

Transforming Dynamics of Electoral Violence: A Comparative Analysis of Local Government in Bangladesh (2003-2023)

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Abstract

The occurrences of electoral violence in Bangladesh have shown various nuanced differences between non-partisan and party-based Local Government (LG) election systems. This article examines the broader trends of violence observed throughout the Union Parishad (UP) elections from 2003 until 2023 in Bangladesh. The main aim of this study is to acquire a deeper understanding of the underlying factors that contribute to violence and its subsequent consequences. Data have been collected from multiple sources, including books, articles, newspapers, and election reports, applying a mixed-methods approach to acquire a systematic and numerical understanding of the instances of electoral violence. The findings suggest that the introduction of the party-based LG elections in 2015 has resulted in alterations to the underlying factors that contribute to conflict and the specific catalysts that incite violence during elections at the local level. The provocation of violence can be attributed to several key factors, including the presence of diverse individual interests within a particular political party and the absence of robust opposition. The study also reveals that the Party-Line LG Election witnessed a significant increase in violence and its associated consequences in its early years. However, as time progressed, there was a noticeable decline in the severity of the violence.

Key Words: Electoral Violence; Local Government; Union Parishad; Party-based Elections; Intra party Violence; Political Conflict; Bangladesh Politics.

Introduction

Meaningful elections are an inseparable part of a democracy and instances of violence are impediment to a meaningful election. Electoral violence take place as a breakdown of the electoral system itself, not as an outcome of the electoral process (Kongkirati, 2016). The role of corruption and weak democratic institutions in fueling electoral violence is also highlighted (Birch, 2020). Evidently, it has been duly observed that no Local Government (LG) elections in Bangladesh have not been free from violence whether it is a parliamentary or an LG election (Akond, 2019). The 7th and 8th Union Parishad (UP) elections were held, respectively, in 2003 and 2011 under the non-party electoral system, in which party symbols were not used. However, political parties, in a regular basis, used to influence the overall electoral process to support ‘their candidate (s).’ Since the tenure of the LG was five years, the next UP elections were expected to be held in 2008, however, the military-backed caretaker government was unwilling to conduct the LG elections on time. Afterwards, assuming power, the newly democratic government arranged the 8th UP election on May 31 and July 5, 2011. The 9th and 10th UP elections took place, respectively, in 2016 and 2021 under the newly introduced party-based electoral system, albeit, in which the ruling party had

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had certain extent of influence. This resulted in massive casualties in almost all the LG constituencies. In the UP elections of 2003 and 2011, the number of injured people and death toll were not very high compared to the instances in the last two party-based UP elections. This was primarily due to intense fights between candidates from the same political party, which created a risky and unstable social and political environment. The introduction of the party-based LG elections caused a significant change in the nature of electoral violence, bringing about new types of political unrest. This paradigm shift in the electoral landscape has not only accentuated the physical manifestations of electoral violence but has also underscored its multifaceted nature, encompassing not only physical altercations but also psychological and structural dimensions. The current study attempts to visit the underlying factors contributing to electoral violence in UP elections, particularly in a comparative analysis—distinguishing between party-based and non-party electoral systems. The barriers to the study include the insufficiency of available data and the lack of preceding scholarly insight on electoral violence in LG elections in Bangladesh. Electoral violence is a prevalent occurrence in Bangladesh which can be observed in both parliamentary and LG elections. In recent years, there has been a significant upsurge in election-related violence at the LG level; they are (the instances of violence) particularly driven by party affiliations. Most recently, a limited number of studies have explored the occurrence of electoral violence, specifically in UP elections. However, it is noteworthy to mention here, there remains a dearth of researches that comparatively analyzes the dynamics of party-based and non-party UP elections and relevant issues related to them. This study may come as a source of assistance to the authorities who make policies related to the overall procedures of elections and effectively implement measures aimed at mitigating electoral violence in Bangladesh.

Study design

This study utilizes secondary data sources, including newspapers, journals, records, articles, and books to analyze relevant scholarly literature. Incorporation of secondary sources enhances the comprehensiveness and depth of the analysis by leveraging existing data and scholarly literature. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies which allows the researchers to understand the intricacies involved in the electoral violence. Distinguishing between party-based and non-partisan electoral systems works as the base of a solid comparative approach that enriches the study's insights into the dynamics of electoral violence in UP elections in Bangladesh since 2003.

Literature review

Research indicates that political violence, including strikes, blockades, and conflicts between parties, is a significant issue in Bangladesh, particularly during election periods (Akond, 2019).

In his recent study, Rahman (2021) delves into the characteristics and manifestations of electoral violence within the context of national or parliamentary elections in Bangladesh. The findings of the study indicate that the occurrence of electoral violence at both national and local elections poses a significant challenge and impedes the progress of democratic development in Bangladesh. No discernible efforts to distinguish the occurrence of violence in the LG elections from that in the national elections were noted.

Mollah and Jahan (2018) conducted a study that examined the primary factors and consequences of electoral violence during the tenth parliamentary election in Bangladesh. The research identifies

common patterns, dynamics, and characteristics of conflict and violence in elections, emphasizing that the nature of conflicts in national and LG elections is fundamentally similar.

Rana and Zisan (2018) expressed the view that the country is not yet prepared for local government elections based on direct and formal political party affiliations. According to their survey, the implementation of a new system of local government elections in Bangladesh has led to an increasing trend of violence.

Noorana (2015) presents reasons regarding the various forms, causes, and consequences of electoral violence in Bangladesh. These arguments support the notion that electoral violence, regardless of its occurrence at the national or local level, does not exhibit any fundamental disconnections. Based on her research, electoral violence encompasses several forms of aggression, such as intimidation, homicides, property assaults, coerced displacement, and civil unrest.

Siddiqui (2014) elucidates the concept of LG elections conducted along party lines. This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the merits and drawbacks associated with party-line elections. The author concludes that the implementation of LG elections based on party affiliations may not be entirely advantageous.

The democratic process encompasses a range of developmental elements that might provide both favorable and unfavorable outcomes (Boix, 2009).

Uddin (2016) examines contemporary patterns in LG elections, presenting accusations against incumbent political parties for favoring specific candidates and influencing electoral processes.

Choudhury (2018) offers valuable insights into the LG elections characterized by party-line affiliations. The author highlights a significant shift in the nature of conflict during the most recent LG election in 2016. Specifically, an intra-party conflict took the place of the previously observed inter-party conflict. This finding greatly contributes to the fundamental understanding of our research.

Party-based LG election and its acceptance in Bangladesh

A party-based election means an electoral framework where political parties nominate candidates who run for elections under their respective party symbols. However, it is worth noting that independent individuals are also allowed to compete as candidates independent of any party affiliation. The role of political parties in a party-based election system is crucial, as they are responsible for nominating candidates who run for elections under their respective party symbols (Kernell, 2015). Since achieving independence, LG elections have been conducted autonomously. In 2015, the Bangladesh Local Self-Government (Amendment) Act was enacted, thereby implementing an innovative structure for the organization of LG elections based on party symbols. The electoral process for selecting the chairman of the UP, Upazilla Parishad, Zilla Parishad, Pourashava, and City Corporation in this particular system is conducted based on using of party symbols. The electoral procedure for selecting the remaining members would continue to adhere to a non-partisan approach. The main opposition party, the BNP, expressed their disagreement with the proposal, whereas the current ruling political party, the AL, showed its support in favor of it. This change may be attributed to as a major paradigm shift in the election system in LG. With the advent of party-based elections, the government asserts that LG elections will become more participatory (Islam, 2020).

The administration further asserts that it will enhance the effective implementation of democratic processes and foster greater responsibility and accountability among elected representatives. The implementation of the system by the government appears to prioritize their own interests rather than promoting democracy or local governance. There were no political or administrative preparations or an environment in place in the country to hold such a partisan LG election (Razi, 2015).

Electoral violence

Electoral violence is a distinct form of political violence, often used as a strategy to manipulate the electoral process and ensure victory (Birch 2020, Jenkins 2020). The UNDP (2009) defines electoral violence as “any acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition.” Höglund notes that “electoral violence is separated from other forms of political violence by a combination of timing and motive. The time aspect relates to violence carried out during the election period. The objective of electoral violence is to influence the electoral process and, by extension, its outcome” (Höglund, 2009). Lisa Laakso (2007) defines electoral violence being “an activity motivated by an attempt to affect the results of the elections, either by manipulating the electoral procedure and participation or by contesting the legitimacy of the results. It might involve voter and candidate intimidation; killings; attacks against their property; forceful displacement; unlawful detentions; and rioting” (Laakso, 2007). Fundamentally, electoral violence refers to a form of political violence that is often carried out with the aim of manipulating the results of an election and subsequently altering the allocation of political authority (UN, 2016).

Transformation of violence type

Electoral violence can be distinguished from other forms of violence by its particular targets, timing, and outcomes (Harish 2017). Electoral violence is a specific form of political violence that has distinct characteristics. It typically takes place during elections, where the stakes are high (Birch 2020). This form of violence is intricately linked to electoral rivalry and can be influenced by various factors, such as the characteristics of the election struggle and the specific issues being contested (Mochtak 2019). basically, Transformation of violence type refers to the change in the characteristics and main factors that contribute to electoral violence. The influence of key factors on violence may change over time and as the circumstances evolve. In emerging democracies, the causes of violence, regardless of its kind, undergo rapid changes.

Table 1: Types of electoral violence

Period of violence	Types of violence
Pre-Election Violence	Threat, forcing disruption of campaign rallies, assassination, intimidation,
Election Time Violence	Looting, shooting, kidnapping, physical attacking, killing,
Post-Election Violence	Assassination, kidnapping, rape, murder, looting, shooting, destruction of property, displacement, rioting.

[Source: Noorana, 2015]

Nature of electoral violence in Bangladesh

Electoral violence encompasses multiple kinds, including physical, psychological, and institutional dimensions. Periodic categorization can be applied to delineate three distinct phases: pre-election

violence, violence during the election period, and post-election violence. The implementation of party-based LG elections has resulted in a change in the dynamics surrounding electoral violence. Several political parties engaged in electoral violence during the period of non-party elections. In recent years, the absence of the primary opposition party, the BNP, from all electoral processes has led to violent competition among the candidates affiliated with the Awami League (AL). The occurrence of electoral violence has undergone a transition, shifting away from inter-party violence into intra-party violence.

Causes of electoral violence

The primary factors contributing to acts of violence are the pursuit of power driven by greed and the competition for dominance among individuals or groups. Electoral violence arises when the electoral procedure bears the elements like lacking fairness, responsiveness, or integrity, hence eroding its political legitimacy. Consequently, stakeholders are compelled to deviate from established standards in their pursuit of desired outcomes (Ebiziem, 2015).

Lack of trust among candidates and supporters: A persistent issue in Bangladesh is the lack of trust between political candidates and their respective supporters. The competition surrounding the outcome of an election engenders confrontations of a violent kind among local communities. The supporters show a propensity for violence and actively take part in violent electoral acts driven by their own internal motivations.

Lack of a level playing field: The responsibility of guaranteeing elections that are both free and fair at all levels is endowed with the Election Commission of Bangladesh. In numerous instances, there has been a failure to guarantee equitable conditions for all political parties. The occurrence of violence can be attributed to the inadequate oversight of the election administration by the EC, particularly at the local level (Alim, 2016).

Power competition among the candidates: Throughout history, a persistent absence of concordance has been observed among candidates representing different political parties. The candidates employ various tactics, such as engaging in violent confrontations, issuing threats, conducting interrogations, and exerting influence, in order to secure victory in an election. This ill competition engenders animosity among political factions, with another contributing factor being the utilization of street-level and local-level political strategies by opposition parties (Obaidullah, 2021).

Weakness of the election commission: The EC is constitutionally entrusted to ensure free and fair elections with transparency and neutrality at all level. In due course, it proved ineffective in establishing equitable conditions for all parties involved and maintaining oversight over the management of the electoral process. The then Chief Election Commissioner "blamed government officials for not cooperating with the EC in holding the elections in a fair and peaceful manner" (Karmakar, 2016). Norma Kriger (2011) opined, "If the electoral process is not managed professionally and impartially by a trusted institution, the risks associated with organizing elections increase drastically. History has shown that election commissions with a bad reputation cannot handle a competitive election environment and are often at the center of controversy" (Alim, 2016). The incidents of numerous events can also be attributed to a dearth of officials, as the EC relies on external groups for support.

The use of illegal money and muscle power: Candidates often resort to use illicit funds and the exertion of physical force as a means to procure votes and instigate instances of electoral violence to secure victory in electoral contests. Various reports in newspapers indicate that illegal money is frequently used in the acquisition of nominations and the procurement of votes. The substantial financial investments made by political parties and candidates create a situation where electoral defeat becomes financially untenable, thereby potentially inciting acts of violence (Alim, 2016). In order to secure victory in a LG election, candidates employ financial resources and exert influence through physical force. This phenomenon results in instances of violent confrontations.

Digital disinformation: Disinformation, or the spread of false or misleading information, has become more prevalent on social media platforms. This political agenda can harm the voting process, create societal fragmentation, and hinder the free and fair dissemination of ideas. Social media platforms are used to spread false information about elections, leading to electoral violence in the LG elections.

Electoral violence in the UP election of 2003

The 7th UP was held from January 25 to March 16, during which elections took place in 4234 out of a total of 4492 unions and saw a historical milestone of a record-breaking total of 61,515,806 voters. The election witnessed the participation of all political parties, with the incumbent Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the opposition AL (AL) mutually accusing one another of supporting factions involved in illicit endeavours. A competitive dynamic existed between the two prominent political parties and their respective coalitions; they often engaged in a violent confrontation.

During the initial five-day period of the electoral process, a terrible total of nine individuals lost their lives, while an additional 1174 individuals had injuries as a result of confrontations linked to the elections. During a 12-day period spanning the election, a cumulative total of 16 individuals tragically lost their lives, while a substantial number of 2236 individuals sustained injuries. Over a period of 33 days, there was a recorded count of 55 fatalities and 5722 individuals who sustained injuries. In the course of the 51-day election period, a total of 80 fatalities and 7029 injuries were recorded (Democracy Watch, 2003).

According to Shujan, the reported number of deaths in the UP elections of 2003 was 23. The occurrence of violence can be attributed to the intense competition among the candidates and their respective supporters in their pursuit of electoral victory. The candidates frequently transgressed the established code of conduct for the election, resulting in repercussions like electoral violence. However, the overall environment surrounding the voting process appeared festive. The election authorities demonstrated impartiality and transparency in their conduct, while the high voter turnout indicated a significant level of public interest in participating in the electoral process. The election witnessed a voter turnout of 87% (Democracy Watch, 2003).

Electoral violence in the UP election of 2011

The government passed the LG (UP) Act, 2009 to make conduct of elections easier. The electoral process took place from May 31st to July 5th, 2011. Following the preceding electoral event in 2003, a similar phenomenon occurred in 2011. In the year 2011, Bangladesh experienced a total of 27 deaths, and 3,136 reported injuries in relation to the UP elections. According to reports published in five prominent national media outlets, a collective total of 436 individuals were

arrested, 15 individuals received gunshot wounds, and a total of 2754 cases were filed in relation to these incidents over the specified period (Democracy Watch, 2011).

The Democracy Watch report highlights instances of violence taken place during the election period. These incidents include clashes between supporters of rival candidates, confrontations between supporters of the winning and defeated candidates, an incident involving an attempt to seize a ballot box, the use of clubs and firearms by law enforcement agencies to prevent violence, instances of violence revolving around the election campaign, and attacks targeting family members of the winning candidates. The incidence of election violence amongst the supporters of the winning and defeated candidates was clearly evident.

Electoral violence in the UP election of 2016

The 2016 UP elections were held on a partisan basis. The electoral process comprised six distinct phases, each of which unfortunately witnessed incidents of violence. The year 2016 saw witness to a series of horrific instances of violence that were unprecedented in the context of local elections. Shujan characterised this election as the most hostile UP election in the history of Bangladesh, mainly due to electoral incidents and widespread electoral violence. Shujan also attributed to occurrence of significant electoral violence in 2016 to party-based elections.

Table 2: Number of death in different periods in 2016

Period	Number of Death
Pre-election	56
During Election	57
Post-election	33
Total number of death	146

[Source: Shujan, 2016]

According to Bangladesh-based organization Democracy Watch, 89 people were killed in pre- and post-election violence, and 53 were killed on election days. Of these 142 deaths, at least 60 were the result of factional clashes (Tasneem, 2021).

Table 3: Electoral Violence in LG election of 2016

Phase	Held on	Violence types/killed
1 st Phase	22 March 2016	21 people were killed, more than 2000 were injured
2 nd Phase	31 March 2016	11 people were killed, more than 1100 were injured
3 rd Phase	23 April 2016	12 people were killed, more than 900 were injured
4 th Phase	07 May 2016	19 people were killed, more than 1000 were injured
5 th Phase	28 May 2016	30 people were killed, more than 600 were injured
6 th Phase	04 June 2016	15 people were killed, more than 350 were injured

[Source: The Daily Songram, (2016)]

The elections for the UP (UP), which is the LG body in Bangladesh, took place from March 22 to June 4, 2016. A total of 263 incidents of political violence and protest were documented during the electoral period, with an average of 25 occurrences per week (ACLED, 2016). According to Democracy Watch, the total number of deaths was 142, and the number of injuries was 11602. The death toll showed that 46 out of 64 districts had seen the killing of people.

Electoral violence in the UP election of 2021-2022

In the year 2021 elections were held in eight different phases to the electoral process, and violence marred each one of them. According to Ain-o-Salish Kendra, a rights group located in Dhaka, Bangladesh, a total of 85 individuals have lost their lives and over 6,000 individuals have sustained injuries as a result of election-related violence since January (Al Jazeera, 2021). The data on fatalities indicates that a total of 44 districts out of the 64 under consideration had instances of deadly violence resulting in the loss of life. An upward trajectory observed in the fatality rate over successive phases.

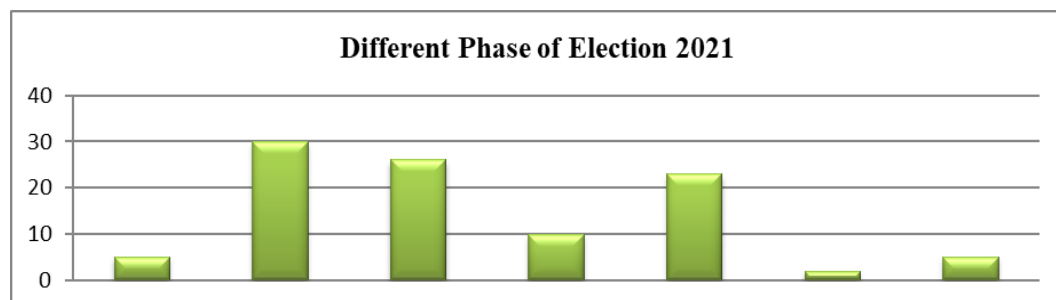
Table 4: Electoral violence in LG election of 2021

Phase	Held on	Violence types
1 st Phase	2 June & 20 September 2021	6 people were killed (Daily Star, 2021)
2 nd Phase	November 11, 2021	18 killed and several hundred injured during campaign (Daily Star, 2021)
3 rd Phase	November 28, 2021	7 killed on the day of election (Prothom Alo, 2022)
4 th Phase	December 26, 2021	4 killed on the day of election (Prothom Alo, 2022)
5 th Phase	January 5, 2022	10 killed in 5 districts (The Daily Star, 2022)
6 th Phase	January 31, 2022	30 killed in the elections of 5 th & 6 th phase (Sara Bangla, 2022)
7 th Phase	February 7, 2022	5 killed (Prothom Alo, 2022)
8 th Phase	February 10, 2022	Data unavailable

Based on information from local media sources, a minimum of 67 individuals have lost their lives and a significant number have sustained injuries in incidents of violence that have transpired throughout the initial three stages of the LG elections (Kamruzzaman, 2021). The level of political violence observed in the 2021 UP elections exhibits a notable increase when compared to prior electoral cycles. Numerous individuals of common status have tragically perished as casualties of this vengeful political agenda (The Daily Sun, 2021).

Instances of violence were observed during the nomination phase, the election phase, and the post-election phase. Conflicts arose between individuals advocating for candidates affiliated with the AL and independent contenders who opposed the ruling party's further consolidation of authority inside the nation, which boasts a population of 165 million.

Table 5: Death toll in the 10th UP elections



[Source: The Prothom Alo (08 February 2022)]

As per the findings of Ain O Salish Kendra, the UP election held in 2022 in Bangladesh has surpassed previous records in terms of electoral violence. The Election Commissioner termed this UP election a "bloody election" (Bangla Tribune, 2022).

A Comparative study on the nature of electoral violence

The implementation of party-based LG elections in Bangladesh has significantly altered the dynamics of electoral violence. Electoral violence occurred among the supporters of major political parties in the non-partisan UP elections due to the presence of numerous rival factions. Most violent incidents occurred between the ruling party and the primary opposition party. In electoral processes conducted under a party-based system, a significant proportion of instances of electoral violence have been observed between the followers of candidates affiliated with the ruling AL and those supporting rebel candidates. A great number of candidates affiliated with the BNP have formally decided to abstain from participating in electoral processes across various levels while some have autonomously contested electoral campaigns. There has been an observable increase in the occurrence of uncontested victories during partisan elections. A total of 371 seats from the AL were uncontested in the UP election of 2021–2022 (New Age BD, February 7, 2022).

In the 10th UP election, a significant number of 43 percent of insurgent candidates emerged victorious in their contests against the officially nominated candidates of the ruling political party throughout the initial six phases of the electoral process. The insurgent candidates' widespread appeal, the support of prominent national figures, and the perception among many candidates that the party undervalues them are just a few of the reasons for their successes. Then AL chairman of the Faridpur Upazilla and a member of the district's advisory board Shamsul Haque told the Daily Prothom Alo that the nomination of people who were not eligible was the reason (Rahman, 2022).

Table 6: Factors contributing to electoral violence in Bangladesh

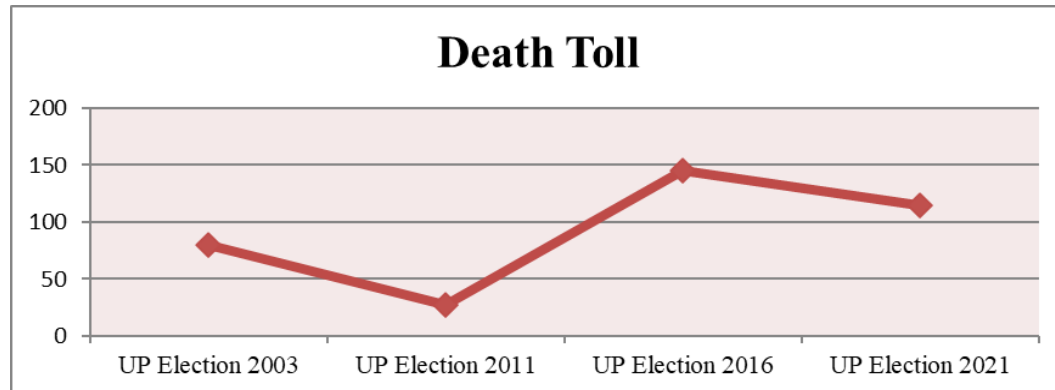
Non-Party	Common Factors	Party-based
No party symbol but significant influence in electoral process; Inter-party rivalry; To ensure victory both for the party and individual; To serve the interest of the political party	Personal and group conflict; To ensure individual winning; Violence prone mentality; Lust for power; To win at any cost	Party symbol; Intra-party rivalry; To ensure individual winning; Lack of power balance

Major findings of the study

According to the research, incidents of violence have marred every UP election since 2003. The implementation of party-based LG elections has transitioned from being predominantly inter-party in nature to primarily intra-party in recent times. In the current political landscape, the absence of a robust alternative political party has given rise to electoral violence among various factions within the ruling AL. A party-based electoral system during the initial stages of elections has been associated with an upward trajectory of electoral violence in the country, appears to be a subsequent decrease in such incidents during the latter stages. One of the key findings of this study is the notable escalation of electoral violence observed in party-based LG elections as compared to non-party LG elections. The research findings indicate a decrease in the number of casualties and fatalities during the 2011 UP (UP) election compared to the 2003 UP election. Furthermore, instances of violence during the 2021–2022 elections were seemed to be lower than those recorded in 2016. Factors such as the impartiality and transparency of the election administration, the existence of a power-balancing structure to

accommodate significant opposition, and the public's engagement in exercising their voting rights have been recognized as influential in discouraging instances of electoral violence.

Table 7: Death Toll in different UP Elections (2003-2021)



Limitations of the study

One key barrier to this study resides in the insufficiency of data about instances of electoral violence during the LG elections held in 2003 and 2011. The preceding scholarly articles have provided analyses and insights on the occurrence and dynamics of electoral violence within the context of parliamentary elections. Additional constraints encompass the insufficiency of financial backing and inadequate time allocation due to Covid-19 pandemic situation for acquisition of empirical data from relevant stakeholders via inspections on the ground.

Conclusion

Elections have long been a fundamental component of power transfer in nations with democratic government spanning several centuries. Electoral violence, a hindrance undermining democratic principles, is a prevalent phenomenon in both party-based and non-party LG elections since 2003. The average number of fatalities and injuries seen in the initial two LG elections held in 2003 and 2011 was lower compared to the subsequent two LG elections conducted in 2016 and 2021–2022. However, upon comparing the occurrences of violence in these two types of elections, the study demonstrates that party-based LG elections exhibit a higher fatality rate. The recent implementation of a party-based system for LG elections has given rise to intra-party violence, representing a novel manifestation of violence in LG elections nationwide. The research underscores a persistent presence of violence in UP elections since 2003, revealing a transformative dynamic in the shift to party-based LG elections, evolving from predominantly inter-party conflicts to intra-party tensions within the ruling AL. After an initial rise, the study sees a subsequent drop in violence during the later stages of party-based elections. It indicates an increase in violence during these elections compared to non-party elections, with factors such as fair election administration, power-balancing structures, and public participation in voting process being important.

In order to avoid electoral violence in Bangladesh, the political parties can strengthen internal party mechanisms to resolve intra-party tensions and promote the inclusion of a more robust opposition by creating a safe political environment. Emphasis should put on improving the electoral system that ensure the establishment and reinforcement of power-balancing structures

and enhance transparency in election administration. Public awareness and engagement in the electoral system by improving civic education are also necessary.

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