

**1975**

Sheik Mujibur Rahman, founding president of Bangladesh, and most of his family are assassinated in a military coup.

**1981**

Former president Ziaur Rahman, of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is assassinated in a military coup.

**1997**

Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord is signed, but violence and Bengali settlement continue. There are 280,000 internally displaced people in CHT by January 2015.

**2004**

Islamist group Huji-B attacks Awami League (AL) rally, killing 24 and injuring 200, including former prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

**2007**

Military coup. Over 52,000 are arrested and 29 killed by law enforcement in the first month of the ensuing state of emergency.

**2008**

Ninth parliamentary elections, after nearly two years of military-backed caretaker government.

**2014**

Islamist party leader Abdul Quader Mollah executed for crimes during war of independence. Large-scale protests, violence, and bombings ensue.

**2015**

BNP protest against AL government leads to violence. At least 112 die, including 40 in police custody.

**2016**

AL clamps down on opposition, arresting thousands of activists and Islamists and sentencing 15 opposition lawmakers to life in prison.

**2017**

Parliament passes the Child Marriage Restraint Act that permits girls under 18 to be married in special cases.

**1971**

War of independence from Pakistan. Bangladeshi authorities claim as many as 3 million deaths.

**1976**

The indigenous, mostly Buddhist *Jumma* of the Chittagong Hill Tracts launch armed struggle against Bengali settlers and security forces.

**1991**

End of military dictatorship and return to parliamentary democracy.

**2001**

Postelection violence forces nearly 200,000 Hindus to flee or emigrate to India.

**2001**

Catholic church bombing kills nine and injures 20. Religious minorities are increasingly targeted by violent Islamist groups.

**2013**

BNP boycotts tenth parliamentary elections, leading to armed violence, attacks on minorities, and hundreds of dead and injured.

**2013**

Communal attacks on Hindu houses and shops follow death sentence for Islamist war criminal.

**2013**

First murders of secular bloggers by Islamic extremist group Ansarullah Bangla Team.

**2015**

Islamic State (IS) affiliate claims credit for first bombing of a Shiite site in Bangladesh.

**2016**

IS affiliate attacks Holey Bakery café in Dhaka. Twenty-eight die, including 20 hostages.

# Bangladesh

## At a glance



National civil war  
**Absent**



Communal/ideological conflict  
**Medium**



National political conflict  
**High**



Local political and electoral conflict  
**High**



Transnational terrorism  
**Medium**



Local resource conflict  
**Medium**



Separatism and autonomy  
**Low**



Urban crime and violence  
**Low**

*\* Rankings are based on the last 15 years and are relative to other Asian countries.*

## Overview

Bangladesh has faced rising political violence and terrorist attacks in recent years. The national parliamentary elections in 2014 highlighted the intense political tension between the ruling and opposition parties, resulting in over 500 deaths from violent clashes. Opposition protests and the government's heavy-handed response further exacerbated the situation. Political rivalry at the national level also affected the local political landscape after the government amended the law allowing registered political parties to nominate candidates in local government elections. Even though local elections had been peaceful compared to national elections in the past, deadly violence between political opponents erupted, killing over 140 people between March and June 2016. The polarized political climate and flawed democratic process appear to be feeding violent Islamist extremism. Transnational terrorist organizations, such as Islamic State and al-Qaeda, are gaining ground utilizing local extremist groups. Bangladesh had over 450 terrorist attacks in 2015 alone. In July 2016, Dhaka had one of its deadliest terrorist attacks, which took the lives of 28 people. Foreigners, secular journalists and bloggers, and religious minorities have been the primary targets of terrorist attacks in the country. Against this political backdrop, communal violence has escalated, and religious minorities continue to be persecuted, while the government is unable or unwilling to address the underlying causes.



### National civil war

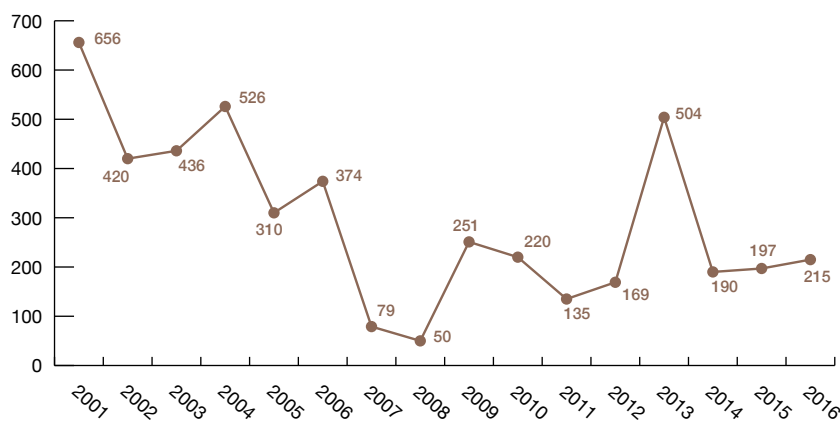
There has been no civil war in Bangladesh since its independence from Pakistan in 1971. During the Bangladesh Liberation War, widespread atrocities were committed, mainly against the Bengali population of East Pakistan. Bangladeshi authorities claim that as many as 3 million people died, although some independent researchers have estimated a lower toll.<sup>1</sup>



### National political conflict

Political violence is a major feature of the Bangladeshi political landscape. Since the revival of the parliamentary system in 1991, tensions between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) have often led to violence.<sup>2</sup> The parties are bitter rivals, and each tries to undermine the other when it is in power. Instead of debating issues in the parliament, opposition parties take matters to the streets, leading to violent clashes with supporters of the ruling party. Political violence intensified during the BNP-led coalition government from 2001 to 2006, taking 2,722 lives. The antigovernment movement led by the AL was the biggest instigator of violence (figure 1).

The military has also played a large role. The country underwent several coups d'état that ended in massacres of political leaders and their families, including assassinations of two heads of state: Sheik Mujibur Rahman (the first president and Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's father) in 1975; and Ziaur Rahman (former president and BNP leader Khaleda Zia's late husband) in 1981. The latest military coup took place in January 2007, when a state of emergency was declared following widespread political unrest prior to the general election. In the first month of the country's state of emergency, 29 people were killed by law enforcement agencies, and over 52,000 were arrested,<sup>3</sup> including majority party leaders Sheik Hasina and Khaleda Zia and some of their senior staff. After nearly two years of the military-backed caretaker government, the ninth national parliamentary elections were held in December 2008.



**Figure 1.** Fatality estimates from political violence in Bangladesh (2001–2016)

Source: Prepared based on political violence statistics provided by Odhikar<sup>4</sup>

# USD 2.2 billion

## net loss due to political turmoil in the first quarter of 2015

Political violence escalated again before, during, and after the tenth national parliamentary elections, which took place in January 2014. Months of violence left hundreds dead and injured across the country. Ain o Salish Kendra, a human rights organization based in Dhaka, reported over 500 deaths in 2013<sup>5</sup> and 62 deaths in the month of January 2014.<sup>6</sup> The violence began with a disagreement between the AL government and BNP-led opposition groups about the appropriate mechanism for free and fair elections. The BNP and other opposition parties demanded the reinstatement of the neutral caretaker government system to oversee the elections.<sup>7</sup> Calling for an election boycott, members of the BNP and opposition groups staged blockades and demonstrations starting in October 2013. In many incidents, opposition groups used petrol bombs and homemade grenades and set off improvised grenades in busy streets without warning. In some cases, opposition groups recruited street children to carry out the attacks. Attacks on property and public transportation scared ordinary citizens, who suffered from a series of national strikes and blockades. Religious and ethnic minority groups, particularly Hindus, were targets for vandalism and intimidation.

Tensions rose further over the trial of Islamist war criminals and debates about whether political Islam should be granted legal space in the country's democratic system. In December 2014, the Jamaat-e-Islami party (JI), the most influential Islamic party in Bangladesh, and its student organization, Islami Chhatra Shibir, staged large-scale protests around the country, marked by extensive violence including the use of crude bombs, after the execution of a senior JI leader, Abdul Quader Mollah, for crimes committed during Bangladesh's independence war in 1971. Violence surrounding the war crime trials also reflected intense debates over the role of political Islam in the country. The JI, the biggest ally of the BNP, was disqualified from participating in the 2014 elections when the High Court ruled that the party's charter did not conform to the secular constitution and cancelled its registration with the Election Commission.

On election day, and the days that preceded it, opposition activists targeted electoral officials and attacked schools and other buildings serving as polling stations. According to Human Rights Watch, attackers killed three election officials and injured 330 other officials and law enforcement agents on election day.<sup>8</sup> The Election Commission suspended voting in 597 of 18,000 polling stations due to violence.<sup>9</sup> A total of 553 schools and educational institutions were damaged.<sup>10</sup> The AL won nearly 80 percent of the parliamentary seats. Voter turnout was a record low 40 percent because of the boycott and violence.

# 5 bloggers killed and 3 injured in 2015

The AL government responded to the violence by deploying security forces to launch a brutal crackdown on opposition groups, unlawfully killing dozens of leaders and activists and carrying out widespread, arbitrary arrests. Human Rights Watch documented the killing of 11 opposition leaders and activists by security forces before, during, and after the 2014 elections.<sup>11</sup> Thousands of opposition party members and activists were arrested. The impunity enjoyed by Bangladesh's law enforcement agencies fueled widespread violations.

Following the 2014 elections, Bangladesh continued to experience political unrest as the ruling AL resisted calls for fresh elections. Violent clashes and protests against the government by the BNP and its allies ebbed and flowed. In January 2015, the anniversary of the tenth national parliamentary elections, large-scale protests demanding that Prime Minister Hasina's government step down escalated into a violent standoff between the opposition and government supporters. At least 36 people were killed. AL ignored the demands of the protestors and branded BNP a terrorist organization. BNP head Khaleda Zia was confined inside her office and called for a nationwide blockade. In the first two months of 2015, arsonists attacked nearly 1,200 vehicles, and at least 112 people died, 40 of whom, mostly opposition activists, were killed while in the custody of law enforcement agencies.<sup>12</sup> The World Bank estimated a net loss of USD 2.2 billion in the first quarter of 2015 due to the political turmoil.<sup>13</sup>

The ruling party remained in power by clamping down on opponents. Many opposition party leaders and members were imprisoned or faced serious charges that could bar them from office. For instance, 15 BNP and JI lawmakers were given life sentences over their alleged involvement in the violent protests of 2013, and over 100 BNP members were indicted for their participation in the 2015 BNP-led blockade.<sup>14</sup> In June 2016, Bangladeshi police arrested 2,100 leaders and activists from the opposition BNP as part of a crackdown on over 11,000 suspected Islamic extremists for religious violence.<sup>15</sup>

The bitter political conflict between the AL and the BNP has created space for Islamist parties such as the JI to expand their power bases. Some analysts believe that Islamists are increasingly influential due to their better organization and party discipline. Support for them has increased as people have lost confidence in the current political system due to widespread corruption, deteriorating law and order, and a weak judicial system. The AL has continued to execute opposition leaders for alleged war crimes during the Liberation War of 1971: the general secretary of JI, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, and a top aide to Khaleda Zia, Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, were executed in November 2015. The following year, a senior leader of JI, Mir Quasem Al, was also executed. Many argue that the rulings have been flawed, with arbitrary limitations on witnesses and documents and bias in favor of the prosecution.<sup>16</sup>



## Transnational terrorism

Some violent Islamist groups have come into existence under political patronage, such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B) and Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). HuJI-B is backed by the Taliban and was officially banned by the government in 2005. JMB has an extensive network and also follows the Taliban's ideals. The government initially cracked down on these groups after a series of terrorist attacks in the mid 2000s. In August 2004, HuJI-B was accused of carrying out a deadly attack at a public rally of the Awami League that killed 24 people and injured 200.<sup>17</sup> The following year, JMB conducted synchronized explosions in 63 of the 64 districts of the country, targeting government buildings, major hotels, and Dhaka International Airport, killing two and injuring 50.<sup>18</sup> The government has used force and legal means to combat terrorism, but these groups have continued to exist even after many of their key leaders have been imprisoned or executed.

According to the 2016 Global Terrorism Index of the Institute for Economics and Peace, Bangladesh was ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> out of 163 countries in terrorist activities and attacks in 2015. The report noted that Bangladesh had 459 terrorist attacks in 2015, which resulted in 75 deaths.<sup>19</sup> Even though, historically, terrorism in Bangladesh has been carried out by local groups such as HuJI-B and JMB, recent terrorist violence has been linked to transnational terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and the Islamic State (IS).<sup>20</sup> These transnational groups are increasing their capabilities in the country by leveraging local terrorist groups. A local Islamic extremist group, Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT; also known as Ansar al Islam, AI), that follows AQIS, was responsible for attacks and the murders of secular bloggers from 2013 to 2015. In 2015 alone, ABT killed five bloggers and seriously injured three.<sup>21</sup> These attacks have stoked public outrage, underscored the problem of rising violent extremism, and shown the government's inability to protect individuals at risk. ABT's links to the student wing of the JI have also been used to justify the government's crackdown against its political opponents.

The emergence of the IS in Bangladesh is relatively recent. The group carried out a series of attacks, targeting foreigners and religious minorities, through the local Islamic organization, JMB, which pledged its allegiance to the IS. In 2015, the IS claimed to be responsible for murdering two foreigners and detonating several bombs, one at a main Shiite site, killing one and wounding 80. This was the first time Shiites were targeted in Bangladesh.<sup>22</sup> On July 1, 2016, the group attacked the Holey Artisan Bakery café in Dhaka, resulting in 28 deaths, including 20 hostages (mostly foreigners), two security forces personnel, and six militants.<sup>23</sup> The government denies the growing presence of IS in the country.

## Subnational level



### Separatism and autonomy

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in southeastern Bangladesh have been the site of an armed conflict between Bangladesh armed forces and the Shanti Bahini, a military arm of the United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Parbattya Chattagram Janashonghoti Samity, PCJSS). Between 1976 and 1997, indigenous peoples struggled violently for greater autonomy in the CHT. The tribal groups of the CHT, collectively known as the Jumma people, make up around 53 percent of the population in the CHT as estimated by the national census of 2011.<sup>24</sup> They previously had a special status of limited self-government under British colonial rule. Pakistan withdrew this status and initiated a process of modernization and settlement of the area by outsiders, precipitating the political and economic marginalization of the Jumma. After Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan, tribal leaders demanded greater autonomy and protection of traditional lands. The government rejected their demands, however, and adopted a constitution that focused on a distinctive Bengali identity, language, and culture.



In addition, the government started a program to send Bengali settlers to the CHT. In response, indigenous peoples formed the PCJSS to unite the different tribal groups of the CHT and created the Shanti Bahini as their military arm.

The magnitude of the conflict is difficult to determine. Uppsala University's Conflict Data Program estimates between 502 and 574 people were killed during the insurgency.<sup>25</sup> Of those, about 230 were civilians, primarily Bengali settlers, killed by the Shanti Bahini. The United Nations and human rights organizations have reported widespread and systematic human rights violations, primarily perpetrated by Bangladesh security forces, including unlawful killings, detention without trial, torture, rape, destruction of houses and property, and forcible occupation of traditional lands.<sup>26</sup> During the conflict, approximately 70,000 Jumma fled to India, and around 100,000 were internally displaced.<sup>27</sup> Large areas of traditional land vacated by the Jumma have been occupied by Bengali settlers who were encouraged by the government to migrate to the CHT under army protection as part of a counterinsurgency strategy.

The AL-led government and the PCJSS signed the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord in 1997, granting limited autonomy to the elected council of the three hill districts. The Accord

promised reforms to promote autonomy and the cultural, economic, social, civil, and political rights of Jumma people. In addition, it promised the removal of all temporary army camps in the CHT and was to give administrative responsibility in a range of areas—including land management—to the three Hill District councils. Jumma refugees returning from India, and internally displaced people who had fled to other parts of Bangladesh or to deep forests in the CHT, were to be rehabilitated through the provision of land, housing, and rations. A land commission was promised to investigate and resolve land disputes.

Since the Peace Accord, tensions over land rights between the Jumma people and Bengali settlers have grown, as Bengali settlers continue to flow into the CHT, leading to an ongoing cycle of violence. The media frequently reports clashes in which Jumma and Bengali settlers have been killed and injured and homes destroyed. For example, Amnesty International reports that in February 2010, a Jumma villager in the Sajek area was killed when Bengali settlers attacked Jumma people and burned their houses following a protest against Bengali settlers building huts next to Jumma settlements.<sup>28</sup> On December 16, 2014, the 43rd anniversary of Bangladesh's independence, a Buddhist temple was vandalized, and more than 50 indigenous homes were burned down.<sup>29</sup> Ongoing violence has displaced both Jumma and Bengali settlers, and has prevented them from returning to their homes. As of January 2015, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimates that there were 280,000 displaced people in the southeastern CHT.<sup>30</sup>

The government has not fully implemented the terms of the Peace Accord, such as removing all temporary military camps in the CHT and resolving land disputes caused by the transmigration program. Due to ongoing violence between Jumma and Bengali settlers, the Bangladesh government continues to maintain a heavy military presence to preserve law and order in the CHT. Jumma view the lack of action as government support for Bengali settlers and the continued invasion of their traditional land. The government agreed to amend the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission Act 2001 in July 2013. The amendment distributes decision-making authority among members of the commission instead of placing it solely in the hands of the chairman. It also gives indigenous people priority in the recruitment of staff for the land commission. In August 2016, the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission Act 2016 was finally approved by the cabinet to amend the 2001 Act. Due to the prolonged amendment process, the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission has been dysfunctional and has failed to resolve any land disputes since its establishment.<sup>31</sup> A government task force established under the Peace Accord estimates that over 90,000 Jumma families remain without access to their traditional land.<sup>32</sup>

Violence against indigenous women committed by settlers and the military is also widespread in the CHT, even though cases are often not reported. Kapaeeng Foundation, a local human rights organization working on indigenous issues in Bangladesh, reported that 290 women and girls from the CHT were victims of gender-based violence between 2007 and 2014.<sup>33</sup> The Home Ministry reported that not a single perpetrator was convicted, even though 215 cases of violence against women were recorded between January 2010 and December 2011.<sup>34</sup> This illustrates the high level of impunity for sexual and gender-based violence against indigenous women and girls in the CHT.



### Large-scale communal and ideological conflicts

Religious and ethnic minorities in the country suffer from frequent threats, assaults, torture, and displacement. While the marginalization of and discrimination against religious minorities goes back to colonialism and the legacy of Partition, violence against them has escalated due to recent political developments and the rise of violent Islamist organizations.<sup>35</sup> Attacks against religious minorities often lead to injuries and involve grabbing and looting of properties and places of worship. Deaths were previously rare: only six fatalities were recorded by Odhikar between 2007 and 2015 (table 1).<sup>36</sup>



**Table 1.** Repression against religious minorities in Bangladesh (2007–2015)

Year	Killed	Injured	Assaulted	Arrested	Abducted	Grabbing		Attack		Idols damaged	Looted	Miscellaneous	Rape
						Land	House	Property	Temple				
2015	0	102	0	0	0	2	14	21	17	121	0	1	0
2014	1	78	2	0	0	14	0	371	32	193	1	0	0
2013	0	118	0	0	0	4	0	441	125	322	2	13	1
2012	0	69	2	0	0	0	1	81	46	0	24	0	1
2011	0	107	2	0	0	6	2	21	25	0	13	4	3
2010	2	244	0	0	0	9	1	20	23	0	4	6	6
2009	1	502	5	0	1	12	4	5	28	0	4	6	5
2008	1	90	1	0	0	7	0	2	24	0	6	0	0
2007	1	91	4	2	6	7	5	4	14	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1,401</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>966</b>	<b>334</b>	<b>636</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>16</b>

Source: Odhikar<sup>37</sup>

Major political events, such as national elections, have often provoked communal violence. Hindus are often threatened and attacked, because the opposition sees them as the electoral base of the AL. Postelection violence in 2001 forced almost 200,000 Hindus to flee to safer areas or migrate to India.<sup>38</sup> Leading up to and following the 2014 elections, many Hindu homes, businesses, and temples were vandalized, looted, and burned down. In addition, Hindus have been targeted in connection with the trial and execution of Islamist war criminals. For instance, the death sentence judgment of Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, the former politician of the JI, triggered widespread violence across the country in 2013. Amnesty International reports that at least 300 Hindu homes and shops and more than 60 Hindu temples were damaged or destroyed between February and April 2013.<sup>39</sup>

Other religious and ethnic minority groups also face persecution. Buddhists, who represent less than one percent of the population, experience discrimination and violence due to ongoing tensions over land, particularly in the CHT (see the section on separatism and autonomy). Christians are increasingly targeted by violent Islamist groups. One major attack against Christians took place on June 3, 2001, when a bomb exploded in a Catholic church in south Bangladesh, resulting in at least nine deaths and 20 injuries.<sup>40</sup> In 2015, a number of priests received death threats, and some were nearly killed.<sup>41</sup> While the majority of the Muslim population in Bangladesh is Sunni, other Islamic denominations and sects are subject to discrimination. Members of the Ahmadiyya community, numbering 100,000 in Bangladesh, have faced frequent hostility from local Islamist organizations since the early 1990s. As of 2015, Shia shrines have also been targeted by violent Islamist groups. Likewise, violence against indigenous communities is widespread across the country. The Kapaeng Foundation documented at least 13 extrajudicial killings and the torture and physical assault of 134 indigenous individuals in 2015.<sup>42</sup>

In general, the police have done little to prevent this violence, and authorities have failed to bring perpetrators to justice. Deteriorating political and security conditions and a culture of impunity have significantly increased the vulnerability of religious minorities and indigenous people in the country.



### Local political conflict and electoral violence

Local electoral violence is characterized by retaliatory clashes between the ruling party and opposition parties. Violence is increasingly used to reduce political participation and as a strategy in political competition, even at the local level. After the national government amended the Local Government Act to allow political parties to contest local government elections, local elections were held for the first time on party lines in 234 municipalities on December 30, 2015. The elections were marked by widespread violence, irregularities, and vote rigging. Activists and supporters of the ruling-party (AL) candidates reportedly committed acts of intimidation and violence against the candidates and supporters of the opposition BNP and other political parties. Odhikar documented six deaths and nearly 1,300 injuries in the run-up to and aftermath of the municipal elections.<sup>43</sup> The local political climate continued to be volatile throughout 2016. The elections for Union Parishad, the lowest tier of local government institutions, which were held in phases from March to June 2016, resulted in 143 deaths and many injuries due to violent confrontations between political opponents.<sup>44</sup> Human rights organizations believe that the Election Commission has failed to deliver fair and peaceful elections and to prevent illegitimate activities by the government.



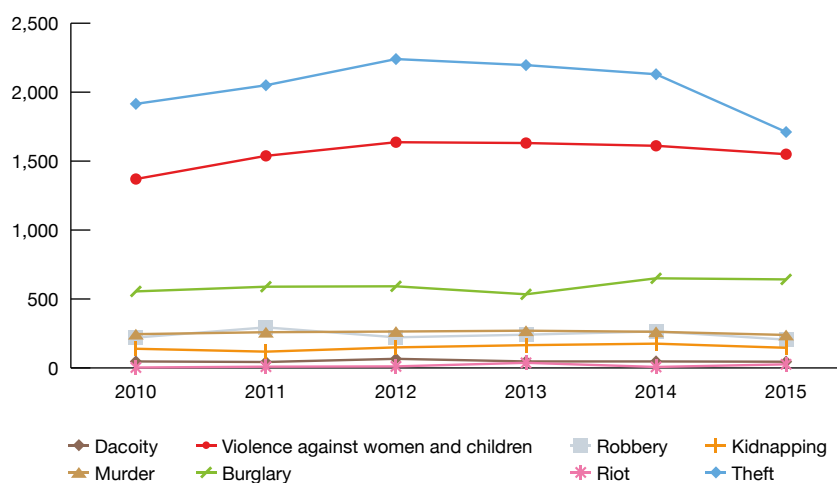
### Local conflict over resources and community rights

See the separatism and autonomy section on local conflict over indigenous rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.



### Urban crime and violence

As Bangladesh has experienced rapid urbanization in metropolitan areas, levels of urban crime and violence have also risen. Dhaka, the capital, with a population of over 7 million people, had the highest number of reported crimes at 19,727 in 2015, followed by Chittagong at 4,862. Theft is the most common form of crime reported in Dhaka, followed by violence against women and children (figure 2). While the incidence of dacoity,<sup>45</sup>



**Figure 2.** Dhaka's crime statistics (2010–2015)

Source: Prepared based on statistics provided by the Bangladesh Police<sup>46</sup>

robbery, murder, violence against women and children, and theft fell from 2010 to 2015, riots, kidnapping, and burglary increased. The largest proportional increase was in riot-related crimes, which rose from three to 26 cases between 2010 and 2015. An alarming trend is the growth in police seizures of illegal explosives, which jumped from 82 incidents in 2010 to 195 in 2015. The national homicide rate remains low at 2.6 per 100,000 people.

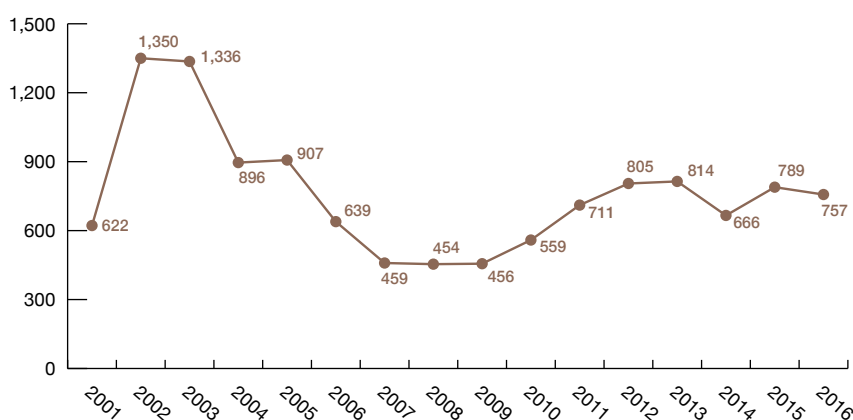


### Domestic and gender-based violence

Violence against women and girls is common in Bangladesh. Women and girls face various forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, physical and psychological abuse, dowry-related violence, rape, and early marriage. Deeply rooted patriarchal social norms and traditional practices and a weak and corrupt criminal justice system enable such violence. The Bangladesh police recorded over 21,000 cases of violence against women and children in 2015, making it the most prevalent violent crime in Bangladesh.<sup>47</sup>

Domestic violence is the most pervasive form of violence against women and girls in Bangladesh, and it is significantly underreported. The Report on Violence Against Women Survey 2015, carried out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, revealed that almost three-quarters of women who had ever been married had experienced violence at the hands of a spouse.<sup>48</sup> The most common form of intimate partner violence was controlling behavior (55.4 percent), followed by physical violence (49.6 percent). Nearly one-third had experienced sexual violence by their spouse. Three in every five married women had experienced a combination of physical, sexual, and emotional violence. The survey also found that rates of intimate partner violence were higher in rural areas (51.8 percent) than in urban areas (48.5 percent). The majority of women (72.7 percent) did not disclose their experience of intimate partner violence to anyone, a rate that was similar in rural and urban areas.

Dowry-related violence is a root cause of domestic violence, despite the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980. Dowry demands are usually settled at the time of marriage; however, some men and their families continue to make dowry demands throughout the marriage. Women who are



**Figure 3.** Rape cases in Bangladesh (2001–2016)  
 Source: Prepared based on data provided by Odhikar<sup>49</sup>

unable to satisfy those demands suffer threats of abandonment, beatings, cigarette burns, deprivation of food and medicine, acid attacks, and death. In 2016, Odhikar reported 206 cases of such violence against married women,<sup>50</sup> with 107 women killed, 94 physically abused, and five committing suicide. Documented cases of dowry-related violence have declined significantly over the years, however, falling from 822 in 2012 to 206 in 2016.

Early marriage remains prevalent. Until recently, the legal age of marriage for women was 18, but a large proportion of women are married before reaching this age. The Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) indicates that the proportion of women marrying in their early teens has declined. The 2014 BDHS found that 59 percent of women aged 20–24 got married before the age of 18, a decrease from 65 percent in 2011.<sup>51</sup> The median age at first marriage among women aged 20–49 increased from 14.4 years in 1993–94 to 16.1 years in 2014. Childbearing also begins early in Bangladesh, with almost half of women aged 25–49 having given birth by the age of 18. Although early marriage is declining, Bangladesh recently took a step backwards in efforts to end child marriage. Despite criticisms from domestic and international human rights and women’s organizations, the parliament passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act in February 2017, permitting girls younger than the age of 18 to be married in special cases.<sup>52</sup>

Rape is one of the most common forms of violence against women and girls in Bangladesh, but victims rarely seek legal redress, due to social stigma. There were 757 reported cases of rape in 2016, 212 of them gang rapes, and more than two-thirds involving children below the age of 18.<sup>53</sup> The number of reported rapes has begun to increase again since 2009 (figure 3).

**3** / **4** of married women  
abused by their  
spouse

## Notes

- 1 Mark Dummett, "Bangladesh war: The article that changed history," *BBC News*, December 16, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-16207201>; Ziad Obermeyer, Christopher J. L. Murray, and Emmanuela Gakidou, "Fifty years of violent war deaths from Vietnam to Bosnia: analysis of data from the world health survey programme," *British Medical Journal* 336, no. 7659 (2008), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2440905/>.
- 2 The AL is a left, secular-democratic political party drawing support from minorities such as Shiite Muslims and Bangladeshi Hindus. The BNP is a nationalistic, conservative party allied with Islamist parties but practicing secular politics. The BNP takes a hard-line approach to India and is openly pro-Pakistan.
- 3 Odhikar, *Human Rights Report 2008: Odhikar report on Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Odhikar, 2009), 14, <http://odhikar.org/human-rights-report-2008-odhikar-report-on-bangladesh>.
- 4 Odhikar, *Bangladesh: Annual Human Rights Report 2016* (Dhaka: Odhikar, 2016), 11, <http://odhikar.org/annual-human-rights-report-2016/>; "Statistics on Political Violence: 2001–2017," Odhikar website, accessed February 20, 2017, <http://odhikar.org/statistics/statistics-on-political-violence/>.
- 5 "Political Violence | January–31st December 2013," Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) website, January 11, 2014, <http://www.askbd.org/ask/2014/01/11/political-violence-january-31st-december-2013/>.
- 6 "68 Deaths due to Political Violence in January–February 2014," Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) website, March 4, 2014, <http://www.askbd.org/ask/2014/03/04/68-deaths-2014-due-political-violence/>.
- 7 The caretaker government system was created to govern in an interim period during the transition from one elected government to another so that an election could be held in a free and fair manner without political influence by the incumbent government. First used in 1996, a caretaker government also managed the elections and transition in 2001 and 2008. In June 2011, the ruling AL used its parliamentary majority to push through an amendment to the constitution that abolished the caretaker government system.
- 8 Human Rights Watch, *Democracy in the Crossfire: Opposition Violence and Government Abuses in the 2014 Pre- and Post-Election Period in Bangladesh* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2014), 3, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2014/04/29/democracy-crossfire>.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid., 19.
- 11 Ibid., 24.
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