant for driving extremism, however, there are some international drivers – e.g. the presence of transnational terrorist groups such as ISIS and AQIS (Idris, 2017a). Middle East funding of madrassas and extremist groups, and the return of Bangladeshi workers from the Gulf who have adopted Salafist ideas there, do foster extremism, but such factors are less important than domestic drivers (Idris, 2017a). The perception and reality of Muslims being oppressed in other countries is also a driver of radical Islamist sentiments – e.g. in Myanmar and Palestine (Macdonald, 2016; IPAC, 2017). Links between Bangladeshi and Southeast Asian extremists 'appear to be growing', due to ISIS and large and increasing population movements across the region. E.g., for trade, study, the Tabligh-i-Jamaat missionary movement, the annual tablighi meeting "Biswa Ijtema" that occurs outside Dhaka, Rohingya refugees, human trafficking, and small movement of people through Hizb ut-Tahrir (despite it being banned in Bangladesh since 2009) (IPAC, 2017, p.2).

The new armed Rohingya insurgency on the Bangladeshi-Myanmar border could become important (IPAC, 2017, p.2). The group was first called Harekat al-Yakin (Faith Movement) and later Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). It could attract funding from Indonesian and Malaysian mujahidin who 'have long been interested in helping their persecuted brethren in Myanmar but have had no good channel for doing so' (ibid). Historic links between Southeast Asian and Bangladesh-based extremists are almost all Rohingya-related, and in the 1980s and 1990s were run through the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) (IPAC, 2017, p.4).

Chittagong Hill Tracts conflict

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) indigenous community continue to experience widespread discrimination, and violence and abuse (US Department of State, 2018; BTI, 2018). 'The ethnic Chakmas are fighting for their land rights which is often encroached upon by Muslim land grabbers in collusion with the administration. Police colluded with the locals on attacks on the ethnic group the Santhals in November 2016 in an eviction drive. Religious and ethnic cleavages are exploited to deny a group's access to state resources and very often to establish hegemony', reports BTI (2018). This is despite the peace agreement signed 20 years ago, which has not been fully implemented, and which has provisions for local governance and nationwide government quotas, e.g. for participation of indigenous CHT residents in the civil service and higher education (US Department of State, 2018; BTI, 2018).

'The government portrays [the violence] as a law and order problem rather than a political problem. The polarization resulting from the killing of bloggers and secular activists remained unaddressed as the government tried to appease the Islamists in the name of protecting religious sentiment of the people' (BTI, 2018, p.31). Bangladesh lacks institutional mechanism to address the conflict, and its 'weak judicial structure and corrupt police do not encourage public faith in the justice system' (ibid).

Bangladesh-India border

Bangladesh and India have experienced border disputes in recent decades, with some cross-border skirmishes and killings between or by the border security agencies (Bhardwaj, 2016). The roots of this are in the 1947 partition of British India, where India and erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), were divided creating a porous land border of 4000 km (ibid). While the border was very porous to begin with, movement became more restricted over time, particularly post-9/11 as the threat and concerns around non-state actor violence escalated (ibid). Border policing became violent and restrictive, especially by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) (ibid). At the same time, movement of people over the border increased, and the population density along the border increased (particularly Bangladeshis living on the Indian side) (ibid).

Despite a 2015 agreement between the Bangladeshi and Indian governments, the BSF are accused of continuing to violate the human rights of people living and travelling along the border. Odhikar (2019), a Bangladesh-based human rights organisation, reports that various types of human rights violations, including killing and torturing of Bangladeshi citizens by the BSF, occurred in the first three months of 2019, and that BSF entered into Bangladesh territory and attacked Bangladeshi citizens there. However, this violence is not reported in other annual human rights reports (e.g. by the US Department of State (2018) or BTI (2018)). The 2015 agreement saw the transfer of 162 enclaves of land between the countries, according to the location of the land.[10] The official calculation is that this directly affected over 53,000 people.[11]

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