



EARLY WARNING COUNTRY REPORT NOVEMBER 2017

BREAKING CYCLES OF DISTRUST

PREVENTING MASS ATROCITIES IN BANGLADESH

UNITED STATES
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SIMON-SKJODT CENTER
FOR THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE



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Executive Summary

This report explores scenarios over the next 12–18 months in which Bangladesh could plausibly experience large-scale, systematic attacks on civilian populations. The authors selected Bangladesh for this study because it has consistently ranked in the top 10 percent of countries in the world on the Early Warning Project’s global statistical risk assessment for state-led mass killing; yet, there has been relatively little apparent policy attention to these risks. Staff of the Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide interviewed a wide variety of stakeholders in Bangladesh and elsewhere to identify potential mass atrocity scenarios and the underlying risks and mitigating factors.

The risk of mass violence in Bangladesh is rooted in the competition between Bangladesh’s two main political parties and is likely to be particularly acute in the lead-up to and aftermath of the general election scheduled for late 2018. Contested or unclear electoral results present the greatest risk of mass killing. If there is disagreement regarding the election results, allegations of fraud or rigging, or a situation where neither the Awami League (AL) nor the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) receives the required number of seats to form a government, the deeply polarized political environment has created incentives for each major party to react violently. Supporters of the competing party are likely to be the main targets in any mass atrocity scenario; religious minorities face distinct but related risks as well.

Our research indicates that the following factors are contributing to the risk of mass atrocities in Bangladesh:

- Previous episodes of mass killing in Bangladesh, namely those committed during its 1971 war for independence from Pakistan, have scarred the country. There have been no effective accountability mechanisms for a prolonged period since independence.
- Escalating competition between the two major parties in Bangladesh—the AL, currently in power, and the BNP, the main opposition party—has grown to the point where cooperation is virtually unthinkable.
- Increased authoritarianism and attacks on civil society have diminished constraints on the ruling party and damaged what could be a source of resiliency against mass violence, together raising the risk that a political crisis would lead to an extremely harsh, violent response.
- There have been acts of politically motivated violence around past elections by the opposition in Bangladesh, but the particularly high stakes of the upcoming election may translate into an elevated risk of mass killing.
- Members of security forces have been implicated in extrajudicial killings and other grave crimes. Long-standing impunity, with some exceptions, for those crimes may encourage security units to act violently in the future.
- Local patronage systems have created a symbiotic relationship between politicians and criminal actors, in which economic motivations may encourage acts of violence.

There are several factors that may mitigate the risk of mass atrocities within Bangladesh, including its positive economic growth, public rejections of violence, recent attempts to reverse impunity, and international collaboration with local peacebuilding efforts.

To mitigate risks of mass atrocities, we recommend that the main political parties, with support from the international community, civil society, and business groups, establish a formal dialogue before the next general election, set acceptable election standards, and establish stronger local monitoring systems. We recommend that the Bangladeshi government protect democratic space and promote accountability for human rights violations, and that both major parties refrain from employing violence as a political tactic. The international community should ensure that relevant staff are trained and empowered to address early warning signs of future mass killing in Bangladesh.

BREAKING CYCLES OF DISTRUST: PREVENTING MASS ATROCITIES IN BANGLADESH

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, a 46-year-old country with 160 million people, has achieved significant economic and social development in recent years. One of the fastest growing emerging economies in the world,¹ Bangladesh has been lauded internationally for its progress in poverty reduction² and public health.³ Founded in 1971 as a secular democracy, Bangladesh traditionally has been known to be inclusive and tolerant. However, polarized political parties and authoritarianism have been consistent features in Bangladesh's political landscape since its founding, and political violence, including assassinations and election-related violence, has marked the country's history. As a national election approaches in late 2018, there are signs of increased polarization between the major political parties, authoritarianism, and shrinking space for civil society. In this context, some groups could be motivated to use violence on a massive scale.

As detailed further in this report, depending on the planning for and outcome of the general election scheduled for late 2018, there may be a heightened risk of mass violence emerging from the deeply polarized political dynamics that for so long have gripped the country. An increasingly fractured and restricted civil society appears less capable of counteracting drivers of violence.

Mass killings are rare events. Preventing them requires deep analysis and foresight about plausible mass atrocity scenarios, even if they are unlikely. This report details the plausible scenarios in which mass killings could occur in Bangladesh, particularly in relation to the next general election. This report also analyzes the various factors that exacerbate or mitigate that risk and concludes with recommendations for preventive action.

METHODOLOGY

The Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide launched the Early Warning Project to provide governments, civil societies, development partners, and vulnerable communities with advanced and reliable warning of mass killings wherever they are threatened. The project aims to highlight situations where mass killings are not yet taking place but where early warning signs are visible. The main elements to date have been an annual statistical risk assessment and an opinion pool to aggregate individual assessments of risk. In order to delve deeper into country-specific contexts, the Simon-Skjoldt Center has initiated a series of studies on selected countries facing relatively high risk of mass atrocities.

¹ PwC, *The Long View: How Will the Global Economic Order Change by 2050?*, (London: PwC, 2017), <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/world-2050/assets/pwc-world-in-2050-summary-report-feb-2017.pdf> (noting that Vietnam, India, and Bangladesh could be the three fastest growing economies between 2017 and 2050).

² World Bank, *Bangladesh Development Update* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2016), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/579721475673660627/Bangladesh-development-update-sustained-development-progress>.

³ The UN Development Programme recognized Bangladesh for meeting several Millennium Development Goals relating to public health. *UNDP in Bangladesh*, <http://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/post-2015/millennium-development-goals.html>.

We selected Bangladesh for this study because it has consistently ranked high on the Early Warning Project’s global statistical risk assessment: between 12th and 16th in each of the last three years. The assessment estimates the risk of state-led mass killing, defined as the intentional killing of 1,000 or more noncombatants, targeted as part of a specific group, over a period of one year or less. Most countries consistently ranking higher than Bangladesh—e.g., Sudan, Nigeria, and Afghanistan—are experiencing an ongoing armed conflict and, as a result, receive considerable policy and media attention. Bangladesh’s relative peace and stability make it easy for those within the country and for the international community to overlook the underlying and systemic risks of large-scale violence. Notably, Bangladesh is the highest-ranking country according to the Early Warning Project’s latest statistical risk assessment that is not currently experiencing an armed conflict.

One specific factor that has contributed to Bangladesh’s relatively high assessed risk is the country’s status as a “partial democracy with factionalism.” This type of governance is by far most likely to experience the major political instability that virtually always precedes mass atrocities.⁴ Factionalism, defined as political competition dominated by groups that promote members’ particular agendas to the detriment of common or crosscutting agendas, increases the risk of instability in contexts where there is a relatively high level of competition for leadership positions in government.⁵ As experts in the forecasting of instability have noted, “The combination of a winner-take-all, parochial approach to politics with opportunities to compete for control of central state authority represents a powder keg for political crisis.”⁶ The rivalry between the two major parties in Bangladesh, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), which have each traded time at the country’s helm, exemplifies this description. Other factors that contribute to the country’s relatively high risk include the existence of state-led discrimination, the armed conflicts taking place in multiple countries in the region, and the past episode of mass killing in Bangladesh.

BANGLADESH: KEY FACTS

Located in South Asia between India and Burma with an area of 148,460 square kilometers (roughly the size of Iowa but with 50 times the population). Dhaka, the capital, is home to 15 million people.

Approximately 160 million people live in Bangladesh, making it the 8th most populous and the 12th most densely populated country in the world. Nearly half of the population is under the age of 24.

Bangladesh is one of the most homogenous countries in the region with over 98 percent Bengalis.

Muslims constitute 89.1 percent of the population; Hindus 10 percent; and Christians, Buddhists, and others 0.9 percent. The Hindu population has declined from 13.4 percent of the population in 1974.

Bangladesh has consistently attained at least 5 percent gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate since 2004—it was 6.9 percent in 2016. GDP per capita was \$1,211 in 2016 compared to \$131 in 1971. Bangladesh has transformed from a primarily agrarian economy to the world’s second largest ready-made garments exporter.

⁴ While most scholars recognize a spectrum of regime types, in general terms, other regime types include full autocracies, partial autocracies, or full democracies. Of these various types, partial autocracies and democracies are more susceptible to instability than full autocracies or democracies. See Jack A. Goldstone, et al., “A Global Forecasting Model of Political Instability,” (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association, 2005), 18-19, http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic700749.files/Goldstone_et_al_Global_Model_Forecast_Pol_Inst_Typescript_2005.pdf.

⁵ Ibid., 19-20.

⁶ Ibid., 20.

It is important to highlight that the rarity of mass atrocities indicates that a country like Bangladesh, whose risk is high relative to other countries, is still unlikely to experience an episode of large-scale, systematic violence against civilians in the near term. This report presents plausible “worst-case scenarios” based on analysis of recent trends without presupposing that such atrocities will happen for certain. The intent is to identify extreme situations to stimulate and inform preventive policy measures.

The research team conducted interviews and desk research from July 2016 to March 2017, including several weeks of fieldwork in Bangladesh in October 2016 and January 2017. The findings are based primarily on interviews and discussions with 107 interlocutors from the government, the opposition, civil society, and the diplomatic community in Bangladesh as well as country experts working in government and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) internationally. The researchers sought to interview a wide variety of stakeholders representing a spectrum of political views for a comprehensive understanding of the local context.

The report’s conceptual framework and research questions draw from atrocity prevention frameworks developed by the United States government as well as the United Nations.⁷ While the Early Warning Project’s statistical assessment focuses on risk of mass killing at the 1,000 person per year threshold, this report discusses risks of mass atrocities defined more generally as large-scale, systematic violence against civilian populations.⁸

WARNING SIGNS BEFORE MASS ATROCITIES	
Tension and polarization	Widening gulf between groups either in social life or in conflict; situation is charged with emotion, anxiety, and fear
Apocalyptic public rhetoric	Leaders claim they face a greater danger and in doing so justify violence
Labeling civilian groups as the “enemy”	Descriptions of a particular group as dangerous, homogenous, or worthless
Development/deployment of irregular armed forces	Increased empowerment and arming of irregular armed groups that may be tasked with attacking civilian populations
Stockpiling weapons	Significant accumulation of weapons, especially weapons that could be used against civilian populations
Emergency or discriminatory legislation	Authorities create laws to facilitate or support state led and/or group-targeted violence
Removing moderates from leadership or public service	Those interested in perpetrating or supporting violent acts remove political opposition to such crimes
Impunity for past crimes	Acts of violence that go unpublished indicate a willingness to condone violence against civilians and may give a green light for more violence in the future.

Source: Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, DC: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016), 76.

⁷ US State Department and USAID, *Atrocity Assessment Framework: Supplemental Guidance on State/USAID Conflict Assessment Framework*, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/241399.pdf>; United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, *Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention* (2014).

⁸ See Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention* (Washington, DC: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016), 31.



POTENTIAL DRIVERS OF ATROCITY RISK

The risk of mass violence, rooted in the competition between Bangladesh's two main political parties, is likely to be particularly acute in the lead-up to and the aftermath of the general election scheduled for late 2018. The history of mass atrocities, factionalized political dynamics, past electoral violence, increased authoritarianism, impunity of security forces, patronage systems, and particularly high stakes of the upcoming election—each analyzed further in this report—combine to create scenarios in which multiple actors could have the motive, means, and opportunity to commit mass killings. The following sections describe the underlying political dynamics in Bangladesh and how they inform our interpretation of the risk of future mass killings.

HISTORY OF MASS ATROCITIES

A past episode of mass atrocity in a country is a consistent risk factor for large-scale violence in the future.⁹ Like most

countries at high risk of mass atrocities, Bangladesh has a history marked by episodes of large-scale, systematic attacks on civilians. The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, a violent episode marked by the killing of an estimated one million people, resulted in the Muslim-majority part of Bengal becoming East Pakistan. Political, economic, and cultural domination by West Pakistan over East Pakistan led to a movement for autonomy that culminated in the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. From March to December 1971, as Bangladesh fought for its independence, the Pakistani army and its collaborators committed mass atrocities against civilians in Bangladesh. According to government figures, three million people were killed, but there has been some controversy in recent years regarding this number.¹⁰ Hundreds of thousands of women, many of whom were actively involved in the struggle for Bangladesh's independence, were raped and tortured by the Pakistani army. The minority Hindu population in Bangladesh was particularly targeted during this period of violence.

Some of the perpetrators of those crimes against humanity are members of the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) party and have remained politically active, enjoying impunity until recently. For a prolonged period, there were no effective mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable for the atrocities of 1971, and survivors often lacked the care and restitution necessary to appropriately address such violence.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

¹⁰ There were cases filed against those who claimed that the number killed may be lower. For a description of a personal account of such legal efforts, see David Bergman, "The Politics of Bangladesh's Genocide Debate," *New York Times*, Apr. 5, 2016.

National war crimes trials announced by current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2008 and established in 2010 to address these mass killings have brought some alleged perpetrators to trial. The government claims the trials resulting in executions of several top JI leaders have played an important role in reversing the culture of impunity and establishing rule of law in the country. Critics, including international human rights groups, have expressed concerns about the lack of due process in the proceedings as well as their seemingly politicized nature.¹¹

Narratives surrounding the liberation struggle and the country's history of mass killings of civilians continue to be relevant today, as political leaders from both major political parties—the AL and the BNP—are closely connected to the country's independence. Current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leader of the Awami League, is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the principal leader of Bangladesh's independence struggle and the country's first prime minister. Begum Khaleda Zia, current leader of the BNP and former prime minister, is the widow of Ziaur Rahman, an independence war hero and past president.

While recent years have witnessed the AL and the BNP trading on and off in periods of leadership, there is a growing gulf between the two parties that may make each more desperate to gain or retain national influence.

ZERO-SUM RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO MAIN POLITICAL PARTIES

Despite little difference in policy platforms or governance approaches, Bangladesh's two main parties have become fierce rivals. While recent years have witnessed the AL and the BNP trading on and off in periods of leadership, there is a growing gulf between the two parties that may make each more desperate to gain or retain national influence. The AL consolidated its power after regaining the majority in 2009 and has significantly restricted the political space for the BNP and other potential political opposition groups ever since. Elections in 2014, which were widely decried as unfair and were boycotted by the BNP-led opposition alliance, further cemented the AL's power and reduced the national leadership capability of the opposition. If the BNP boycotts the next election in 2018, the party risks deregistration and the loss of all prospects of regaining political power through the electoral process. The upcoming election is therefore a key flashpoint for the rift between these two major parties.

¹¹ See, e.g., Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: War Crimes Verdict Based on Flawed Trial," Mar. 22, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/22/bangladesh-war-crimes-verdict-based-flawed-trial>.

BANGLADESH: POLITICAL TIMELINE (1947-1990)

ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

1947: The Indian subcontinent was divided at the end of British colonial rule. A Muslim-majority state comprising West Pakistan (current Pakistan) and East Pakistan (former East Bengal and currently Bangladesh) was formed.

1970: Awami League (AL), led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, popularly known as “Bangabandhu,” won an electoral landslide with 167 out of 169 seats in East Pakistan, resulting in a majority of the 313 seats in the National Assembly. West Pakistani military and political leaders denied AL its constitutional right to form the government by refusing a peaceful transfer of power after the election.

1971: Bangladesh was declared an independent nation on March 26, which started a nine-month-long war for independence from Pakistan that concluded on December 16 of the same year. Official figures estimated over three million people were killed and another ten million people forced to take refuge in neighboring India due to repression and atrocities by the Pakistani Army and their local collaborators during this period.

EARLY YEARS

1972: President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the country's founding father, became prime minister of Bangladesh in January. He was re-elected the following year.

1975: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (AL) became president of Bangladesh in January. He was assassinated along with most of his family members, including his wife and three sons, in a military coup in August. His daughter, Sheikh Hasina, the current prime minister of the country, and her younger sister were out of the country during the attack.

1977: Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) General Ziaur Rahman assumed the presidency after the president, Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem, resigned in April. Rahman formed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and was elected as president for a five-year term the following year.

1981: President Ziaur Rahman (BNP) was assassinated in a military coup in May.

1982: Army Chief General Hussein Mohammad Ershad declared himself CMLA and assumed the presidency the following year.

1986: President Hussein Mohammad Ershad formed the Jatiya Party (JP) and was elected as president for a five-year term in October. He declared a state of emergency after opposition demonstrations the following year.

1990: Hussein Mohammad Ershad (JP) resigned from the presidency after mass protests against autocracy.

Over the last two decades, escalating competition has dominated the relationship between the AL and the BNP to the point where cooperation is virtually unthinkable. Leaders of the two parties have come to view their relationship as zero sum. Each party has controlled the government over the past two decades, with elections in 1991, 1996, 2001, and 2008 each resulting in a change in leadership between the two parties. During their respective terms in government, both parties have been responsible for some degree of politicization of state institutions, violent crackdowns on political opponents, and capture of political and economic resources; when

in the opposition they have orchestrated violent protests and faced disruption to their business interests. This system has created political instability and, as one scholar notes, “a sense of perpetual crisis.”¹²

In addition to these drivers of political instability, political analysts interviewed by our research team pointed to the long-standing rivalry between current Prime Minister and AL President Sheikh Hasina and former Prime Minister and BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia. Their relationship has deteriorated significantly in recent years due to growing mistrust, resentment, and perceptions of existential threats to themselves and their leadership, particularly after a grenade attack targeting then-opposition leader Hasina in 2004.¹³ AL and BNP leaders blamed each other for allegedly attempting to harm their respective parties and leaders on several occasions when the other side was in government. A longtime political advisor told us that this level of tension did not exist when he was growing up in Dhaka decades earlier.¹⁴

The zero-sum relationship increases the risk of the two main parties appeasing fringe religious extremist outfits for political expediency. Both the AL and the BNP have made concessions to hardline groups in recent years in order to appease more extreme elements in the country and gain an upper hand against political rivals. Experts pointed to the AL’s courting of Hefazat-e-Islam (HI), an Islamist group that advocates for an abandonment of national secularism and harsh penalties for those who

BANGLADESH: POLITICAL TIMELINE (1991-PRESENT)

POST-RESTORATION OF DEMOCRACY

1991: Begum Khaleda Zia (BNP), wife of former President Ziaur Rahman, was elected as prime minister in February.

1996: In February, Begum Khaleda Zia (BNP) was re-elected as prime minister in an election boycotted by the opposition but was forced to step down following mass protests for fresh elections. In June, Sheikh Hasina (AL), daughter of Bangladesh’s founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was elected as prime minister.

2001: Begum Khaleda Zia (BNP-led Four-party Alliance) was elected prime minister in October with a two-thirds majority.

2007: President Iajuddin Ahmed declared a state of emergency amidst political violence ahead of the next general election scheduled in January. Former World Bank official Fakhruddin Ahmed was appointed chief adviser (equivalent to prime minister) of a military-backed caretaker government.

2008: Sheikh Hasina (AL-led Grand Coalition) was elected prime minister in December with a two-thirds majority, forming the government in January 2009.

2014: Sheikh Hasina (AL-led 14-party Alliance) was re-elected prime minister in January in an election boycotted by the BNP and other opposition parties. There was political violence in 2013 during the lead-up to the election and in 2015 on the first anniversary of the election.

¹² Rounaq Jahan, *Political Parties in Bangladesh* (Bergen, Norway: Centre for Policy Dialogue and Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2014), 2, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/5229-political-parties-in-bangladesh>. Jahan also explains that despite the two parties trading time in power, instability stems from the parties’ inability to reach agreement on electoral processes between elections, as well as the tendency of each party to prioritize patronage politics over developing a committed ideology.

¹³ Some political analysts believed the relationship between the two sides deteriorated in the aftermath of the failed assassination attempt on then opposition leader and AL President Hasina in 2004. See Julfikar Ali Manik and Chaitanya Chandra Halder, “A Test for Investigators,” *The Daily Star*, Aug. 18, 2012, <http://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-246622>. In the meantime, Zia is currently facing several high-profile corruption cases considered to be politically motivated by her party members that could potentially lead to her disqualification from contesting the next general election. See Manik Miazee, “Rizvi: PM Spreading Lies about Khaleda’s Cases,” *Dhaka Tribune*, Apr. 26, 2017, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/2017/02/19/rizvi-pm-spreading-lies-khaledas-cases/>.

¹⁴ Interview with Simon-Skjodt Center staff, Jan. 17, 2017.

appear to “insult” Islam. The government’s revisions to 2017 editions of national textbooks to bring them in line with HI’s demands, and its approval of a law that allows girls under the age of 18 to marry, were cited as examples of dangerous attempts by the government to build an alliance with a hardline group. Others interviewed expressed concern about the BNP’s close relationship with JI, an Islamist group implicated in past mass violence. Some experts were taken aback by both the AL’s and the BNP’s eagerness to cater to some of the more hardline groups in the country despite negligible public support for them.

VIOLENCE AROUND BANGLADESH’S 2014 ELECTION

The election-related violence that occurred in 2014 is indicative of the type and scale of violence that can stem from intense inter-party rivalry. In 2013, the BNP opposition alliance called for a series of national shutdowns—strikes known as *hartals* and transportation blockades—to demand the restoration of a nonpartisan caretaker government to administer the general election in 2014. The opposition boycotted the election on grounds that the electoral system purportedly set up to favor the incumbent AL. The BNP and its allies violently reacted at those appearing to break the boycott or the shutdowns, resulting in casualties of those who were commuting or in public during the protests. JI, a key member of the BNP alliance, was responsible for targeted attacks on governing party members, voters, religious minorities, election officials, and law enforcers across the country.¹⁵ In some cases, the BNP alliance reportedly mobilized and paid criminal groups to carry out petrol bomb and arson attacks during the shutdowns.¹⁶ The security forces responded in harsh ways, including by firing upon protesters. In total, 507 people were killed and 22,407 people were injured in political violence in 2013 alone.¹⁷

The violence continued during the election on January 5, 2014, as 18 people were killed and 300 people were injured, making it the most violent election in the country’s history.¹⁸ The first anniversary of the election was marked by further civilian deaths from petrol bomb and arson attacks allegedly by political opposition members from January to March 2015. During this period, 69 people were killed and 69 people were injured in vehicles being set on fire by opposition activists. The perpetrators of this and other instances of politically motivated violence have rarely been brought to justice. The government has often carried out mass arrests that have allegedly been motivated by political vendetta rather than a sincere attempt to bring perpetrators to justice.

¹⁵ Star Report, “18 Killed, 300 Hurt,” *The Daily Star*, Jan. 6, 2014, <http://www.thedailystar.net/18-killed-300-hurt-5637>, accessed on Nov. 8, 2015; and Star Report, “Terror on Hindus,” *The Daily Star*, Jan. 6, 2014, <http://www.thedailystar.net/terror-on-hindus-5670>, accessed on Dec. 12, 2015.

¹⁶ See Mohammad Jamil Khan and Ashif Islam Shaon, “57 Politicians Identified as Financiers of Bomb-making,” *Dhaka Tribune*, Nov. 15, 2013, <http://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2013/nov/15/57-political-leaders-identified-financers-bomb-making>, accessed on Nov. 16, 2016. The report cites an intelligence officer as stating, “These bomb-makers produce bombs on order. There are also groups affiliated with them who hurl the bombs on contract. Some group leaders keep contact with local-level political leaders who give them ‘assignments’ to detonate them at certain areas.”

¹⁷ Ain O Salish Kendra, “Political Violence: Jan.–Dec. 2013” (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Ain O Salish Kendra, 2014), <http://www.askbd.org/ask/2014/01/11/political-violence-january-31st-december-2013/>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017.

¹⁸ Star Report, “Turnout Low in Deadliest Polls,” *The Daily Star*, Jan. 6, 2014, <http://www.thedailystar.net/turnout-low-in-deadliest-polls-5632>, accessed on Nov. 6, 2015. See also Odhikar, *Six-Months Human Rights Report—January to June 2015* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Odhikar, 2015); Star Report, “Arson Bomb Attack on Vehicles Continue,” *The Daily Star*, Feb. 9, 2013, <http://www.thedailystar.net/arson-bomb-attack-on-vehicles-continue-63863>, accessed on Dec. 14, 2016; Tribune Report, “Death Toll Rises as Another Victim Dies,” *Dhaka Tribune*, Feb. 20, 2015, <http://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2015/feb/20/death-toll-rises-74-another-victim-dies>, accessed on Dec. 8, 2016.

POLITICAL PARTIES IN BANGLADESH	
Major Political Parties	
Awami League (AL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Center-left political party, co-founded in 1949 by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, popularly known as “Bangabandhu,” Bangladesh’s founding father and former prime minister and president One of the two largest political parties in Bangladesh, along with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party Previously in office in 1972–1975 and 1996–2001, governing party since 2009, re-elected in the controversial 2014 general election boycotted by the main opposition party Presently headed by Sheikh Hasina, current prime minister, who is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman
Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Center-right political party, founded by Ziaur Rahman, former president of Bangladesh, in 1978 One of the two largest political parties in Bangladesh, along with the AL Previously in office in 1979–1982, 1991–1996, and 2001–2006; currently without representation in the parliament after boycotting the 2014 general election Presently headed by Begum Khaleda Zia, former prime minister, who is the wife of Ziaur Rahman
Jatiya Party (JP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Center-right political party, founded by Hussein Mohammad Ershad, former president of Bangladesh, in 1986 The third largest political party in Bangladesh Previously in office in 1986–1990 Currently the main opposition party in the parliament but simultaneously holds representation in the cabinet Presently headed by founder Hussein Mohammad Ershad, special envoy of the prime minister
Islamist Political Parties	
Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Right-wing Islamist political party founded in British India and later part of JI Pakistan Accused of collaborating with the Pakistani Army during the 1971 liberation war in committing war crimes and crimes against humanity Previously a governing coalition partner with representation in the cabinet of the BNP government in 2001–2006 Currently part of the BNP-led 20-party opposition alliance Party registration was officially cancelled by a court ruling on grounds of violating the constitution and election laws; the party has been unable to make inroads in electoral politics beyond a fringe vote bank, leading to a declining number of seats and percentage of votes in elections since 1991 Key leaders were tried, convicted, and executed for war crimes Advocates a theocratic Islamic state based on Sharia, in accordance with extremist ideology of its founder, Syed Abu A’la Maududi Played a leading role in orchestrating violence before and during 2014 general election
Hefazat-e-Islam (HI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Right-wing Islamist political network comprising political parties and <i>qwami</i> (private) madrassas Came to the national and international spotlight for demanding the capital punishment of secular bloggers in 2013 Presently headed by Shah Ahmed Shafi, an ultra-conservative Islamist leader who has given speeches advocating violence against bloggers and undermining the equality of women Promotes Islamization of Bangladesh, including changing textbooks in the national curriculum Announced a 13-point demand including provisions to undermine rights of women and minorities Attempted to exert influence on both the AL and the BNP by taking advantage of the schism between them and is currently in a close relationship with the governing party, the AL Advocates an Islamic theocratic state, but factions are divided on immediate political alignments with mainstream parties Component parties are expected to contest the general election, and parts of the network have been implicated in political violence and violent extremism

Though violence between the governing and opposition parties was nothing new, people unaffiliated with political parties were targeted by petrol bomb and arson attacks on an increased scale in 2014 and 2015. Some experts interviewed for this report said that the growth in attacks on civilians may have resulted from the BNP’s sense of desperation following the 2014 election and may have been motivated by a desire either to force the government to resign or to encourage the military to intervene.

INCREASED AUTHORITARIANISM AND ATTACKS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

Against this backdrop of political polarization, the current AL government has adopted a series of laws and policies that restrict civil society, dissenters, and political opposition. A decisive turn towards autocratic rule might actually bring a degree of stability to Bangladesh, albeit with significant costs in the long run. But the combination of sharp political competition and diminished constraints on the ruling party raises the risk of a political crisis leading to an extremely harsh, violent response.

The AL has engaged in attacks on its political opposition, levying criminal charges against BNP leader Zia and raiding her office in May 2017 to search for “anti-state” documents,¹⁹ arresting and disappearing individuals affiliated with the opposition,²⁰ and, as reported by Human Rights Watch, arresting and shooting in the leg members and supporters of the political opposition, in what has been termed “kneecapping.”²¹

In recent years, the government has enacted several laws that make it harder for civil society organizations to operate freely. These include the Foreign Donation (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act of 2017 that allows the government to cancel the registration of an NGO on ambiguous grounds, including purported anti-state activities and malicious statements against constitutional bodies. It also imposes bureaucratic hurdles by requiring prior approval from the government for all planned activities under foreign grants. Though the government claimed the new legislation was required to prevent terror financing and corruption amongst NGOs, civil society interlocutors were concerned that some of the provisions will further hinder the ability of human rights defenders to secure resources as well as expand the government’s ability to interfere with their work. Other laws that affect civil society organizations include the Information Communication Technology Act that can be used for arbitrary arrests under the pretext of causing deterioration of law and order, prejudice to the image of the state, or harm to religious beliefs. Media interlocutors mentioned a high level of self-censorship around what is considered to be politically correct, and civil society leaders told us that they felt increasingly constrained in their work. A senior editor faced 79 legal claims against him, including 62 for defamation and 17 for sedition—charges that were believed to be politically motivated and designed to deter other potential dissidents.²² One Dhaka-based professor said that she cancelled one of her classes because she did not want to censor herself in what had become an increasingly dangerous environment.²³

A strong civil society can provide restraint that prevents the escalation of violence.²⁴ In this regard, the state-led campaigns against civil society organizations have quashed what could be a source of resiliency against mass

¹⁹ News18.com, “Bangladesh Police Raid Khaleda Zia’s Office,” May 20, 2017, <http://www.news18.com/news/world/bangladesh-police-raid-khaleda-zias-office-1407227.html>.

²⁰ See Poppy McPherson, “Bangladesh Is Vanishing the Opposition,” *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 16, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/16/bangladesh-is-vanishing-the-opposition/>; Human Rights Watch, “*We Don’t Have Him: Secret Detentions and Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh*,” Jul. 6, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/06/we-dont-have-him/secret-detentions-and-enforced-disappearances-bangladesh>.

²¹ Human Rights Watch, “*No Right to Live*”: “Kneecapping” and Maiming Detainees by Bangladesh Security Forces, Sep. 28, (2016), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/28/no-right-live/kneecapping-and-maiming-detainees-bangladesh-security-forces>.

²² Maher Sattar, “Bangladesh Editor Faces 79 Court Cases After an Unusual Confession,” *New York Times*, Mar. 27, 2016.

²³ Interview with Simon-Skjoldt Center staff, July 25, 2016.

²⁴ Scott Straus, *Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 43.

violence. A United States-based researcher said that the crackdown on NGOs and the press makes it harder for human rights defenders to play a proper watchdog role, and that the flight of journalists and others who fear attack leads to an even smaller democratic space.²⁵

Additionally, the government has responded inappropriately to the killings and other attacks by religious extremists against religious minorities, secular activists and bloggers, foreigners, human rights activists, journalists, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists.²⁶ The spate of attacks that began in 2013 has resulted in dozens of victims. Though some extremists have been arrested for their involvement in such attacks, some civil society leaders and secular activists told us they were disappointed with Prime Minister Hasina’s public response that urged people not to “hurt religious sentiments.”²⁷ The national police chief noted that those who hurt someone’s religious sentiment would be punished by law.²⁸ There have been several cases filed against secular activists for purportedly hurting religious sentiments.²⁹ The Bangladeshi government has therefore responded to threats against civil society leaders not only by promulgating laws that inhibit civil society networks, but also by blaming activists who come under attack by extremists. A Bangladesh-based journalist told us that government restrictions on civil society and free speech, and its lack of protection for those activists who have been targeted by extremists, constitute the most worrisome trend in Bangladesh today.³⁰



Bangladeshi riot policemen fire tear gas shells towards protestors during a demonstration at Mirpur in Dhaka, September 28, 2006. *Getty Images*

²⁵ Interview with Simon-Skjodt Center staff, July 29, 2016.

²⁶ For an overview of government-sponsored attacks on civil society, including a lack of protection for activists facing threats from religious extremists, see Amnesty International, “Caught Between Fear and Repression: Attacks on Freedom of Expression in Bangladesh,” May 8, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/6114/2017/en/>.

²⁷ BDNews24.com, “Prime Minister Hasina Says Hurting Religious Sensitivities Will Not Be Accepted,” Sep. 3, 2015, <http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2015/09/03/prime-minister-hasina-says-hurting-religious-sensitivities-will-not-be-accepted>.

²⁸ Agence France Presse, “Bangladesh Police Chief’s Blogger Warning Sparks Uproar,” Aug. 10, 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/world/regions/south-central-asia/102189-bangladesh-police-chief-blogger-warning-jail-sparks-uproar>.

²⁹ For one example, see TheIndependentBD.com, “Rafiur Rabbi Sued for Hurting Religious Sentiments,” Apr. 19, 2017, <http://www.theindependentbd.com/post/90832>.

³⁰ Interview with Simon-Skjodt Center staff, Aug. 15, 2016.

IMPUNITY FOR SECURITY FORCES IMPLICATED IN HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

State security forces almost always represent the “frontlines” of mass atrocities, either as perpetrators or protectors. Human rights organizations have expressed concern about Bangladesh’s security forces’ longtime practice of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest, torture, and other grave human rights violations. Law enforcement agencies, including the Rapid Action Battalion—an elite group made up of members of the police, military, and other security units—have come under particular scrutiny for their purported practices of disappearances and so-called “crossfire” killings, or incidents of alleged extrajudicial killing that the security forces describe as a death in crossfire. A local human rights organization documented 208 killings in 2013 by law enforcement agencies, including shootings, “crossfire” killings, and torture.³¹ The organization documented between 154 and 195 deaths each year since then.³² The Human Rights Committee, which oversees implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bangladesh is a party, expressed concern in its April 2017 report at the “high rate” of extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh.³³ The governing party holds considerable sway over the actions of security forces in the country irrespective of which party is in power—security forces committed human rights violations at the direction of both AL and BNP leadership during their respective times in government—so violence by security forces will remain a concern no matter the outcome of the next election.

Some interviewees expressed concern that such extrajudicial killings were commonplace, enjoyed some degree of public support, and were rarely investigated. Some interlocutors mentioned that the lack of confidence in the rule of law has led to broad public acceptance for the use of force in crackdowns against criminals and terrorists by the security apparatuses. Others said that any related successes by law enforcement in fighting crime and terrorism would be undermined by the lack of faith local communities have in the legal process, which may keep people from participating in investigations.

Impunity for small-scale acts of violence—those that do not meet the definition of mass atrocity—can signal risks of more severe violence in the future.³⁴ Long-standing impunity, with some exceptions, for security force members implicated in extrajudicial killings and other grave crimes lays a foundation of lawlessness that may encourage such units to act violently at the request of the state no matter which party is in power.

³¹ Ain O Salish Kendra, *Death by Law Enforcement Agencies: 2013* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Ain O Salish Kendra, 2014), <http://www.askbd.org/ask/2014/01/11/death-law-enforcement-agency-2013/>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017.

³² See Ain O Salish Kendra, *Death by Law Enforcement Agencies: 2014* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Ain O Salish Kendra, 2015), <http://www.askbd.org/ask/2015/01/15/deaths-law-enforcement-agencies-2014/>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017; Ain O Salish Kendra, *Death by Law Enforcement Agencies: 2015* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Ain O Salish Kendra, 2016), <http://www.askbd.org/ask/2016/01/07/death-law-enforcement-agencies-january-december-2015/>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017; Ain O Salish Kendra, *Death by Law Enforcement Agencies: 2016* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Ain O Salish Kendra, 2017), <http://www.askbd.org/ask/2017/01/08/death-law-enforcing-agencies-january-december-2016/>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017.

³³ Human Rights Committee, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, “Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of Bangladesh,” United Nations Doc. CCPR/C/BGD/CO/1, Apr. 17, 2017.

³⁴ Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*, 82.

LOCAL PATRONAGE SYSTEMS

The proliferation of local patronage systems based on personal networks has led to a nexus between some politicians and criminal elements, which increases the chance that elites will use violence to pursue their political and economic interests.³⁵ Some politicians are reliant on muscle power to exert influence during elections, while criminal actors seek the protection of political leaders to evade law enforcement, creating a symbiotic relationship. Such patronage systems enable politicians to mobilize criminal elements for violence with political and/or economic motivations.

Local governing party leaders typically play the leading role in patronizing criminal elements by influencing state apparatuses and sharing the spoils of power, but opposition leaders with financial capacity may also be able to participate in this politics-crime nexus as well. Local patronage systems may include administrative and security officials who are willing to carry out illegal orders of political leaders in exchange for favors such as promotions and desired postings, particularly in highly politicized state institutions. In such cases, some politicians may be able to influence security forces not only to ensure impunity for criminals carrying out political violence on their behalf, but also to encourage those security forces to carry out severe crackdowns on political rivals in local areas.

Economic motivations are a key driver of the politics-crime nexus that brings together local criminal actors and local political leaders. In some cases, the preeminence of economic motivations over political identity has led to violence being jointly carried out by criminal elements of both parties and their allies, for instance attacks on the Hindu community in Nasirnagar in 2016.³⁶

Such acts of violence by a local politics-crime nexus largely take place outside the chain of command in respective political parties. In fact, recent violence indicates national leaders often have limited leverage over the actions of local members of their respective parties. Both parties have used patronage for political and economic reasons, so these dynamics would be of concern no matter the outcome of the next election.

HIGH STAKES OF UPCOMING GENERAL ELECTION

While elections are often important turning points for any country's political leadership, the perceived stakes of the upcoming election in Bangladesh are especially high. Some analysts predict that the AL will go an extra mile to win the next general election to avoid their leaders and members facing retaliation and/or losing political and economic power acquired during their two consecutive terms in office. Some indicated that the upcoming 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence in 2021 is an important event that the AL would want to oversee, making victory in the next election of even greater importance. In contrast to the strength of the AL, the BNP alliance is now significantly weakened, as its decision to boycott the 2014 general election left the

³⁵ The connection between local patronage systems and the risk of mass atrocity is not fully examined in the existing literature. This report addresses the connection between local patronage systems and mass violence because these concerns were raised in many expert consultations.

³⁶ M Abul Kalam Azad and Rashidul Hasan, "Attack on Hindus in Brahmanbaria: Ambition, Not Religion," *The Daily Star*, Dec. 9, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/news/arson-blasts-mark-day-2>, accessed on Mar. 20, 2017.

group with no parliamentary representation. Some analysts believe that the BNP alliance is desperate to win the 2018 election because its leaders and members feel increasingly deprived of political and economic gains and are facing court cases and arrests after two terms out of power.

POTENTIAL MASS ATROCITY SCENARIOS RELATING TO THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION

One Dhaka-based NGO worker, while discussing Bangladesh’s history of political violence, recent terror attacks, and lack of “breathing space” for political opposition and civil society, said that “all of these elements are a toxic brew” that could spiral into mass violence if there were a particular trigger.³⁷ Those interviewed for this report, including activists and civil society leaders within the country as well as international researchers, stressed that if the trends of politically motivated attacks on civilians continue, there may be a risk of mass violence around the 2018 election. The purpose of this report is not to support any particular outcome of the election, but to analyze potential risks of mass killing—including potential perpetrators, targeted groups, and motivations.

People interviewed for this report, including civil society leaders, political advisors, members of the diplomatic community, and international researchers, believe that the BNP will likely contest the upcoming general election, as the 2014 boycott did not yield positive results for the group. If the BNP contests the election, various interlocutors told us, there may be a lower risk of violence leading up to the election, but there would be a greater risk of mass violence in the post-election period.

No matter the outcome of the election, the power differential between the two parties may militate against future mass killings—as the BNP may not have the resources to organize a systematic campaign of violence, and the AL can probably achieve its political goals without resorting to mass violence.

PRE-ELECTORAL PERIOD: LOWER RISK

A major determinant of the risk of mass killing around the next general election will be whether the AL and the BNP agree on election modalities beforehand that will encourage participation by the opposition and a credible outcome. If the terms of the election ensure that it will be free and fair and that diverse political parties, including the BNP, participate, then no group would have a motive for using large-scale violence before the election. We spoke with several experts, including a Dhaka-based journalist, who were concerned that the AL might shape the electoral processes to advantage the current government and reduce the chances of a fair contest, and that we may even see increased arrests or harassment of the opposition as the election approaches. If this is the case, and if the opposition feels that the process is unfair and chooses not to participate, there may be a violent reaction similar to that in the lead-up to the 2014 election, when opposition members and others attacked those breaking the boycott.

³⁷ Interview with Simon-Skjoldt Center staff, Jan. 17, 2017.

Those interviewed for the report believed it is more likely than not that the BNP will participate in the election, which we judge would reduce the risk of mass violence before the election. There was a consensus amongst political analysts that the opposition's strategy to stay away from the last election was a failure that allowed the governing party to return unopposed in the majority of parliamentary seats, and that the BNP opposition would not follow that same strategy in the future. In addition, the BNP is likely to contest the upcoming polls to avoid the risk of losing its registration due to consecutive boycotts as per electoral laws. The opposition's participation will not necessarily rule out clashes altogether, but it is likely to reduce the frequency and scale of violence compared with the boycott of the last election.

Nonetheless, our research points to two potential violent pre-electoral scenarios, though neither could plausibly reach a massive scale:

First, both the AL and the BNP could be motivated to attack religious minorities. Leaders of minority communities expressed a concern about attacks on religious minorities, who typically are seen as supporting the AL. Hindu and Buddhist leaders we met expressed concern that they are increasingly under threat from both major political parties, citing the threat of land grabs from those affiliated with the AL as well as voter intimidation from those affiliated with the BNP. There could therefore be attacks on minorities for either political or economic motivations, or both.

Second, there could be pre-election violence within the AL. There has been an increasing trend of violence within the party due to conflicting factional interests over consolidating political power and capturing resources in the absence of a strong opposition. Though intra-party factional violence is common irrespective of which party is in power, the frequency and intensity of clashes leading to casualties have increased significantly in recent years.³⁸ Similarly, within the AL leadership, supporters of party-nominated and unaffiliated candidates may attempt to attack their respective opponent before the election. There may be a higher likelihood of violence within the AL, as opposed to within the BNP, due to multiple AL candidates and the absence of a strong opposition. Our interviews indicate that while this type of violence is a concern, it is unlikely to rise to the level of mass killings.

POST-ELECTORAL PERIOD: HIGHER RISK, NO MATTER THE OUTCOME

We assess the risk of mass atrocities will be higher in the immediate post-electoral period regardless of the outcome. The nature of the risk, however, will vary according to the three potential electoral outcomes: 1) a clear victory by the AL, 2) a clear victory by the BNP alliance, or 3) contested or unclear results. If the election

³⁸ In 2016, 73 people were killed and 3,856 people were injured due to internal clashes between AL factions. Odhikar, *Annual Human Rights Report 2016* (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Odhikar, 2017). There was a spike in intra/inter-party feud during the local government elections in March-June 2016 causing 119 deaths, out of which half were killed due to intra-party violence within the AL. See also Triune Report, "Incidents of Violence on the Rise: One Dies, Scores Injured," *Dhaka Tribune*, Mar. 16, 2016, <http://archive.dhakatribune.com/politics/2016/mar/16/incidents-violence-rise-one-dies-scores-injured>, accessed on Dec. 17, 2016; and Star Report, "UP Polls Violence Takes 10 Lives," *The Daily Star*, May 28, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/country/polls-chased-lawmen-man-hits-wall-dies-1230727>, accessed on Mar. 5, 2017; "JCD Leader Killed in Pirojpur," *The Daily Star*, Mar. 10, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/jcd-leader-killed-pirojpur-788911>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017.

modalities are designed to ensure a free and fair election, any of these potential results is a reasonable possibility. Several interlocutors pointed out that the population of Bangladesh is relatively evenly divided between allegiance to the AL and the BNP alliance, and that a free and fair election would mean that either party could win.³⁹

1. Clear Victory by the AL

If the AL wins the election, some AL activists may orchestrate violence in order to eliminate local political opposition, in particular the BNP. Leaders of minority groups also expressed a concern that minorities, especially Hindus, may be targeted by those aligned with the opposition for their purported support of the AL. The leaders also indicated that those affiliated with the AL may try to consolidate its power following an electoral victory and may do so by violently seizing land from Hindus and other minorities, often as a result of internal party strife. However, the leaders also indicated that this particular scenario may not escalate into an episode of mass killing.

Contested or unclear electoral results present the greatest risk of mass killings. The deeply polarized political environment has created incentives for each major party to react violently.

2. Clear Victory by the BNP Alliance

In an alternate situation of the opposition winning the election, some interlocutors were concerned that members of the BNP alliance may commit acts of mass violence in reprisal against AL stalwarts and beneficiaries. Given that the AL has consolidated power since its 2008 electoral victory and that the opposition has been attacked and deprived of the spoils of power for nearly a decade, the BNP may seize an opportunity for retribution. The BNP alliance may not have the capacity to carry out systematic attacks alone, but given the violence committed on its behalf in 2013 and 2015 by JI and others,⁴⁰ the BNP may be able to draw upon these groups once again. JI may have separate motivation to carry out attacks on governing party leaders, religious minorities, and

³⁹ A poll conducted by USAID, Democracy International, and UKAID indicated that in December 2014, 38 percent of respondents expressed support for the AL, while 35 percent of respondents expressed support for the BNP. At that time, 5 percent of respondents did not want to reveal their political leanings. In October 2016, Democracy International noted that the same percentage of respondents (38 percent) supported the AL, but 5 percent of respondents supported the BNP and 35 percent of respondents did not want to answer. While the more recent poll could be interpreted as diminishing support for the BNP, some experts interviewed for this report indicated that the sharp fall in reported support for the BNP and a sharp increase in those who do not want to reveal their political preferences reflects the increased attacks on the BNP opposition and its supporters in recent years. See USAID, Democracy International, and UKAID, "Democratic Participation and Reform (DPR) Bangladesh: Key Findings," Oct. 23-31, 2016, <http://democracyinternational.com/media/CATSS%20Bangladesh%20October%202016%20Survey.pdf>.

⁴⁰ The media reported that the majority of violent attacks, including petrol bomb explosions, were carried out by members of JI and its student wing, Islami Chatra Shibir. See Mohammad Jamil Khan, "Molotov Cocktail Attacks Zooming in on Capital," *Dhaka Tribune*, Jan. 21, 2015, <http://archive.dhakatribune.com/politics/2015/jan/21/molotov-cocktail-attacks-zooming-capital>, accessed on Nov. 15, 2016. See also "18 Killed, 300 Hurt," *The Daily Star*, Jan. 6, 2014; "Hindu Family Comes under Attack in Lalmonirhat, 4 Hurt," *The Daily Star*, Mar. 8, 2014, <http://www.thedailystar.net/hindu-family-comes-under-attack-in-lalmonirhat-4-hurt-33142>, accessed on Mar. 10, 2017.

secular activists for its own goals of establishing a theocracy and seeking revenge for the war crime trials. Some experts interviewed for this report stressed that, similar to the scenario above, minority groups may be likely targets of BNP-sponsored violence in the event of a BNP electoral victory given their perceived support for the AL.

Even if the BNP central leadership wants to preserve law and order in this situation, some analysts were doubtful whether the leaders would be able to rein in overzealous members of their alliance who may seek revenge for past wrongs or seek to capture increased power or resources during the transition period.

3. Contested or Unclear Results

Of these three potential outcomes, contested or unclear electoral results present the greatest risk of mass killings. If there is disagreement regarding the election results, allegations of fraud or rigging, or a situation where neither the AL nor the BNP receives the required number of seats to form a government, the deeply polarized political environment has created incentives for each major party to react violently. The AL may feel that it can employ state security forces to suppress any opposition protests in the case of contested results. Additionally, given the perceived weakness of the BNP alliance, a strong BNP showing could catch the ruling AL by surprise, increasing the risk that the ruling party would use violence to delay a handover of power.

The BNP alliance may be frustrated by contested or unclear results, given the experience of the last general election that favored the AL. If an election designed to encourage participation and preserve fairness still leads to a murky result, the BNP may resort to violent opposition against an unfavorable election result. While the political opposition is weak, it was still able to orchestrate violence against civilians around the last election, and it may be able to draw upon JI and other allies to do so again. In the event of contested results, BNP and JI activists may attack AL leadership in order to force a handover of power.

Both the AL and the BNP may be motivated to commit large-scale violent attacks in order to create a scenario in which the army is forced to move in to keep order. The zero-sum relationship has created a situation where both parties would rather see the army in power than the other side.

If politically motivated violence takes hold following the election, extremist groups already present in the country could seize the opportunity to attack the government, foreigners, or international interests to further discredit the secular model of governance. We assess, however, that extremist groups would not be capable of committing atrocities on a massive scale.

THREE POTENTIAL SCENARIOS			
Scenario	Potential Perpetrator	Potential Targeted Group	Motivation
AL victory	AL activists and AL-affiliated organizations, including student and youth wings	1) BNP and other political opponents 2) Hindu and other religious minorities	1) Consolidate power 2) Grab land
	BNP and JI activists, and organizations affiliated with these groups, including student and youth wings	Hindu and other religious minorities	1) Retaliate for perceived minority community's support of the AL 2) Grab land
BNP victory	BNP and JI activists, and organizations affiliated with these groups, including student and youth wings	1) AL leaders and activists 2) Hindu and other religious minorities	1) Gain retribution for attacks and restrictions during the AL's time in power 2) Gain retribution for perceived minority community's support of the AL
Contested result	AL activists, and AL-affiliated organizations, including student and youth wings; and security forces	BNP leaders, activists, and supporters	Delay potential handover of power, or encourage military to take control
	BNP and JI activists and organizations affiliated with these groups, including student and youth wings	AL leaders, activists, and supporters	Retaliate against the AL, and force the AL to hand over power more quickly, or encourage military to take control

FACTORS THAT MITIGATE THE RISK OF MASS ATROCITIES

POSITIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Bangladesh has recorded consistently high economic growth rates of 5–7 percent over the last one and a half decades.⁴¹ The Bangladesh government predicts the GDP growth rate will exceed the target of 7.2 percent for fiscal year 2016–2017.⁴² GDP per capita has been forecasted at US\$1,466 for the current fiscal year compared to US\$403.2 in 2005.⁴³ The poverty rate has declined to 18.5 percent in 2010 from 44.2 percent in 1991.⁴⁴ Bangladesh has transformed from a primarily agrarian economy to the world's second largest ready-made garments exporter.⁴⁵ Moreover, the government has encouraged economic growth and development by undertaking several large-scale infrastructure projects.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Data: *Bangladesh* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2017), <http://data.worldbank.org/country/bangladesh>, accessed on May 10, 2017.

⁴² "Bangladesh to Exceed 7.2% GDP Growth Rate in FY 17," *The Daily Star*, Apr. 5, 2017, <http://www.thedailystar.net/business/bangladesh-exceed-72pc-gdp-growth-fy17-muhith-1386832>, accessed on Mar. 10, 2017.

⁴³ "Per Capita Income Rises to \$1,466," *The Daily Star*, Apr. 6, 2017 <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/capita-income-rises-1466-1204930>, accessed on Mar. 10, 2017; "Bangladesh," *UN Data* (New York: United Nations, 2017), accessed on Mar. 10, 2017.

⁴⁴ "Remarkable Feat in Poverty Cutting," *The Daily Star*, Apr. 17, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/remarkable-feat-poverty-cutting-1299625>, accessed on Mar. 10, 2017.

⁴⁵ Refayet Ullah Mridha, "Bangladesh Remains Second Largest Garments Exporters, against All Odds," *The Daily Star*, Jul. 17, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/country/bangladesh-remains-second-largest-garments-exporter-against-all-odds-1255084>, accessed on Mar. 10, 2017.

⁴⁶ Sharier Khan, Hasan Jahid Tusher, and Partha Pratim Bhattacharjee, "7 Mega Projects Gaining Pace," *The Daily Star*, Feb. 15, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/7-mega-projects-gaining-pace-1223545>, accessed on Mar. 10, 2017.

Beyond the strong economic growth recorded in recent years, the structure of economic incentives in Bangladesh appears to reduce the risk of mass atrocities. Economies that depend on manufacturing and foreign investment, as is the case with Bangladesh, may be less susceptible to onsets of mass violence since political and business elites stand to lose if mass violence were to risk potential income or investments.⁴⁷ Positive economic growth creates an incentive for political parties as well as the business community to value stability.

Our discussions with a wide range of stakeholders revealed an overwhelmingly positive take on Bangladesh's future economic potential. Some political and civil society interlocutors said that there was almost no appetite for political violence undermining economic growth in the country, particularly amongst the aspirational middle class and youth, who may be driven more by materialistic goals than partisan bias. There was also a broad recognition by AL and BNP stakeholders that political stability and rule of law will be integral for sustained economic growth and poverty reduction. It is noteworthy there is no fundamental difference between the economic policies of both parties despite considerable debates over other political and historical issues.

Some civil society interlocutors noted that there is a consensus across the political divide regarding the need to attract foreign investment and private sector enterprise developments. There has been a growing involvement of businessmen in political activities who may influence their respective party leaderships to reduce the proclivity of inter-party violence, including enforced shutdowns, which would impede investor confidence in the country. One US-based expert suggested that the business community may have such a great interest in securing stability in Bangladesh that business leaders may be well-placed to broker political agreements between the two major parties.

PUBLIC REJECTIONS OF VIOLENCE

It was evident from our consultations there is a broad societal rejection of violence and terrorism in Bangladesh. After the hostage siege and terrorist attack at the Holey Bakery in Dhaka in July 2016, there were spontaneous citizens' movements in the form of public rallies and human chains condemning violent extremism. Some security analysts believed that the Dhaka attack may have been a test case for violent extremist groups to gauge their popularity and acceptance by the people, but that it backfired amidst an overwhelming public rejection from even Islamist groups in the country. Such negative reactions may not necessarily preclude further attacks, but nevertheless indicate that violent acts are intolerable and can be publicly rebuked.

⁴⁷ Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*, 67.

RECENT TERRORIST ACTIVITY AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Since the AL government came to power in 2009, Bangladesh has adopted what its government calls a “zero tolerance” policy against terrorism, cracking down on violent extremist groups operating in the country and/or using its territory to pose security threats for neighbors.^a The policy includes new laws against terrorist groups, specialized counter-terrorism capacity within the police force, and intelligence coordination with foreign countries.^b

The terror attack and hostage siege at the Holey Bakery in Dhaka on July 1, 2016, in which 29 people,^c including the five assailants, were killed, sparked a strong response by law enforcement, who lost two of their own in the incident. The bakery was popular among foreigners and Dhaka’s elite. Those we interviewed reported that the terror attack had a chilling effect on tourism and business, while major infrastructure projects were negatively affected by the flight of some expatriates due to security threats. Some civil society organizations feared organizing in public spaces frequented by foreigners. In the months that followed, the government carried out a series of anti-terror raids that killed dozens of individuals, identifying them as participants in some part of the Holey Bakery attack.

In recent years, terror organizations in Bangladesh have shown signs of institutional linkages and ideological convergences with transnational groups. Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) announced its partnership with the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), an online media outlet linked to al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent and its mother organization, al Qaeda, in 2015.^d The GIMF Bangla Team, the self-styled partnership between ABT and GIMF, released a video titled *From Charlie Hebdo to Jagriti*, referring to two publications attacked by the groups in France and Bangladesh respectively as part of a shared global jihadist mission.^e In the same year, Islamic State magazine *Dabiq* recognized Jamaat ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) as a “proper jihadist organization in Bengal” indicating some degree of ideological solidarity between the two terrorist organizations.^f

While attacks by terror groups, both local and international, remain a concern, those we interviewed did not expect those groups to be capable of carrying out mass killing as per the definition in this report. Security analysts told us they believed the operational capacity of terrorist groups had been significantly weakened despite posing a sustained threat. However, the heavy-handed, sometimes disproportionate response by security forces regarding the terror threat may be a cause of concern for potential killings in response. Even small-scale violent attacks can cause serious political consequences, potentially fueling or providing a spark for large-scale violence by other actors.

^a United Nations, “Statement of H.E. Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister,” UN General Assembly Speech Archive, (New York: United Nations, 2015).

^b See Government of Bangladesh, Anti-Terrorism Act, effective Feb. 24, 2009; Government of Bangladesh, Money Laundering Prevention Act, effective Feb. 20, 2012; Government of Bangladesh, Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Act, effective Feb. 12, 2012; “DMP Sets Up Counter Terror Unit,” *The Daily Star*, Feb. 17, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/dmp-sets-counter-terror-unit-513295>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017; Star Report, “Bangladesh, US to Work for Stopping Terror Financing,” *The Daily Star*, Mar. 8, 2014, <http://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh-us-to-work-for-stopping-terror-financing-48081>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017; “Dhaka, London Partner in Fighting Terrorism,” *The Daily Star*, Jun. 28, 2009, <http://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-94671>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017.

^c “Blood, Shock, Horror,” *The Daily Star*, Jul. 3, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/dhaka-attack/blood-shock-horror-1249471>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017.

^d “Ansarullah Bangla Team Joins GIMF, Rebranded ‘GIMF Bangla Team,’” *Jihadist News*, Dec. 31, 2015, (Bethesda, Maryland: SITE Intelligence Group, 2015), <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/ansarullah-bangla-team-joins-gimf-rebranded-gimf-bangla-team.html>, accessed on Jan. 15, 2017.

^e “GIMF Bangla Team Video Celebrates Attacks on ‘Islam-Hating’ Writers,” *Jihadist News*, Feb. 9, 2016 (Bethesda, Maryland: SITE Intelligence Group, 2016), <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/gimf-bangla-team-video-celebrates-past-attacks-on-islam-hating-writers.html>, accessed on Jan. 15, 2017.

^f “IS Warns of Fresh Attacks in Bangladesh,” *Dhaka Tribune*, Dec. 13, 2015, <http://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2015/nov/20/warns-fresh-attack-bangladesh>, accessed on Jan. 10, 2017.

Similarly, political violence by some opposition activists, often resulting in the deaths of civilians unaffiliated with political parties, was widely condemned by the civil society and media in 2013 and 2015. Such violence proved to be counterproductive by generating fear amongst common people, including commuters in public vehicles set afire, that considerably eroded support for the opposition's cause for fair elections and resulted in escalating state crackdowns.

EFFORTS TO REVERSE THE CULTURE OF IMPUNITY

Bangladesh is afflicted by an entrenched culture of impunity. Throughout nearly all of our interviews, experts indicated that reversing longstanding impunity was a key priority for Bangladesh.

There have been some efforts to address the crimes of the past. For example, the government and academic and civil society groups have conducted research and sought to raise awareness of the 1971 genocide in order to prevent similar atrocities in the future. In particular, the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, Dhaka University's Centre for Genocide Studies, and the Liberation War Museum have been instrumental in researching, documenting, and disseminating information on mass atrocities.

Some interlocutors also mentioned that recent investigations, prosecutions, and convictions of perpetrators in several high-profile cases of violence will help reverse the deep-rooted culture of impunity pervading in Bangladesh.⁴⁸

Though many perpetrators of violence, particularly those who are powerful and/or wealthy, may remain unpunished, some civil society interlocutors believed that recent cases seeking to reverse the culture of impunity may serve as small steps forward in establishing the rule of law in the country and reducing the risk of violence. Notwithstanding the constraints discussed above, civil society, in particular the electronic and print media, played an important role to raise awareness and seek justice for the victims in the aforementioned cases of violence.

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION ON PEACEBUILDING EFFORTS

The growing collaboration between the Bangladeshi and other governments and NGOs in promoting nonviolence, tolerance, and social cohesion can play an important role in mitigating the risks of violence in the country. Our consultations with government, diplomatic, and civil society stakeholders revealed a wide range of ongoing and planned interventions addressing the drivers of violence and promoting peacebuilding at the grassroots level. The Bangladeshi government has been receptive to international support for promoting peacebuilding in the country. Projects focusing on youth, women, and Rohingya communities, amongst other groups, in violence-prone districts will be implemented by civil society organizations under the auspices of the

⁴⁸ Some examples of recent investigations and prosecutions include a verdict for the Bangladesh Rifles (paramilitary border guard) mutiny killings in 2009, which was the largest criminal case in the country's history in terms of the number of accused and convicted; the 2014 Narayanganj murder case involving an influential local politician and senior RAB officials, including the family member of a powerful minister; an investigative report of a 2016 attack against the Santal community and the suspension of two police officers for the same incident.

Country Support Mechanism, a multi-stakeholder public-private mechanism bringing together government, civil society, private sector, and international community representatives under the auspices of the Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund. The United Nations Development Program, US Agency for International Development, and other bilateral and multilateral organizations are in the process of launching large-scale projects to promote political, religious, and social tolerance that aim to make communities more resilient to violence.

Our discussions with civil society and youth groups revealed their interest to undertake peacebuilding projects with the support of the international community. Politically linked youth organizations were also enthusiastic in promoting advocacy campaigns against violence and terrorism. Moreover, the international community has been supporting local think tanks in identifying drivers of violent extremism. Such forms of collaboration between local and international stakeholders may bring communities together and can set expectations about proper conduct, but they do not reflect a concerted effort to dismantle the myriad structural factors listed above that fuel the risk of future mass killings.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF FUTURE MASS ATROCITIES

Given the potential scenarios, exacerbating factors, and mitigating factors described above, those concerned about peace and stability in Bangladesh should monitor the following potential developments that would change the level and/or nature of risk of mass killings:

- **Failure of the major political parties to agree on election modalities.** If the parties do not agree upon election modalities, there is a greater likelihood of a non-participatory election, or the development of biased procedures that favor the ruling party, which could spark discontent and violence by opposition groups against perceived supporters of the AL.
- **Irregular election procedures, or biased election commission membership or policies.** These developments could encourage the opposition to boycott the election or generate a violent response after the election.
- **A boycott of the election by the political opposition.** This would raise the risk of violence by the opposition in an effort to enforce boycotts and similar strikes, similar to what occurred in 2013–2015.
- **Signs that the election results may be uncertain.** Indicators of relatively equal turnout of AL and BNP supporters, or lack of credible procedures for tallying votes, would increase the chance that the election results are uncertain, which in turn would raise the risk of post-electoral violence by both major parties.
- **Perception among party leaders that the election was stolen or unfair.** Public statements about an election having been “stolen” would likely spur violence by supporters of the party on the losing side.
- **Contests between rival candidates within the same party.** This would increase the risk of attacks between those allegiant to “official” and “unofficial” rebel candidates within the same party who are contesting the same position. While intra-party competition for a given position is not itself a problem, the recent increases in violence within the AL, for example, raise concern that one candidate’s supporters may act violently against another’s.

- **Targeted attacks, including arrests and disappearances, of political leaders.** Such tactics may increase well before the election in order to further weaken any potential threat to continued AL leadership. A steady increase in these kinds of attacks during the pre-electoral period would suggest that the ruling party perceives a rising or stubborn threat, which could mean greater risk of their employing more severe tactics.
- **Increased limitations on civil society, including the media.** Civil society and the media are often on the front lines of documenting and campaigning against violent acts by political parties and the inappropriate use of force by security units. Limitations on those who can bring crimes to light may indicate an interest in using violence in the future.
- **An unanticipated shock, such as a terror attack or international crisis, that could affect the relationship of power between the two main political parties.** In an already volatile period, any event that could shape political leaders' perceptions of threat and opportunity should be studied closely for its risk of fueling further violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO POLITICAL PARTIES IN BANGLADESH

- **Engage in formal inter-party dialogue before the election.** Reestablishing connections between the two parties would help move past the recent practice of opposition protests and correspondingly heavy-handed responses by the state. Given the deep divide between the parties, a neutral third-party mediator may be required to bring the parties together. The business community may be well placed to do so, given its interest in national stability as well as its local and international connections and support.
- **Establish and publicize an agreement on expected electoral conduct.** Negotiations between the two sides could focus upon establishing a public, if informal, agreement in which each major party: (a) agrees upon the proper conduct for political parties before, during, and after the election, such as ways to protect electoral fairness and prevent fraud or intimidation; and (b) establishes mechanisms to monitor adherence to the agreement. The very process of regular consultations on acceptable behavior in the pre-election period may itself reduce the risk of mass violence,⁴⁹ and the process would strengthen fledgling connections between each of the major parties at a critical juncture in which mass violence is a serious risk. Any agreement would need to be supported by genuine and effective mechanisms to monitor compliance and adequately respond to breaches. As aforementioned, a third-party mediator may be required to establish and promote adherence to such an agreement.
- **Establish stronger local monitoring of election-related violence.** Because election-related violence may be decentralized and widespread, both the AL and the BNP should support local mechanisms, including the capacity within each party, to monitor election-related violence, document such crimes,

⁴⁹ ACE Project, *Parties and Candidates*, second edition, 2012, <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/pc/pcc/pcc01/pcc01a>.

and send that information to party leadership and civil society groups. Local monitors should be empowered and trained to document specific acts that may indicate an escalation into potential mass killing, including violent protests, acts of violence accompanied by group-targeted hate speech, and violence against religious minorities and women.

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH

- **Ensure protection of democratic space for opposition parties and civil society.** Protecting a strong and independent civil society strengthens its ability to restrain a potential escalation of violence.⁵⁰ One necessary step in this regard is the revocation of the October 2016 Foreign Donations Regulation Act and section 57 of the Information Communication Technology Act, in particular the provisions that significantly limit the independent functioning of NGOs in the country.
- **Promote accountability for members of the security forces.** Ensuring that security forces operate according to the rule of law would mitigate the threat of a political party, whether a current or future governing party, using security forces to commit mass violence. While this is an ambitious, long-term endeavor, immediate steps to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of grave human rights abuses would send an important signal in this critical period.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- **Promote political negotiations and the setting of acceptable election standards.** The international community may be able to play a role in encouraging AL and BNP leaders to come together in the time leading up to the next general election. However, the international community would need to be tactful and sensitive in its public messaging, keeping in mind the concerns of the political parties and avoiding being seen as interfering in Bangladesh's domestic affairs. At this particular point, the AL wants to enhance Bangladesh's stature regionally and internationally, while the BNP is seeking international acceptance and credibility. This is a window of opportunity for the international community, particularly development or business partners, to initiate a constructive engagement with parties for a consensus on election conduct.
- **Encourage investigations and prosecutions of members of the security forces and others implicated in human rights violations.** The international community should be clear in its engagement with the Bangladeshi government that effective and genuine accountability processes are essential to stem human rights violations. Those concerned about mass killing around the next general election should clearly express to the government that independence, accountability, and other key aspects of security sector reform are essential bulwarks against potential mass killing. The international community in its engagement with political actors in the government and the opposition should emphasize that there must not be any impunity for criminal elements within parties engaged in violence.

⁵⁰ Scott Straus, *Fundamentals of Genocide and Mass Atrocity Prevention*, 43.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND INCITEMENT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

In recent years, there were recurrent patterns of systematic violence against religious minorities orchestrated on the pretext of purportedly blasphemous Facebook posts against Islam that were later found to be fake. The fabricated Facebook posts, including photos claimed to be “hurting religious sentiments,” were circulated online and/or offline to mobilize violence against the Buddhist and Hindu communities in several parts of the country. The Facebook account of a Hindu fisherman was hacked to upload an allegedly offensive image in Nasirnagar in October 2016.^a In other cases, doctored screenshots of Facebook accounts framing a Buddhist and Hindu youth of demeaning Islam were photocopied in Ramu in September 2012 and in Pabna in November 2013.^b It was confirmed in subsequent investigations that the Facebook posts were either forged or manipulated to falsely incriminate members of the minority community and incite violence against them.

Those fabricating the false social media posts mobilized a cross-section of political parties, religious extremist groups, and politically unaffiliated people to carry out violent attacks on minority communities, often using mosques and leaflets to promulgate hateful messages.^c In all cases mentioned above, there was a common trend of orchestrating violence in three steps: (a) circulating rumors against members of minority communities implicating them for the fabricated Facebook posts; (b) disseminating hateful rhetoric by multiple speakers, including politicians and religious extremists, who were not necessarily involved in the conspiracy but wanted to gain local political mileage by portraying themselves as “defenders” of Islam; and (c) undertaking arson, vandalism, and lootings of houses and temples belonging to minority communities. The targeted communities were often displaced and forced to take refuge in neighboring villages after the attacks.^d In some cases, families were forced to migrate to India for safety.^e

These violent attacks were motivated by multiple and overlapping layers of political, religious, and economic factors. In most cases, the perpetrators had underlying objectives of capturing property, in particular land, owned by religious minorities. For instance, the National Human Rights Commission in Bangladesh found the attacks on Hindu villagers in Narisnagar were orchestrated to grab their land.^f Human rights defenders indicated that religious minorities were feeling increasingly vulnerable about further recurrences of violence and atrocities on the pretext of fabricated Facebook posts in the country. They mentioned it is possible to frame religious minorities by hacking their Facebook accounts or manipulating screenshots. Though Facebook has a significantly high penetration in Bangladesh, there is still a lack of understanding about how the social media platform works, which enables fabricated posts to be circulated online and/or offline to incite violence against religious minorities and little critical thinking about the origin of the post.

Experts interviewed for this report did not discern an immediate risk of mass killing of minority groups, but the use of social media to promote hate against targeted groups and the connections between online and offline mobilization for violence should be watched in the future.

^a “Rasraj Did Not Upload the Image on FB,” *The Daily Star*, Nov. 7, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/fb-post-made-dhaka-1310611>.

^b Julfikar Ali Manik, “A Devil’s Design,” *The Daily Star*, Oct. 14, 2012, <http://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-253751>; Ahmed Humayun Kabir Topu, “Hindus attacked in Pabna,” *The Daily Star*, Nov. 3, 2013, <http://www.thedailystar.net/news/hindus-attacked-in-pabna>.

^c Adil Shakawat, “Nasirnagar Attacks Driving Away Hindus,” *Dhaka Tribune*, Nov. 2, 2016, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/crime/2016/11/02/nasirnagar-attacks-driving-away-hindus/>.

^d Inam Ahmed and Julfikar Ali Manik, “Tearing Out the Soul,” *The Daily Star*, Oct. 2, 2012, <http://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-252079>; M Abul Kalam Azad and Rashidul Hasan, “Attacks on Hindus in Brahmanbaria: Ambition, Not Religion,” *The Daily Star*, Dec. 9, 2016; Ahmed Humayun Kabir Topu, “Hindus attacked in Pabna,” Nov. 3, 2013.

^e Adil Shakawat, “Nasirnagar Attacks Driving Away Hindus,” *Dhaka Tribune*, Nov. 2, 2016.

^f Star Online Report, “Attack Planned, to Grab Hindu Land,” *The Daily Star*, Nov. 2, 2016, <http://www.thedailystar.net/country/attack-hindus-nhrc-team-visiting-bbaria-temple-1308190>.

- **Provide UN country team and embassy staff with atrocity prevention training.** Our interviews revealed that many international staff based in Bangladesh, including those who may be well placed to respond to early warning signs of mass atrocities, lack an adequate understanding of mass atrocities or strategies to prevent them. Atrocity prevention training can give key staff the tools to identify early warning signs of mass atrocities and an understanding of the potential appropriate responses to those signs. In the lead-up to the next election in particular, the UN country team would benefit from regular discussions on atrocity prevention strategies, including identifying early warning signs of potential mass killings.
- **Deploy an international election monitoring presence.** A report from the US Institute of Peace cited the weakness of international election monitoring during Bangladesh's 2014 election as a missed opportunity to prevent violence.⁵¹ International election monitors can provide helpful documentation not only of election processes but of acts of violence around the election. Election monitors should be trained and empowered to collect information on crimes that may indicate early warning signs of mass violence.
- **Ensure that counter-terror support to the government of Bangladesh takes into account the atrocity risk detailed in this report.** Governments, including the United States, have lent support to Bangladesh in its counter-terror efforts. While international support is essential in order for the Bangladeshi government to effectively counter the terror threat in the country, such support should take into account the polarized political dynamics, the potential for violence around the 2018 election, and reports of human rights violations by security forces. Support should not be extended to units known to have committed grave human rights violations
- **Use the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process at the UN Human Rights Council to press for improvements before the next general election.** The next UPR for Bangladesh is in spring 2018, at least several months before the next general election. The UPR would be an opportunity for the international community to encourage the government of Bangladesh to adhere to its international treaty obligations, undertake reforms that will address long-standing issues regarding impunity for human rights violations, and commit to free and fair elections.
- **Support early warning and response efforts, especially around the upcoming general election.** Support community-based initiatives to identify early warning signs of mass violence and develop effective response systems. While the need to monitor risks may be great around the next general election, early warning and response efforts should be deepened so that strong and responsive structures can persist long after the election.

⁵¹ United States Institute of Peace, "Key Findings on Election Violence Prevention: Bangladesh: January 2014 Election," <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-02/Electing-Peace-Bangladesh-Preventing-Electoral-Violence.pdf>.

- **Support civil society initiatives against violence.** The international development and donor community can support initiatives undertaken by civil society organizations to promote nonviolence at the local level. Potential forms of assistance include funding projects that promote the respect for the rule of law, counter hate speech, reduce group-targeted hatred and violence, and monitor election-related violence.

The Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide

of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum works to prevent genocide and related crimes against humanity. The Simon-Skjodt Center is dedicated to stimulating timely global action to prevent genocide and to catalyze an international response when it occurs. Our goal is to make the prevention of genocide a core foreign policy priority for leaders around the world through a multi-pronged program of research, education, and public outreach. We work to equip decision makers, starting with officials in the United States but also extending to other governments, with the knowledge, tools, and institutional support required to prevent—or, if necessary, halt—genocide and related crimes against humanity.

Cover: Protesters try to break through a police barricade during a demonstration against a strike called by the opposition in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Monday, Feb. 9, 2015. *Associated Press*



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