

Caught in the Crossfire: Bangladesh's Erosion of Human Rights in the Battle Against Terrorism and Religious Extremism

Shaul M. Gabbay

Global Research Institute,

Posner Center for International Development, Denver, CO USA

ABSTRACT

Egregious human rights violations are prevalent in Bangladesh, with torture and ill-treatment deeply ingrained within the country's law enforcement agencies, intelligence organizations, paramilitary groups, and security forces. This paper explores the rampant use of torture as a powerful tool to suppress political opponents, silence dissenting voices, and control vulnerable communities, while instilling fear among ordinary citizens. Despite enacting legislation and ratifying international conventions against torture, Bangladesh continues to struggle with a culture of impunity and lack of implementation, hindering independent investigations and delayed prosecutions. The historical context reveals the roots of violence and torture in Bangladesh, including the tragic genocide in 1971. Political instability, polarization, and the rise of religious extremism have further exacerbated the issue. The international dimension highlights external pressures, particularly from the United States and its allies, urging Bangladesh to combat terrorism and religious extremism. As a critical player in regional counterterrorism efforts, Bangladesh faces the challenge of balancing strong measures with human rights protection. The paper emphasizes the need for comprehensive reforms, strengthened accountability, and independent investigations to address the deeply ingrained practice of torture. By upholding international obligations, fostering a culture of transparency, and respecting human rights, Bangladesh can pave the way for a more equitable and rights-respecting society. Only through concerted efforts can the legacy of violence and torture be transformed into a commitment to protect the dignity and rights of all its citizens, ensuring a brighter future for Bangladesh and its people.

Keywords: torture, suppression, detention, impunity, corruption

INTRODUCTION

Appalling human rights violations are prevalent in Bangladesh. This paper explores the rampant and entrenched use of torture and ill-treatment by state actors. The practice of torture is deeply ingrained within the country's law enforcement agencies, intelligence organizations, paramilitary groups, and security forces. It serves as a powerful tool to extract forced "confessions," suppress political opponents, silence dissenting voices, and control vulnerable communities, while instilling fear among ordinary citizens.

Members of law enforcement agencies enjoy impunity, shielded by successive governments, who implicitly validate their actions in silencing opposition and critics. Reports consistently

highlight incidents of torture occurring during police custody, leading to tragic deaths in custody.

The paper also addresses the international dimension of the issue, as the U.S. Department of State has expressed concern over the government's use of law enforcement agencies and security forces to quell political rivals and dissenting voices. Additionally, allegations of corruption, arbitrary detentions, harassment, and intimidation by law enforcement agencies have further exacerbated the human rights situation in the country.

Despite enacting the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act in 2013 and ratifying the UN Convention against Torture, Bangladesh continues to struggle with a culture of impunity and lack of implementation. This pervasive culture hampers independent investigations and delays prosecutions, perpetuating the cycle of human rights abuses. Furthermore, this paper highlights the unfortunate reality of law enforcement agencies being considered among the most corrupt institutions within the country.

TERRORISM IN BANGLADESH

One can't deny the need for Bangladesh to be assertive in its quest to tame terrorism. The country has emerged as a prominent hotspot in the global fight against religious extremism. Situated at the crossroads of South Asia, this densely populated nation faces unique challenges due to its political landscape, socio-economic disparities, and religious diversity. Over the years, it has grappled with the rise of terrorist activities, becoming a critical concern for both regional and international actors.

Roots of Terrorism

The roots of terrorism in Bangladesh can be traced back to various factors, with a significant one being the political climate characterized by polarization and instability. The country's political landscape has been marked by a prolonged power struggle between major political parties, leading to the exploitation of religious sentiment for political gains. As a result, extremist groups find fertile ground to promote their ideologies and recruit disillusioned individuals, especially among the youth.

The rise of religious extremism has further exacerbated the terrorism challenge in Bangladesh. Radicalization within certain segments of the population, often driven by ideological beliefs, has led to the formation of militant outfits seeking to impose their extremist agendas on society. The influence of transnational terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), has also been a cause for concern, inspiring local groups to align with their global objectives.

Pressures to Address Terrorism

The pressure to counter terrorism and religious extremism in Bangladesh has not only come from within but also from external actors, particularly the United States and its allies. Given the global nature of terrorism, the international community recognizes the significance of addressing the problem at its roots. As such, Bangladesh has faced increasing pressure to crack down on terrorist activities and dismantle extremist networks operating within its borders. The United States and its allies view Bangladesh's stability and security as crucial components in combating terrorism in the broader South Asian region. They emphasize the need for

Bangladesh to take decisive action against terrorist groups, disrupt their financing, and share intelligence to prevent potential attacks both domestically and internationally. The country's strategic location also makes it a critical player in regional counterterrorism efforts.

In response to international pressure and recognizing the importance of addressing terrorism, Bangladesh has taken measures to strengthen its counterterrorism capabilities. The government has launched numerous operations against terrorist cells, resulting in the arrest of key operatives and the disruption of their activities. Additionally, Bangladesh has increased cooperation with foreign intelligence agencies and law enforcement bodies to share information and coordinate efforts.

Challenges vs. Solutions

However, despite these efforts, challenges remain. Bangladesh's law enforcement agencies and judicial systems face obstacles in effectively prosecuting terrorists, often due to resource constraints and a lack of specialized training. The issue of radicalization and recruitment within prisons also poses a significant challenge, as incarcerated extremists continue to propagate their ideologies to other inmates.

Bangladesh finds itself in the center of the fight against terrorism and religious extremism, grappling with domestic and international pressure to address this pressing issue. The country's political climate, socio-economic disparities, and religious diversity contribute to the complex challenge of combating terrorism. While Bangladesh has taken steps to enhance its counterterrorism capabilities, the need for sustained efforts, international cooperation, and innovative approaches remains paramount to effectively root out terrorism and ensure lasting stability in the region.

While there is an undeniable need for Bangladesh to employ robust measures in tackling the pressing issue of terrorism, the crux of the matter lies not in the necessity itself, but in the manner of implementation. Urgency is real, and the challenges are significant. However, the overzealous enforcement of these measures and the alarming lack of self-restraint in violating human rights in the zealous pursuit of controlling not only terror suspects but also political opponents demand our examination. Moreover, the egregious use of torture despite Bangladesh being a signatory to the Convention against Torture raises further concerns that warrant scrutiny.

A STUBBORN HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE

Since gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh has faced a tumultuous history marked by instances of violence, political strife, and human rights abuses. The use of violence and torture has been pervasive in the country, with various state actors employing these measures to assert control, suppress dissent, and combat terrorism. There is a dark history of violence and torture in Bangladesh since its independence, shedding light on the key events and patterns that have shaped the nation's trajectory.

Post-Independence Political Unrest

In the aftermath of gaining independence from Pakistan, Bangladesh encountered political instability and turmoil. The country's nascent democracy struggled to establish a stable governance framework, leading to frequent changes in leadership and power struggles among

political parties. This backdrop set the stage for the use of violence and torture as means to consolidate power and silence opposition.

One of the most significant incidents of violence occurred during the 1975 coup d'état, which resulted in the assassination of Bangladesh's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with several members of his family. [1] The ensuing period witnessed military rule and political repression, with the military employing torture and extrajudicial killings to suppress opposition voices. [2] [3]

Turbulent Political Landscape and Human Rights Abuses

Throughout the following decades, Bangladesh experienced a tumultuous political landscape, characterized by shifting alliances, coups, and political confrontations. As political parties vied for power, the use of violence, torture, and extrajudicial measures remained a recurring theme. Human rights organizations documented numerous cases of torture, especially during periods of martial law and emergency rule.

The 2000s saw a rise in religious extremism and terrorism, leading to an intensified government response. While the need to combat terrorism was evident, human rights abuses became increasingly prevalent. Law enforcement agencies were accused of resorting to torture and ill-treatment while interrogating terror suspects, contributing to a cycle of violence and retaliation. [4]

Counterterrorism Measures and Human Rights Violations

The Bangladesh government's counterterrorism efforts have often been marred by allegations of human rights violations. [5] Under the guise of combating terrorism and religious extremism, security forces targeted not only terrorists but also individuals critical of the government. Reports of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture in custody became commonplace. In one such tragic incident, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a special paramilitary force, came under severe scrutiny for its alleged involvement in extrajudicial killings. Despite mounting evidence of human rights abuses, few members of the RAB faced accountability, perpetuating a culture of impunity. [6]

Torture as a Tool of Intimidation

Torture became a pervasive tool of intimidation in Bangladesh, often used to instill fear among political opponents, dissenting voices, and vulnerable groups. Victims of torture were subjected to both physical and psychological abuse, with the aim of extracting false confessions and silencing opposition. The lack of accountability and a dysfunctional judicial system further contributed to the perpetuation of this brutal practice.

TORTURE IN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND SECURITY FORCES

The practice of torture has deeply permeated Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies, intelligence organizations, paramilitary groups, and security forces, leaving a profound impact on the nation's human rights record. Despite constitutional provisions and international commitments, the prevalence of torture within these institutions has been a longstanding concern, raising questions about accountability and the protection of human rights. This essay sheds light on the reality of torture in Bangladeshi law enforcement and security forces, exploring its causes, consequences, and the need for urgent reform.

Historical Context of Torture

The roots of torture in Bangladesh can be traced back to its turbulent post-independence history. During the 1971 Liberation War, allegations of torture and atrocities committed by Pakistani forces against Bengali civilians were rampant. This period set a precedent for the use of torture as a tool of control and intimidation. Regrettably, this practice has persisted in the decades that followed.

The indiscriminate killings of Bengalis by the Pakistan military in 1971 stand as a dark chapter in human history, scarcely subject to exaggeration. During the period from March to December 1971, the eastern wing of Pakistan, now Bangladesh, witnessed one of the worst genocides in modern times. Termed "Operation Searchlight," the Pakistan military initiated a brutal assault, leading to the deaths of as many as three million people, with thousands subjected to rape and an estimated 10 million displaced, fleeing the country.

In March 1971, the Pakistan military launched a campaign of terror that spared no one, targeting Bengali civilians with ruthless aggression. Within the first month of the genocide, thousands of lives were lost, and millions became refugees, seeking safety in various camps set up by the Government of India in West Bengal, Tripura, Meghalaya, Assam, and other parts of India. [7]

The horrifying genocide persisted for nine months, causing immeasurable suffering to the Bengali population. The international media, scholarly researchers, and some policymakers have shed light on the atrocities committed during this period, using terms such as "selective genocide," "the bloodbath in Bengal," and "one of the bloodiest slaughters in modern times." [7]

Historical Complexities Underscore Urgent Need for Reform

The scale of violence and the gravity of the human rights abuses during this period are a testament to the deep-rooted brutality that has characterized Bangladesh's history of violence and torture. The scars left by the 1971 genocide continue to shape the nation's collective memory and underscore the importance of respecting human rights, ending impunity, and promoting accountability.

Understanding the historical context of torture and violence in Bangladesh helps elucidate the complexities of the present challenges the country faces. The overzealous implementation of counterterrorism measures, driven by political interests, has led to egregious human rights violations by law enforcement agencies and security forces. Such patterns of abuse underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to establish a just and rights-respecting society.

Bangladesh's history of violence, including the 1971 genocide, has left a lasting impact on the nation's development, shaping the current landscape of human rights issues and challenges. Recognizing and addressing the deeply ingrained practice of torture within law enforcement and security forces is crucial for safeguarding human rights and fostering an environment of accountability and justice. By embracing necessary reforms and upholding its international obligations, Bangladesh can move towards a future where human rights are upheld, and the legacy of violence is transformed into a commitment to protect the dignity and rights of all its citizens.

Other Key Causes and Motivations

In addition to historical shadows, several other factors contribute to the deeply ingrained nature of torture within Bangladeshi law enforcement and security forces.

One key factor is the lack of proper training and capacity building for law enforcement officials. Inadequate training leads to a reliance on coercion and brutality, undermining the principles of fair and effective policing.

Moreover, the political climate in Bangladesh, marked by polarization and power struggles, incentivizes the use of torture as a means to silence opposition and suppress dissent. Torture is employed as a tool to extract forced confessions, perpetuating a cycle of injustice and abuse of power.

Impunity and Lack of Accountability:

One of the most significant obstacles in addressing the issue of torture is the prevailing culture of impunity. Members of law enforcement and security forces often evade accountability for their actions, which emboldens them to continue engaging in torture and other human rights violations. The absence of rigorous investigations and impartial judicial proceedings allows perpetrators to escape justice, perpetuating a sense of invincibility.

The use of torture extends beyond the interrogation of terror suspects; it is also directed towards political opponents, government critics, and vulnerable groups. This blurring of lines between counterterrorism measures and politically motivated coercion contributes to a climate of fear and distrust.

Extrajudicial Killings and Forced Disappearances:

Torture is often linked to extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances in Bangladesh. Rights groups have documented numerous cases where individuals detained by security forces have subsequently disappeared or been found dead under suspicious circumstances. These actions not only violate basic human rights but also erode public trust in the institutions responsible for safeguarding law and order. [5]

International Obligations and the Way Forward:

Bangladesh is a signatory to various international human rights treaties, including the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. As such, the government is obligated to uphold and protect the rights of its citizens, ensuring that torture is unequivocally condemned and eradicated.

To address the deeply ingrained practice of torture, comprehensive reforms are urgently needed. These reforms should include strengthening the criminal justice system, enhancing the independence and effectiveness of oversight mechanisms, and implementing comprehensive training programs for law enforcement officials. Additionally, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability is vital to prevent future abuses and restore public confidence in law enforcement agencies.

The deeply ingrained practice of torture within Bangladeshi law enforcement and security forces represents a grave violation of human rights and a stain on the nation's democratic

journey. Urgent action is required to break the cycle of abuse, impunity, and distrust. By implementing robust reforms, holding perpetrators accountable, and upholding international obligations, Bangladesh can pave the way for a society that respects the dignity and rights of all its citizens. Only through concerted efforts can the scourge of torture be eliminated, ensuring a brighter future for Bangladesh and its people.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Bangladesh grapples with a troubling history of violence, human rights abuses, and the pervasive use of torture within its law enforcement and security forces. The country's journey towards democracy has been marred by political instability, polarization, and the rise of religious extremism, creating an environment where the excessive use of force and suppression of dissent have become deeply ingrained practices.

The 1971 genocide stands as a grim reminder of the consequences of unchecked violence and torture, leaving scars that continue to shape the nation's collective memory. However, the lessons from this tragic event underscore the importance of respecting human rights, promoting accountability, and seeking justice for victims of torture and abuse.

While there is a legitimate need for Bangladesh to address the pressing issue of terrorism, the overzealous implementation of counterterrorism measures and the lack of self-restraint in violating human rights demand critical examination. The international community's concern over human rights violations emphasizes the urgency of striking a balance between strong counterterrorism efforts and respecting fundamental human rights.

To forge a path towards a more equitable and rights-respecting society, comprehensive reforms are essential. Strengthening the criminal justice system, enhancing oversight mechanisms, and implementing robust training programs for law enforcement officials are crucial steps to break the cycle of impunity. Holding perpetrators accountable, regardless of their positions, is fundamental in restoring public trust in law enforcement agencies and the government.

Bangladesh's commitment to its international obligations, including the Convention against Torture, is vital to eradicate the deeply ingrained practice of torture. By fostering a culture of transparency and accountability, Bangladesh can demonstrate its dedication to upholding human rights and justice.

To address the issue of terrorism and religious extremism, Bangladesh needs to recognize the root causes and develop holistic strategies that address socio-economic disparities, political polarization, and religious radicalization. Collaborating with international partners and sharing intelligence can further strengthen its counterterrorism efforts, while also enhancing regional stability.

The journey towards lasting change will be challenging, but it is crucial for Bangladesh to foster an environment where human rights are protected, dissent is respected, and torture is unequivocally condemned. By embracing comprehensive reforms, upholding international commitments, and empowering its citizens, Bangladesh can pave the way for a brighter future—a future built on a foundation of justice, accountability, and respect for the dignity and rights of all its people.

References

- [1]. M. Kamruzzaman, "46 years later plot behind killing of Bangladesh founder remain mystery'," 8-15-2021 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-46-years-laterplot-behind-killing-of-bangladesh-founder-remain-mystery-/2335120>.
- [2]. Human Rights Watch, "The Torture of Tasneem Khalil: How the Bangladesh Military Abuses Its Power under the State of Emergency," 14 February 2008. [Online]. Available: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/02/13/torture-tasneem-khalil/how-bangladesh-militaryabuses-its-power-under-state>.
- [3]. S. A. Rahman, "No Extrajudicial Killings, Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh, Bachelet Is Told," 17 August 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.voanews.com/a/no-extrajudicialkilling-enforced-disappearance-in-bangladesh-bachelet-is-told-/6704801.html>.
- [4]. Amnesty International, "Bangladesh: Endemic torture since independence," 29 November 2000. [Online] Available: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/asa130082000en.pdf>.
- [5]. A. F. a. I. D. (. A. F. f. H. R. a. D. (. -. A. Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC), F. -. I. F. f. H. Rights and R. F. K. H. R. W. O. Odhikar, "UN COMMITTEE CALLS OUT BANGLADESH'S USE OF TORTURE," 14 August 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://rfkhumanrights.org/un-committeecalls-out-bangladeshs-use-of-torture>.
- [6]. C. C. |. A. I. |. B. S. |. N. Conrad, "'Death squad': Inside Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion," DW: Made for Minds, 3 April 2023.
- [7]. I. Ahmed, "RECOGNISING THE 1971 BANGLADESH GENOCIDE: AN APPEAL FOR RENDERING JUSTICE," February 2022. [Online]. Available: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disasterreduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf.