JOURNAL OF ISSN 1529-0905

# Bangladesh Studies

VOLUME 9 NO. 2 2007

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# Democratic Performance in Bangladesh 1991-2006: A Political Measurement

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## Abstract

This study surveys the political performance of democracy in Bangladesh using a set of minimum criteria in three areas of democratic procedures: electoral procedures, legislative procedures, and procedures related to citizens' rights. The study contends that together these three areas are minimally constitutive of a democratic polity, and therefore should form the basis of a minimum performance evaluation. Contrary to recent assertions, substantial variation in democratic performance is found across the administrations that governed the country during 1991-2006.

### Introduction

Since the declaration of emergency rule in Bangladesh in January 2007, it has been increasingly asserted and accepted that democracy, as practiced in the country since 1991, has 'failed.' Some assertions go further, like those made by Bangladesh's Army Chief, who extends the failure of democracy and elected politicians to "the last thirty-six years" (BBC 2007a, BBC 2007b; "Digging In," *The Economist*, 4 April 2007). The discourse of democratic failure is undertaken partly to legitimize the authority of an interim caretaker government, and partly to provoke debate about institutional alternatives. But from the perspective of serious political analysis and democratic theory itself, how defensible are these claims? This is the question that the paper at hand seeks to explore.

The objective here is to provide a systematic measurement of democratic performance using a standardized set of criteria across the three democratic administrations that headed the country during 1991-2006. The first one was led by the center-right Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) from 1991 to 1996. The center-left Awami League (AL) governed from 1996 to 2001, followed by BNP once again from 2001 to 2006. 'Performance' itself is a loaded term, in both academic and popular usage. Moreover, there is no consensus among political scientists on the measurement or indicators of democratic performance (see, e.g., Bollen 1980; Bollen and Paxton 2000). Aspects of performance may include everything from the economy to the society, culture, peace and security, law and order, foreign relations, or even philosophical dimensions, such as defense of liberalism or stance toward distributive justice and equity. Most of these are related to the performance of a government, and many of them are thus seen included in the overarching concept of 'good governance' (Weiss 2000; Kaufmann and Kraay 2007). This paper, however, will concern itself to measuring *democratic* performance, not governmental performance. In other words, the objective would be to assess performance along indicators that are *constitutive* of democracy as a political system, that is, indicators that comprise the core aspects of the minimal definition of democracy.

A definition is not absolute; it is only valuable to the extent that it is workable or useful (Zuckerman 1991). I will therefore begin by establishing what I mean by the minimal working definition of democracy, and based on that, derive a set of performance criteria that will be employed to measure democracy as a political system. I will then apply these criteria systematically to evaluate the performance of the three administrations. In the final section, I will summarize the findings and implications and indicate some areas that would be served well by further research.

### Evaluating the Minimum Political Performance of Democracy

The major clarification that needs to be made at the outset is between democracy and representation, which are linked but separate concepts. As pointed out repeatedly by Hanna Pitkin (1967, 2004), democracy and representation originate from two distinct and mutually uneasy sources. Democracy connotes rule by the (eligible) people, along the lines of Greek city states, and representation connotes the decisional primacy of a few, who claim to act as agents of a larger group, which as a system began to emerge much later in England. Representation as such may have nothing to do with elections, and in this vein, in many countries, from Indonesia to Jordan to Guinea, a proportion of legislative seats for 'representatives' are selected, nominated, reserved ex officio, or appointed.

Another concept used at times as a yardstick for judging democracy is 'rule of law.' In a recent paper, Ganguly (2003) compares the quality of democracy between India and Bangladesh using rule of law, accountability, and governmental responsiveness as three of the four primary criteria. However, none of these is *constitutive* of democracy. For instance, the term 'rule of law' essentially indicates whether a polity is governed along predictable legal guidelines. Rule of law is extremely strong in Singapore—but Singapore is not an unqualified democracy: political freedom is restricted, and the ruling People's Action Party has won at least 95 percent of the seats in the last ten national elections, even though there were no balloting irregularities (Freedom House 2007). Rule of law or governmental responsiveness can be criteria for evaluating the performance of any regime type. But if the laws in question were promulgated primarily by freely elected public representatives, the polity would then have exhibited one of the constitutive aspects of democracy.

Among the features of democracy that are constitutive of its definition, the first and foremost is the procedure of contestable elections. Thus, the minimal definition of democracy favored by Robert Dahl and employed in a variety of quantitative research is not concerned with representation or rule of law; it defines democracies simply yet smartly as those regimes that hold elections that the opposition has some chance of winning (Przeworski et al. 2001). Many other theorists of democracy, including Schumpeter (1947), Huntington (1991), and Gastil (1991), also agree on the centrality of elections. Democratic indices, such as those prepared by Freedom House or the Polity IV Project also accord primary importance to the holding of competitive elections.[1] This, consequently, is our first criterion for minimal democratic performance: the holding of competitive elections that are free, that is, contested by meaningful opposition, and fair, that is, not rigged or biased from the process of voting through counting and the declaration of results.

Evaluating elections is the start. The Dahlian procedure-centric definition is unable—and indeed, uninterested—in the evaluation of democratic performance beyond the holding of free and fair elections, partly because criteria beyond the centrality and universality of elections can easily become subjective. Elections, however, are only episodic events. In Bangladesh, national elections are held every five years. Electoral fairness may have nothing to do with whether democratic *norms* or *values* are upheld in the following five years. But attempting to define or establish democratic norms are precisely where subjectivity may come into play. For some, economic equity may be a significant norm. For others, such as libertarians, equity or distributive justice may have little to do with democracy. Similarly, for some, shunning the parliament in favor of street politics, as has happened on many occasions in Bangladesh, may be a crucial violation of democratic norms, while for others it may be a crucial expression of democratic rights. Are there standards that can be established with regard to the political performance of democracy beyond election years?

The possible key to resolving this question is to take a cue from Robert Dahl and propose *minimal procedural* standards related to key political objectives of democracy as it is practiced day to day as a form of government. Both qualifiers, 'minimal' and 'procedural,' are important here. Once we go beyond electoral procedures, most treatments of democracy focus on the political process of decision-making. In fact, some definitions of democracy emphasize this as the most critical aspect, noting that democracy is a system that allows, unlike autocracy, the general population to participate in governmental decision-making (Amin 2004). Since participation entails delegated action by people's representatives, procedurally we will need to ask: To what extent are those who have been elected able to discharge their duties as legislators? Once elected, does the government rely on the parliament as the final legislative authority? Important to note here is that the primary burden of responsibility in this must fall on the party in power, just as, in Dahl's conception, the burden of conducting free elections is on the party in power. What is being proposed here is that the parliament, or the elected body of legislators, is minimally necessary to the functioning of democracy; all other related institutions, such as the judiciary or the ombudsman or vocal civil society, are additional enhancers, but not minimally necessary to the procedure of democratic decision-making. Being minimal, this criterion can be universally measured in all democracies; the ensuing performance indicator is the proportion of laws that are passed duly by the parliament as opposed to other authorities. The primary political objective of electing a parliament is to allow the representatives to legislate.

The final criterion relates to rights. Political rights are central to the concept of democracy, as democracy as a system is established and legitimized on the basis of

a polity protected by rights, from expression to voting. In this vein, Bollen's work on the measurement of democracy argues that political rights and liberties are the critical visible factors that ensure that 'non-elites' in a society have some influence or control over political elites (Bollen 1991). In other words, without rights there can be no popular participation or possibility of control over either elections or legislation. Democratic performance therefore is inseparable from the performance with regard to rights, and here too, the primary burden of responsibility is on the elected government. It is therefore not surprising that most studies of democracy and protection of human rights find a positive correlation between the two, that is, the more democratic a polity is, the more protected citizens are from human rights violations (Davenport and Armstrong 2004). There are various proxy measures for how well rights are protected under a democratic government, from the number of arbitrary arrests to more vague measures such as effective curbs on freedom of speech or organization. But the minimal indicator must concern the most fundamental of rights, the right to life. As proxy indicator of protection of rights, therefore, this paper will consider variation in the number of citizens killed extrajudicially by government agents, such as the police, the paramilitary, and the military. This is a particularly powerful indicator because of three factors. First and foremost, it concerns the right to life. Second, it points to violations by those (i.e., an elected government) entrusted to protect it. Third, it also provides a measure for the violation of due legal procedure, since the type of death with which the paper is concerned here takes place outside normal judicial oversight.

Of course these three layers are not exhaustive in the measurement of democratic performance. However, these three, I contend, together constitute the minimal procedural indicators of performance. As intimated earlier, indicators of substantive democracy will not only be complex to measure, but also ill-suited toward generalization with a good degree of precision. Procedural definitions and indicators are necessary to avoid this problem of 'conceptual stretching' (Sartori 1970; Collier and Mahon 1993), to allow better measurement, and to approximate universality. The goal in this paper has been to arrive at the *procedural minimum that can be considered constitutive of a democratic polity*. In other words, these are not 'optional packages' that can enhance different aspects of democracy. A system of checks and balances among different government organs, for instance, can enhance the performance of democracy by preventing absolute rule, but it is not constitutive of the definition of democracy in the fundamental way that respect for right to life is.

Figure 1 summarizes the rationale and description for the three minimum performance indicators. The proxy measurements are some of the avenues or methods by which the performance for each of the three indicators can be approximated. Once again, as in much of the social sciences, these are approximators. The question about the validity of these measurements is not whether they are exhaustive or whether other indicators are possible; the question is whether these are able to approximate the core issue raised by each of the indicators.

## Democratic Performance in Bangladesh

How would Bangladesh fare in the application of our set of procedural indicators of a democratic polity? Before answering the question directly, a few baseline points should be noted. Our task is not to explore whether democracy has performed better than authoritarianism. Nor are we interested in exploring if democracy is the right form of governance in Bangladesh. However, a question related to our study can be raised—and has been historically—by those who examine political culture, especially the public's predisposition toward democracy and democratic institutions (e.g., Almond and Verba 1989, Diamond 1993). If democratic performance has not been satisfactory, as the current emergency government has charged, it may be due to a public environment inhospitable to democracy (Huda 2007). Along this line, some have argued that the core principles enshrined in the Bangladeshi constitution itself run counter to the cultural and political beliefs of the majority (Amin 2004). There is also attraction, especially on part of supporters of the current emergency government, to the idea of the "Asian Way," a pseudo-democratic system with a strong leader, stylized along the lines of Malaysia's Mahathir Mohammed (Körösényi 2005).

### *Political Culture and Political Performance*

This study relies on several observations, foundational, behavioral, and attitudinal, to assume that there is strong support for a democratic system in Bangladesh. The basic democratic foundations, such as freedoms of expression, organization, and the

**Figure 1**
**Minimum Procedural Indicators of Democratic Performance**

| Indicator | Procedure Measured | Proxy Measurements |
|---|---|---|
| 1) Freeness and fairness of elections | The process of holding and conducting elections | (a) Are elections held on time?<br>(b) Does the opposition participate?<br>(c) Do voters participate?<br>(d) Is the election process considered acceptably fair?<br>(e) Are election results indicative of voter preferences? |
| 2) Primacy of elected legislature | The process of legislation through elected representatives | (a) Is the elected legislature responsible for making laws?<br>(b) Do parliamentary committees scrutinize bills? |
| 3) Respect for political rights | Due process in respecting fundamental rights of citizens | (a) Do extrajudicial killings of citizens take place? |

press have been generally enjoyed in Bangladesh. Restrictions on these, conversely, have been generally disliked and criticized by the broader public. The key behavior that characterizes democracy is political competition, which also can be assumed to be vibrant in Bangladesh. Although competition is restricted within political parties, ascent to political power at the national level since the early 1990s has been by and large regular, and subject to open, public competition, through elections held every five years. The third aspect, which I am terming 'attitudinal,' is about acceptance of political competition.[2] One aspect of this is the innovation of a "caretaker authority" system: three months prior to national elections, governments have handed over power to a caretaker authority headed by a Supreme Court Justice, which then organizes the elections and hands power back to the newly elected government. While the system is in flux now, this innovation and its institutionalization was an indication, between 1991-2006, that major parties had accepted the need to ensure procedural fairness and neutrality in the competition for national power.

Surveys of public attitudes also indicate that the public, at least during the period under study, valued democracy and democratic institutions over alternatives by a fairly large margin.[3] The World Values Surveys, conducted twice in Bangladesh in 1996 and 2002, found that between 90 and 93 percent valued democracy as the political system. Between 85 and 87 percent of respondents had confidence in the Parliament as an institution. For India and Pakistan, the figures were 41 percent and 73 percent respectively. On another question that asked whether "having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections" was good or bad, 82 percent in Bangladesh thought it was "bad" or "very bad." The corresponding figure for India was 30 percent and for Pakistan 59 percent.[4] Another survey conducted in 2000 by IFES, a Washington-based research group, found that between 90 and 98 percent of responders believed that officials should be elected at all levels of government, from local to national (IFES 2001). The majority of citizens wanted conflicts to be resolved through the parliamentary process. In practice as well, Bangladeshis have turned out in fairly large numbers to vote in national elections: 56 to 62 percent in 1991 (depending on source), 75 percent in 1996, and 75 percent in 2001.
Based on available evidence, the political culture of Bangladesh appears strongly supportive of democracy. This is the point of departure for this article. The task now is to evaluate, in context of this supportive environment, how the three democratic administrations have performed with regard to upholding the minimum constitutive procedural indicators or functions of a democracy proposed earlier.

***Electoral Procedures***

From the mid-seventies to 1990, Bangladesh was under authoritarian rule. It was deposed during the surge of democratic movements around the world in 1989-1990, and national elections were held in 1991. Between 56 and 62 percent of voters cast ballots, and elections were considered free and fair by both local and international observers. To ensure neutrality, major political parties had agreed to let one-time-only caretaker government (CTG) organize the elections. The CTG was led by a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. BNP was elected to power, winning 140 seats and receiving 30.8 percent of the vote. Awami League led the opposition bench with 88 seats, but had won 30.1 percent of the popular vote.

A major setback in the elections took place later during BNP's tenure. BNP proceeded to rig a parliamentary by-election in 1994 to get its candidate win a seat vacated by the death of a parliament member (Chowdhury 2003: 66-68; Hakim 2006: 73-91). The opposition parties combined and demanded that the one-time caretaker system be brought back to ensure that all future elections are free and fair. BNP refused the demand and the opposition decided to boycott upcoming elections, with legitimate fears of rigging. The parliament was eventually dissolved, and national elections were held in February 1996 without participation by the opposition. BNP won 289 out of 300 seats in a "nearly voterless" contest in which only about 10 percent of the voters cast ballots. In protest of the sham elections, professional organizations, trade unions, and wide swathes of the civil society began a non-cooperation movement against the government, in which even traditionally apolitical organizations like national chambers of commerce participated (Kochanek 1997). Finally, a section of civil servants refused to cooperate with the BNP-led government, and the government fell.

Holding one-sided elections in February 1996 was a severe blow to democratic performance, as the elections failed all of the proxy measurement criteria we had laid out. In the period of uncertainty after the fall of the government, there was even a small-scale attempt, in May 1996, at a military coup. The positive trend underneath was the attempt by the voting public to preserve democratic institutions and values. It is telling that only about 10 percent of voters participated in the February 1996 elections, indicating a rejection of an electoral contest deemed closed and unfair.

In view of a nation-wide demand for fair contest, BNP agreed to support the institutionalization of a caretaker government to organize every national election.[5] Fresh elections were held under a caretaker government in June 1996, with 75 percent voter turnout. Awami League (AL) was elected to power, winning 137 seats. BNP was a strong opposition, obtaining 104 seats. The elections were widely deemed free and fair. At the expiry of its term in 2001, AL handed over power relatively smoothly to another caretaker authority. In the 2001 elections, in which turnout was about 75 percent, power rotated back to BNP, which allied itself with the right-wing party Jamaat-e-Islami. The 2001 elections, however, were held amid a high degree of violence that claimed 150 lives, many of them religious minorities, who usually are supportive of the more progressive Awami League. Most international observers, however, considered the results generally acceptable, even with violence and irregularities. A crisis again arose at the end of BNP's tenure in 2006 when the party compromised the integrity of the system by handpicking a favorably-disposed Chief Election Commissioner and installing a biased chief of the caretaker government by first increasing the retirement age of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and then handing the job over to the President (who was appointed by BNP) extraconstitutionally. In addition, it rigged the voter registration process to inflate numbers in its support. With legitimate concerns about electoral rigging, the opposition once again combined en masse, eventually creating a political deadlock that paved the way for the declaration of a state of emergency and a military takeover.

***Legislative Procedures***

The first democratic government in 1991 was sworn in with enormous public optimism. The opposition, as well, began to work constructively inside the parliament. Proceedings and debates of the parliament were carried regularly on radio, and listened to and debated intently around the country, demonstrating a level of political enthusiasm rarely seen even in more mature democracies. By the mid-1990s, however, the government began to sidestep the parliament and resort decision-making increasingly in a core group within the executive. Between 1991 and 1996, more than one-third of the bills were enacted through executive ordinance rather than the legislative process. In addition, despite opposition demands, bills were not submitted to bipartisan parliamentary committees; in fact,

committees scrutinized only seven out of the 173 bills passed during this time (Ahmed 2003). After the rigged by-elections, the opposition left the parliament and took to the streets.

Once the 1996 elections under a caretaker authority were completed, both the parties returned to the parliament (known as the Seventh Parliament), with AL heading the government. The initial year and a half of the Seventh Parliament went well. Toward the end of 1997, however, the opposition (BNP) began agitation to withdraw a variety of corruption cases brought against leading BNP leaders, and began calling for the overthrow of the government. But apart from periodic walkouts and absences, parliamentary politics continued, largely due to the willingness of the government to work within parliamentary parameters. 97 percent of all bills were promulgated through the parliament during 1996-2001, in sharp contrast to the trend in 1991-1996. Moreover, every bill was scrutinized by relevant parliamentary committees (Ahmed 2003: 64).

By 2000, however, parliamentary processes became more confrontational again as parties began to prepare for elections. After the Eighth Parliament went into session following the 2001 elections, the newly elected BNP government exhibited a strong trend toward centralization of decision-making. A year and a half passed before the administration took the initiative to form parliamentary committees. According to a newsletter published by the opposition parties in May 2003, the government submitted none of the 54 laws passed by the Eighth Parliament for scrutiny by relevant parliamentary committees. AL also charged that out of the 111 discussion notices given at the Parliament of urgent matters of public importance, 104 that were submitted by AL members were disallowed (Awami League 2003). Newspapers also published reports about a quorum crisis due to an "unmatched record of absence." In 2001, *The Daily Star* reported that most of the younger members of the treasury bench had stopped coming to the parliament ("Parliament Activities," *The Daily Star*, 2 December 2001). In 2004, another analysis noted that for the first time in history, parliamentary proceedings had to be canceled, due to a lack of quorum (Mondal 2004). By 2005 the quorum crisis had become "chronic," according to a report by Transparency International, Bangladesh (2006: 2). By this time, the opposition party had resigned to the fact that the Parliament had been handicapped deliberately, and they thus began to boycott the parliament.

Full parliamentary statistics from this period are not available yet, but qualitative evidence support the partial data cited above. The main reason that the parliament had ceased to operate effectively is that the hub of national decision-making was shifted elsewhere through several dramatic rounds of centralization of power. Soon after BNP's electoral victory, a cabal of '21 Young Turks' led by the Prime Minister's son Tareq Rahman and responsible for BNP's electoral strategy began to exercise authority over much of the party's affairs. This occurred despite dissatisfaction by senior elected leaders. Even cabinet ministers complained that they were powerless and that decisions were being made "elsewhere" (Jahan 2003). In June 2002, this faction further sealed their authority by orchestrating a palace coup, first retiring the Chief of Army Staff, then forcing the country's President, Badruddoza Chowdhury, who was also the senior-most BNP leader and its co-founder, to resign from both the party and the presidency, and the next day, securing the appointment of the Prime Minister's son as the Joint Secretary-General of the party (Habib 2002). This placed him effectively as second-in-command, after his mother. In 2004, furthermore, this group initiated a reorganization of the district-level committees of the party to consolidate their authority over the local branches. In August 2005, violent clashes erupted within BNP in 35 districts around the country, prompted in part by this group's interference in the local branches without consulting experienced party leaders. Local members of the parliament were usually not privy to the process of recasting the local branches of the party ("BNP Dates with Disaster," *The Daily Star*, 3 August 2005).

Throughout the 2001-2006 period, the opposition raised in both the parliament and other public forums issues about the 'non-representative and non-accountable' nature of decision-making within the government, claiming that Hawa Bhaban, the office of the Prime Minister's son and his group, was "the de facto seat of power" in the country.[6] In April 2004, in protest of major decisions emanating from Hawa Bhaban instead of the parliament, the opposition tried to organize a picket of Hawa Bhaban, which the police suppressed, injuring 200, and arresting 2,000. Much of the civil society and the media also began to criticize the shadowy role of this group and its support by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Even parliament members of BNP have complained that it was "impossible to speak about Hawa Bhaban before the Prime Minister" ("BNP Bigwigs Wary," *The Daily Star*, 21 January 2004). In the crucial

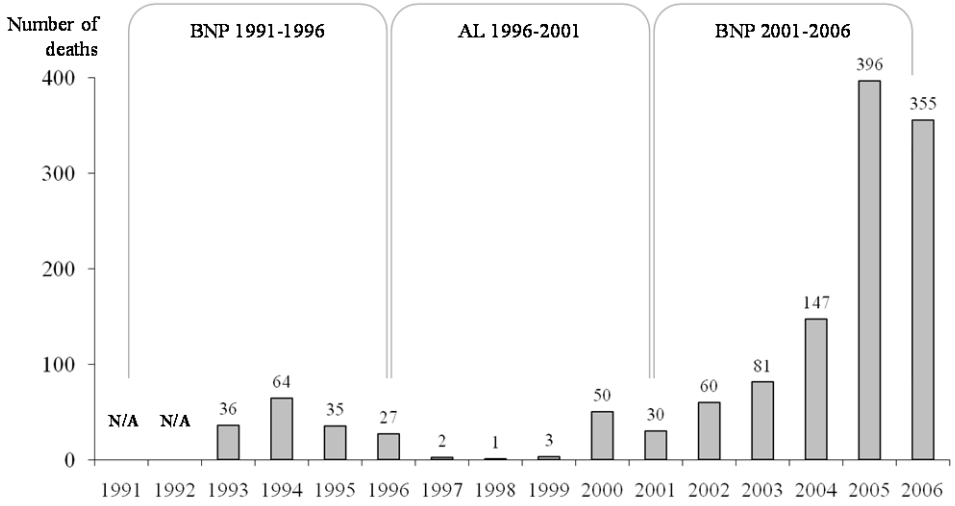
negotiations that went on between BNP and AL about reforming the electoral system between October 2006 and January 2007, the BNP General Secretary, aside from sitting with the rest of the party's senior leadership, conferred one-on-one with the Prime Minister's son for approval, reflective of his authority.[7]

The elevation of this group may seem as though it was simply a re-organization within BNP, with effects limited to internal party affairs. Its underlying significance, however, was to bypass both the parliament and the formal executive as decision-making authorities, removing access for opposition parties as well as the public in general. This was reflected in the 'quorum crisis' and other parliamentary statistics that indicate that legislative supremacy in the country had been compromised severely even before the emergency takeover in January 2007.

***Rights-Related Due Process***

During the first democratic administration of 1991-1996, the human rights situation in Bangladesh worsened after the AL-led opposition quit the parliament in the wake of rigged by-elections in 1994. The Awami League's subsequent agitation and the government's hard-line methods of repression contributed to a rapid deterioration of law and order: by one count in 1995, more than 5,000 violent crimes, including 1,100 murders and political assassinations, took place, the highest such figures in the country's history till then (Hossain 1996: 199). On average, government agents killed 41 people extrajudicially per year between 1993-1996.[8]

**Figure 2**
**Trends in Extrajudicial Deaths**




Source of data: US Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* (Washington, DC: US Department of State, various years)

The situation improved considerably in the next administration. Between 1996-2001, the number of extrajudicial deaths, including deaths in custody, fell to 19 per year on average, half the level of the previous administration. Importantly, the government was also able to sign a peace treaty that ended a decades-long insurgency in the tribal mountainous area of Chittagong Hill Tracts, which had been the region that had suffered the most systematic human rights violations in the country.

The situation then took a sharp turn to the worse, as shown in Figure 2. In the three months immediately following the 2001 elections, the BNP-Jamaat-e-Islami alliance, who had won the elections, went on a rampage, especially against Hindus and other minorities for their support of Awami League. According to many investigative reports in the local media as well as international human rights watchdogs, such attacks included killings, public assault, rape, looting of minority homes, and destruction of temples and properties, in the wake of which up to 20,000 Hindus fled the country (Human Rights Watch 2003, Refugees International 2003). The opposition also refused to accept the election results, and their protests were met with mass arrests. Terrorism against the opposition increased significantly, and peaked in 2004-2005, when several bomb attacks, targeted at the opposition leadership claimed the lives of senior opposition members, including the finance minister of the previous government. In one particularly brutal incident, about a dozen grenades were hurled at an opposition rally organized in downtown Dhaka to protest violence and attended by the entire senior leadership of the Awami League. The attack killed 22 opposition leaders and activists and injured about 200. In none of these incidents did investigation result in any significant breakthroughs, raising questions about the government's possible complicity (Karlekar 2005; also *New Age*, 20 August 2005; *The New Nation*, 10 December 2005). Freedom of the press was also violated considerably. As chronicled by Reporters sans Frontiérs (2005), for the three years between 2002 and 2005, "Bangladesh was the country with the largest number of journalists physically attacked or threatened with death."

The violence correlated also with expanded extrajudicial authority taken by the government. In 2002 the government asked the Army to recover illegal arms and ammunition. "Operation Clean Heart," begun in late 2002, recovered some arms, but resulted in more than 40 deaths due to use of excessive force (Jahan 2004: 59). An elite police force, called the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), was created the following year and was allowed to operate outside traditional judicial oversight. Extrajudicial killings by the police jumped to over 147 in 2004 and over 300 in 2005 (Amnesty International 2005; Buerk 2005). On average, between 2001 and 2006, the tenure this administration, extrajudicial killings by government agents spiked to 178 per year, by far the highest in the three periods under study.

**Summary**

Bangladesh has had regular national elections between 1991 and 2006, which were by and large free and fair, and which resulted in rotations in power between the two major political parties, the center-right BNP and the center-left Awami League. But democratic performance has varied considerably through the three administrations. Figure 3 below summarizes the trends in minimal procedural indicators of democratic performance between 1991 and 2006.

The variation in performance, as can be seen from Figure 3, raises considerable doubts about the consolidation of democracy in Bangladesh, with the polity facing the duality of a potential failure in the institutionalization of democracy despite widespread public support for democratic institutions. The administrations during 1991-1996 and 2001-2006 fared worse than the administration in 1996-2001. The last tenure, from 2001-2006, was responsible for a virtual breakdown in the parliament and the state's respect for basic rights. On top of that, BNP's designs to engineer elections and the opposition's street violence in protest are what eventually led to the promulgation of emergency rule. But the suspension of rights and the revision of procedures during emergency means that the institutions of democracy were battered yet again, and they are yet to stabilize into a permanent form. On the other hand, the fact that procedural indicators were comparatively positive during the AL administration in 1996-2001, in addition to the existence of public support for democracy, provides some grounds for optimism about democratic consolidation in future, provided that free and fair elections are held as promised in 2008, and most importantly, that existing democratic institutions, however fragile, are not replaced with

**Figure 3**
**Trends in Minimum Procedural Indicators of Democratic Performance**

| | Electoral Procedures | Legislative Procedures | Rights-related Procedures |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1991-1996 BNP** | • 1991: Fair elections, 62% turnout*<br>• 1996 (Feb): One-sided elections, 10% turnout | • 67% legislation through parliament<br>• 4% bills submitted to parliamentary committees | • Average 41 extrajudicial killings by government per year** |
| **1996-2001 AL** | • 1996 (Jun): Fair elections, 75% turnout*<br>• Local elections held fairly | • 97% legislation through parliament<br>• 100% bills submitted to parliamentary committees | • Average 19 extrajudicial killings by government per year |
| **2001-2006 BNP** | • 2001: 75% turnout, but high violence in elections, minorities threatened* | • Full data not available<br>• 0% bills submitted to parliamentary committees*** | • Average 178 extrajudicial killings by government per year |

Notes: * Held under a caretaker authority
** 1993-1996
** Up to May 2003

interests.

Further structured research into several questions on democratic performance in Bangladesh will be fruitful. One involves the issue of representation. While democracy and authoritarianism in general have received some attention from scholars studying Bangladesh, representation and its practice both locally and nationally is a large research gap. A better understanding of representation is necessary to understand the reason for variations in democratic performance as well as to inform institutional design. A second area concerns the performance indicators. While the focus here has been to propose and analyze indicators that can be considered minimal and procedural, opportunities exist in extending the set of indicators both in breadth (adding additional criteria) and depth (moving from procedural to substantive practices). Such exercise, however, would need to be conducted with care, since extensions in definition and measurement can be fraught with problems with specification and precision. A third area is to delve performance criteria, such as electoral fairness or human rights. This will also increase the potential size of observations from three (the three periods under study here) to almost nine hundred (three periods times three hundred constituencies), which will certainly yield a rich trove of empirical data and hitherto undetected patterns.

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**Endnotes**

1. On the strengths and weaknesses of various datasets on democracy, including these two, see Munck and Verkuilen (2002).

2. On a slightly different distinction between behavioral and attitudinal bases, see Linz and Stepan (1996).

3. See the *World Values Surveys*, conducted in Bangladesh in 1996 and 2001, available online at www.worldvaluessurvey.org. See also the survey done by IFES (2001).

4. *World Values Survey*, data accessed online at www.worldvaluessurvey.org. The surveys for India and Pakistan cited here were conducted in 2001.

5. For more on the politics leading to the formation of a caretaker authority, see Zafarullah and Akhter (2000).

6. See reports of parliamentary proceedings and numerous other public statements by the opposition throughout this time in many newspapers. Examples include *The Independent*, 26 October 2004; *The Daily Star*, 19 June 2005; *The New Age*, 20 August 2005; *The Daily Star*, 12 September 2005; *The Daily Star*, 1 November 2005; *The New Nation*, 10 December 2005; *The Financial Express*, 1 March 2006; *Bangladesh Today*, 18 May 2006; *The Financial Express*, 11 July 2006; *The Daily Star*, 7 September 2006.

7. On these meetings, see the cover stories in *The Daily Star* between 28 September 2006 and 5 October 2006.

8. The estimates for extrajudicial killings are my

calculations, based on the mid-range of numbers cited in annual reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the US Department of State. The estimate includes deaths from direct application of force on civilians by the police, the paramilitary, and the military, plus the number of questionable deaths in custody, which human rights organizations usually attribute to torture.

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