

# INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION TO PARTY CONFLICT IN BANGLADESH

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## Abstract

*The conventional wisdom regarding the sources of inter-party conflict in Bangladesh mainly concentrate on bitter enmity and culture of confrontational politics between two rival political parties namely Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). What is important to study is the institutional factor to party conflict- the dimension which is not widely discussed by researchers. This paper, therefore, intends to explore the linkage between the quality of political institutions and the party conflict in Bangladesh. It will highlight the signs of weakness in some major political institutions e.g. the parliament, the electoral institution and the political party itself which have profound effect on intensifying conflict among contesting parties. Richard Jackson's theoretical assumption of weak state framework states that the causes of internal conflict is in fact, located in the structures of weak states. However, this paper has showed how the existing weak intuitions including the political party have impact on the conditions to conflict between AL and BNP. The analysis of this paper suggests that the quality of state institutions has a strong impact on how the party conflict is conducted in Bangladesh.*

## INTRODUCTION

From the last several years, the politics of Bangladesh has been shaped by a deeply embedded political party rivalry between the ruling Awami League (AL) and opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) that have significantly affected the institutional permanence of the country.<sup>1</sup> Although Bangladesh has already traversed four decades of state building process, the country is still coupled with the problems of weak institution.<sup>2</sup> The intense conflict between the two major parties in Bangladesh is, however, a consequence of weak performance of the existing core political institutions. The evidence of parliamentary malfunction, the controversial role of electoral system and the undemocratic political party structure have been sourced to partisan conflict now-a-days. Moreover, roughly two decades of democratic rule did not bring

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<sup>1</sup> Bina D' Costa, "Bangladesh in 2011, Weak State building and Diffident Foreign Policy," *Asian Survey*, vol. 52, no. 1, January/February 2012, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Sreeradha Datta, "Bangladesh's Political Evolution: Growing Uncertainties," *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 27, no. 2, April/June, 2003, pp. 233-249.

any meaningful change in the entrenched inter-party conflict.<sup>3</sup> This is, however, important to address the institutional dimension of political party conflict- the issue which is still under researched topic.

Among the existing literature on the political party and Bangladesh politics, most of the authors have claimed that politics of confrontation and bitter enmity<sup>4</sup> are the causes of inter- party conflict. But their analysis have often elides the linkage of institutional weakness to party conflict in Bangladesh. This paper is, therefore, attempted to fill the principal gap in this debate by asking *how does the poorly functioning institutions promotes political party conflict within the state framework of Bangladesh?*

The theory of ‘weak state framework’ suggests that the causes of internal conflicts are in fact, located in the structures of weak states.<sup>5</sup> The political party conflict is the outcome of varying level of the weakness of political institutions in the state. Based on this theoretical assumption, this paper has argued that the chronic weakness of the existing institutions is, however, responsible to the causes of inter- party conflict between AL and BNP.

In order to answer the question of this paper, qualitative research method would be applied in which the data sources are mainly secondary. This research seeks to explain the causes of inter- party conflict in Bangladesh, is DV (dependent variable). The set of factors that are linked with the causes of conflict are IV (independent variables) here. Therefore, the operationalization of these variables would be as follows: IV (weak democratic institutions): dysfunctional parliament due to the absence of opposition parties in the parliament. The indicators of conflict over mode of election, politicization of Election Commission (EC), vote rigging and election result boycott etc. would be used to explain weak electoral institutions. Personal feud, dynastic party leadership, undemocratic party structure and party confrontation etc. are the indicators explaining how the institution is affected and promotes conflict between parties.

The analysis would mainly concentrate on the deadly conflict incidents of 2013 but other significant conflict events after 1991 will be used as reference. However, the structure of the paper is as follows: in the next segment, it will briefly review the literature that will partially cover the debate on party conflict and institutional drawbacks within the state framework in Bangladesh. After

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<sup>3</sup> Habib Zafarullah and Redwanur Rahman, “The Impaired State: Assessing State Capacity and Governance in Bangladesh,” *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, vol. 21, no. 7, 2008, pp. 739-752.

<sup>4</sup> Ahrar Ahmad, “Bangladesh in 2013: Year of Confusions, Confrontations, and Concerns,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 54, no. 1, January/February, 2014, pp. 190-198.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Jackson, “The State and Internal Conflict,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2001, pp. 65-81.

that, this paper will touch upon the theoretical framework. The next part would concentrate on the main analysis, applying the variables to justify institutional linkages to party conflict. The final segment is the conclusion part which will mainly favour the author's argument in key points.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The issue of political party conflict in Bangladesh has caught attention to many academics, researchers and political commentators soon after the reintroduction of democracy in 1990s. Following the deadly inter-party conflict before the 10<sup>th</sup> national election recently, the interest has grown to a new height. This is partly because of the behavioural shifts of party leaders and their political functions that have brought many questions to interested readers. Moniruzzaman in his article entitled "*Party Politics and Political Violence in Bangladesh: Issues, Manifestation and Consequences*", has argued that "political violence emerges from a deep rooted political culture of intolerance, antagonism, revenge and arrogance."<sup>6</sup> To him, Bangladesh is a unique example where both inter- party differences and intra-party factionalism leads to violent conflict. Although in his writings, there is a reference of cyclical relationship between political party activities and conflict; the analysis of the relation between institutional weakness and party violence is absent.

Multi-party democracy did not bring any solution to party conflict in Bangladesh. This straight forward analysis is found in the work "*The Impaired State: Assessing State Capacity and Governance in Bangladesh*" by Zafarullah and Rahman. In the article the authors have pointed out that weak institutional structure and undemocratic nature of political parties undermines the logic of democracy. The authors have claimed that restoration of democracy in 1991 did not bring any meaningful change in democratic governance. "Contrarily, democracy has been tottering and the political system remains as unstable as ever. Evidence of instability has been reflected in the number of general strikes, road and transportation blockades, siege of government offices and public installations organized by opposition parties during democratic rule."<sup>7</sup>

The yearly incidence of political party rivalries and its consequences on democratic institutions has been described by many authors. Rashiduzzaman in his article has argued that by provoking nationwide unrest, politicians in Bangladesh has set bad precedence for institutional development.<sup>8</sup> D'Costa claimed that Bangladesh's political system is deeply embedded political party

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<sup>6</sup> M. Moniruzzaman, "Party Politics and Political Violence in Bangladesh: Issues, Manifestation and Consequences," *South Asian Survey*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2009, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> *Supra* note 3, p. 743.

<sup>8</sup> M. Rashiduzzaman, "Political Unrest and Democracy in Bangladesh," *Asian Survey*, vol. 37, no. 3, March 1997, pp. 254-268.