

## DRAFT FOR COMMENT

# Social violence and democratization in South Asia: The general case and Bangladesh as a case study

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Paper for presentation at a workshop to honor Paul Brass and his work  
Seattle, 4 September 2011

I began to develop this essay thinking it would be interesting to extend Paul's recent work on social violence in India to the Bangladesh context. Paul has focused on communal violence, while the principal arena for violence in Bangladesh has been the long competition between the two principal political parties, so at first glance to compare the two would seem an apples-and-oranges exercise. But what attracted me to the idea was his concern with the *institutionalization* of Indian communal violence – the idea that the violence has been played out according a certain set of “Rules of the Game” that served the interests of various political elites in mobilizing electoral constituencies and maintaining dominance.<sup>1</sup> For several years now I have been trying to interpret political violence in Bangladesh in terms of a set of Rules, which for two decades and more have promoted a dysfunctional politics infesting social life. Possibly some fruitful comparisons could be made here.

A bit more thinking led me to ponder patterns of violence in the other major South Asian countries as well.<sup>2</sup> Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal have all been characterized by sustained waves of civil violence over the past decade in particular, with antecedents going further back in time. Is there something about the subcontinent that is especially conducive to civil violence? We (or at least I) tend to think of South Asia's countries as engaged in a great effort lasting by now many decades to attain political democracy on a sustainable basis and maintain their political systems as consolidated democracies – almost as though some teleological process has been at work, manifesting itself in the form of a national karma or kismet. Yet at the same time there have been increasing levels of domestic social violence in all five countries, especially in more recent years. How if at all are these two phenomena related to each other? Is there some common pattern here?

To treat these questions in any serious depth would take at least a book, more likely a number of volumes, including several addressing individual states within India. But the present occasion to celebrate Paul's work and especially his interest in unorthodox ideas provides a chance to conduct some exploration of my own, so I offer this short essay with three objectives. First, I

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular Brass (2003, 2004a, 2004b).

<sup>2</sup> I have not included Bhutan or the Maldives in this essay.

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will explore the relationship between democratization and social violence in South Asia generally over the last decade. Second, I will look at how the relationship manifests itself in Bangladesh, concentrating in particular on the period following that covered in my essay for Paul's Handbook of South Asian Politics, which appeared in 2010. And in the process of these first two efforts, it will be exciting for me to try looking at the bigger picture of subcontinental comparative politics as opposed to the more narrow-gauge analyses that I have undertaken in the past.

This paper begins by contrasting the region's mixed performance in democratization with its very poor record in violence and instability. It then goes on to examine briefly the subcontinent's experience with the latter two phenomena, finding a common pattern that has accelerated in most countries, in part as an accompaniment to democratization. Finally the paper explores violence and instability in Bangladesh as a case study – one which at first appears quite different from the rest of the subcontinent in lacking an ethnic basis, but which shows very similar linkages to electoral democracy, when political parties are substituted for ethnicity and religion.

### **Democratization in South Asia**

During the first decade of the present century, each of South Asia's main five countries struggled to maintain or regain or refrain from losing a favorable democratization trajectory in its political system. Some like India managed this effort reasonably well, while others like Bangladesh and more so Nepal and Pakistan sagged significantly and then appeared to recover at least partly, and still others like Sri Lanka wobbled up and down but in the end declined badly. In contrast, when social violence and political stability are gauged, these five systems all fared badly: poor performers at the beginning of the decade and generally even worse at its end.

Figure 1 shows the Freedom House scores for the five South Asian countries over the 2000-2010 period.<sup>3</sup> In the figure, the indices for Political Rights and Civil Liberties have been combined, so that these two 1-to-7 rankings become a single 2-to-14 range, with 2 the best score and 14 the worst. Freedom House labels countries with scores of 5 or better (i.e., lower) as "Free," those from 6 to 10 as "Partly Free," and those of 11 or worse as "Not Free."<sup>4</sup> Including all this information in Figure 1 makes for a bit of clutter, but does display a clear pattern. With its steady rating of 5, India rides above the other systems as the only "Free" polity in the subcontinent,

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<sup>3</sup> I am assuming a general familiarity with the Freedom House annual survey of Freedom in the World. Those wanting information about it should consult << <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=15>>>.

<sup>4</sup> One can argue with the Freedom House rankings, especially comparing countries in any given year (e.g., was Nepal really so similar to Bangladesh in 2009 as shown in Figure 1 – just one point away?), but the real virtue here is comparison across the combination of time and countries. The distribution in any one year might be off a bit, but over an extended period, I believe it holds up very well.

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standing as a model for the others. At the other end of the South Asian democracy spectrum, Pakistan also maintained a steady “Not Free” rating of 11 under Parvez Musharraf’s military dictatorship until the 2007 [2008??] elections, after which it attained and hung onto a rating in the lower “Partly Free” range.

**[Figure 1 about here]**

Suffering under a Maoist insurrection and heavy state attempts at repression, Nepal declined steadily in the early part of the decade and then began to recover with the 2006 provisional accord, but progress stalled out toward the end of the period. Bangladesh sagged after the election of the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) to power in 2001 and then dropped further under the military-backed Caretaker regime in 2007 but recovered with the democratic restoration of 2009. And Sri Lanka improved a bit in mid-decade, but as the civil war dragged on it declined in terms of democratic scoring until finally in 2010 Freedom House gave it the same ranking as Pakistan.

In recent years the World Bank has developed a series of governance measures, its World Governance Indicators (WGI), begun in 1996 as a biannual ranking and then after 2002 as an annual presentation. The WGI’s “Voice and Accountability” index is quite similar to the Freedom House measures, capturing “perceptions of the extent to which a country’s citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media.”<sup>5</sup> Figure 2 shows the WGI findings across the whole period for our six countries, using the percentile ranking for each one every year. Thus India ranked in the 52<sup>nd</sup> percentile in 1996 and had moved gradually up to the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile by 2009. As with the Freedom House data, India sits comfortably above the other countries throughout the period, Pakistan ranks lowest (except during Nepal’s worst years of 2005 and 2006), and the others bounce around in between.

**[Figure 2 about here]**

The overall democratization picture, then, shows one good, steady case that amounts to a showcase (India), one bad but slightly improving case (Pakistan), and three highly mixed cases (Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka) bobbling up and down over the decade. In a word, significant heterogeneity within the region.

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<sup>5</sup> The WGI measures are more fine-grained than those employed by Freedom House, as they give scores in terms of standard deviations from a global mean. The Bank also uses more sources than Freedom House and scores six governance dimensions altogether. WGI publication takes longer, though, and is now available only through 2009. For a full explanation, see <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp>. In general, Freedom House and WGI pretty much agree, as can be seen by comparing Figures 1 and 2. The WGI methodology is explained in detail in Kaufmann et al. (2010).

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## Instability and social violence

When we turn to political stability and social violence, the picture changes markedly. The measure employed here is the World Bank's assessment of "Political Stability and Absence of Violence," which "measures the perceptions of the likelihood that the government will be destabilized or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means, including domestic violence and terrorism."<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps not the ideal measure we would like to have to analyze social violence in South Asia; in India's case, for example, it would be much better to be able to separate communal riots, Naxalite insurgency, Kashmir violence, and terrorist incidents. But like the Freedom House scores it employs a well-developed and consistent methodology, appears every year, and includes every independent political entity on the planet. On that rationale, I will employ it here with some unease as a proxy for social/civil violence.

The WGI ratings appear here as Figure 3, which shows a stark contrast with the democratization measures presented in Figures 1 and 2. Freedom House placed four of our five countries in "free" or "partly free" territory, while the WGI put three of the five in what could be called the middle range between the 30<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> percentiles, and at least part of the time a fourth country (Nepal) fell within this range as well. Only Pakistan stood outside. The Political Stability rankings in Figure 3 place all five countries below the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile throughout the period. Bangladesh set the high marker at the 28<sup>th</sup> percentile in 2000, while Nepal managed to reach the 27<sup>th</sup> in 1996 and India the 26<sup>th</sup> twice, in 2000 and 2005. In mid-decade and afterward, India performed significantly better (though dropping at the end to the 13<sup>th</sup> percentile) than the others, all of which went into a decline, such that for the final years shown in Figure 3, none (except Sri Lanka in 2009) rose above the single digits in percentile terms.

### [Figure 3 about here]

A comparison with the subcontinent's sister states in Southeast Asia is instructive. Figure 4 shows the WGI percentile rankings in Voice and Accountability for the major countries in that region, while Figure 5 presents a similar picture for Political Stability. Voice and Accountability finds five of the seven countries within the 30<sup>th</sup>-to-60<sup>th</sup> percentile range occupied by most of their South Asian counterparts in Figure 2. But while Figure 5 shows most of the cases above the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile (only Indonesia and the Philippines falling consistently below), it will be recalled that Figure 3 showed none of the South Asian states above the 30<sup>th</sup> percentile at any point. To be sure, these WGI measures capture only a gross level of generality, but the picture they present is clear: Voice and Accountability have been present at more or less the same middling level in both South and Southeast Asia for the last 15 years, while Political Stability and Absence of Violence have been for the most part substantially better in Southeast Asia than in the subcontinent. What is it about South Asia?

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<sup>6</sup> The sources used to make up the Political Stability and Absence of Violence indicator can be found at <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/pdf/pv.pdf>.

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[Figures 4 and 5 about here]

## **Social violence in South Asia: the current scene**

In Table 1 I have tried with considerable trepidation to outline the present South Asian picture regarding social violence. I should confess at the outset that, while I know a good deal about Bangladesh and have a fair knowledge of a couple of India's regions (but am woefully ignorant about others), I am only slightly acquainted with Nepal and not at all with Pakistan or Sri Lanka aside from what I pick up from such sources as the *New York Times* and the *Economist*. Accordingly, Table 1 at best represents intelligent speculation. But I hope it will be at least heuristic and even to some extent informative in showing present patterns of violence and their causes.

[Table 1 about here]

In India, violence occurs principally in two arenas: communal conflict; and the Naxalite uprising. The first manifests itself in the communal riots that Paul has analyzed in great detail and had its proximate origin in the Lahore Resolution of 1940 when Mohammad Ali Jinnah broke with the Congress and launched the campaign for a separate Muslim state. But Hindu-Muslim tension goes back much further into the colonial and pre-colonial eras, and much of Hindu fundamentalism can be traced back to the origins of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the 1920s. Today it gets reinforced through India's electoral democracy, which creates a powerful incentive for politicians to build constituencies through communal demagoguery, a temptation the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as well as smaller groups like the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra state have been unable to resist. In various ways, the violence in Kashmir stems at least in part from this incentive structure, in that both the BJP and the Congress have taken a counterproductively hard line against Kashmiri aspirations for autonomy, the former to burnish its credentials as a pro-Hindu force and the latter to ward off accusations of being limp in confronting Pakistan.

The Naxalite insurgency, which has bedeviled much of central India in recent years and which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has labeled the most serious security problem confronting the country, has a quite different logic. Stemming from a long history of state neglect of largely *adivasi* (indigenous tribal) communities and exploitation of natural resources in their areas by outsiders, the Naxalite rebellion constitutes a second front of social violence, essentially unrelated to the communal strain. It most probably contributes a great deal to the overall measures of violence gathered by the World Bank team in making up the index shown in Figure 3.

Social violence in Pakistan centers on the fundamentalist upsurge that began with Zia ul-Haq's fervent promotion of an Islamic state in the 1970s and 1980s. By the end of the 2000s, the country had become plagued with Taliban violence, terrorist *lashkar* gangs, along with evident

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support from salafist military leaders. Of course, all these troubles do not stem from Zia's policies alone; a general instability after the 1947 partition of British India punctuated by periods of authoritarian rule, all built on a foundation of agrarian feudalism, certainly helped. And just as contemporary Hindu fundamentalism traces back to the RSS of the 1920s, one could make a similar (though weaker) case for Islamic fundamentalism and the Deoband School in British India during the same period.

In Bangladesh, social violence centers not around religion, ethnicity or civil rebellion, but rather around party rivalry manifesting itself in a ruthless zero-sum-game competition between two dynastic parties emerging from the country's independence struggle of 1971. Their story will be taken up later on in this paper.

Sri Lanka's 26-year-long civil war ended in May 2009 with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam by a brutal army offensive, but this conflict costing as many as 100,000 deaths had its roots in S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's efforts in the 1950s to mobilize an electoral base among the country's majority Sinhalese community by demonizing the minority Tamils, who arguably had been favored during British rule. The electoral demagoguery continued through succeeding decades, playing a major role in inciting the Tamil armed uprisings of the 1980s. Today the formal conflict is over, but the state has made little effort to repair the economic, social and psychic damage the war brought about, and it would be surprising if Tamil-bashing did not continue to be part of the Sinhalese political leaders' strategies.

Finally, Nepal's civil war stemmed from the Maoists' ability to turn rural grievances based on feudalism and caste discrimination into a willingness to rebel. Lasting 10 years and causing perhaps 15,000 deaths, the conflict ended in 2006, but the inability of national leaders to forge a settlement satisfactory to all the major sides has not brought anything like a lasting peace. Even so, relatively little violence attended the first (and thus far only) post-conflict election in 2008, nor has the contentious effort since then to write a constitution been accompanied by much outright violence, to say nothing of new Rules of a violent Game getting established.

In both India and Pakistan, social violence can also be analyzed at the subnational level,<sup>7</sup> as suggested in Table 2. Communal violence in Gujarat, which Paul has analyzed in some detail, is an obvious case in point here. Bihar's intercaste conflicts from the later 1970s into the 1990s, when their caste *senas* (armies) literally engaged in combat in the state's central region, provide another example, though under current state leadership the rural scene has calmed down significantly.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Paul's detailed analysis of communal violence in India has been mainly at the local level, but he has interpreted it (rightly, I think) as part of the national political scene.

<sup>8</sup> Like my knowledge of Pakistan's and Sri Lanka's politics, my command of the Gujarat scene is modest at best. I am more familiar with Bihar (e.g., Blair 2008).

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[Table 2 about here]

Violence in Karachi arose from two waves of migration, beginning with the post-partition influx of Muslims fleeing India called Muhajirs, who attained a critical mass in Karachi and came to control much of the city. In more recent years, in-migrating Pashtuns from the North-West Frontier Province have built up their strength, and today the two communities have between them created something of a reign of terror across the country's wealthiest and largest city, now numbering upward of 20 million inhabitants.

What is noteworthy in this doubtless overly simplistic analysis is the extent to which social violence has been intertwined with electoral politics in so much of South Asia. India's Hindu-Muslim communalism, Karachi's ethnic strife, Bangladesh's party rivalry, and Sri Lanka's ethnic demagoguery have all been heavily exacerbated by the need to mobilize votes in an electoral democracy and the willingness – even eagerness in many cases – to stoke social tensions to corral those votes.

To what extent have these pathologies become institutionalized with their own sets of Rules of the Game that guide behavior and facilitate the indefinite continuation of violence as one of the cardinal Rules? Paul has shown how such a system operates in India, and I believe a parallel system with its own quite different set of Rules obtains in Bangladesh. Similar analyses might be made of Indian Kashmir, Pakistan at both macro-level and the Karachi area, and post-conflict Sri Lanka.

## Exploring the Bangladesh case

By coincidence, Freedom House started compiling its Freedom in the World index in 1972, just after Bangladesh had achieved its independence in December 1971, so it is possible to chart the country's democratization trajectory virtually from its beginning. Figure 6 shows the Political Rights and Civil Liberties scores individually and then added together for the entire 1972-2010 period. The first two decades saw a series of wild gyrations with the democracy-dictatorship fluctuations successively of the country's first three leaders.

[Figure 6 about here]

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman began as the hugely popular father of his country (*Bangabondhu* or Friend of Bengal, the title bequeathed on him posthumously) but then turned authoritarian after a couple of years and was assassinated in August 1975. Ziaur Rahman opened his rule with a military coup in late 1975 but within a couple of years transformed himself into a genuinely popular elected leader, as is reflected in the Freedom House scores for the latter part of his era. He was assassinated in 1981, however, and within a year H. M. Ershad seized power in another military coup. He attempted to replicate Zia's self-reinvention as a popular elected leader, but succeeded only partially, as can be seen in Figure 6.

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Over the course of the Ershad years, the two opposition parties recovered themselves to form a formidable opposition to his government. Both parties were legacies of previous leaders, the Awami League (AL) headed by Mijib's daughter Sheikh Hasina Wajid, and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), led by Zia's widow Khalida Zia. By the end of the 1980s, the two parties had crafted a "politics of the street" consisting of mass rallies, marches, and most effectively *hartals* (strikes) that could essentially bring economic and administrative activity in the major cities to a halt for days at a time – all tactics that set the tone for political life during the next two decades.

Responding to the orchestrated protests with a mixture of guile and repression, governance under the Ershad regime began to deteriorate,<sup>9</sup> reaching a low point at the end of 1990, when finally the army responded to a presidential command to impose martial law by instead directing Ershad to resign office immediately, which he did.

A "free and fair" national election in early 1991 set into place what might be called a "two-party-plus" system, with the AL and the BNP the major players, dividing between them the overwhelming majority of votes and seats, as shown in Table 3. Minor parties were drawn into electoral alliances and after the first two elections were needed to form majorities in the *Jatiyo Sangsad* (parliament), but the main political drama has been played out between the two major parties, with the lesser groups being largely shoved to the sidelines over time.

### [Table 3 about here]

After an initial burst of democratic enthusiasm at the beginning of the 1990s, the system settled into kind of routine momentum, which appears clearly in Figure 6. Civil Liberties continued from year to year at a steady score of 4 on the Freedom House scale, while Political Rights ranked somewhat higher at a 2 during most of the 1990s and then moving gradually downward to a 4 in the following decade. During most of this time, however, the country was consumed by what seemed to be a highly dysfunctional politics of instability verging on chaos, in which neither the party in power nor the opposition observed the basic conventions of a Westminster parliamentary system. The ruling party totally excluded the opposition from any meaningful role, routinely using state power – especially the police – to harass and intimidate it, while the opposition appeared to take every opportunity to disrupt normal life and cause sufficient turmoil that the army would find it necessary to intervene once again and eventually give it a chance to come to power through new elections.

The polity suffered a near-death experience in 1996 when the ruling party engineered a blatantly rigged election, but a combination of international outrage and donor pressure forced an electoral

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<sup>9</sup> Freedom House did not publish its annual survey for 1989, which accounts for the gap in Figure 6's graphs. Had the scores been tallied, they would have shown a decline from 1988.



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rerun under a nonparty Caretaker Government (CTG), and the system righted itself, using the CTG system again for the 2001 election. During what I have labeled the “Democratic Era” in Figure 6, Bangladesh did pass the Huntington “two turnover test” – that the ruling party be turned over through elections at least twice – but otherwise the dysfunctional polity went on, continually seeming to approach the edge of a total breakdown. Opposition-led hartals closed down the urban areas for days at a time; gangs of *mastaans* (small-time thugs under the direction mafia-style patrons) disrupted normal life, often with police connivance; institutions like universities, professional associations, and even NGOs were colonized by the parties and became divided into “panels” affiliated with them; the lower judiciary was used as an enforcer for the ruling party; and the list goes on.

### Rules of the Dysfunctional Game

But despite the appearance of breakdown and chaos, there was a quite well defined set of Rules of the Game for public politics, understood and observed by the parties, their leaders, the bureaucracy including the police, and most of the general populace. This set of Rules was never publicly articulated as such, but it was followed almost all the time. A seemingly dysfunctional system had become *institutionalized*, to use Paul’s word. These were the essential elements:

- Electoral democracy: “free & fair” elections are held on time with a Caretaker Government in charge for a 90-day period.
- All power to election winners: the ruling party takes over the state bureaucracy, operates a rent-seeking regime.
- Opposition to the barricades: the past election is denounced as fraudulent (see Figure 7), parliament is boycotted, *hartals* become the norm BUT violence is bounded, not insurrectionary.
- Gangsterism in public life: party-based *mastaan* networks with police collusion intimidate opposition, operate extortion rackets, enjoy virtual impunity.
- Organized life commandeered: “panels” infest institutions everywhere.
- Relative print media freedom: Marcusean “repressive tolerance” permitted for elites, but some self-censorship. Broadcast media more closely monitored and pressured.
- Two-track judiciary: High Court and Supreme Court enjoy autonomy, while lower court system is controlled by the Executive and used to support the ruling party.
- Electoral renewal: a new cycle begins with each election.

[Figure 7 about here]

This system survived several jolts, including assassination of several leading AL politicians and numerous murders of lower-level party functionaries on both sides, a brief reign of terror in part of the country led by a fundamentalist Islamist, a set of simultaneous bombings in 63 of the country’s 64 districts, and a short wave of suicide attacks on courthouses. But none of these

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shocks had any real lasting effect on public life. Things went on within the set of Rules I have outlined.

In the run-up to elections scheduled for the beginning of 2007, however, the system began to unravel:

- The ruling party (the BNP) was widely believed to be arranging the appointment of a party sympathizer to the post of Chief Advisor (i.e., administrator) to the Caretaker regime that would guide the country through the election period.
- The new Election Commissioner and his deputies were thought to be BNP partisans, a concern that intensified when it was discovered that millions of bogus names had been added to the electoral rolls.
- The opposition Awami League announced it would boycott the elections.

### **The Caretaker interregnum and the elections of 2008**

Foreign donors reacted with public dismay, and the United Nations threatened to cease recruiting Bangladeshi troops as peacekeepers if the military supported a biased election.<sup>10</sup> Almost immediately, the military took steps to replace the Chief Advisor, and the new CTG – under civilian management but clearly operating with military guidance – put elections on hold and shut down party activity for the indefinite future. The CTG extended its time in office and undertook a number of serious reforms. The most important one was to expel the two party leaders from the political scene and from the country as well: the “two begum solution.” In the end, this plan failed, as subordinate functionaries in both parties proved unwilling (and perhaps unable) to resume operations without their dynastic leadership.<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to rumors that the military might emulate the earlier examples of Zia and Ershad or the more recent one of Parvez Musharraf in Pakistan, the military did not decide to stay in power and attempt to launch an electoral mandate to continue their rule, but instead kept to their promise, remained in the background while the CTG managed the country, and supported an open election that returned Bangladesh to popular rule in December 2008.

While in power, the CTG did undertake a number of serious political reforms through promulgating ordinances. Among the most important ones were:

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<sup>10</sup> Bangladesh had been a major supplier of such troops, who for several years amounted to around 12 percent of active duty army strength. The UN payroll for the peacekeepers formed a major component of army income.

<sup>11</sup> Their inability to part with their chieftains certainly fits the South Asian dynastic model exemplified by post-independence history in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Actually one group did splinter off from the BNP, but never got enough traction to form a serious party and so withered.

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- A computerized national voter ID system was put into effect, which greatly reduced the potential for fraud.
- The lower judiciary was finally separated from the executive branch after decades of promises from both parties and demands from the Supreme Court.
- An Upazila Parishad<sup>12</sup> council was reinstated with a directly elected chairperson after a lapse of more than two decades and another set of unfulfilled promises from both parties.

National Elections were duly held in late December 2008 and were pronounced “free and fair” by various teams of outside observers. Although the AL was expected to win, following the pattern of ruling parties getting replaced in successive elections, everyone was completely surprised at the result,<sup>13</sup> which gave the AL just over 48 percent of the valid vote – more than any party had won since Ershad’s faux victory in 1988 – and over three-quarters of the seats in the Jatiyo Sangsad. The BNP was reduced to less than 10 percent of the seats, an all-time low for the leading opposition party in the history of Bangladesh.

The incoming AL majority had to ratify the Caretaker ordinances to make them legitimate, and quickly did so for the more important ones, including the electoral reforms, judicial separation and upazila parishad creation mentioned above. In addition, it passed a Right to Information Law similar to the one India had passed in 2005 and had become a major success there. Thrown into total disarray by the magnitude of its electoral loss, the BNP could do little more than mutter about electoral fraud (cf. Figure 7), a claim to which virtually no one attributed any validity.

In early 2009, then, the major questions facing the Bangladesh polity were:

- Would the AL’s huge majority give it sufficient comfort that it could govern like a Westminster system party in power and grant the opposition a share in the structure of governance?
- After licking its electoral wounds, would the BNP conclude that the route back to power lay in becoming a loyal opposition that would participate in parliament, responsibly lay out an alternative agenda, work on rebuilding its constituency base, and bide its time until the next national election?

To put it a different way, could the BNP emulate the Canadian Tories, who in the 1993 election went from being the governing party to losing all save two seats, but in the ensuing years pulled themselves back together and returned to power in 2006, winning the next two national elections as well? Similar examples are offered by British Labour coming to power in 1997 after successive drubbings at Conservative hands, followed by a reverse sequence of three decisive

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<sup>12</sup> Upazilas were essentially the erstwhile thanas renamed, analogous to taluks and tehsils in India. Thus the upazila parishad is similar to the panchayat samiti in India. Despite constitutional requirements, Bangladesh has never set up an elected zila (district) council system.

<sup>13</sup> “Everyone” included me as a member of the National Democratic Institute’s observer team.

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Labour victories and then a Tory return to power in 2009. Or would things return to the old dysfunctional pattern?

### **The old (dis)order restored?**

Some answers were not long in coming. The much-reduced BNP delegation did attend the opening ceremonies of the Ninth Parliament in January 2009, but soon after began to boycott most of its sessions, and by the end of the first year it had skipped 65 or 77% of its 86 meetings – the highest rate of boycotting since electoral democracy was restored in 1991.<sup>14</sup> Large scale opposition-led *hartals* did not re-emerge as quickly, but by the summer of 2010 the BNP was launching and enforcing 36-hour citywide strikes in Dhaka and other urban centers. The pace picked up, and by a year later a 48-hour *hartal* shut down the major cities altogether, in the process almost completely dominating the news. *Hartal*-related stories and photographs took up seven of the nine news items on the front page of the *Daily Star*'s edition on July 10<sup>th</sup>, for example, as can be seen in Figure 8. The hartal was largely non-violent, certainly by the standards set in the previous decade, but given the rhetoric employed by the BNP, it seemed more than likely that agitation would escalate to less peaceful tactics before long.

### **[Figure 8 about here]**

Along these lines, the university student fronts for the parties resumed their campus disruption that had hobbled the academic enterprise so severely ever since the Ershad days but had been brought under control during the CTG. And while I'm not sure that professional and civil society organizations have as yet come under severe pressure to form "panels" aligned with one party or another, it is probably a safe bet to assume that this process is well under way.

For its part, the AL government quickly dropped all criminal cases against their own leaders that had been instituted by the CTG, while reinvigorating the parallel cases that had been started against BNP hierarchs, most especially Khalida Zia and her son Tariqur Rahman.

Other developments were somewhat more subtle. The urge for the ruling party to squeeze the opposition out of any serious role in public life took several forms. The new government did conduct the upazila parishad elections early in 2009, but shortly afterward passed a bill stipulating that Members of Parliament would have veto power over any activity an upazila parishad lying within his constituency wished to undertake. Thus any upazila chairs who might affiliate themselves with opposition parties would be denied any real role in local governance,

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<sup>14</sup> Data from Liton (2010).

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while those identifying with the ruling party would be reduced to becoming sycophants.<sup>15</sup> And of course AL control over local government finances would mean that MPs could use a good portion of available funds to lubricate party patronage machines.

Second and also in 2009, the parliament passed a measure awarding each MP a Tk 150 million “constituency development fund” which could be used at the officeholder’s discretion to fund infrastructural development in his or her constituency. At roughly US\$2 million annually for about 500,000 people, this was serious money to further stoke an MP’s patronage interests, especially given the scope for malfeasance in awarding construction contracts. Given the party’s control of more than three-quarters of the parliament’s seats and combined with MP veto power over upazila parishad activity, the constituency development fund scheme significantly strengthens the prospect for the AL to establish a lasting control over local politics.

A further step to consolidate AL control occurred on 30 June 2011 with the passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing the CTG system for guiding the polity through elections (its huge majority of seats allows it to alter the Constitution at will). Claiming the bill’s purpose was to forestall any future prolonged periods of non-party control of the state, the AL assured the country that elections could safely be conducted under the ruling party’s aegis.

To be sure, the new government did make some progressive moves on paper, but these have been negated by footdragging or outright lack of action.

- **Judicial separation.** Although the Caretaker ordinance separating the lower judiciary from the executive was ratified by the incoming parliament, the Constitution has not been amended to solidify the move, and the executive branch continues to control postings and promotions, which leaves the door open to more serious interference.
- **Corruption.** The incoming government also ratified the Caretaker government’s upgrading of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), but then levied a requirement that the ACC get state permission before beginning an inquiry against any public servant, a move that potentially leaves the agency essentially toothless.

One last development appears to have not only promise but also some actual hope of realization. In the spring of 2009, the parliament also ratified the Caretaker Government’s Right to Information (RTI) ordinance in the form of the Right to Information Act 2009, which mandated citizen access not only to government organizations but also NGOs operating with state-provided or foreign funds. The Act required government bodies to appoint Designated Offices to respond to RTI requests and also set up an Information Commission with some punitive powers to deal with complaints. Two years later, as of April 2011, it was reported that more than a thousand

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<sup>15</sup> Upazila elections are held on a “nonpartisan” basis, but party affiliations are widely known. The system has some advantages, since upazila chairs, not officially belonging to any party, can easily shift their allegiances from one to another.

## DRAFT FOR COMMENT

government bodies had appointed Designated Officers, as well as 201 NGOs. So far, the media appear to have made relatively little use of the RTI, but several NGOs have provided training programs to enable citizens to utilize the RTI provisions, while some others have taken advantage of it to demand information about state activities.<sup>16</sup> The Information Commission has also been active in answering complaints.

### **Political violence institutionalized in Bangladesh?**

I believe a good case can be made out that political violence did indeed become institutionalized in Bangladesh during the 1991-2006 period. A set of Rules of the Game developed that came to be observed – willingly or unwillingly – by all the major players: parties most of all, but also the police, organized gangsters, bureaucrats at all levels, the lower judiciary, the media and the general public. Has the Game become in effect homeostatic, in the sense that it is the normal condition of the polity, having sufficient inertial momentum that any change in direction or behavior – like the Caretaker regime in 2007-2008 – can only be temporary, after which things return to their prior arrangements?

Two-and-a-half years into the AL government, it does not seem that the political scene has completely regressed to the dysfunctional norm of the earlier period. *Hartals* have resumed, as has parliamentary boycotts by the opposition, colonization of at least some associational life (students especially), and the ruling party has shown more than a few signs of squeezing out all opposition through its control of union parishads, its deployment of the constituency development fund, its abolishing the Caretaker system, its reining in the Anti-Corruption Commission, and is stalling on judicial separation.

But the *hartals* have not become anything like as violent as earlier, urban life has not become as disrupted, and the media remain more or less free. Moreover, the Right to Information Act, while as yet not implemented on a wide scale, shows promise of becoming a major force to ensure open and transparent governance.

So where do matters stand? In a word, the polity seems to be returning to the old dysfunctional Rules of the Game, but slowly. The AL's abolition of the Caretaker governance setup is arguably the most worrisome step, threatening to repeat in a slightly different format the BNP's machinations that provoked the military-backed interregnum of 2007-08. One can easily imagine the BNP stepping up the tempo and temperature of the *hartals*, the AL responding repressively, associational life again caught up in the maelstrom and paralyzed, the Election Commission subjected to tampering, and an opposition playing its last card by boycotting the national election that must take place by the end of 2013.

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<sup>16</sup> See Halim (2011), Khan (2011), and Sobhan (2011).

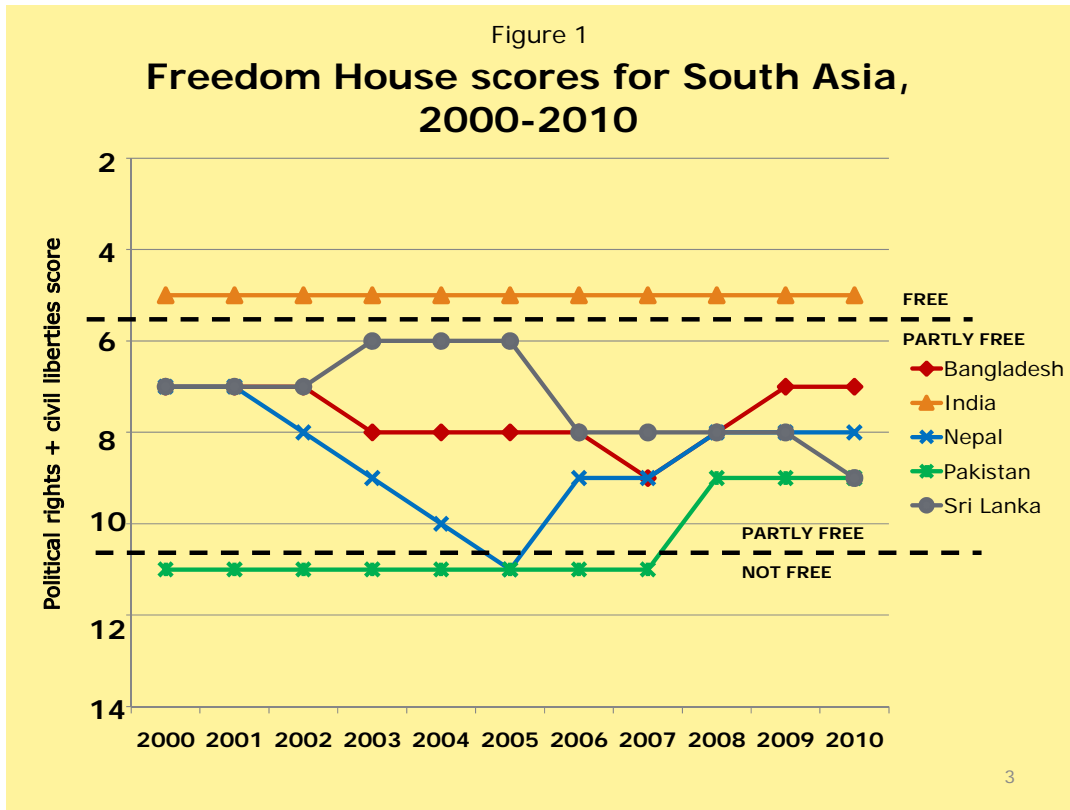
## DRAFT FOR COMMENT

Has a culture of party-based violence then become institutionalized in Bangladesh to the extent that religion- and ethnicity-based violence appear to have elsewhere in the subcontinent? One could hope (as many have for quite some time) that the eventual departure of the begums and their obsessive mutual enmity will clear the scene, allowing the parties to assume a more Westminster-style relationship.

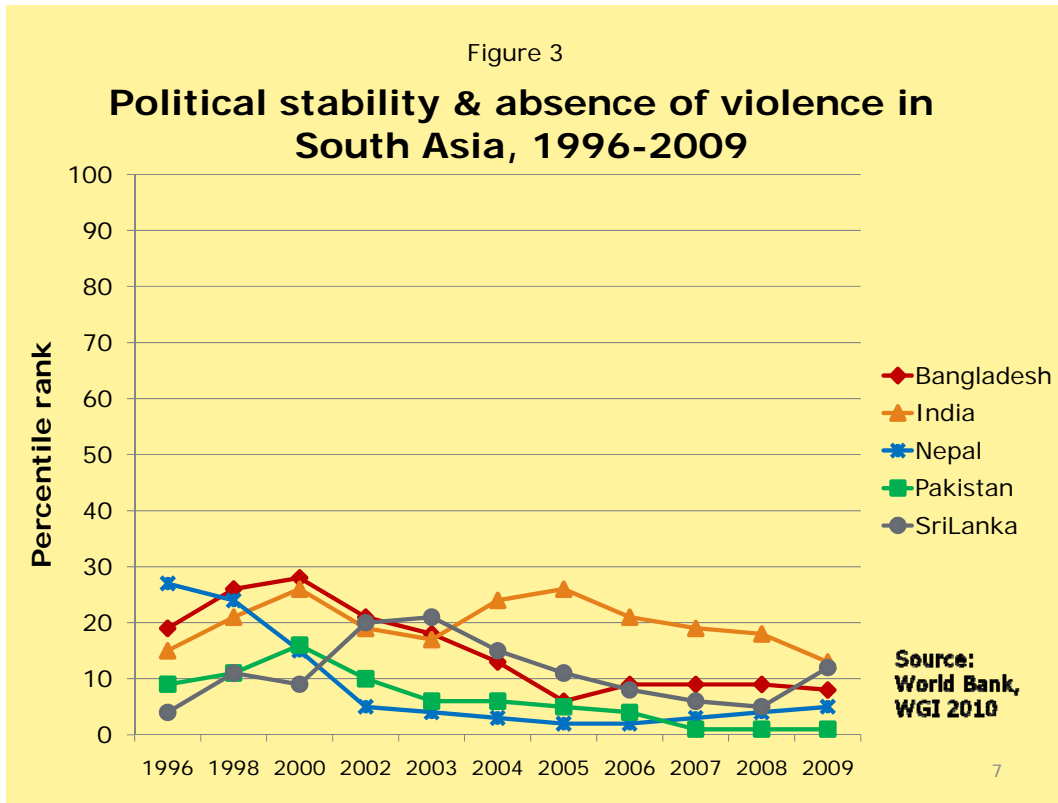
In earlier years, two factors would have militated against such a happy outcome. The obvious and enduring one in the South Asian politics is the pervasiveness of dynastic leadership. Just as Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia have inherited their mantles of leadership from father and son, so too each has been grooming a son of her own to eventually assume command. Perhaps their leadership styles would be less centered on the kind of personal hostility evidenced by their mothers, but the methodology of party control through patronage, corruption, and manipulation of state agencies could be expected to continue, along with the likelihood that violent competition between the parties would also carry on.

The other factor was pointed to long ago by Goren Hyden (1983) in his analysis of African politics, when he observed in the 1980s that the main reason behind the compulsion to grab and hang on to state power in so much of Africa was that the state was the only institution that mattered – the private sector offered no similar path to wealth, status and power, so politics was (and in many African countries remains) the only road to take. At its independence, Bangladesh had no industrial base to speak of and thus nothing like a national bourgeoisie, nor any large landholding class to exercise political clout. Such business enterprises as existed were largely engaged in trading and importing. Over the last two or three decades, however, the country has developed a rapidly growing economy paced most visibly by the garment industry but also by commercial farming and agricultural exports. In sum, there are now other ways to acquire advancement; politics is not the only game in town today.

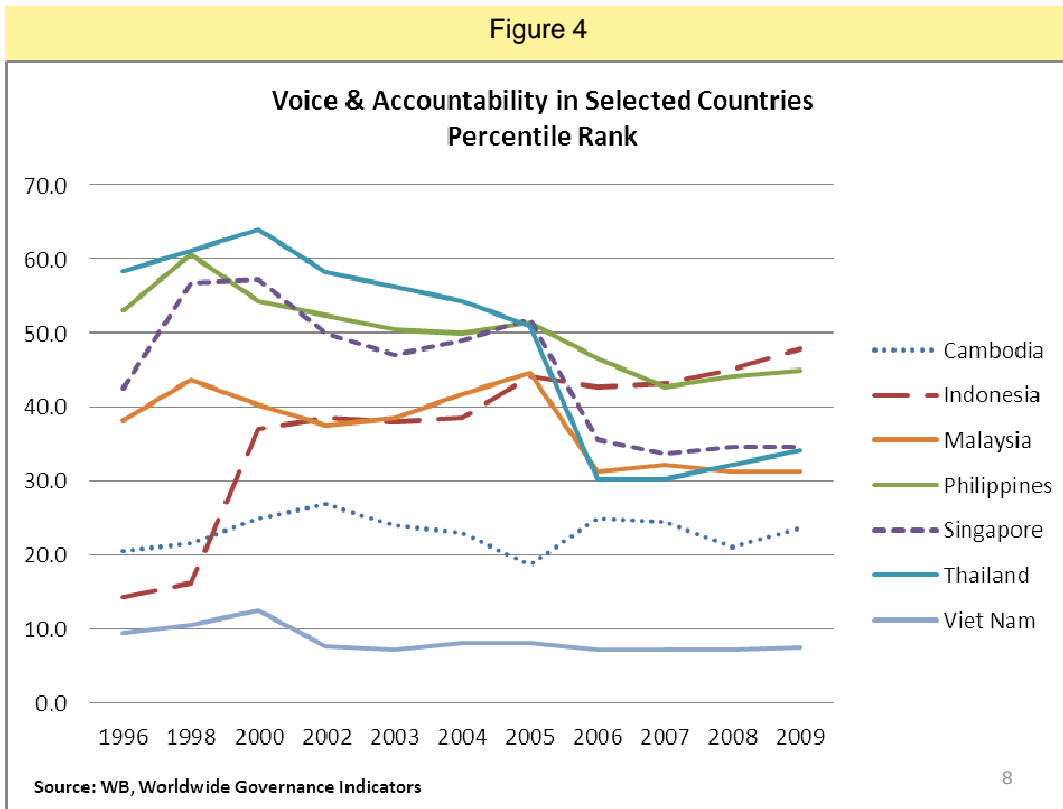
Perhaps, then, a culture of institutionalized political violence will cease over time to be the normal condition for Bangladesh. In the shorter run, though, there is much case for concern as the polity appears to be undergoing a homeostatic return to norm.







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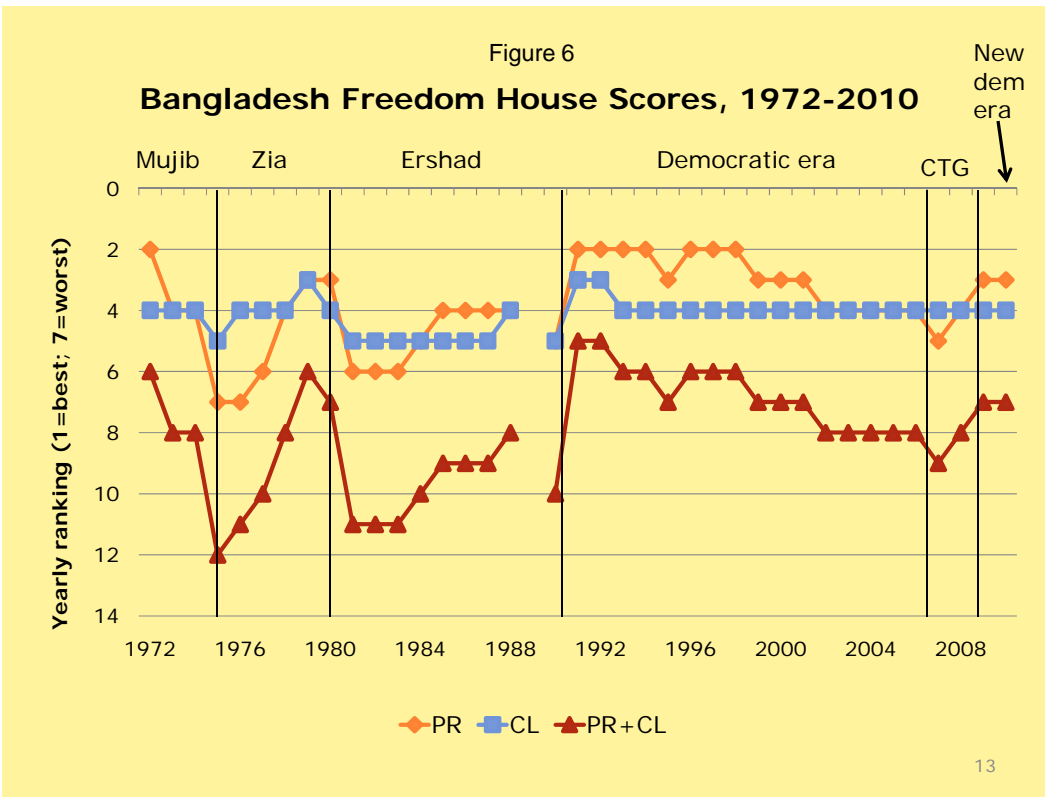
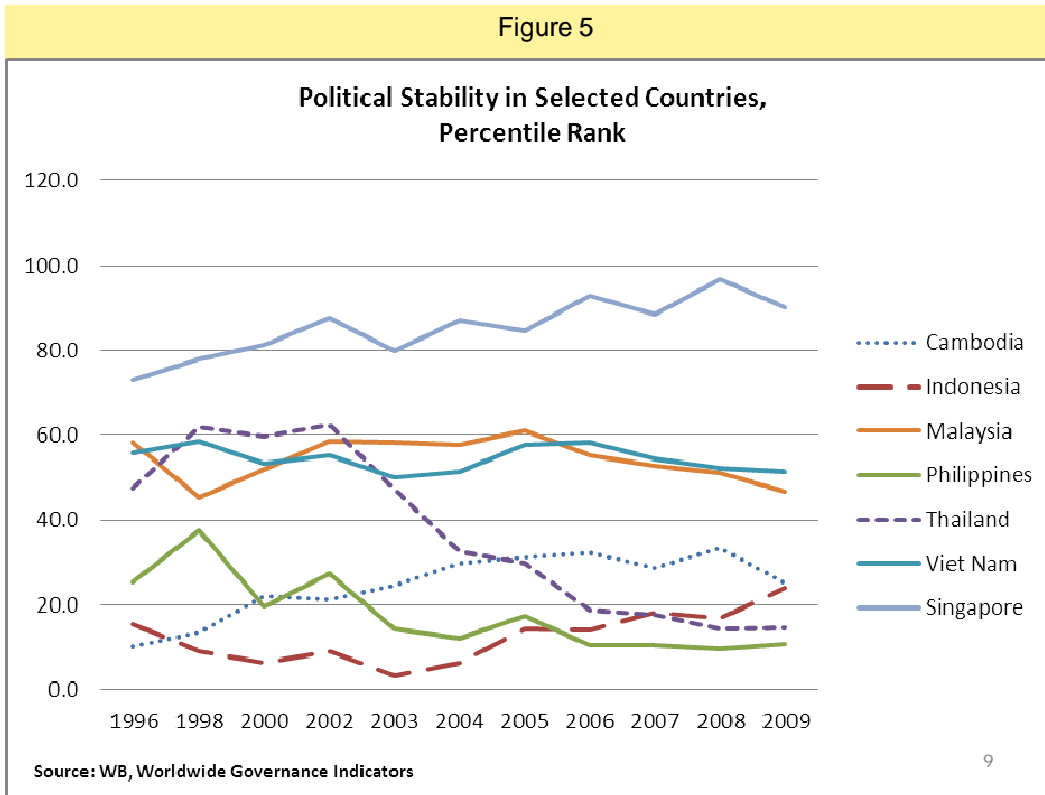




Figure 7

Daily Star, 11 May 2011

## POLITICS OF FAIR POLLS & RIGGED POLLS

<p><b>1996</b></p>  <p><b>AL</b> Won polls</p> <p>It's fair. Respect people's verdict</p> <p><b>BNP</b> Lost polls</p> <p>Polls rigged thru' admin support</p>	<p><b>2001</b></p>  <p><b>BNP</b> Won polls</p> <p>It's free, fair. Good job by EC, CG</p> <p><b>AL</b> Lost polls</p> <p>It's crude rigging. No question of accepting the result</p>	<p><b>2008</b></p>  <p><b>AL</b> Won polls</p> <p>It's free, fair, transparent. Many</p> <p><b>BNP</b> Lost polls</p> <p>It's stage-managed, digitally rigged. Result unacceptable</p>
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DHAKA SUNDAY JULY 10, 2011

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Figure 8

10 July 2011

Hartals dominate the news

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Table 1

## Current violence in South Asia: Sources & mechanisms

Country	Main arena in 2000s	Manifestations	Proximate origin	Earlier sources	Reinforcing engines
India	Communalism, Kashmir	Communal riots, Kashmir violence	1940 Lahore Resolution et seq.	RSS from 1920s, colonial & pre-colonial eras	Demagoguery in electoral democracy
	Naxalism	Naxalite insurgency	1990s: State neglect, outside exploitation	State neglect, outside exploitation	State repression, rebel cohesiveness?
Pakistan	Fundamentalist threat to state	Pakistan Taliban, various lashkars, salafist military leaders	1970s: Zia ul-Huq	Deoband school in 1920s? Post-independence instability, authoritarianism, feudalism	Kashmir & India obsession; dynastic
Bangladesh	Political party rivalry	Zero-sum-game politics, party-based mafias	1970s: post-Mujib fallout, begum-based parties	West Pakistan domination, Mujib & BAKSAL	Rules of democratic game, dynastic
Sri Lanka	Communalism	Civil war & aftermath	1950s: Bandaranaike & political opportunism	Tamils as elite minority in colonial era	Demagoguery in electoral democracy, dynastic
Nepal	Revolution	Insurrection & aftermath	1990s: Maoists	Feudalism & caste	Political elite incompetence

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Table 2

## At subnational level in India and Pakistan

Locale	Main arena	Manifestations	Proximate origin	Earlier sources	Reinforcing engines
Gujarat	Communal	Pogroms	BJP leadership	RSS stridency	Elections
Bihar	Caste groups	Forward/Backward/Dalit conflict	OBC upsurge in 1970s & 1980s	Feudalism, zamindari system, Permanent Settlement of 1793	Electoral strategy, caste senas
Karachi	Communal strife	Ethic rivalries	Muhajirs and later Pashtuns	1947 partition	Elections, gangs

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Table 3

## Vote & seat shares 1991-2008

(figures in percentages)

		1991	1996	2001	2008
AL + BNP	Votes	61	71	83	81
	Seats	76	87	85	86
All others	Votes	39	29	17	19
	Seats	24	13	15	14
Totals	Votes	100	100	100	100
	Seats	100	100	100	100

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