

Changing Dynamics of Electoral Violence in Bangladesh: A Comparative Analysis Between the 11th and 12th National Elections at the Two Constituencies

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Abstract: This comparative study of electoral violence drawing the case of 11th (2018) and 12th (2024) national parliamentary elections in two constituencies: Barisal-5 and Patuakhali-2 explores the patterns, causes, and consequences of electoral violence using qualitative methods like key informant interviews (KII), focus group discussions (FGD), and content analysis of academic and news articles. The findings of the study identify a shift from the inter-party violence in 2018 provoked by the rivalry between the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to intra-party violence within the AL in 2024 triggered by the boycott of elections by BNP. Findings also indicate that though fierce competition fuels electoral violence, the absence of opposition doesn't guarantee peaceful elections. Nomination contests, hegemonic campaign styles, and the use of retaliatory violence are key causes whose victims were inordinately economically disadvantaged and minority citizens. The article emphasizes electoral reforms aimed at institutionally enhancing independence and safeguarding vulnerable groups, and this article contributes to electoral violence literature in polarizing democracies.

Keywords: Electoral violence, Bangladesh, 11th National Election, 12th National Election, Awami League, BNP.

1. Introduction

Since its independence, electoral violence has compromised the democratic integrity of Bangladesh. Historically, Bangladesh's multiparty democracy has had violent electoral patterns influenced by political polarisation between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Patronage networks, insufficient institutional oversight, and socio-economic inequalities exacerbate electoral violence in Bangladesh, resulting in a rise in intimidation, voter suppression, and confrontations among party supporters during elections. When the caretaker government system dissolved in 2011, it raised serious concern on electoral integrity and increased violence during elections. Since 2009, the incumbency of AL and the declining influence of BNP have altered the dynamics of violence. During this period, the character of political violence has transitioned from

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inter-party battles to intra-party rivalries, particularly within the AL, as demonstrated in the national election of 2024. Poverty and other socio-economic inequalities render disadvantaged populations, including religious minorities, susceptible to coercion and compromise electoral integrity.

General elections, conducted every five years, have consistently demonstrated competition and violence, including physical assaults, voter intimidation, and anomalies (Islam, 2015). The 11th (2018) and 12th (2024) national elections illustrate these difficulties well, with the former resulting in multiple casualties and the latter witnessing a markedly low voter turnout due to the BNP's boycott. These incidents exemplify a broader trend wherein electoral violence functions as a tool to control politics under a winner-takes-all paradigm.

This research examines election violence in two seats of Barisal (Barisal-5 and Patuakhali-2) due to the competitive political environment. These two constituencies elucidate the manifestation of national electoral violence trends at the local level, characterised by urban-rural dispersion and a history of violence. The primary aim of the research is to analyse the changes in the patterns, causes, and effects of electoral violence between the 11th and 12th national elections and its impact on democratic consolidation.

2. Literature Review on Electoral Violence

Electoral violence undermines the democratic values by integrating physical or verbal acts of violence into the election process (Hafner-Burton et al., 2014). It can come in different form such as physical (assault), psychological (threat) or systematic (preventing voters from voting) manners (Nwolise, 2007). This can lead to significant intimidation of voters, disruption of the electoral process and influence democratic outcomes. Therefore, before we elaborate electoral violence within electoral politics, we must define and explain violence, political violence, and electoral violence. Violence in its broadest sense refers to the intentional use of physical force or power against individuals, groups, or property that results in, or has a high likelihood of resulting in, injury, death, psychological harm, deprivation, or social damage (Bardall et al., 2019). When such acts are carried out with the intention of influencing political authority, institutions, or power relations, they fall under the broader category of political violence. Political violence therefore encompasses collective acts committed by state or non-state actors aimed at altering, maintaining, or contesting political power structures, including repression, insurgency, terrorism, coups, ethnic conflict, or criminal activities with political motives (Höglund, 2009; Birch et al., 2020).

Broadly, electoral violence more specifically a form of political violence which has direct connection with the electoral process. Electoral violence includes coercive acts such as physical attacks, intimidation, harassment, or destruction of property intended to influence electoral processes or outcomes before, during, or after elections (Daxecker et al., 2019). Political violence can occur outside the electoral cycle in civil conflicts or state persecution, according to scholars (Höglund, 2009; Birch et al., 2020). Electoral violence is also distinguished by its timing within the electoral cycle, its targets, such as voters, candidates, party activists, journalists, and electoral officials, its motives of influencing electoral

outcomes, and its diverse forms, from intimidation and harassment to organised clashes and lethal attacks.

Globally, electoral violence happens due to political instabilities and socioeconomic disparities. Political elites often use bribery, intimidation and violence to remain in power, which eventually results in the distortion of elections and the democratic process. Weak political institutions, lack of security, and political order lead to election violence, especially during acute crises and ethnic polarisation (Кравченко & Лівенко, 2024). In Sub-Saharan Africa, and it is at its worst around the major election days and it has historical, ethnic, and socio-economic factors related. According to Goldsmith (2015) and Koko (2013), violence is a way of maintaining power for political groups and claiming political rights for minority groups in Africa. In Latin America, though in a less documented manner, and it might not be similar in form and magnitude to what is witnessed in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The electoral violence in Jamaica is usually accompanied by the problems of state capacity and partisanship (Birch, n.d.). In South Asia, democracies are much weaker because of socioeconomic inequalities, religious and ethnic tensions and institutional failures. These elements instigate political tensions, hamper democratic transition, and require reforms to increase the effectiveness of the democratic institutions (Thapa, 2024), such as improving electoral processes, enhancing the rule of law, and fostering inclusive political dialogue. Political parties consider electoral violence a fairly acceptable strategy of influencing or determining the election outcomes.

Bangladesh's political system has the confrontational bipolar structure, dominated by the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. This highly polarised bipolar party system encourages political actors to deploy both legal and illegal strategies to secure electoral advantages or maintain political dominance (Rahaman, 2007; Moniruzzaman, 2009). Two-party dominance creates a high-stakes atmosphere in which election victory is regarded as not only a political victory but also as the survival of the party (Islam, 2015). The incumbents use tactics such as intimidating the opposition and abuse of state authority to keep their grasp on power (Daxecker and Jung, 2018), which not only undermines democratic processes but also contributes to the overall climate of fear and instability in the political landscape. Bangladesh uses a majoritarian election system where the 'winner-take-all' system is more likely to increase competition at the constituency level, thereby increasing the rate of political violence, in comparison with Proportional Representation (PR) systems (Fjelde & Höglund, 2016).

Scholars also argue that the persistence of electoral violence in Bangladesh is closely linked to weak institutional constraints. Weak institutional checks, particularly an election commission perceived as lacking autonomy, have further enabled electoral manipulation and intimidation with limited accountability. Moreover, the politicisation of security agencies has blurred the boundary between state authority and partisan interests, creating what some analysts describe as a "party-police nexus" (Jackman & Maïtrot, 2022). The patron-client political culture of the country reinforces the use of violence to gain power by implying that loyalty is paid in exchange for resources (Islam, 2015). The historical background of the political violence, coupled with the absence of strong institutional protection mechanisms, creates the environment under which violence is institutionalised and continues through political means (Islam, 2011; Karim, 2019).

In Bangladesh, electoral violence has different regional trends in different ways both in urban and rural constituencies. The level of violence differs across constituencies depending on the interface between the individuals and the state and the information that parties possess about voter preferences (Akbar, 2016). Population density, socioeconomic mobility, and ethnic diversity in cities can raise tensions and violence. Anonymity and social disintegration in the city also increase electoral violence (Dorward et al., 2024). Cities like Dhaka are hubs of political power and economic opportunity, making them political battlegrounds. Politics in such areas are more challenging, and actors who dominate politics in such areas utilise violence to manipulate election results so as to sustain their dominance (Islam, 2015).

However, in rural constituencies, electoral violence is typically instigated by local political dynamics and competition for resources. Such regions experience a weak presence of state authority, which leaves local elites to have high influence in electoral processes (Mohamed, n.d.). Competition over the land and natural resources may cause conflicts that take the form of electoral violence. In rural settings, where the income and daily life of individuals are closely associated with natural resources and land and where local power structures play a significant role in shaping political behaviour, elections tend to unleash local tensions that have been existing locally (Moncada, 2013; Parvez, 2018).

Introducing party symbols in local government elections in 2015 has worsened intraparty tensions. Parties are now facing internal conflicts between the candidates who want to be nominated with the party symbol by showing their popularity and control over political institutions (Rahman & Nasrin, 2017). Intraparty violence is not only the collapse of a party's chain of command, but it is also an organised strategy for controlling resources and access to patronage. Clientelism plays a dominant role in the political system in Bangladesh, and patron-client relationships prevail in election tactics. This has resulted in some kind of authoritarian democracy where the incumbent party's intent to control the election often resulted in intraparty violence between factions fighting each other over patronage and resource allocations (Islam, 2023).

The violent role of student politics during elections is another unique feature of Bangladesh politics. Student groups affiliated with political parties commit violence to establish their dominance with the political establishment and gain political legitimacy. Such student groups, who are usually considered as the foot soldiers of political parties, serve as tools of electoral violence, making the cycle of violence continue even after elections (Suykens, 2018). Participation in violent activities can enhance political visibility and loyalty within party hierarchies, turning victimhood and militancy into forms of political capital (Suykens, 2018). This system has been even more consolidated with the integration of student politics in the national party structure, making violence a tool to possess power and to control it within the parties, which ultimately perpetuates a culture of fear and intimidation that discourages democratic engagement among the student population (Kuttig, 2022). While religious parties are sometimes portrayed in political discourse as key drivers of violence, empirical research suggests that secular political parties are more frequently involved in violent incidents than their Islamist counterparts (Hassan, 2023).

3. Methodology

The research was carried out in Barishal-5 (Constituency 123) and Patuakhali-2 (Constituency 112) in Bangladesh. Barisal Sadar Upazilla (sub-district) and Barisal City Corporation constitute Barishal-5, and Patuakhali-2 encompasses Bauphal Upazila. These parliamentary constituencies were selected to illustrate rural-urban contrast of electoral violence. An analysis of BNP-dominated urban area Barisal-5 and Awami League-dominated rural area Patuakhali will help to unveil political and geographical insights regarding electoral violence (Sandelowski, 1995).

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews were employed to gather data. FGDs were chosen for their ability to encourage community input and discussion. FGDs are cheaper and safer for open discussion. KIIs sought experts who could provide information and insights beyond the reach of the general public (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Participants with experience or knowledge of electoral violence were chosen using purposive sampling. This research engaged 40 participants in interviews. Two focus group discussions comprised 10 participants each, along with 20 key informant interviews. Politicians, students, entrepreneurs, academics, public officials, and NGO representatives engaged in focus group discussions. Five local politicians, five journalists, two government officials, two university teachers, two student leaders, two civil society representatives, and two NGO employees participated in the key informant interviews, all of whom were engaged in or possessed direct experience with the electoral process (Charmaz, 2004).

All the interviews including focus group discussions were recorded with consent and transcribed. To maintain anonymity, interview transcripts omitted participant identification. The analysis was thematic, therefore open and axial coding were used to find reoccurring themes and patterns in the transcripts (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Scholarly journals, publications, news items, and official documents were used to get secondary data, which was then used to build the theoretical framework, set the scene, and back up the results. Triangulation employing secondary data reduced bias, while 'member verification' guaranteed that the participants' contributions were expressed accurately. The study complied with ethical standards, including informed consent, participant rights, and data protection (Green & Thorogood, 2018).

4. Historical Context of Electoral Violence in Bangladesh

Political violence in Bangladesh tends to follow a cyclical pattern, often intensifying during parliamentary or local elections when competition for power reaches its peak (Rahman & Nasrin, 2017). In Bangladesh, electoral violence is not some isolated event but a reflection of deeper structural features of Bangladesh's political system. Scholars argue that confrontational politics, intense party rivalry, and recurrent episodes of political and electoral violence are common in Bangladesh politics. The country's bipolar party system, dominated by the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has fostered a highly polarised "winner-takes-all" political culture in which electoral victory determines not only governmental control but also access to state resources and patronage networks (Moniruzzaman, 2009; Islam, 2015). Electoral violence in Bangladesh manifests in a variety of forms, including hartals (general strikes), blockades, street clashes between

party activists, especially student wings, attacks on opposition supporters or minority communities, ballot box theft or arson, intimidation of voters and candidates, and intra-party conflicts. Both urban centres such as Dhaka and Chittagong and rural constituencies experience electoral violence, although empirical evidence suggests that incidents in rural areas often outnumber those in urban areas.

Since its independence in 1971, electoral violence has been one of the banes of the democratic aspirations of Bangladesh. The country has had eight (5th to 12th) parliamentary elections between the years 1991 and 2024, whereby all the elections had varying degrees of violence. The restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991 followed a decade-long military regime in the country led by Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981) and Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1981-1990). The 5th parliamentary elections held on 27th February 1991 under a neutral caretaker government helped to conduct a free, fair and inclusive election. Despite that, there are incidents of violence, as the inter-party clashes left 4 fatalities and 255 people injured (Rahman, 2021).

The Awami League (AL) boycotted the 6th election on February 15, 1996, which was run by the BNP government. This led to a lot of bloodshed. The inability of people to vote resulted in protests, which subsequently escalated into violence after the election, causing many deaths and injuries. With a 74.81% voter turnout, the seventh election (June 12, 1996) was more legitimate because it was run by a caretaker government. Fights between AL and BNP prior to the election resulted in 26 deaths and 746 injuries (Rahman, 2021). The 8th election, which took place on October 1, 2001, under a caretaker government, was one of the most violent. It resulted in 126 deaths and 5,149 injuries. Most of the deaths happened before the election when AL and BNP supporters fought each other because of deep political divisions. The 9th election, which took place on December 29, 2008, was peaceful, with only 5 deaths and 331 injuries. While the absence of deaths prior to the election demonstrated the effectiveness of institutions monitoring the situation, minor acts of violence continued after the election (Rahman, 2021).

Elections held under the caretaker government were historically less violent and more participatory. But the abolition of the caretaker government system in 2011, following a Supreme Court ruling, shifted elections under the grasp of AL-led administrations, which intensified electoral violence. The 10th election (January 5, 2014), boycotted by BNP due to the lack of a neutral caretaker government, was the deadliest, with 117 deaths and 5,335 injuries. Pre-election violence previously occurred mainly through opposition protests and primarily targeted political workers. However, this pattern has shifted, and civilians have increasingly become the victims (Rahman, 2021). The 11th election (December 30, 2018), participatory but criticised for rigging, saw 29 deaths and 13,380 injuries, with pre-election violence dominating due to AL-BNP clashes (Rahman, 2021). The 12th election (January 7, 2024), another non-participatory election boycotted by BNP, recorded 27 deaths and more than 3300 injuries (Human Rights Support Society, 2024). Allegations of rigging and intra-AL factionalism contributed to violence, though its scale was lower than in 2014, indicating a troubling trend of political instability and public unrest in the electoral process.

Table 1: Electoral Violence in Bangladesh and Causalities (1991–2024)

Election	Date	Pre-Election	Election Day	Post-Election	Total Deaths	Total Injuries
5 th	Feb 27, 1991	1 death, 65 injured	1 death, 100 injured	2 deaths, 90 injured	4	255
6 th	Feb 15, 1996	8 deaths, 813 injured	10 deaths, 300 injured	48 deaths, 2345 injured	66	3458
7 th	Jun 12, 1996	15 deaths, 511 injured	5 deaths, 150 injured	6 deaths, 85 injured	26	746
8 th	Oct 1, 2001	82 deaths, 3835 injured	5 deaths, 450 injured	39 deaths, 864 injured	126	5149
9 th	Dec 29, 2008	0 deaths, 93 injured	1 death, 100 injured	4 deaths, 138 injured	5	331
10 th	Jan 5, 2014	94 deaths, 4934 injured	18 deaths, 300 injured	5 deaths, 101 injured	117	5335
11 th	Dec 30, 2018	9 deaths, 12923 injured	18 deaths, 200 injured	2 deaths, 257 injured	29	13380
12 th	Jan 7, 2024	7 deaths, 1681 injured	3 deaths, 150 injured	17 deaths, 1496 injured	27	3327

Sources: Rahman, M. S. (2021); Human Rights Support Society (2024)

5. Electoral Violence in Barishal-5 and Patuakhali-2: Patterns and Causes

The National Elections in 2018 and 2024 show how political contexts can trigger political conflicts. During these elections, electoral violence in both constituencies demonstrates how political situations can lead to political disputes. Conflicts between and within parties occurred in Barishal-5, an urban competitive constituency, during all three stages of election. On the other hand, due to factional politics, Patuakhali-2's Awami League domination confined the violence primarily within the party, resulting in fewer incidents affecting the broader electoral process compared to the more competitive Barishal-5 constituency. This comparison demonstrates that electoral violence is more latent in one-party control and more common in competitive environments.

Patterns of Electoral Violence in Two Constituencies:

Though Patuakhali-2 and Barishal-5 are just a few hours from each other, they show two different versions of Bangladesh's electoral scenario. Electoral violence has traditionally been a result of conflicts between and within parties in Barishal-5. In a regional setting, it reflects national political themes, including intra-party factional politics in 2024 and the use of state apparatus to crush opposition in 2018. In Patuakhali-2, the dominance of one party may reduce interparty conflict; however, it could also lead to violence within that same party.

Barishal-5: An Abundance of Urban Rivalry

Pre-election Violence:

In both elections, the Barishal-5 constituency mirrored the bigger national struggles of clashes between different parties and fierce battles within the same party and showed how political competition can turn violent. The Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh

Nationalist Party (BNP) engaged in a high-intensity and somewhat lopsided race in the 2018 election. A civil society member pointed out in an interview that the BNP's nomination procedure divided the party into opposing groups, giving the AL an 'additional advantage' going into the campaign. (Personal Communication, April 28, 2024). This fragmentation coincided with a heavily biased electoral environment. The BNP candidate had to 'survive by fighting against its two main rivals, the election administration and the Awami League' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024) in the face of a unified AL machine and persistent resistance from the government and law enforcement agencies. Reports of arrests, intimidation, and targeted harassment underscored the partisan role of the state apparatus in shaping the contest.

In contrast, the BNP did not participate in the 2024 election, which resulted in increased intra-party rivalry in place of inter-party competition. The ruling party were divided into opposing groups due to nomination conflicts, some of which supported independent candidates. According to a teacher of Barisal University, this created 'extra heat in the election field that directly fuelled violence' (Personal Communication, April 27, 2024). Both main candidates were connected to the ruling party; therefore, law enforcement and administrative organisations took an exceptionally impartial approach. But being neutral didn't stop the violence. Supporters of competing AL-backed candidates attacked each other, vandalised property, and threatened each other, and activists from both sides were hurt.

In both elections, the pre-election phase was the most turbulent time when internal or interparty political disagreements erupted into open conflict. The struggle in 2024 was fuelled by intense rivalry for power within the ruling party, whereas in 2018, it was influenced by state-enabled repression of the opposition.

Election-day Violence:

Although there were no major incidents of physical violence reported in Barishal-5 on election day during the 2018 election, the contest was anything but peaceful. The Awami League (AL) and law enforcement agencies, according to the BNP, routinely prevented its polling agents from entering the polling booths in around 70 of the 174 voting centres, undercutting a crucial measure to ensure electoral transparency. As one BNP leader recalled, 'Awami League leaders, workers, and law enforcement agencies stopped me from entering the polling station on the morning of the election day' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024).

The obstruction extended to voters, with targeted suppression preventing known BNP supporters from entering polling centres. A supporter of BNP recounted, 'I was being stopped on Sadar Road and forcibly sent home without being allowed to vote' (Personal Communication, April 29, 2024). BNP leaders alleged, 'AL activists cast fake votes in full view of law enforcement agencies, who remained silent' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024). By midday, the BNP candidate boycotted the election, withdrawing agents and effectively ceding control of the remaining process. As a Barisal University teacher observed, 'After BNP's withdrawal from the election, no incident of violence occurred during the rest of the election day' (Personal Communication, April 27, 2024). Thus, the

2018 contest showed that procedural exclusion (limiting access, participation, and observation) could secure electoral control instead of overt clashes.

In contrast, the 2024 election unfolded without BNP's participation, replacing opposition suppression with intra-party rivalry between the AL nominee and an independent candidate drawn from AL's own ranks. The most notable incident occurred in the morning at Bottola polling station, where the independent candidate alleged that he was attacked in a stronghold of the AL nominee, a charge denied by the AL candidate. A journalist described the atmosphere as 'Both factions have tried to exert some sort of influence at the polls' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024). Throughout the day, accusations of vote rigging and blame-shifting surfaced, but the administration rejected them as unfounded. The aggressive posturing, mutual accusations, and attempts to sway perceptions revealed an election-day atmosphere still characterised by competitive disruption even though the physical violence was modest and contained.

Across both elections, Barishal-5's election days were less about large-scale clashes than about controlling the mechanics of voting. In 2018, the outcome meant opposition exclusion backed by partisan state forces; in 2024, it meant factional skirmishes and credibility battles within the ruling party's own electoral space. In each case, the constituency demonstrated how, even without overt physical violence, election day could serve as a carefully managed arena for consolidating power.

Post-election violence:

In the 2018 election, the post-election period in Barishal-5 was unusually calm for a constituency with a long history of combative politics. The BNP's decision to boycott the election midway through voting day effectively eliminated violent retaliation. The disappearance of opposition leaders and activists from public view left the winning Awami League (AL) with no opponent. As one civil society member explained, 'Since the BNP boycotted the election on the election day, the BNP leaders and activists went into hiding to avoid violence. As there was no adversary, there was no major violence and conflict' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024). This absence of political confrontation produced a rare moment of stability: local governance continued without partisan street battles, public services remained uninterrupted, and residents could turn their attention to economic and social concerns.

The 2024 election had a dramatically different outcome. Defined by intra-party struggle within the AL, the aftermath became a forum for settling factional disputes. Supporters of the victorious AL candidate, Zahid Faruk, allegedly orchestrated targeted attacks on allies of defeated independent candidate Salahuddin Ripon, including an attack on Anwar Hossain, vice president of the Barisal City AL and a prominent participant in Ripon's election campaign. A civil society member observed, 'After the election, the existing problems between different groups of Awami League in Barisal turned into open violence... Grouping politics within the Awami League took the form of open violence' (Personal Communication, April 28, 2024). According to reports, winning factions visited rivals' houses and issued threats, advising them to leave the area or suffer consequences.

To avoid additional harassment or expulsion, the losing party usually had to negotiate directly with the dominant group in such a situation.

Taken together, the contrasting post-election outcomes illustrate how the absence or presence of a viable opposition shapes the tenor of political life after the polls close. In 2018, the vacuum left by the BNP's withdrawal removed the conditions for immediate post-election violence; in 2024, the internal factions within the ruling party ensured that the struggle for supremacy did not end at the ballot box but spilt over into targeted retribution, intimidation, and the reassertion of factional dominance.

Patuakhali-2: A Rural Stronghold of Power

Pre-election violence

Patuakhali-2, a long-standing Awami League (AL) stronghold in Bangladesh's Barisal division, shows how when the most intense conflicts take place within the ruling party, safe constituencies may nevertheless be tumultuous political theatres. Even in the absence of intense inter-party competition, factionalism, psychological pressure, and strategic obstruction affected pre-election dynamics in both the 11th and 12th National Parliamentary Elections.

In 2018, although three candidates contested the seat, the AL nominee was by far the strongest contender. As one senior AL leader explained, 'Since independence, Patuakhali-2 constituency has been one of the Awami League's strongest strongholds; the competition for party nominations among Awami League leaders is intense; as a result, different types of violence arise' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024). The nomination process triggered deep internal divisions, with five or six contenders mounting vigorous campaigns for endorsement. While physical clashes were rare, locals sensed a climate of 'silent violence' involving verbal abuse, intimidation, and behind-the-scenes threats.

The BNP, the main opposition, struggled to mount a serious challenge. Administrative and political pressures, including alleged demands that BNP leaders and activists leave the constituency, further eroded their campaign capacity. One BNP leader argued, 'The AL sought to single-handedly dominate this seat by obstructing BNP rallies and grassroots outreach' (Personal Communication, May 3, 2024). As a result, physical violence was minimal, but political competition was heavily skewed by internal AL rivalries on one side and systematic suppression of the opposition on the other.

In 2024, the BNP abstained from the election, leaving the AL and the Jatiya Party as the nominees. The true competition was inside the AL; the Jatiya Party actually presented little threat. Factional infighting grew more intense because the party's nominee was almost certain to win because of BNP's absence. To demonstrate widespread support for party leaders, candidates and their followers participated in rallies, social media campaigns, and verbal altercations. Psychological pressure on competing factions was common, as were personal attacks that frequently questioned opponents' political loyalty or morals. A local journalist observed, 'Awami League is unbeatable in the election field in this seat. Violence, both physical and psychological, is rampant around nominations for this seat' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024).

Even in the absence of substantial inter-party competition, Patuakhali-2's pre-election phase was the most volatile of both elections. Conflict in 2018 combined nomination-driven intra-party strife with state-enabled opposition suppression; in 2024, with no viable opposition left, the fight for supremacy was fought almost entirely within the AL itself, turning the pre-election phase into a high-stakes arena for factional power struggles.

Election Day violence

The 2018 Patuakhali-2 election day was free of violent altercations despite a pre-election atmosphere characterised by 'silent violence', intra-party rivalry, and accusations of opposition suppression. Bauphal Upazila saw no incidents, which local law enforcement ascribed to a strategic security apparatus that included pre-positioned forces, ongoing intelligence monitoring, and increased policing throughout the constituency. A local journalist linked this absence of violence directly to the weakened position of the BNP and said, 'BNP leaders and workers were disappointed when BNP candidates left the election field two days before the election. On the election day, no activity from BNP leaders and activists was visible. As a result, no violence was observed' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024).

The BNP's ability to monitor voting or contest was weakened by their reduced presence, which also prevented them from posting polling agents in the majority of polling stations. BNP's representation had completely vanished from polling stations by lunchtime, which fuelled rumours of intimidation, compulsion, or just plain demoralisation. However, the lack of official complaints preserved the appearance of a peaceful election day, whether due to suspicion of the grievance procedure or fear of reprisals. As one AL leader noted, 'Historically, Patuakhali-2 has been the Awami League's stronghold. The BNP has been unable to send agents to every polling station because of their political incompetency' (Personal Communication, May 3, 2024).

If 2018's calm reflected a mix of strategic suppression and opposition weakness, 2024's polling day was the outcome of an even more decisive reality: the BNP boycott. With the Jatiya Party posing no credible threat and other contenders lacking both organisational presence and public recognition, the AL candidate's victory was effectively predetermined. Polling stations opened on time, voting proceeded without disruption, and no reports of intimidation or irregularities surfaced. As one university teacher observed, 'Except for the Awami League candidate, all the candidates are strangers in this constituency. As there was no strong competition, the Awami League candidate won easily and without any violence' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024).

The absence of formal challenges from losing candidates reinforced the perception of a fair, peaceful, and uncontentious process. In a political culture where defeated parties frequently allege fraud, the lack of post-poll accusations marked Patuakhali-2's 2024 election as exceptional.

In both elections, Patuakhali-2 election day was a controlled environment where competition was either completely absent (2024) or neutralised (2018). The boycott made sure that no significant opposition joined the field at all in 2024, while demobilisation and strategic suppression rendered the still-existing BNP ineffectual in 2018. The seeming

serenity in each instance concealed the underlying reality of a political climate in which contestation had been structurally restricted long before votes were cast.

Post-election violence

Following the 2018 election, Patuakhali-2 entered a post-poll period entirely free of violence. This calm was neither accidental nor spontaneous; it stemmed directly from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) tactical withdrawal from the constituency before the polling closure. Anticipating possible clashes with Awami League (AL) supporters celebrating victory, BNP leaders and activists vacated the area, removing any immediate triggers for confrontation. As one university teacher explained, 'BNP leaders and workers left the area to avoid violence after the election... the winning candidate does not have any kind of rival in the constituency. As a result... the post-election period was very calm and violence-free' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024).

AL leaders and activists faced neither provocation nor the chance for post-election retaliation because there was no competing group to target. In addition to facilitating the AL's consolidation of power, the lack of a rival prevented the disturbances that usually accompany contentious decisions. Government initiatives could be carried out without partisan resistance, and daily social and economic life continued as usual. Although politically costly, the BNP's deliberate absence protected the constituency from the damaging escalation that frequently follows closely contested outcomes, such as protests or violent clashes that often arise in highly competitive electoral environments.

If 2018's post-election stability was born from tactical avoidance, 2024's tranquillity was rooted in political inevitability. With the BNP boycotting the race and remaining challengers posing no substantive threat, the AL candidate's victory was assured well before ballots were cast. The campaign had been largely uncontested, and this absence of competitive tension carried into the post-election phase. As one journalist described: ‘

There was no contest in the Patuakhali-2 seat in the 12th National Parliament election. The rival candidates were fragile and not active in the election field. After the election, the victorious Awami League activists did not commit any kind of violence. Peace and order prevailed in the entire constituency (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024).

In an unusual display for Bangladeshi parliamentary politics, candidates from all sides demonstrated mutual respect and instructed their supporters to remain tolerant, creating what many described as the calmest post-election period in the constituency's history. Without political grievances to avenge, the post-poll environment became an unbroken continuation of the non-confrontational campaign period.

Patuakhali-2's post-election politics in both elections showed that the absence of violence does not always indicate reconciliation but rather the elimination of competitive opportunities. In 2018, the opposition's preemptive withdrawal prevented potential conflicts from arising, while in 2024, the election campaign was so one-sided that no lasting animosities emerged during the post-election period. In both scenarios, an

imbalance in political power played a more significant role in maintaining peace than any genuine agreement.

5.2 Causes of Electoral Violence in Two Constituencies

The causes of political and electoral violence often overlap. High-stakes competition for political power, weak democratic institutions, exclusionary political practices, intense political polarisation, patron-client networks, and economic inequalities all contribute to the emergence of violence within political systems (Fjelde & Höglund, 2016). In many contexts, political elites strategically mobilise violence to intimidate opponents, control voters, or consolidate authority; in other cases, violence may emerge from grassroots grievances or spontaneous mobilisation. Electoral violence in Barisal 5 and Patuakhali 2 is not a random occurrence but a result of political, social, and structural anomalies across the nation. In Barisha-5's high-stakes politics, nomination disputes, campaign clashes, revenge cycles, partisan administration, vote manipulation and digital and rhetorical incitement have amplified tensions both within and between parties. The 2018 election brought AL and BNP into confrontation, whereas BNP's boycott in the 2024 election shifted the violence among the factions of AL. By contrast, Patuakhali-2's AL stronghold experienced similar causes with less physical violence due to assured victory and absence of strong opposition. Together, these cases show how the same categories of electoral conflict are refracted through the prism of local political realities, producing either volatile street battles or quieter but still politically charged contests.

I. Intra-Party Nomination Disputes

In Bangladesh, nomination-related disputes are widespread and traditionally have led to electoral violence. Neither of the two constituencies is an exception to that. For example, in Barishal-5, nomination battles were a key motivator of violence, notably inside AL, due to the constituency's high-stakes urban milieu. While inter-party (AL-BNP) disputes dominated in 2018, intra-party disagreements over nominations exacerbated underlying antagonism. 'BNP's nomination disputes split their voters, weakening their campaign and sparking minor clashes among supporters,' a civil society member noted (Personal Communication, April 28, 2024). In 2024, when the BNP boycotted, fights broke out between AL candidates who were trying to get nominated. A university teacher described, 'Multiple AL candidates vied for nominations, leading to factional fights; supporters of non-nominated heavyweights attacked official candidate's camps' (Personal Communication, April 27, 2024). A journalist added, 'AL's nomination process was a war zone; dropped candidates backed independents, escalating violence' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024).

At Patuakhali-2, which was an AL-dominated rural constituency, nomination disputes within AL were less violent but still significant. In 2018, internal AL competition created silent aggression. A senior AL leader explained, 'Nomination battles are fierce here; five or six candidates campaigned for AL's endorsement, leading to threats and verbal abuse' (Personal Communication, May 3, 2024). In 2024, with BNP absent, AL's nomination process involved verbal sparring and public displays to secure party support. A journalist recounted, 'AL candidates engaged in heated debates and rallies to prove their worth, but

physical violence was rare due to AL's assured victory' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024).

II. Campaign Clashes

In the competitive setting of Barishal-5, campaign events like rallies and processions served as hotspots for violence. AL hindered the BNP's campaign in 2018, which resulted in conflicts. 'AL activists disrupted our rallies in Barisal city, cornering our supporters and sparking scuffles,' a BNP leader recounted (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024). 'AL's youth and student wings targeted BNP's election camps, creating fear among voters,' a journalist noted (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024). In 2024, supporters of official and independent candidates attacked each other's election camps, resulting in a predominance of intra-AL campaign conflicts. 'AL factions vandalized rival camps, burning motorcycles and injuring supporters to assert dominance,' said a civil society member (Personal Communication, April 28, 2024).

Campaign-related violence was minimal due to AL's dominance and opposition's weakness in Patuakhali 2. In 2018, AL's campaign efforts faced little resistance, but BNP reported obstructions. A BNP leader noted, 'AL blocked our rallies in Bauphal Upazila, using verbal threats to stop our campaign' (Personal Communication, May 3, 2024). In 2024, with BNP boycotting and Jatiya Party candidates lacking visibility, AL's campaigns proceeded unopposed. A journalist explained, 'AL's rallies were unchallenged; other candidates had no campaign presence, so no clashes occurred' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024).

III. Revenge and Vendettas

Political and personal retaliation, particularly during the post-election period in Barisal - 5, greatly exacerbated the violence. Due to the BNP's exit in 2018, retaliation was less prevalent, although underlying resentment remained. A BNP leader hinted, 'AL targeted our workers after the election to settle old scores from past elections' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024). In 2024, intra-AL vendettas erupted after the election, with supporters of AL's Zahid Faruk attacking Anwar Hossain, a backer of independent candidate Salahuddin Ripon. A civil society member recounted, 'AL factionalism led to brutal assaults; Anwar was attacked at a college for supporting Ripon' (Personal Communication, April 28, 2024). Threats to Ripon's supporters, as the member added, 'instilled fear to reinforce AL's control' (Personal Communication, April 28, 2024).

In Patuakhali-2 revenge-driven violence was negligible due to AL's dominance and the opposition's absence. In 2018, BNP's preemptive withdrawal prevented retaliatory clashes. A college teacher observed, 'BNP leaders departed to evade AL's post-election retaliation, thereby maintaining peace' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024). In 2024, the lack of competition eliminated motives for revenge. A journalist stated, 'AL's enormous margin and weak rivals meant no grudges to settle; candidates urged tolerance' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024).

IV. Partisan Administration

In Barishal-5, the partisan nature of state administration was a key driver of violence in 2018, with AL leveraging law enforcement agencies to favor its campaign. A journalist described, 'Police openly backed AL, arresting BNP activists during rallies and ignoring their complaints' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024). A BNP leader added, 'Police threatened our families, ensuring AL's dominance' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024). In 2024, seemingly neutral administration reduced this cause, as both main contenders were AL-affiliated. A journalist noted, 'With only AL candidates competing, law enforcement stayed impartial, lowering tensions' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024).

In AL dominated Patuakhali-2, partisan administration had less of an impact. Administrative assistance helped AL in 2018, but there was little overt prejudice. 'AL used administrative pressure to block our campaign, but it was mostly verbal,' a BNP senior recounted (Personal Communication, May 3, 2024). According to an election official, 'With no real opposition, we had no reason to favor any side' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024); the administration maintained its neutrality in 2024.

V. Winning Imperative

The zero-sum dynamics of elections, wherein victory confers dominion over resources, incited violence in the competitive milieu of Barishal-5. In 2018, AL employed aggressive strategies to ensure victory at whatever expense. A member of civil society remarked, 'AL's desperation for victory resulted in voter suppression and obstruction of polling agents' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024). In 2024, groups within the AL vied for supremacy, as a university teacher observed, 'AL candidates perceived victory as a power struggle, inciting assaults on opponents' (Personal Communication, April 27, 2024).

The urgency to win diminished owing to AL's confident triumphs at Patuakhali-2. In 2018, AL's pre-eminence diminished the necessity for assertive strategies. An AL leader remarked, 'Our stronghold status ensured that the victory was inevitable; thus, we eschewed violence' (Personal Communication, May 3, 2024). In 2024, the absence of competition further undermined this cause. A journalist stated, 'AL's candidate encountered no opposition; thus, there was no necessity to contend for victory' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024).

VI. Digital and Rhetorical Incitement

Social media threats, ironic discourse, and deceptive campaign materials polarize adherents, engender fear, and provoke violence. This amalgamates digital communication, campaign rhetoric, and incendiary discourse to amplify psychological and physical aggressiveness. In 2018, AL launched digital warfare against BNP in Barishal-5. A university instructor stated, 'BNP activists were subjected to death threats on Facebook and was forced to flee for their life' (Personal Communication, April 27, 2024). A journalist observed, 'Candidates' derogatory remarks at rallies provoked confrontations among supporters' (Personal Communication, April 26, 2024). Digital hate campaigns and artificial intelligence exacerbated violence in 2024. A civil society member stated, 'The

contemptuous social media posts and videos containing false assertions from AL candidates provoked factional conflicts' (Personal Communication, May 5, 2024).

In 2018, the social media threats from AL instilled fear in BNP in Patuakhali-2. A member of civil society stated, 'AL activists warned BNP through online to withdraw from election, which escalated tensions' (Personal Communication, May 31, 2024). A journalist stated, 'AL-BNP provocations instigated altercations' during discussions (Personal Communication, May 27, 2024). An AL leader stated, 'The lack of competitors required a decrease in incendiary rhetoric,' indicating diminished provocation in 2024. Rural area of Patuakhali-2 have limited digital accessibility. The urban and technologically advanced setting of Barishal-5 exacerbated digital and verbal incitement, leading to heightened violence during both elections. The remote location of Patuakhali-2 and its lack of competitiveness in 2024 mitigated this issue.

VII. Electoral Malpractices and Vote Manipulation

Electoral fraud, vote purchasing, and coercion at polling stations undermined trust and incited protests. Election irregularities, illicit funds, polling booth violence, and the desire for victory collectively exacerbate this issue by seeking to alter the results illegitimately, frequently resulting in bloodshed. In 2018, BNP supporters engaged in violent protests in Barisal 5 following the AL's allegation of ballot steals. A student leader stated, 'AL coerced voters in Para-mahalla (localities), resulting in 70 injuries during confrontations' (Personal Communication, April 29, 2024). Such incidents occurred as a result of vote-buying and intimidation at polling stations. In 2024, illicit funds instigated electoral bribery that resulted in injuries to 20 individuals, as reported by an NGO worker. 'Affluent candidates expended millions, inciting conflicts' (Personal Communication, April 29, 2024). The election official stated, 'Allegations of underage voting resulted in minor altercations' (Personal Communication, May 5, 2024).

In 2018, the BNP alleged fraudulent voting in Patuakhali-2. A university teacher stated, 'AL's electoral manipulation resulted in altercations' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024). A BNP leader stated, 'The AL expelled our agents, exerting pressure on voters' (Personal Communication, May 26, 2024). The absence of vote-buying or related difficulties in 2024 were attributed to minimal competition. The competitive environment in Barishal-5 exacerbated misconduct, resulting in violence during both elections. Manipulation incited violence in Patuakhali-2 in 2018; however, the absence of competition in 2024 eradicated it.

6. Impact and Changing Dynamics of Electoral Violence

The consequences of electoral violence are profound, as it undermines the legitimacy of elections, discourages voter participation, deepens political polarisation, and, in extreme cases, may escalate into broader forms of political conflict (Kleinfeld, 2021). The electoral violence during the 11th and 12th National Parliamentary Elections negatively impacted Bangladesh's democratic process. In 2018, political animosity between AL and BNP resulted in numerous violent incidents that marred the election. Examples include institutional bias, obstructions in campaigns, and assault. The BNP's nonparticipation in

the 2024 election fostered tranquillity in Patuakhali-2. Political competitiveness influences violence, as evidenced by this alteration. Reports from stakeholders suggest that the system is dysfunctional, necessitating immediate measures for fair electoral oversight and violence mitigation, particularly in light of the recent political tensions and the history of violence surrounding elections in the region.

Political tensions escalated into violence prior to both elections, resulting in significant instability. In 2024, the ruling party experienced power difficulties following the suppression of opposition members in Barishal-5. These constituted the primary causes of the conflict. The primary competition for Patuakhali-2 occurred the year preceding the election. In 2018, party factions engaged in conflict with both the administration and the opposition, which led to a fragmented political landscape that influenced the election outcomes. By 2024, no significant resistance persisted, prompting the AL to contend for internal dominance. Factional power struggles prevailed prior to the election, contributing to a climate of instability that affected voter turnout and party cohesion.

Violence in 2018 created inequality and impeded voting participation. BNP activists in Barishal-5 experienced harassment. A senior BNP official stated, 'The assaults on our staff, the disruption of rallies, and the detention of 300 individuals rendered campaigning impracticable' (Personal Communication, April 27, 2024). A BNP spokesperson in Patuakhali-2 stated, 'The AL's hegemony, bolstered by police, forced 500 of our activists to flee, stifling our voice' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024). This violence stripped opposition supporters of their rights and instilled fear in the population. A teacher at Barisal University stated, 'Political parties foster a culture of fear to coerce apolitical voters into supporting the powerful' (Personal Communication, April 27, 2024). Voter suppression and systemic bias have undermined public confidence in the political process and democracy.

On election days in Barishal-5, instances of violence surpassed fears of voting. This indicates that partisan administration facilitated the marginalisation of the opposition in 2018. In 2024, the pattern indicated intra-party tensions and credibility issues within the ruling party's electoral domain, which may have contributed to a lack of trust among voters and raised concerns about the fairness of the electoral process. Although both instances lacked physical violence, election day was evidently orchestrated for the purpose of power consolidation, as evidenced by the lack of competitive candidates and the suppression of dissenting voices. The election day at Patuakhali-2 was tranquil. Competition effectively ceased in 2018 and vanished entirely in 2024. Each constituency's election-day tranquilly concealed the reality of limited competition prior to voting.

Violence underwent substantial alterations in 2024 as a result of the BNP boycott. Violence among the Awami League escalated in Barishal-5 due to nomination disputes and factional power struggles. A reporter stated, 'AL factions participated in daily confrontations, resulting in injuries to 30 supporters and the incineration of election camps, indicative of significant internal discord' (Personal Communication, April 28, 2024). Patuakhali-2 experienced a subdued campaign owing to minimal competition. An AL leader stated, 'The lack of competitors led to the absence of violence; we campaigned without interruptions' (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024). A civil society participant stated, 'AL ensured

victory through subtle intimidation, demonstrating control even in the absence of competition' (Personal Communication, May 5, 2024). This discrepancy indicates that party non-competition diminishes overt violence but does not mitigate more insidious electoral manipulation that undermines voter autonomy.

The political situation hinges on the existence of a credible opposition, as indicated by the polls. The BNP's withdrawal from Barishal-5 in 2018 averted post-election violence. In 2024, the ruling party's internal schisms resulted in calculated retribution, coercion, and dominance of factions outside the electoral process, which ultimately undermined democratic principles and led to widespread discontent among the electorate. The post-election dynamics of Patuakhali-2 indicated that the absence of violence does not inherently signify harmonious relations; it may rather reflect a deficiency in rivalry. In 2018, the opposition retracted, removing potential sources of violence; in 2024, an unequal electoral contest resolved all tensions in the post-election period. In both constituencies, political asymmetry prevailed over consensus, rather than fostering tranquillity.

The transition from inter-party to intra-party violence indicates systemic deficiencies that require remediation. In 2018, the Awami League's repression of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party incited turmoil. An AL leader remarked, 'Fifteen candidates vied for our nomination, inciting unprecedented factional violence' (Personal Communication, April 28, 2024). Both elections compromised democracy. A teacher from Barisal University stated, 'Violence obstructs authentic participation and diminishes the legitimacy of the election' (Personal Communication, April 27, 2024). Essential reforms, such as an autonomous Electoral Commission and transparency in digital incitement and electoral manipulation, together with appropriate nominations and sanctions, are necessary to resolve these concerns. In the absence of these safeguards, electoral violence would continue to instil fear and distrust in Bangladesh and undermine democratic consolidation.

7. Conclusion: Addressing Electoral Violence for a Democratic Bangladesh

This comparative analysis reveals that the complex interplay of institutional, social, and political elements jeopardises Bangladesh's democratic process. In the 2018 election, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party engaged in deadly conflict. The violence was due to issues with the electoral process, inequitable law enforcement, and complications with the campaign. The BNP's 2024 boycott altered the election scenario. In Patuakhali-2, violence diminished due to the absence of opposition; however, in Barishal-5, violence escalated due to internet hate campaigns and disputes regarding nominations. Both elections targeted workers from rival parties, non-partisan individuals, marginalised groups, religious organisations, and intra-party adversaries. It highlights the persistent issue of electoral violence and asserts that Bangladesh must implement urgent systemic reforms to enhance the fairness, transparency, and tranquillity of the electoral process. The shift in electoral violence from inter-party to intra-party conflict indicates deficiencies in the structure of Bangladesh's political system. In 2018, a BNP representative from Barishal-5 said, "They caught and beat up our workers to stop our campaign" (Personal Communication, April 27, 2024). In the same district in 2024, there was daily violence between different groups within the AL, which caused several injuries (Personal Communication, April 28, 2024). This story shows how groups inside a group can cause

violence outside of their group. In 2024, the relative peace of Patuakhali-2, which one AL leader called "no rivals, no violence" (Personal Communication, May 4, 2024), shows that competitiveness can lead to bloodshed. However, the lack of opposition does not guarantee democratic integrity because covert pressure continued, as evidenced by reports of intimidation and manipulation of electoral processes by the ruling party. These results indicate that party frameworks and unregulated political competition undermine electoral legitimacy, sustaining cycles of fear and distrust.

Electoral violence has repercussions that extend beyond physical suffering. It undermines voter autonomy, public confidence, and the integrity of democracy. According to an academic, 'Parties instil fear to deter apolitical voters' (Personal Communication, April 27, 2024); vulnerable communities, particularly the economically downtrodden and religious minorities, are more susceptible to intimidation. This sort of intimidation, coupled with online threats and misleading campaign information, fractures communities and deters public engagement. The occurrence of these issues in both elections underscores the urgent necessity for significant reforms, including the establishment of an independent Election Commission, transparent party nomination procedures, and robust regulations for internet platforms to prevent incitement. Restoring public trust necessitates ensuring that law enforcement remains impartial and that electoral regulations are adhered to to prevent vote-buying and ballot manipulation.

Ultimately, political parties, government authorities, and civil society must collaborate to prevent electoral violence. Bangladesh might enhance its democracy by fostering a culture of peaceful competition and using elections to accurately reflect the populace's desires. A civil society representative in Patuakhali-2 stated that 'violence will persist in hindering our democratic advancement' if these measures are not implemented (Personal Communication, May 5, 2024). Collaboration in ensuring an equitable, just, and violence-free election is the sole means to fulfil democratic aspirations.

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