



Bangladesh: Daily Challenges

Public Opinion on Economics, Politics and Security

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Bangladesh: Daily Challenges: Public Opinion on Economics, Politics and Security

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IRI in Bangladesh



A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization founded in 1983, the International Republican Institute (IRI) advances freedom and democracy worldwide by developing political parties, civic institutions, open elections, democratic governance and the rule of law. IRI supports Bangladesh's democratic development through programs that encourage citizen-centered government, promote women's political participation and strengthen the country's multi-party political system. IRI has implemented voter participation and public education programs, and assessment and observation missions for national and local elections in Bangladesh. IRI fields national public opinion research and targeted focus group discussions to help Bangladesh's political parties and elected officials identify citizen priorities and respond to their constituents.

Executive Summary

Approach

- In the summer of 2017, IRI conducted research in Bangladesh to better understand citizens' views of critical economic, political and security issues facing the country.
- This report is based on focus group discussions (FGDs) held in each of Bangladesh's eight divisions. The FGDs included individuals from various segments of the population. The participant selection process controlled for division (i.e., administrative unit), geographic area (urban or rural), age, political affiliation, and gender.
- IRI uses FGDs to complement its public opinion surveys and to understand how and why citizens hold their perceptions and beliefs. IRI has conducted 10 national public opinion surveys in Bangladesh since 2008.

Findings

- **Finding #1:** Participants expressed significant concerns about their economic condition, but many did not blame the government for their suffering.
- **Finding #2:** Participants overwhelmingly viewed corruption as a significant problem that pervaded numerous aspects of everyday life.
- **Finding #3:** Participants were critical of the quality of Bangladesh's democracy and democratic institutions, often citing electoral fraud and violence. However, most still intended to vote in the next election and nearly all participants supported more cooperation between the parties.
- **Finding #4:** Most participants expressed a positive view of the Awami League and its leader, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, often associating her and the party with the country's independence movement and current development.
- **Finding #5:** Regarding opposition parties, most participants viewed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its leader Khaleda Zia and Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) negatively. In comparison, the Jatiya Party, which is the "official opposition" in parliament, was the only opposition party to receive more positive than negative responses.
- **Finding #6:** Participants were divided about the return of the caretaker government.
- **Finding #7:** Most participants said Bangladeshis are afraid to discuss their political views in public because they fear retribution from political parties.
- **Finding #8:** Participants expressed mixed opinions on their personal security, but negative comments were more common. However, most participants felt the government was performing well on security issues.

Key Takeaways

- The FGDs suggest that many Bangladeshi citizens face significant daily challenges including economic hardship, corruption and insecurity.
- The FGDs suggest that the Awami League's incumbent government is in a strong political position entering the 2018 election cycle because of its development achievements and the popularity of its leader.

- The FGDs suggest that the political opposition, particularly the BNP and its ally Jamaat,¹ face strong headwinds entering the 2018 election cycle because of their association with violence, intransigence and religious extremism.
- The FGDs suggest that many Bangladeshis are fearful of expressing their political views in public and many believe the country's democracy is underperforming if not entirely broken.

Recommendations for Political Parties and the Government

- Economic growth is not benefiting many segments of society. The government should formulate policies to promote broad-based local development and employment opportunities.
- Corruption is perceived as pervasive. The government should take steps to prevent corruption in both the public and private sectors.
- Elections are viewed as increasingly corrupted by violence and partisanship. The government should ensure safe, free and fair elections through measures such as strengthening nonpartisan election administration and improved security.
- Insecurity, particularly for women, is a serious problem. The government should bolster the rule of law and the capacity of local police to prevent crime.
- Many citizens are frustrated with political violence. The major political parties should identify areas of compromise and engage in productive oppositional politics as opposed to noncooperation and protest.

Recommendations for International Organizations Providing Democracy, Rights and Governance (DRG) Assistance

- As the 2018 election cycle begins, political party assistance should be targeted to cultivating issue-based campaigning for opposition and incumbent parties.
- Key institutions of election-violence prevention, including the election commission, security services and domestic observers, should be targeted for capacity building.

Overview

IRI conducted this FGD study from August 9-20, 2017 to complement its national survey,² which was fielded in March and April 2017. This poll showed a majority of Bangladeshis positively view the direction of the country, its economy, and level of security. However, the economy and law and order were also listed as the top two problems facing the country. This FGD study was designed to probe for more detail on Bangladeshis' beliefs and attitudes regarding economics, politics, and security.

Sixteen FGDs were conducted, two in each of Bangladesh's eight divisions: Barisal, Chittagong, Dhaka, Mymensingh, Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Sylhet. Each focus group comprised at least eight participants and included both youths and adults. Within each division, one FGD was held in

¹ Jamaat is officially banned from electoral competition, but its candidates often run as independents and the party remains an important political actor despite its ban.

² International Republican Institute. *National Survey of Bangladeshi Public Opinion*. March 6 – April 19, 2017. Available at http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/bangladesh_national_survey_-_april_2017_-_public.pdf

a rural area and the other in an urban area, which ensured geographic inclusivity. In addition, men and women were split into different FGDs to ensure women could speak freely.

Table 1: Overview of FGD Composition

	Division	Geographic Area	Age*	Gender	Political Affiliation**
1	Barisal	Urban	Mixed Youth/Adult	M	Mixed BNP/AL
2	Chittagong	Urban	Mixed Youth/Adult	F	Mixed BNP/AL
3	Dhaka	Urban	Mixed Youth/Adult	M	Mixed BNP/AL
4	Mymensingh	Urban	Mixed Youth/Adult	F	Mixed BNP/AL
5	Khulna	Urban	Mixed Youth/Adult	M	Mixed BNP/AL
6	Rajshahi	Urban	Mixed Youth/Adult	F	Mixed BNP/AL
7	Rangpur	Urban	Mixed Youth/Adult	M	Mixed BNP/AL
8	Sylhet	Urban	Mixed Youth/Adult	F	Mixed BNP/AL
9	Barisal	Rural	Mixed Youth/Adult	F	Mixed BNP/AL
10	Chittagong	Rural	Mixed Youth/Adult	M	Mixed BNP/AL
11	Dhaka	Rural	Mixed Youth/Adult	F	Mixed BNP/AL
12	Mymensingh	Rural	Mixed Youth/Adult	M	Mixed BNP/AL
13	Khulna	Rural	Mixed Youth/Adult	F	Mixed BNP/AL
14	Rajshahi	Rural	Mixed Youth/Adult	M	Mixed BNP/AL
15	Rangpur	Rural	Mixed Youth/Adult	F	Mixed BNP/AL
16	Sylhet	Rural	Mixed Youth/Adult	M	Mixed BNP/AL

*FGD participants were not divided equally by age within each session. However, there was at least one youth (18-34) and one adult (35 and older) in each group.

**The two major political parties in Bangladesh are the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). At least one participant in each FGD identified as a member of each party.

IRI, in consultation with its local research partner, created a screening questionnaire to select participants and a discussion guide to structure each discussion session. The screening questionnaire (see Appendix II) included six questions probing for division, city, age, gender, party support, and comfort with expressing an opinion in a group setting. This last question was designed to guarantee respondents were willing to discuss their viewpoints in front of others. This ensured that any reticence among participants was a response to the question and not a personal disposition. IRI's local partner translated and administered the screening questionnaire in selected cities or towns in each division where the FGD was to be held. Researchers randomly approached individuals in a central location – for example, in a market – and invited or dismissed potential FGD participants based on their questionnaire answers.

During each FGD, an experienced moderator used a standardized discussion guide to structure the session. The discussion guide (see Appendix III) included 19 key questions within the themes of economic, political, and security issues. Each FGD was conducted in Bangla – the most common language spoken in Bangladesh – and then transcribed and translated into English based on audio recordings. IRI's Washington, D.C.-based research staff analyzed the transcripts using NVIVO, a computer program for qualitative data analysis. Once completed, this analysis was cross-checked with a simultaneous but separate analysis conducted by IRI's local research partner. Any significant disparities in the findings between the two reports were resolved through discussion between the

two research teams. This two-pronged analytical approach creates intercoder reliability, thereby reducing biased analysis. It also combines IRI's methodological and country expertise with the knowledge of local researchers.

IRI's rigorous and systematic approach to FGDs is designed to meet international best practices for research. However, there are limitations inherent to focus group research. First, focus groups are not representative samples of the population. This study, which includes approximately 130 participants, is not large enough to meet statistical requirements to accurately represent Bangladesh's approximately 160 million citizens (nor did its randomization process for participant selection meet requirements for statistical rigor). However, this study meets the common FGD standard of "transferability" – generating findings that are plausibly transferable to the broader population. IRI's research design, which adheres to accepted practices for FGD research, ensures – to the best of its ability – that these findings are relevant beyond the participants in the sessions. Second, as a methodological tool, FGDs can be tainted by groupthink, social desirability bias, fear, cultural stigmas or hierarchies, or other social and group dynamics that are difficult or impossible to completely eliminate. IRI's attention to quality research design and the use of an experienced local partner minimized, to the extent possible, these risks.

Context

Bangladesh has a violent and tumultuous political history. The country gained independence from Pakistan in 1971, but quickly fell into authoritarian rule under Mujibur Rahman (1971-1975), Ziaur Rahman (1977-1981), and Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1983-1990). Bangladesh's current democratic era began with elections in 1991, which were followed by free and fair elections in 1996, and 2001, during which the two major parties – the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – alternated power.

In order to avoid the politicization of election administration, Bangladesh instituted a system of caretaker government (CTG), in which a team of nonpartisan officials would administer the government and election process in the months prior to an election. After successfully overseeing elections in 1996 and 2001, the 2006 caretaker government attracted controversy. The main political parties disagreed over who should run the CTG, creating a stalemate. In order to break the impasse, the military intervened, creating a military-backed CTG between 2007 and 2008. The CTG pursued corruption charges against political leaders and became viewed by many politicians and citizens as deeply repressive.

In 2008, free elections were held³ and were won by the Awami League. While in power, the Awami League took two controversial actions: it amended the constitution to eliminate the CTG system and began a war crimes tribunal that sought justice for crimes committed during Bangladesh's war of independence against Pakistan. The trials, which became widely criticized by the international community, targeted members of the political opposition – imprisoning and executing several opposition leaders. The BNP and its allies boycotted the 2014 election to pressure the government to reinstate the caretaker government, which it saw as essential to fair elections. The Awami League's refusal to do this and its continued pursuit of war crimes trials against opposition leaders led to significant political violence in the year prior to the election. With many parliamentary seats

³ International Republican Institute. *"Bangladesh Parliamentary Elections, December 29, 2008: Election Observation Mission Final Report.* 2009 (1-128) Available at http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/fields/field_eo_report/bangladeshs_2008_parliamentary_elections.pdf

uncontested due to the boycott, the Awami League won reelection in January 2014 in a process condemned by most foreign governments and international IGOs and NGOs. With elections set for January 2019 at the latest and the start of a new election cycle, political tensions remain extremely high.

There are four primary parties in Bangladesh:

- *Awami League (AL)* – Founded by Mujibur Rahman (known as Mujib or Bangabandhu), who led Bangladesh’s independence movement against Pakistan, the Awami League is Bangladesh’s oldest political party and associated with the war of liberation and secular policies. The Awami League has governed from 1972-1975 under Mujib and from 1996-2000, 2008-2013, and 2013-present under Sheikh Hasina (Mujib’s daughter).
- *Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)* – Founded as the personal political vehicle of President Ziaur Rahman in 1978, the BNP has historically enjoyed popularity equal to the Awami League. The BNP is associated with religious nationalism rooted in Islamic values rather than Bengali ethnicity. The BNP governed from 1978-1982 in the Ziaur era and from 1991-1995 and 2001-2006 under Khaleda Zia (Ziaur’s widow).
- *Jatiya Party* – The Jatiya Party was founded by President Hussain Muhammad Ershad in 1986 to formalize his political power. Today, the party is largely non-ideological, but continues to win a minority of the vote. The height of the Jatiya Party’s power was under Ershad’s authoritarian rule, when it won two largely controlled elections in 1986 and 1988. While the party is currently the official opposition in parliament, several party members are cabinet members in the Awami League government.
- *Jamaat-e-Islami* – Jamaat, which originated in Pakistan, advocates elements of Sharia law in Bangladesh. Jamaat opposed the breakaway of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 and is accused of collaborating with the Pakistan Army’s violence against liberation supporters. Jamaat’s leaders fled to Pakistan after independence, but returned to Bangladesh under Ziaur’s BNP rule. Jamaat is a minor electoral party, but is highly organized and has recently provided its traditional ally, the BNP, with organizational support during protests and elections. Jamaat members have been accused of committing acts of terrorism, which the party denies. The government recently deregistered Jamaat as a political party, which prevents it from open electoral competition.

Over the past two decades, Bangladesh has achieved significant economic progress. World Bank data show improvements in several indicators of economic health.⁴ According to the international poverty line of \$1.90 per person, poverty declined from 44.2 percent in 1991 to 18.5 percent in 2010. More than 20 million rose out of poverty between 1991 and 2010 and literacy rates and food production increased. More than seven percent growth in 2016 continued Bangladesh’s solidified status as a “lower middle-income country.” However, the World Bank also notes ongoing challenges. Many Bangladeshis lack consistent access to electricity, quality infrastructure, and habitable land. Furthermore, millions remain in abject poverty and gender equality is low.

Compared to other countries in South and Southeast Asia, Bangladesh is religiously and ethnically homogenous. According to U.S. government sources,⁵ Bangladesh has a population of

⁴ The World Bank, “The World Bank In Bangladesh,” 2017. Available at <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh/overview>.

⁵ The CIA World Factbook, “Bangladesh,” <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>

approximately 157 million. Approximately 98 percent of citizens are ethnically Bengali. About 90 percent are Muslim, 10 percent Hindu, and less than 1 percent are a mix of other religions. Bangladesh has a young population, with a median age of 26.7 years. Most citizens live in rural areas, but urbanization has increased to 35.8 percent. Historically, Bangladesh has been known for secularism and syncretic religious practice. However, recent public polling suggests growing religious conservatism. In recent polls, the Pew Research Center found that 82 percent of Bangladeshis support making Sharia official law⁶ and 26 percent say acts of violence against civilians in the name of Islam are at least sometimes justified.⁷

Findings

Finding #1: Participants expressed significant concerns about their economic condition, but many did not blame the government for their suffering.

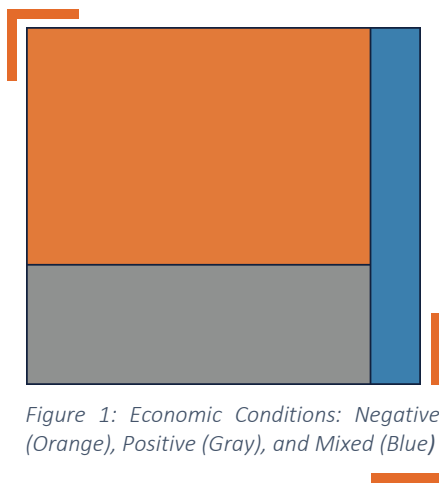


Figure 1: Economic Conditions: Negative (Orange), Positive (Gray), and Mixed (Blue)

Most participants had a negative view of their economic situation. Common critiques of economic conditions included rising prices, disparities in wealth and lack of opportunity. A man from urban Dhaka complained, “The earlier fare of five Taka [.06 USD⁸] for a rickshaw puller has now turned to 20 Taka [.20 USD].”⁹ He continued: “A day laborer works from morning to noon and gets less than 400 Taka [4.82 USD] for eight hours of work.” A woman from urban Mymensingh said, “All things are bad. The prices of vegetables are high.” Several participants noted that the wealthy are thriving while the poor are not. “The businessmen have a lot of money. They increase the price of everything, which means poor people have problems,” said another woman from urban Mymensingh. “There are also problems with low income. The rich people around us are busy with themselves,” argued a woman from

urban Rajshahi. A man from urban Barisal said, “I think the area where I live in Barisal district is very deplorable. Here, we were supposed to have established two new industries, but they’re still not here. I’m not sure why.”

In contrast, a substantial minority of participants cited improving economic conditions across both rural and urban groups. A man from rural Mymensingh represented a common sentiment: “After the Awami League came to power, bridges have been built, electricity has come, and all things have become developed.” However, others still noted an underlying weakness in the economy. A man

⁶ The Pew Research Center, “Chapter 1: Beliefs About Sharia,” April 30, 2013. Available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-beliefs-about-sharia/>

⁷ The Pew Research Center, “Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world,” August 9, 2017. Available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>

⁸ Bangladesh’s currency is called Taka. This report uses the exchange rate 1 USD = 83.1431 Taka, which is taken from XE Currency Converter on December 28, 2017.

⁹ Some quotes included in this report have been edited from the original translation to correct for English grammar and syntax. The meaning of the original speaker was retained. Words or phrases inserted within brackets were used when the speaker’s meaning was unclear; there was a Bangla term that needed clarification; or to replace a pronoun or missing word.

from urban Rangpur said, “Externally, we understand that our economic condition is good, but in reality we are not economically strong or self-dependent. Considering expenditures and overall conditions, we are not economically solvent.” Another man from the same area contended, “If our economic problems continue increasing rapidly, we will be the same as Zimbabwe at some point.” Several participants cited politics as a key driver of economic suffering. Another man from urban Rangpur claimed, “I think doing business is now difficult in the present political condition. We can’t run our business as we did previously. There are some politicians who torture us. Torture means they are asking for donations from us and also threatening us, so that we are bound to give them donations.”

Participants were particularly pessimistic about job opportunities, often citing corruption and nepotism as key impediments to employment. “There are no jobs now. Nobody is getting hired,” said a woman from rural Chittagong. A woman from rural Dhaka complained, “Not everyone gets a job. My younger brother has passed his M.A. degree, but he is unemployed.” In order to get a job, many participants said significant bribes were necessary. “Our young generation is not getting jobs. Nowadays you need a minimum of seven to eight lakhs¹⁰ Taka [8,419.22 to 9,621.97 USD] to get a government job. In our district one or two people can get a job and the rest of them are unemployed,” said a man from urban Rangpur. Another man from the same area explained, “On the twenty-first of last month, I gave an examination at the Deputy Commissioner’s office for a job but...they said that if you give us 14 lakhs [16,838.44 USD] you will get the job. I offered them 10 lakhs [12,027.46 USD] but they denied my proposal.” Others complained that personal connections and religion play a significant part in job decisions. “The Awami League government says it will give jobs only to freedom fighters’ children, not others. It is not right,” said a woman from rural Khulna. “This government gives jobs mostly to Hindus,” claimed another woman from rural Khulna. There was a broad consensus across groups that merit did not ensure access to jobs.

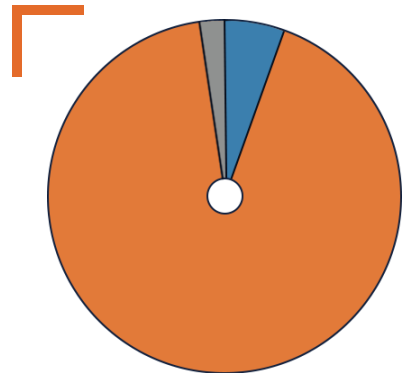


Figure 2: Perception of the Job Market: Negative (Orange), Mixed (Blue), Positive (Grey)

Despite these wide-ranging and consistent concerns about the economy across focus groups, participants were divided in their evaluation of the government’s performance on economic issues. Many respondents from both rural and urban locations praised the government for a variety of policies and absolved the government of responsibility for their economic problems. A woman from rural Rangpur said, “There is no point in blaming our government. The government is giving grants. We are not getting jobs because of us.” A woman from rural Chittagong argued, “If we give all the blame to the government, it will not be right. How can Sheikh Hasina do everything alone? The government, ministers and high-level officers should also take care of matters. We have to work for ourselves.” “Here we do not blame our government,” said another woman from Chittagong. “Those who do business by colluding in syndicates or cartels are responsible.” The government received praise across focus groups for providing micro credit, loans, training and stipends; building roads, schools and colleges; and improving access to electricity and new technology. “The government has no fault in economic problems,” concluded a woman from urban Sylhet.

¹⁰ The term “lakh” is a South Asian numerical term to denote multiples of 100,000.

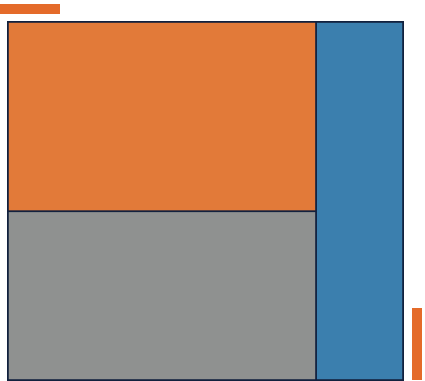


Figure 3: Perception of Government Performance on Economics: Negative (Orange), Positive (Grey), Mixed (Blue)

However, the government’s economic performance was also censured by many participants across groups. Critics of the government often cited a lack of government services. A man from urban Barisal said, “The government tries to solve economic problems, but it doesn’t implement the policies because of bureaucratic problems and procrastination...within the political party.” Another man from the same area contended, “The government doesn’t think about our livelihood or our life. It doesn’t provide us any unemployment stipend. Our working environment is very risky; there is no safety. If we become injured while working, there is no quota in the hospital for us. There is no free healthcare treatment for laborers.” A woman from rural Khulna said, “I think this government is doing badly. It is providing subsidies to the people more or less, but the government is not doing its responsibilities properly.”

Participants recommended the government control prices more effectively, curb corruption, create jobs and ensure development. Another man from urban Barisal concluded, “The government has not taken any steps for our locality. Our roads and transport system are very poor, but government work is 0 percent.”

Zoom-In: Our Analysis:

According to the Asian Development Bank, Bangladesh achieved 7.1 percent economic growth in 2016, which was the sixth consecutive year of growth greater than 6 percent. However, the FGD participants’ statements suggest that the benefits of this growth have not trickled down to many Bangladeshis, both in urban and rural areas. Perceptions of personal economic conditions were strikingly negative given the steady improvement in national-level economic indicators. Nevertheless, the Awami League-led government did not receive the brunt of the blame for poor economic conditions. Although there were significant criticisms, negativity toward the government was not commensurate with pessimism regarding the economy. Many participants praised improved local development even while lamenting poor job availability and rising prices. Politically, this suggests that though the Awami League has so far avoided disproportionate blame for financial adversity, it is potentially vulnerable to opposition critiques on economic issues.

Finding #2: Participants overwhelmingly viewed corruption as a significant problem that pervaded numerous aspects of everyday life.

According to participants, corruption is pervasive in Bangladesh. As outlined in Finding #1, job access often requires a bribe, but participants cited examples of corruption across various sectors. A man from rural Mymensingh complained, “My son has applied to the Ananda Mohan College. He

was in waiting with other students who had A+ averages. In spite of this, my son was not permitted to admit. There are some students who had 3.00 averages, but were admitted. Is this not corruption?" A man from rural Sylhet said, "The responsibility of the police is to maintain the rules and regulation of a country, but they are causing ordinary people pain. They collect bribes from the innocent people." "Suppose you are waiting at a hospital behind about 100 people," explained a woman from rural Dhaka. "If you give a bribe of 10 Taka [.12 USD], you'll be in the front." A woman from rural Rangpur said, "Suppose an exam fee for a school is 100 Taka [1.21 USD]. But the administrator is taking 200 Taka [2.41 USD] instead. It is difficult for us to pay 200 Taka. In this case, school teachers are corrupt; they are taking the extra money."

Engaging in the political system can also require bribes. A man from urban Rangpur claimed, "If I engage in politics I need musclemen who will use violence, terrorism and extortion on my behalf. They will come to me and say, 'How will I enjoy Eid, if I don't get money?' But from where will I get this money?" Other participants mentioned corruption around access to electricity, receiving loans, road construction and resolving land disputes.

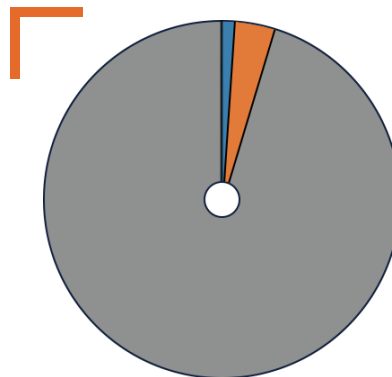


Figure 4: Is corruption a significant problem? Yes (Grey), No (Orange), Mixed (Blue)

Zoom-In: Our Analysis:

Corruption appears to be pervasive in Bangladeshi society, politics, and economics and there are few aspects of daily life in which bribes are not at least occasionally required. High levels of corruption can have important implications for a country. While Bangladesh has experienced positive economic growth in spite of rampant corruption, over the long-term, corruption can deter investment, undermine regulations, undercut tax revenue and spur budget inefficiencies, among various other negative effects. Continued and unmitigated corruption could imperil Bangladesh's long-term economic growth. Furthermore, corruption can have a political impact. Corruption surrounding elections and politics potentially undermines the faith of Bangladeshis in their democracy. In addition, although it appears corruption is so widespread in Bangladesh that no particular actors receive disproportionate blame, political parties risk demoralizing their supporters if corruption persists unabated.

Finding #3: Participants were critical of the quality of Bangladesh's democracy and democratic institutions, often citing electoral fraud and violence. However, most still intended to vote in the next election and nearly all participants supported more cooperation between the parties.

Many participants, distributed across nearly every focus group, were critical of the state of Bangladesh's democracy. "No, there is no democracy in Bangladesh," said a woman from Mymensingh. "It is called dictatorship," said a man from urban Barisal. A man from urban Dhaka argued, "This government of Sheikh Hasina came without elections." A man from urban Rangpur claimed, "There is no democracy in our country. We can call it autocracy...the government party is using its own law." A man from rural Sylhet said, "Those who are in power have everything. There is no place for others." "We don't have democracy," said a woman from rural Chittagong. "I don't

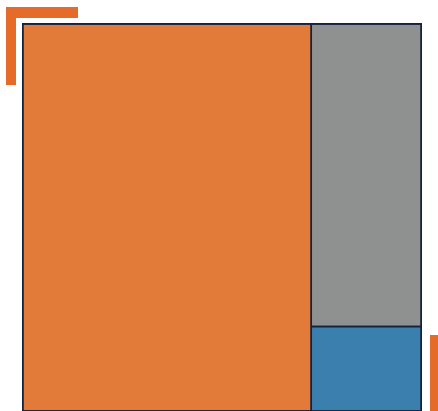


Figure 5: Is Bangladesh a democracy? Negative (Orange), Positive (Grey), Mixed (Blue)

have the right to say anything.” A man from urban Barisal said, “In the constitution, there is democracy, but in practice, it doesn’t exist.” A woman from rural Barisal explained, “Now all things happen without the opinion of the people. If democracy was available, we would be able to vote.”

Many participants argued the credibility of elections was undermined by fraud and violence. A man from urban Dhaka claimed, “At our polling station, there were not more than three votes at 3 pm. But when the votes were counted, there were 800 votes. How is this possible?” Another man from the same region said, “When I went to vote it was said to me that if I want to vote then I have to vote in front of [polling staff]... This is the example of our country’s voting system.” A man from urban Barisal noted, “There is no opposition party at the

polling center. It seems the ruling party dominates the polling stations.” “The last MP election is an obvious example of this,” explained a man from urban Khulna. “No person went to the voting center except the police and dogs. We saw this in newspapers and media. In spite of this, our election commission said that 70 percent of the vote was cast.” A woman from rural Chittagong said, “During elections there is manipulation. When we reached the vote center we found that somebody has already cast our vote.” Direct vote buying, through money or other goods, was commonly noted. A man from rural Chittagong explained, “When I voted in the mayoral election, then they gave me biriyani to eat. They said, ‘I am managing your vote... You are not any outsider; you are also in our group.’ Election violence and fear was also mentioned. A woman from Dhaka claimed, “The Awami League is ruling and now those who are supporters of the BNP are afraid. Even in our village, some have left to go to foreign countries.”

However, a smaller but not insignificant number of male and female participants across rural and urban locations praised Bangladesh’s democracy and nearly all participants intended to vote in the next election. “The government is really vigorous as a democratic party,” said a woman from rural Rangpur, “and Bangladesh is also doing well as a democratic country.” A man from Mymensingh said, “Before the Awami League came to power we did not get any chance to cast our vote. Now the situation has changed, we can cast our vote freely now.” A woman from urban Rajshahi praised the country’s progress on women’s rights: “Bangladesh is a democratic country. Now women are getting the same rights as men. In school, women are getting the same facilities... For this reason I think that this is a democratic country.” Nearly all participants, both critical and laudatory of Bangladesh’s democracy, said they would vote in future elections. A man from urban Mymensingh explained, “I am a citizen of the country and to prove this I want to cast my vote.” A man from urban Barisal said, “Casting a vote is my civil right. I want to cast a vote to keep the right person in the right place and to save the country.” Similarly, a woman from rural Rangpur said, “Our country is democratic. The country depends on public opinion. We need a good leader for our country, which we will select through an election. To select a better government, we need to vote.”

Additionally, nearly all participants supported more cooperation between political parties. In comparison, 66 percent of respondents in a 2017 IRI survey supported the Awami League including other political parties in the decision-making process.¹¹ Among the stated benefits of greater

¹¹ Center for Insights in Survey Research. “National survey of Bangladeshi Public Opinion. March 6 – April 19, 2017,” pg. 23. International Republican Institute. 30 April 2018.

cooperation were less violence, less corruption, and better development and economic performance. A woman from urban Sylhet said she would feel “encouraged and fearless” if she saw Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia working together. A woman from rural Barisal claimed, “Peace will come in our country if they work together.” A woman from rural Rangpur said, “We want them to work together. If they co-operate with each other, it will be beneficial for our country. People can live peacefully and can easily earn their livelihoods.” “If BNP has integrity,” explained a man from urban Barisal, “then... it can work together with the [Awami] League in the parliament.” A man from rural Chittagong contended, “Previously the parliament was very lively, but now we don’t enjoy the parliament activities. Previously, there was an understanding between parties. But now the situation is that if one is a lion then the other is a rat.” Despite this desire to see cooperation, many participants were skeptical it would occur. “It would be good, but they will never work together,” said a woman from urban Mymensingh. A woman from rural Dhaka argued, “They want to work together. But the people surrounding them don’t let this happen.”

Zoom-In: Our Analysis:

Despite widespread criticism of Bangladesh’s democracy, Bangladeshi citizens retain a strong dedication to democratic processes. The key factors undermining perceptions of the country’s democracy – electoral fraud, political violence, and creeping authoritarian politics – were mostly, but not exclusively, linked to the Awami League. Yet the Awami League’s continued popularity in polling and FGD data suggest that Bangladeshis might be inured to political violence and combative politics and therefore do not see the Awami League as uniquely blameworthy. In the past, opposition parties, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat), have also been implicated in violence and intimidation. This fact strengthens the Awami League against a key criticism of its tenure. In addition, Bangladeshis remain strongly committed to democracy and key democratic norms. Nearly all participants hoped to vote in the next election, citing it as their duty as citizens of a democracy, which aligns with IRI’s Spring 2017 survey where 76 percent of Bangladeshis stated they were very likely to vote in the next election. There is also strong popular support for greater cooperation between parties, but the upcoming election cycle is likely to produce the opposite dynamic. Particularly in the wake of Khaleda Zia’s conviction on corruption charges in February 2018, the prospects for party unity are dim. This suggests the social fundamentals of Bangladesh’s democracy remain strong even in the face of political intransigence and characteristics of democratic backsliding.

Finding #4: Most participants expressed a positive view of the Awami League and its leader, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, often associating her and the party with the country’s independence movement and current development.

When asked to describe the Awami League, most participants from across rural and urban locations expressed positive descriptions of the party’s history and current policies for development. A woman from urban Mymensingh said, “Sheikh Mujib died for the country. He was confined in jail. He has done many things for the country. His whole family was killed. For these reasons people love the Awami League.” A woman from rural Barisal said, “I love Sheikh Mujib so I love the Awami League.” Similarly, a woman from urban Rajshahi explained, “The Awami League is always doing very well. Sheikh Hasina’s father, Sheikh Mujib, did a very good job and his daughter is also doing the same.” Many participants also credited the Awami League with local development. A man from rural Mymensingh said, “The Padma bridge is being built without the Asian Development Bank and World Bank; it is the contribution of the Awami League.” A woman from rural Dhaka claimed, “They have

repaired so many roads.” “In the past there was mud, roads were worse,” said another woman from rural Dhaka. “Now there are new roads and there's electricity in every house.” A man from rural Mymensingh explained, “In rural area clinics are being built. In every case, Sheikh Hasina is noticing.” Participants also praised the Awami League for improved communication infrastructure, security, and literacy rates, among other issues. However, a smaller number of participants still criticized the Awami League, calling it dictatorial, anti-democratic, illegal, violent and fascist.

The Awami League’s leader and current Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, received similar praise, which far outnumbered criticisms from participants. “I remember Sheikh Mujib,” said a woman from urban Mymensingh when asked what word she associated with Sheikh Hasina. “Sheikh Hasina means Bangabandhu¹² and Bangabandhu means liberation war,” explained another woman from the same area. A woman from urban Rajshahi said, “First I can recall the name of her father; he has sacrificed his life for our country.” Other participants associated Sheikh Hasina with improved development. “When I remember her, I remember the development of the country,” noted a man from urban Khulna. “She made good plans, but bureaucrats are corrupt; it is not her fault.” A woman from Mymensingh said, “I like her as she stands beside the poor.” Participants praised Sheikh Hasina for her actions on women’s rights, better education, leadership, and being personally educated and patriotic. A smaller number of participants criticized Sheikh Hasina as dictatorial, pro-Indian and violent. A man from urban Khulna associated Sheikh Hasina with “oppression, suffering.” Nevertheless, when asked to name aspects of Sheikh Hasina they did not like, many participants said they like everything about her.

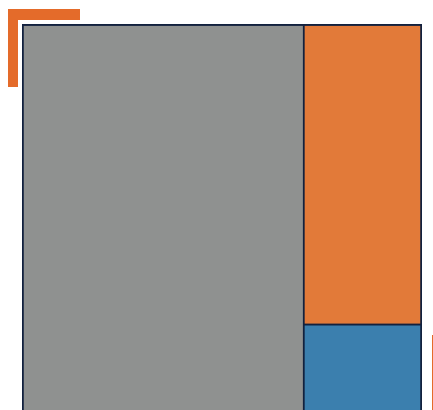


Figure 6: Favorability of Awami League: Positive (Grey), Negative (Orange), Mixed (Blue)

Zoom-In: Our Analysis:

Bangladeshis appear to have a strong and deeply personal dedication to the Awami League and its leader, Sheikh Hasina. Two key factors seem to drive this: targeted local development and the history of Sheikh Hasina and her party. This combination of emotive and policy-based support appears to provide the Awami League with a resilient base of support. Despite concerns about corrupted democratic institutions and political violence, many Bangladeshis remain loyal to the party and its leader. While the FGDs suggest that many Bangladeshis are not benefiting from the country’s economic development, improved living conditions are nevertheless a key element of the Awami League’s support. This presents a distinct challenge for opposition parties attempting to craft a compelling critique of the ruling government.

Finding #5: Regarding opposition parties, most participants viewed the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its leader Khaleda Zia and Jamaat-e-Islami negatively. In comparison, the Jatiya Party, which is the “official opposition” in parliament, was the only opposition party to receive more positive than negative responses.

Criticism of the BNP was more frequent and widespread than praise. A man from urban Dhaka said, “I personally believe that BNP belongs to Khaleda Zia, so there is no democracy. The party will be pressured by what Tareq Zia [Khaleda Zia’s son] will order.” Similarly, a man from rural

¹² A popular nickname for Mujibur Rahman, the first president of Bangladesh.

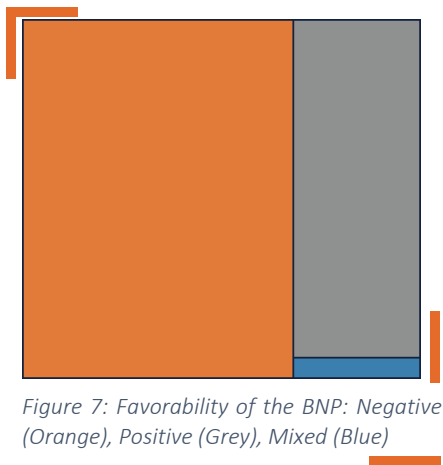


Figure 7: Favorability of the BNP: Negative (Orange), Positive (Grey), Mixed (Blue)

Mymensingh said, “The son of [Sheikh] Hasina is highly educated, but the son of Khaleda [Tareq Zia] is incendiary.” Many participants associated the BNP with violence. “I feel fear when I hear BNP,” said a woman from rural Khulna. A woman from rural Barisal claimed, “Violence occurs during BNP rule. Ordinary people carry out violence, but the blame is on the shoulders of the BNP.” A young man who did not remember the last BNP administration (2001-2006) said he heard about violence during that period: “We have heard that there were so many killings and open robbery.” Among the smaller number of participants who praised the BNP, they said the party was patriotic, supportive of Islam, democratic and pro-development.

Participants’ opinions were split regarding the BNP’s leader Khaleda Zia, who received more praise than her party but comparatively less praise than Sheikh Hasina. A man from urban Barisal said, “Khaleda always considers the people’s love, not herself.” Another man from the same area said, “Actually, she is not educated, but she thinks about people. Her word and work are the same.” “In the period of Khaleda Zia’s rule, the price of everything was reasonable,” said a woman from urban Rajshahi. “She established the first scholarship for girls.” When asked what they like about Khaleda Zia, participants praised her tenure and development achievements under her past rule. However, negative characteristics were just as frequently mentioned. Some participants said Khaleda Zia was weak and reliant on advisers. A woman from urban Rajshahi said, “I don’t find anything good about Khaleda Zia.” Another woman from the same area complained, “Khaleda Zia always gives us hope, but, in practice, her party leaders are torturing us. They are hurting us on our weakest spot.”

Regarding Jamaat, negative comments outweighed positive comments among participants. Most criticisms centered on the party’s use of violence and conservative religious agenda. A man from urban Dhaka said, “Jamat-e-Islami is not Islamic. Their works are not Islamic. Islam is peaceful, but they aren’t.” A man from rural Chittagong said, “I think Jamaat-e-Islami is a terrorist party.” A woman from rural Rangpur argued, “Jamaat-e-Islami always commits violence, riots and murder in the country.” Jamaat received particular criticism on women’s issues. A woman from urban Mymensingh said, “On the one hand, they will suggest women to stay at home, but, on the other hand, they will suggest that men throw bombs.” A woman from urban Mymensingh claimed, “Now our country is going properly. Women are contributing in every sector. But if Jammat comes to power, they will create a hindrance for women.” “No matter how religious I become,” said a woman from urban Sylhet, “Jamaat will never get [my vote].” Other critics said Jamaat was a Pakistani party, criminal, communal, and did not respect the liberation of Bangladesh or Mujib Rahman.

Although less numerous, several participants defended Jamaat, often praising its religious credentials. A woman from rural Khulna said, “If there is no Jamaat, then there will be no religion in our country.” A man from urban Barisal said, “Actually 95 percent of this country is Muslim. If they obey Allah... then this party is ok.” A woman from rural Barisal explained, “Jamaat is good for Islam. If this party came to power, it would be better for girls because they now wander in very undisciplined ways. Now they wear shirts, jeans, but before they would not wear this.” Other participants criticized the government’s repression of Jamaat. A man from urban Barisal contended, “It is an Islamic party. It has the right to participate in politics. But this government doesn’t allow this party to participate.” A man from urban Rangpur noted, “If Awami League commits violence, it is

permissible; but if Jamaat commits violence, then it is not permissible. This does not seem right. From this point of view, I think that the position of Jamaat is better than others.” In addition, a woman from urban Rajshahi explained, “We can’t call them bad because when any Hindu is in trouble, they help them. They have good policies. They treat us in a good way, not in any bad manner. They treat other women as their own family members.”

The Jatiya Party, which is the “Official Opposition” in parliament, had the highest ratio of positive to negative comments across focus groups. Participants often associated Jatiya and its leader Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the former President, with a lack of corruption, fresh thinking and development. A man from urban Khulna said, “In... Khulna, all credit for development goes to Ershad compared to Khaleda [Zia] or [Sheikh] Hasina.” There was also a gendered component to praise for Jatiya and Ershad, particularly among women. “I personally think one man is better than two women. Women are better for women and also men are better for men,” said a woman from urban Sylhet. A woman from rural Barisal explained, “Male-driven government is good.” A woman from rural Chittagong argued, “[Jatiya Party] ...ruled in our country for nine years... I think we should eliminate these two ladies and select Jatiya Party again.” Among the smaller number of critical participants, Jatiya was labelled dictatorial, in decline, weak, disorganized and unprincipled. A man from urban Khulna said, “Nowadays, in the morning Ershad says one thing but after a few hours he reverses himself.”

Zoom-In: Our Analysis:

Opposition political parties in Bangladesh, excluding Jatiya, are mostly associated with negative characteristics. The violence during the 2014 election appears to have disproportionately tarred the BNP, while the Awami League has avoided significant blame. Further challenging the BNP, Bangladeshis have a mixed view of the party’s leader, Khaleda Zia, who received more criticism than Sheikh Hasina. In addition, Jamaat, the BNP’s political ally, is strongly associated with the rise in violent Islamic extremism and regressive attitudes toward women. These negative views could impact upcoming electoral outcomes. The BNP’s opposition coalition, which includes Jamaat, is the most plausible alternative to the Awami League, yet the Bangladeshi public’s negative view of the coalition’s key parties could undermine its ability to exploit the Awami League’s vulnerabilities. While the Jatiya Party’s support in the FGDs appears strong, it is not currently considered a major opposition party given its close relationship with the Awami League government. Jatiya’s appeal in the FGDs likely represents two dynamics: the personal popularity of Ershad and Bangladeshis’ deep frustration with the current state of party competition.

Finding #6: Participants were divided about the return of the caretaker government.

The participants’ views of the caretaker system were heavily shaped by their perception of the previous caretaker government (CTG), which ruled from 2006 to 2008. Neither gender nor geographic location correlated with these views. Slightly more participants supported the return of the caretaker government. These participants often cited election neutrality and transparency and reduced corruption. A man from urban Rangpur said, “There is no need for a caretaker government in a truly democratic country. But because we are not fair, we need a caretaker government... [E]very election under a caretaker government has been done fairly. There is no bad side of the caretaker government.” In contrast, critics of the caretaker system said it creates violence and strikes, impedes voting, undermines development, hurts the economy and has stayed in power too long. A woman from urban Sylhet said that the previous CTG “kept people arrested during Hartal

[strikes] and set curfews on roads... That's why we do not like them." Another woman from the same area explained, "people used to be panicked all the time. There was no freedom during their rule."

Zoom-In: Our Analysis:

The negative legacy of the last Caretaker Government (CTG) has weakened support for its return. In January 2014, an IRI survey found that 77 percent supported bringing back a caretaker government before elections, while in April 2017, only 56 percent supported a caretaker government. Many Bangladeshis now associate the CTG with political turmoil, violence and authoritarianism. The decline in support for the CTG hurts the BNP most, which has conditioned its return to electoral politics on the installation of a neutral election arbiter. The Awami League has steadfastly refused to reinstate the caretaker system, and the CTG's declining popularity will likely only harden the Awami League's position. This creates the potential for a violent standoff moving into the election year of 2018. If the opposition perceives the election rules as partisan, the BNP could again boycott the election. This creates the potential for further election violence as well as the continued irrelevance of political opposition in Bangladesh. This would have important implications for the country. A viable opposition is essential to ensuring government accountability and sustaining democratic norms and practices. This potential for escalating political conflict will likely only strengthen citizen's disillusion with their government.

Finding #7: Most participants said Bangladeshis are afraid to discuss their political views in public because they fear retribution from political parties.

Participants across every focus group said Bangladeshis fear discussing politics in public. A woman from urban Sylhet said, "Regarding politics, people think twice before saying something." A man from urban Rangpur explained, "If I express my opinion on the side of the BNP, then maybe I will have a problem with the police. If I say anything against the opposite party of someone, then he can create trouble for me." A woman from rural Rangpur said, "I am afraid that if I speak anything about politics, my family might be in danger." A man from rural Chittagong argued, "It is a question of security. If I want to say anything, I will be beaten." Similarly, a man from urban Khulna said, "If I express my opinion, I will be snatched." Participants said this fear pervades public spaces. A man from rural Chittagong said, "Now in restaurants, public transports, and in offices it is written that political discussion is not allowed." A man from rural Sylhet explained, "Say there is a [political] program going on in our college campus, but I must go to class. [If student political groups] ask me where I am going. Then I...say, in fear, that I have class and will attend the program after class." According to one participant, many Bangladeshis lie about their vote. "Many people vote for the BNP, but they said they voted for the Awami League," said a man from rural Chittagong. A smaller group of participants across fewer focus groups said there was no fear of discussing politics in public.

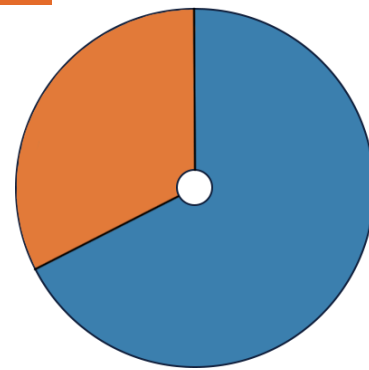


Figure 8: Do you feel safe to discuss political opinions? No (Blue), Yes (Orange)

Zoom-In: Our Analysis:

The fear of discussing politics in public appears mostly linked to intimidation from the government rather than the opposition. However, the focus group participants expressed fear of all major parties. When in power in the past, the BNP has used similar tactics of repression against supporters and members of the Awami League. The fear of reprisal for political speech is another indicator of declining democratic norms in Bangladesh. This pervasive fear in Bangladeshi society also raises an important question for public opinion research: Is support for the Awami League in these FGDs driven by fear of criticizing government? This appears unlikely for several reasons. First, FGD participants, despite saying they are fearful to discuss politics, were generally eager to express their opinion during the discussions. This ostensible contradiction suggests that while fear might be real, under some conditions people are nevertheless willing to openly express their views. Second, praise for the Awami League during the FGDs was often enthusiastic, linked to common issues, appeared genuine to moderators, and was seen across all FGDs, which spanned each division in Bangladesh. This suggests that most of the praise in the FGDs for the Awami League was sincere despite a general fear regarding political speech in day-to-day life.

Finding #8: Participants expressed mixed opinions on their personal security, but negative comments were more common. However, most participants felt the government was performing well on security issues.

Many participants were concerned about their personal or community's safety. Some of the concerns included were robbery, kidnapping, road safety, drugs, violence at colleges and child trafficking. Concern about women's safety issues was particularly prevalent. A woman from urban Rajshahi said, "Little girls are raped frequently but the government has not taken any action." A woman from urban Mymensingh argued, "Children drink wine and then disturb the young girls." A man from urban Dhaka echoed these sentiments: "During Awami League's period women were tortured exceedingly, I admit it as a party man." A woman from rural Chittagong explained the full extent of women's abuse:

Moreover, men are touching ladies' bodies when they find any opportunity. If an unknown person touches you, then how do you feel? Is this my fault? Am I walking nude?... It is not only teasing; they are touching our bodies at any place. Sometimes rickshaw pullers also say bad things to us on the road when we are waiting... Now if somebody rapes us, then we are asked for the evidence. Giving evidence of rape is more painful than being raped. So, a woman is being raped every minute. Also, the lawyers are asking where they have been touched, what they did with you. A woman who has been raped is already suffering. She is weak not only physically but also psychologically.

Several participants also complained of political and state-led violence. A man from urban Barisal said:

There is no personal safety. I am the best example. One day...I was waiting on the road... [and] the police arrested me. I asked them about my crime; they did not give me any answer. That means in our country there is a government but there is no

safety. If the police killed me, there would be no proof available. I think the government itself provides no safety.

Another man from the same area said, “If anyone says any word against the [Awami] League, then there will be no safety.” A man from urban Khulna similarly noted, “Words can’t be uttered about the ruling party [Awami League]. If we talk about them, they react. It is a social and state problem.”

However, when asked to rate the government’s performance on security issues, many participants gave high marks. They praised the government for improving road safety, providing electricity and prosecuting criminals. While some participants claimed that so-called “crossfire deaths” (people killed during shootouts with the police) are in fact extrajudicial killings by the state, some justified these killings. A man from rural Mymensingh said, “Cross firing is unknown to us; we think the government is doing this for the betterment of the people.” Another man from the same area argued, “Actually the people who die in crossfire fights, they have many cases against them, so the public wants their death.” When asked to recommend steps for the government to improve security, participants named a range of issues, including harsher punishments for crime, regulating alcohol and drugs, stopping child marriage, preventing violence against and harassment of women and improving roads. The most frequently recommended action was to end police corruption. A common sentiment was expressed by a woman from rural Khulna: “Police take bribes in order to lessen punishment. Bribes must be reduced.”

Zoom-In: Our Analysis:

Local-level insecurity is a significant problem for many Bangladeshis. From unsafe infrastructure to physical assault, citizens face often dire challenges on a daily basis. Women in particular are common victims of harassment and sexual assault. However, similar to corruption, pervasive insecurity does not significantly redound against the government or the Awami League. Insecurity is often viewed as a social problem, which is sometimes exacerbated by failures in local governance, but is not ultimately blamed exclusively on national-level parties.

Key Takeaways

The FGDs suggest that many Bangladeshi citizens face significant daily challenges including economic hardship, corruption and insecurity.

Despite a growing economy and improving development indicators, many Bangladeshi citizens continue to face severe hardships. Local economic conditions are marked by high unemployment, rising prices and various other challenges. Bribes and other forms of corruption limit access to jobs, the rule of law, healthcare, education and other public goods. Furthermore, personal security is poor. Women, in particular, live in fear of sexual assault and have little recourse for justice. Politically, these challenges create a potential window of opportunity for the opposition; however, these data suggest that a critical mass of citizens has yet to conclude that the Awami League bears full responsibility for these social and economic problems.

The FGDs suggest that the Awami League’s incumbent government is in a strong political position entering the 2018 election cycle because of its development achievements and the personal popularity of its leader.

Bangladesh's next election will occur sometime prior to January 2019. Entering this year-long election cycle, the Awami League is in a strong political position and the party and its leader, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, are popular. The party gets credit for improved local-level development and continues to benefit from its historical role leading the country's independence movement. Moreover, the Awami League has managed to fend off blame for the key challenges facing Bangladeshis – namely, economic hardships, corruption and insecurity. The public appears to hold businesses and local government officials equally responsible, deflecting liability from the Awami League. These conditions may benefit the Awami League in the forthcoming election.

The FGDs suggest that the political opposition, particularly the BNP and its ally Jamaat, face strong headwinds entering the 2018 election cycle because of their association with violence, intransigence and religious extremism.

Bangladeshis face significant daily challenges that have the potential to benefit the political opposition and weaken the incumbent Awami League. However, many Bangladeshis do not blame the Awami League and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for their adversity. In fact, the Awami League and its leader continue to be held in high esteem. As a result, the opposition has not been able to capitalize on key vulnerabilities of the incumbent government. The opposition's key election issue, the return of neutral election rules similar to the caretaker government (on which it has staked its return to election campaigning), has only medium levels of support from the population, weakening its position in the forthcoming election.

The FGDs suggest that many Bangladeshis are fearful of expressing their political views in public and many believe that the country's democracy is underperforming if not entirely broken.

These FGD data correspond with other studies indicating that the quality of Bangladesh's democracy is in decline.¹³ Voter fraud, politically motivated violence and harassment, religious extremism, insecurity and corruption are growing. Bangladeshis are fearful to express their political views in public and many believe their democracy is underperforming, if not entirely broken. However, the governing Awami League is not disproportionately blamed for this at present. Yet many outside observers and those in Bangladesh's political opposition are increasingly critical of the Awami League's actions. If Bangladesh's political opposition continues to weaken, then there will be no serious counterweight to the Awami League's parliamentary majority. This presents a potential danger for the country's democracy over the long term. Healthy democracies require strong opposition parties that can present new ideas and check unconstrained power. Without this, the quality of democratic institutions can decline.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended for Bangladeshi political parties and the government, as well as international organizations providing DRG-related assistance.

Recommendations for Political Parties and the Government

¹³ For example, see The Economic Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, which gives Bangladesh's democracy its lowest rating in over 10 years. <https://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2018/01/daily-chart-21>.

- Economic growth is not benefiting many segments of society. The government should formulate policies to promote broad-based local development and employment opportunities.
- Corruption is perceived as pervasive. The government should take steps to prevent corruption in both the public and private sectors.
- Elections are viewed as increasingly corrupted by violence and partisanship. The government should ensure safe, free and fair elections through measures such as strengthening nonpartisan election administration and improved security.
- Insecurity, particularly for women, is a serious problem. The government should bolster the rule of law and the capacity of local police to prevent crime.
- Many citizens are frustrated with political violence. The major political parties should identify areas of compromise and engage in productive oppositional politics as opposed to noncooperation and protest.

Recommendations for International Organizations Providing DRG Assistance

- As the 2018 election cycle begins, political party assistance should be targeted to cultivating issue-based campaigning for opposition and incumbent parties.
- Key institutions of election-violence prevention, including the election commission, security services and domestic observers, should be targeted for capacity building.

Appendix A: Participant Composition

FGD-1 – Male, Urban			
Location: Dhaka City			
Date: August 11, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Male	36	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Male	35	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	22	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Male	25	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Male	26	Hinduism	Working Class
Male	23	Agnostic	Middle Class
Male	42	Islam	Working Class
Male	38	Islam	Upper Middle Class

FGD-2 – Female, Rural			
Location: Dhaka City			
Date: August 11, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Female	30	Islam	Working Class
Female	30	Islam	Working Class
Female	20	Islam	Working Class
Female	36	Islam	Middle Class
Female	40	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Female	40	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Female	25	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	50	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	40	Islam	Lower Middle Class

FGD-3 – Male, Urban			
Location: Rangpur			
Date: August 14, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Male	51	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	40	Islam	Middle Class
Male	46	Islam	Upper Class
Male	37	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	44	Islam	Working Class
Male	30	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	30	Islam	Working Class
Male	28	Islam	Working Class

FGD-4 – Female, Rural			
Location: Rangpur			
Date: August 14, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Female	45	Islam	Semi-Skilled Manual Worker

Female	40	Islam	Working Class
Female	22	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Female	45	Islam	Working Class
Female	38	Islam	Working Class
Female	33	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	35	Islam	Working Class
Female	34	Islam	Semi-Skilled Manual Worker

FGD-5 – Female, Urban			
Location: Rajshahi			
Date: August 17, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Female	27	Islam	Upper Class
Female	25	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	22	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	40	Hinduism	Lower Middle Class
Female	34	Hinduism	Working Class
Female	28	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Female	37	Islam	Upper Class
Female	25	Islam	Skilled Working Class

FGD-6 – Male, Rural			
Location: Rajshahi			
Date: August 18, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Male	40	Islam	Middle Class
Male	33	Islam	Working Class
Male	35	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	32	Islam	Working Class
Male	34	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	60	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	55	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	45	Islam	Middle Class

FGD-7 – Female, Rural			
Location: Chittagong			
Date: August 18, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Female	20	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	37	Islam	Middle Class
Female	50	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	19	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Female	48	Islam	Upper Class
Female	19	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	21	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	36	Islam	Working Class

FGD-8 – Male, Urban			
Location: Chittagong			
Date: August 19, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Male	20	Islam	Upper Class
Male	21	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Male	19	Islam	Middle Class
Male	36	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	38	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	40	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	48	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Male	32	Islam	Upper Class

FGD-9 – Male, Urban			
Location: Khulna			
Date: August 19, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Male	30	Hinduism	Skilled Working Class
Male	36	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Male	40	Hinduism	Lower Middle Class
Male	38	Islam	Middle Class
Male	25	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	25	Hinduism	Lower Middle Class
Male	38	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	60	Islam	Upper Middle Class

FGD-10 – Female, Rural			
Location: Khulna			
Date: August 19, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Female	46	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	35	Hinduism	Skilled Working Class
Female	44	Hinduism	Middle Class
Female	40	Hinduism	Working Class
Female	35	Hinduism	Working Class
Female	27	Hinduism	Skilled Working Class
Female	20	Islam	Semi-Skilled Manual Worker
Female	50	Islam	Working Class

FGD-11 – Female, Urban			
Location: Mymensingh			
Date: August 22, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Female	19	Islam	Working Class
Female	19	Islam	Working Class
Female	37	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Female	40	Islam	Working Class

Female	39	Islam	Upper Class
Female	45	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Female	23	Islam	Working Class
Female	21	Islam	Working Class

FGD-12 – Male, Rural			
Location: Mymensingh			
Date: August 22, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Male	42	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	40	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	35	Islam	Middle Class
Male	56	Islam	Unskilled Manual Worker
Male	57	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	25	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	62	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	18	Islam	Middle Class

FGD-13 – Female, Urban			
Location: Sylhet			
Date: August 19, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Female	23	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	20	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Female	39	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Female	30	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	40	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	38	Islam	Middle Class
Female	25	Islam	Working Class
Female	36	Islam	Lower Middle Class

FGD-14 – Male, Rural			
Location: Sylhet			
Date: August 19, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Male	22	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	20	Islam	Unskilled Manual Worker
Male	19	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	37	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	39	Islam	Working Class
Male	29	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	50	Islam	Semi-Skilled Manual Worker
Male	22	Islam	Skilled Working Class

FGD-15 – Female, Rural			
Location: Barisal			
Date: August 21, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Female	46	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	28	Islam	Middle Class
Female	52	Islam	Middle Class
Female	45	Islam	Working Class
Female	20	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Female	32	Islam	Semi-Skilled Working Class
Female	45	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Female	32	Islam	Skilled Working Class

FGD-16 – Male, Urban			
Location: Barisal			
Date: August 21, 2017			
Gender	Age	Religion	Socio-Economic Class
Male	25	Islam	Middle Class
Male	38	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Male	52	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Male	30	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Male	26	Islam	Skilled Working Class
Male	58	Islam	Lower Middle Class
Male	25	Islam	Upper Middle Class
Male	37	Islam	Working Class

Appendix B: Screening Questionnaire

1. Division

In what division do you live?		
Division	Code	Continue if respondent resides in the district under study
Barisal	1	
Chittagong	2	
Dhaka	3	
Mymensingh	4	
Khulna	5	
Rajshahi	6	
Rangpur	7	
Sylhet	8	

2. Area

In what city do you live?

[Continue if the respondent resides in the city under study.]

3. Age

What is your age?		
Age	Code	Continue if the respondent fulfills the necessary age requirement for the group.
18-25	1	
25-35	2	
35-45	3	
45-60	4	

4. Gender

What is your gender?		
Gender	Code	Continue if the respondent fulfills the necessary gender requirement for the group.
Male	1	
Female	2	

5. Party Support

If the election was held today, which party would you vote for?		
Party	Code	Continue if the respondent contributes to minimum requirement of party representation in a group (at least 2 BNP and 2 AL)
AL	1	
BNP	2	
JP	3	
Jamaat-e-Islami	4	
Other (specify)	5	
Not yet made a decision	6	

Refused to answer	7	
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6. Comfort Expressing Opinion

How comfortable are you expressing your opinion in a group setting?					
Not comfortable at all			Completely comfortable		
1	2	3	4	5	6
TERMINATE			CONTINUE AND INVITE TO GROUP		

Appendix C: Discussion Guide

Introduction

The International Republican Institute is conducting focus groups in Bangladesh to gather the opinions of ordinary Bangladeshi citizens on key economic, political, and security issues. Our conversation today will last about an hour and 30 minutes. Your answers will help us better understand some of the challenges Bangladeshis face on a regular basis.

I should tell you that your responses will be kept anonymous. The information discussed today will go into a report, but any identifying information will be removed. You will each be provided with a unique identification code. Neither the research team nor anyone else will know your identity.

I would like to reiterate from the form you signed that you do not have to participate in this discussion. Also, you do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable with at any point of the focus group.

Project Overview

These focus groups are an opportunity for you to voice your opinion of the economic, political, and security situation in Bangladesh. Your answers, which will remain anonymous, will be used to brief political parties on the lives and attitudes of ordinary citizens. It is therefore vitally important you give your honest opinion on the issues discussed today. Sessions like this strengthen democratic politics by informing political parties of the needs and concerns of citizens.

Questions

I. For our first topic, we will discuss economic issues in your community.

1. How would you describe your economic condition?
 - a. What are the primary economic challenges facing you and your community?
 - b. Can you talk about employment in your area? Are people able to get jobs and earn a living?
2. How would you rate the government's performance on economic issues?
 - a. What could the government do to improve your economic situation?
3. Thinking about corruption, do you think this is a problem in Bangladesh as a whole?
 - a. How serious is this problem?
 - b. What about in your community – is corruption a serious problem?
 - c. Can you give me some examples of corruption in your area?
 - d. How has this affected your life? Can you please give some examples from your own or your close relatives' experience?

II. For our second topic, we will discuss political issues in Bangladesh.

1. What does the word “democracy” mean to you?
2. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about Bangladesh's future? Why?
3. How would you describe the current status of Bangladesh's democracy?
 - a. Would you describe Bangladesh as fully democratic?

4. Do you intend to vote in future elections? Why or why not?
 - a. Do you think that voting gives you a chance to affect decision-making in the country? Why or why not?
 - b. Generally speaking, do you think that the elections in Bangladesh are credible?
 - c. Do you think that election rigging is a problem? How serious is this problem?
 - i. Can you provide an example of election rigging you have seen or heard of?
 - d. What do you think about the upcoming parliamentary election? Will it be fair or will there be election rigging?
5. What one word would you use to describe the Awami League?
6. What one word would you use to describe the BNP?
7. What one word would you use to describe the Jamaat-e-Islami?
8. What one word would you use to describe the Jatiya Party?
9. What word comes to mind when you hear the name Sheikh Hasina?
10. What word comes to mind when you hear the name Khaleda Zia?
11. Do you support more or less cooperation between the ruling party and BNP? Why or why not?
12. Do you support the return of the caretaker government?
 - a. What are the positives or negatives of the caretaker government?
13. Finally, when it comes to expressing political opinions, do you think that people in Bangladesh feel safe in expressing their beliefs or do you feel that people are scared to do so?
 - a. For those who think that people are scared, why do you think this is the case?
 - b. Can you provide examples of a situation where people did not feel free to express themselves?

III. For our third topic, we will discuss security issues in Bangladesh.

1. How would you describe your personal security situation?
2. What are the primary security challenges facing your community and Bangladesh as a whole?
3. How would you rate the government's performance on security issues?
 - a. What could the government do to improve security in Bangladesh?

