**Measuring State Fragility: A Case of Electoral Violence against Religious Minority in Bangladesh**

**Abstract**: Bangladesh has a history of election violence after every major national and local government election. Particularly religious minorities are the target of this electoral violence. The recurring pattern of electoral violence raises the question of state capacity to control violence during the election period and protect its citizen. In this study, we measure state capacity based on state fragility index. State capacity to face the challenges and manage its reaction determine the state fragility. The primary objective of this study is to find out how electoral violence against religious minority affects the state fragility. Here we analyse the relationship by using two related fragile state indicators- social cohesion and political indicators. We will be focused on how electoral violence weakens social cohesion and affect the political spectrum. Findings of this study will help us to understand how the state’s incapacity to control electoral violence against religious minority marginalise the minority within the state and makes it fragile.

**Introduction:** Bangladesh has a history of election violence after every major national and local government election (Macdonald, 2016). Especially the religious minority people are subject to this violence after parliament elections (Chowdhury, 2010). Though for the last 28 years of democratic regime different political parties took office the situation remains the same. It creates a sense of fear among the religious minority which is less addressed but one of the critical issues to ensure to exercise one’s democratic right- voting. This phenomenon undermines the democratic process and hampers the state’s capacity. A recurring phenomenon of electoral violence against religious minority raised the question of a state’s capacity to curve the violence and challenge its authority and brings the question of fragility.

State fragility is a concept to measure state capacity. Here we try to measure a state's capacity to face challenges and cope with the situation. State fragility index proposed by the Fund for Peace is a critical dimension to analyse a states capacity to properly exercise its resources to face the challenges it faces. In this study, we will try to find out the situation of state fragility of Bangladesh in the context of electoral violence against the religious minority.

**Background:** Religion always plays a significant role in politics in the Indian sub-continent. Bangladesh is the product of a long series of ethno-religious conflicts in the region which have their footprints in other countries of the sub-continent. India was partitioned based on religion (Hindus and Muslims) in 1947 and Bangladesh were the part of Pakistan (East Pakistan). In Pakistan period religious minority, especially Hindus were considered as the enemy of the state (Chowdhury, 2010). Later in 1971 in the liberation war of Bangladesh, they were one of the major targets for atrocities by the Pakistan army. Then in Bangladesh period, they remain vulnerable for different socio-political regions.

In Bangladesh, 11% of the total population is a religious minority, among them more than 9% are from Hindu community (Macdonald, 2016). Demographically Hindus become important in electoral politics as they are the major portion of the religious minority group. In Bangladesh parliamentary election 134 seats among 300 seats are regarded as “minority seats” (Arefin, 2003). In these seats, minority votes can take the decisive role to determine the result of the election. This numeric distribution of the minorities in Bangladesh makes them important because more than one-third of the parliament seats they can play a decisive role.

Minorities are always vulnerable in the social setting of Bangladesh as they do not have the strength to stand off the aggression from any strong groups (Togawa, 2011). Vulnerability conjugal with voting behaviour perception leads the religious minority, particularly the Hindu population as one of the centres of attention of election violence in Bangladesh. Also, violence against the religious minority can be expressed as *modus vivendi*: tension in the cultural sphere (Apostolov, 2001). Hindus of Bangladesh are no exception in this case. The rise of Islam as a political tool within the political area is one of the contributions of the military government before the democratic regime in Bangladesh (Riaz, 2010). This starts a tension in the social and cultural sphere in Bangladesh which has consequences over minority population. The increasing importance of religion in politics sharpen the social division and tension between two major religious groups. State fails here to control the tension and curve the violence and became fragile.

**Research Question:** In this study, how violence against the religious minority is related to the state fragility? Here, our main objective is to find out how violence against the religious minority affects the different variables related to state fragility.

**Literature Review:** Scholarship on electoral violence casts light on the matter of violence from numerous angles. To understand the electoral violence and security of a religious minority, we must first understand how these terms are perceived in different literature. The election is seen as a way of expressing people’s choice in state policy (Mollah & Jahan, 2018). Election opens an entry point for democratisation and thought of it as building a piece of majority rules system through speaking to the general will of the nations (Ndulo & Lulo, 2010) (Hussain, 2017). It shows that the election is regarded as one of the processes for peaceful transfer of power in a democratic system. Here people choose the representatives of them to represent in the state system. Though in democratic system election regarded as the process of peaceful transfer of power the violence is not uncommon in a different part of the world. Mainly where democratic institutions are not strong enough there it is a common problem of the process. Then it brings the question, why it ignites violence in the process? Some authors indicate the question of legitimacy in the process (Hussain, 2017) (Fischer, 2002). If people perception suggests that the election process is somehow compromised, then it leads to public violence (Macdonald, 2016). The legitimacy of the election process not only depends on the legal conditionality but also the moral and social acceptability of the election process (Hussain, 2017). These literature show that the question of legitimacy depends on two things- election process and moral or social acceptability of the election. If the perception about the election process is that it is not fair to all the parties in the process, then legitimacy is questioned. Here election conducting process is crucial as it indicates the all the stockholder has enjoyed the same treatment in the process. Also, with the legal conditionality, the legitimacy of the election also related to the moral and social acceptability of the process. If the election is conducted by the present rule and the rule is not morally accepted by the citizens, then the whole election process is in question. If the legitimacy of the election is in question, then the different portion of the political spectrum become hostile to each other, and that leads to the electoral violence. In the Bangladesh context, the legitimacy of the election process is one of the significant questions in the democratic era.

Violence can be defined as “the illegitimate and unauthorised use of force to effect decisions against the will or desires of other people in the society” (Wolff, 1969). Political violence is seen as the use of force to keep the existing power structure or to overthrow it and in the process change the political system (Anifowose, 1982) (Edigin & Obakhedo, 2015). Violence can also be defined as “the illegitimate and unauthorised use of force to effect decisions against the will or desires of other people in the society” (Wolff, 1969). Also, “political violence refers to all
Collective attacks within a political community against the political regime, its actors including competing political groups as well as incumbents or its policies” (Mollah & Jahan, 2018). From these definitions, it shows that political violence is the use of power to influence political dimension within a political system. In Bangladesh political violence is a prevalent feature in political culture. Sometimes opposition parties use it as a mean to overthrow the government, and sometimes the government use it to dominate a political opponent. In both cases, the use of force as a means to achieve political goals initiate the process of violence. Use of violence in the political process makes it a part of the political culture in Bangladesh. Hence the use of political violence became a norm after the independence of Bangladesh (Mollah & Jahan, 2018). Existing literature shows that violence is a recurring phenomenon in the election cycle of Bangladesh and the state failed to control this. The election is the most significant process of power transition in the political area and winner take all attitude in Bangladesh politics makes it vital to the political parties to achieve power. This attitude coupled with the failure of state apparatus to control violence lead to a path of violence time and again.

Electoral violence generally denotes- “any acts or threats of coercion, intimidation or physical harm perpetrated to affect and electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition” (Islam, 2015). According to Hoglund electoral violence can be seen into two subcategories- a subset of a larger conflict or an ultimate tool of election fraud (Hoglund, 2007). In Bangladesh perspective, these two categories have immense importance. The rivalry between two major political parties in Bangladesh creates tension in the political sphere and often that leads to violence. Particularly in election time when this tension became more intense and ultimately led to violence. In Bangladesh, both two categories can employ to analyse electoral violence. Also, the party in power sometimes use violence as a means to fend the threats from the opposition (HAFNER-BURTON, Hyde, & Jablonoski, 2014). The analysing election process in Bangladesh shows us that tension between two major political parties (AL and BNP) and use of force to subdue the opponent by the party in power is a common phenomenon (Islam, 2015). Generally, this kind of situation escalate political tension and leads to violence.

Scholarship on the election violence in Bangladesh shows that three kinds of electoral violence have been used to express the force- physical, psychological and structural (Mollah & Jahan, 2018) (Arefin, 2003). These kinds of violence perpetuate the sense of fear within the society, and it hinders the citizen to exercise their voting right. Also, these have a more significant long-term impact on society. Particularly the psychological effect of this kind of violence is having a long-term effect. Victims of this violence have to go through the process of mental trauma and perpetuate the sense of fear among them. When a society faces these kinds of violence repeatedly, then the bond of trust between citizen and government weaken in the state. Some of the scholars address these trust issue regarding repeating electoral violence (Wilkinson, 2004) (Jahan, 2008) ( The International Republic Institute , 2008). They show that recurring violence in the election cycle weakens the citizen’s trust in democratic institutions. Because it shows that if the government agency failed to address the violence factor adequately, then it became a common factor in the election cycle. Thus, it is crucial for us to focus on trust issue because its recurring phenomenon creates distrust within the citizen about the democratic process and hence connected with the fragility issue of state.

Finding a universal definition of minority is difficult. Different scholars define the term from a different angle. Discussion on different UN bodies fails to accommodate the proper definition of minority. Countries except for the definition on their convenience which will provide the political power within their national territory. Some scholars define minority on the base of ethnicity, some on religion or some on language (Redclift, 2011) (Apostolov, 2001). These people are regarded as a separate entity from most of the population based on their ethnicity, language or religion, or some other factor is a state. For our study, we will focus on the concept of minority based on belief. A religious minority is a, “… social groups which are numerically inferior and non-dominant in the states they live in” (Apostolov, 2001). From Apostolov’s point of view, the religious minority is a social group based on religion in a state where they do not have the numerical advantage and not dominant in the social settings.

Religious minority is different from the other forms of minority (ethnic/language/national) because they share the same language and cultural heritage with most of the citizens. These make them unique. Because in the case of another minority group the source of tension is based on their difference in language, ethnicity and cultural diversity. In a religious minority, the nature of tension is different because all these factors are the same as most of the population. Religious minority rarely seek to separate themselves from the existing state system and introduce a new one (Apostolov, 2001). All these attributes make the tension with the religious minority in a state much more complicated. Because religious minority shares most of the cultural, heritage and ethnic background with most of the people but again they are different in the ground of religion. These dual characters of the scenario are essential for analysis. When we are analysing tension related to the religious minority we have to keep in mind how these difference in religion, as well as the shared heritage, language and culture, affect the situation.

In the case of Bangladesh, religious minority (Hindus) the scenario is the same. They have the same heritage, language and culture to share with the majority of Muslims. The tension in this case rooted in the socio-political legacy in Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2010) (Rafi, 2008). Imperial policy in British India has created social and political divisions within the Indian sub-continent based on religion. What once British imperialist use to weaken the social bond against them remains as one of the significant sources of tension in the sub-continent countries (Rafi, 2008). The politics behind the partition of India in 1947 has deeply imprinted within the political system of Bangladesh. Different political parties try to use this situation in their favour in different ways. Also, the multi-level identity of “over-lapping membership” makes the religious minority case a unique one (Apostolov, 2001) and minority in Bangladesh is not an exception.

State fragility is relatively a new term to understand state capacity. Previously state capacity was measured in “strong-weak” continuum. Some literature measured state capacity based on – military capacity, administrative capacity and coherence of political institutions (Hendrix, 2010). In this context, state capacity is mainly measured based on state apparatus. How these state apparatus (military, administrative and political) perform indicates the state capacity. Some literature measured state based on its capacity to provide public goods (Rotberg, 2003). Here state’s role is defined as the provider of the public goods. The state is the main provider of public goods like- security. State’s capacity is determined by how effectively and efficiently state can provide the public goods to the citizen. Both of this perspective measure state in a strong-failed continuum. The fund for peace proposed a different way to measure the state capacity. They prepare a “fragile state” index where the state is ranked based on how they are prone to fragility. The higher in the index a country is far from the fragility. State fragility identifies as the state capacity to manage pressure that it faces (The Fund for Peace , 2018). The fund for peace categorised the measuring variables under four broad categories- cohesion, economic, political and social (The Fund for Peace , 2018). Here state fragility is measured based on these four variables and how the state can manage the pressure from these four perspectives. These variables are again divided into some subcategories. In our study, we are going to use the variables used by the fund for peace to analyse the state fragility in the context of electoral violence against a religious minority.

**Theoretical Framework**: Fragile state index defines the state fragility as the state’s capacity to cope with the pressure that it faces. According to the Fragile state's index, there are four broad categories (cohesion, economic, political and social indicators) to determine the state fragility (The Fund for Peace, 2018). There are few subcategories under these broad headings. For our purpose, we will choose cohesion and political indicators as a variable to determine the state fragility in terms of electoral violence against the religious minority.

Here our main argument is that when the state has failed to control the recurring electoral violence against the religious minority, then it has a high impact on the cohesion and political indicators. To determine the effect of violence on cohesion, we will focus on state apparatus, fractionalized elite and group grievance. In the case of political indicators, we will focus on human rights and state legitimacy. The primary objective of our study will be to find out how electoral violence has an impact on these issues. This study will be conducted on qualitative methodology, and for data sources, we will use mainly the secondary sources.

**Methodology**: We will conduct this research through qualitative research methods. Case study technique will be applied for the study. “…qualitative case study is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. This ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood” (Baxter & Jack, 2008)”. As, we know that violence against the religious minority has the social, cultural and political roots then we need to analyse the factor from various angles, and qualitative case study method can be beneficial here. The multi-level identity of the religious minority and their “overlapping” membership within the society cannot be explored from a single dimension. Case study method here will help us to analyse the situation and relation with different variables from the various perspective and shades light on the phenomenon.

Yin suggested that qualitative case study method is useful when we are searching for the answer of “what” and “why” and the boundary between the phenomenon and context are not clear (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Here, our research question is what the relationship between violence against the religious minority and state fragility is? If we try to find out the answer to the question of then we have to find out “what” causes the violence, then the qualitative case study method is appropriate here. Also, the lack of previous academic pursuit regarding this matter make the boundaries between the phenomenon and context is hazy. Lack of study in determining the relationships among violence against the religious minority and the different variables to state fragility makes it essential to determine the context properly. So, a case study will help us to understand the phenomenon. Religious minorities of Bangladesh have they're own economic and social background. It will not be easy to understand the relationships among different religious communities without understanding their social and economic context. This relation may decipher the critical question, why these religious minorities are the target of electoral violence over and over?

Selection of the unit of analysis for the case study is important to determine the future course of the research. For this study, we will choose two different elections (2001 and 2008 election) for a case study. The reason behind selecting these two specific national elections is that- in two elections two different major parties came into power, and the nature and extent of post-election violence are different in two times. Also, these two elections are the last two elections where all the major political parties take part. So, it will help us to identify the context of election violence, the role of the different political spectrum in the process. Also, this will provide us with the insight to understand that perception regarding the voting behaviour of the minority has any relation to electoral violence against them. If the common understanding is that party in power is supportive to the minority community and if the perception is that party in power is not in favour of a minority than what is the difference in the nature and extent of electoral violence. This will shed light on our research question and measure the relations among different variables there.

**Developing Case study question and variable to compare the cases**

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| **Case**  | **Research Question** | **Considering Variables** |
| Election of 2001 | 1. Was the winning party in favour of a religious minority?2. Did the state agencies take enough action to prevent electoral violence against a religious minority?  | 1.Fractionalized Elite2.Group Grievance3.Violation of Human rights4. State Legitimacy and violence |
| Election of 2008 | 1. Was the winning party in favour of a religious minority?2. Did the state agencies take enough action to prevent electoral violence against a religious minority? | 1.Fractionalized Elite2.Group Grievance3.Violation of Human rights4.State Legitimacy and Violence |

Here we will examine the both 2001 and 2008 election in light of the few variables, like- social cohesion and political indicators.

**Electoral Violence against minority and State Fragility**: In this part of the study we will try to find out how electoral violence against religious minority affect the state fragility in Bangladesh. We will discuss the phenomenon in two subcategories- cohesion and political factors. Here we will try to determine how the different variables under these two sub-categories affect state fragility in Bangladesh perspective of minority violence.

**Cohesion and State Fragility**: Social cohesion is one of the indicators of state fragility. Council of Europe defines social cohesion as- “the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation” (Council of Europe, 2004). Fragile state index operationalised the cohesion into- security apparatus, fractionalized elites and group grievance. In this part of the study, we will try to determine how these variables affect social cohesion and lead to state fragility.

Fragile state index uses state apparatus indicators to identify the threats to the state and its citizen. Also, it tries to determine the citizen’s trust in the state agency to ensure their security (The Fund for Peace , 2018). Here our focus is to understand the relation citizen and security. In this context, violence is very important for determining the relationship. From the fragile state index perspective, the question should be- is the violence is politically motivated? Is the state has some role to play here? From minority violence, in election cycle perspective these two are the big question. Different literature shows that there is a strong connection between political motivation and electoral violence against the religious minority. Post-election violence of 2001 in Bangladesh there is strong support from the winning four-party alliance (Sen, 2011). The literature clearly shows that post-election violence after the 2001 election in Bangladesh is politically motivated and religious minorities are the prime target here. Political nature of the violence particularly support of the ruling party of that time to the violence makes it clear that state apparatus is not appropriately used to control the situation. After the 2001 election (three-month period of post-election) police report of violence against religious minority increased in four categories- robbery, murder, rape and riot. It was believed that the incidence of violence was higher than reported. Also, some study clearly shows that minorities were discouraged from reporting to the authority (Rafi, 2008). There was no clear indication of government action to control the situation before pressure builds up on government from various internal and external sources (Sen, 2011). One of the significant points to state fragility is how the state can ensure the security of its citizen from any external or internal threat. In this case, the state had failed to provide the religious minority with the necessary protection from the post-election violence. It makes the state more fragile to internal violence.

Another indicator of cohesion is- factionalised elite. The Factionalized Elites indicator considers the fragmentation of state institutions along ethnic, class, clan, racial or religious lines, as well as and brinksmanship and gridlock between ruling elites (The Fund for Peace, 2018). In Bangladesh fictionalisation of society in line of religion had rooted in the political history of the last seven decades. Religious minorities are separated from the rest of the population different times within this period. In Pakistan period minorities, particularly the Hindus were regarded as the enemy of the state. State structurally discriminate them from the rights and even declare their property as enemy property in that period (Chowdhury, 2010). Later in Bangladesh period, there remains a perception that minorities are loyal to India. This perception leads to the communal riot in Bangladesh as the reaction to the communal riot in India in 1991 (Sen, 2011). It shows that, as India is a neighbouring country and Hindu majority country thus the Hindu community of Bangladesh are always perceived as a proxy citizen of India (Togawa, 2011). Perceiving the Hindu community as the proxy citizen of India and repeated violence over time make them alienated from the majority of the population. This fractionalization of the two religious’ group within the country has a profound impact over the society and state of Bangladesh.

When a part of the society is alienated from the other parts then it makes them vulnerable. As we can see, violence against the minorities coupled with the perception about their loyalty in a way weakens their trust in the state. Because when the state failed to protect them from the violence time and again it increases distrust among the minorities. An incident like property grabbing, vandalism in the religious temple sharpens the distrust more (Togawa, 2011). Barakat (2011) shows that this kind of violence after election intensify the migration of religious minority (Sen, 2011). In the social sphere when a member of the minority community question about their loyalty to the country that makes their trust in the society weakens. These all the factor shows that how these electoral violence-related incidents fractionalized the Bangladesh state. This fractionalization makes the state more prone to fragility.

Group grievance is another key indicator of social cohesion. Group grievance is determined as- divisions and schisms between different groups in society (The Fund for Peace , 2018). Group grievance is operationalised into -post-conflict response, divisions and communal violence. The post-conflict response is one of the crucial indicators of group grievance. Post-conflict response regarding electoral violence against the religious minority in Bangladesh is weak. Compensation for victims, like- provide help to the victims to return to the previous life- are generally offered by the various sources. After the 2001 election different NGO’s and civil society initiatives were taken to ensure the victim's safe return to the previous life (Sen, 2011). Another important indicator of group grievance is the division of society. In the Bangladesh context, a division of the society along with religion has a sharp effect. Intergroup relation between two major religious groups has consequences. The previous history of politics and the rise of Islam perpetuate a sense of tension between these two groups. Particularly rise of Islam creates a tension between these two groups. Also, religiously motivated crime became a common incident over the years (Rafi, 2008). In this context, electoral violence against the religious minority has a profound impact on the group relation within society. In the case of electoral violence against the religious minority, it is clear that they are the politically motivated crime against a specific religious group. Targeting a particular group for their perceived voting behaviour after every significant election weakens the trust between the two major religious community. Also, it undermines the bond of society.

Also, the communal violence based on religion is a common phenomenon in Bangladesh society. Some literature shows that in the post-election period number crime committed against the religious minority increased at a significant level (Rafi, 2008). This religious-based violence’s has a profound impact on the state fragility index. State fragility indicates the capacity of one state to cope with the challenge. History of communal violence in Bangladesh shows that as a state Bangladesh can never fully control this kind of violence. After every significant election recurring phenomenon of violence against the religious minority shows that Bangladesh as a state cannot handle this specific situation properly. This communal tension over the years sharpens the gap between two major religious groups within the national boundary. All these indicate that this group grievance makes the Bangladesh state more fragile.

**Political factors and Fragility**: Political indicators of fragility are essential to determine the state fragility. Political indicators mainly deal with different decisions related to various political institutions and their consequences. To determine the state fragility in the context of violence against the religious minority we consider the state legitimacy and the rule of law as the determining factors. State legitimacy is defined as- “…the representativeness and openness of government and its relationship with its citizenry. The Indicator looks at the population’s level of confidence in state institutions and processes and assesses the effects where that confidence is absent, manifested through mass public demonstrations, sustained civil disobedience” (The Fund for Peace, 2018). Here we will consider the question of political fairness and political violence to determine the state legitimacy. We can see that citizen’s perception of the political process has a significant impact. If citizens have no or less confidence in the political process and its fairness, then it is likely to lead them to protestation. This protestation sometimes may lead to political violence.

Political violence has always consequenced over the state, and Bangladesh is no exception. Both in 2001 and 2008 electoral violence indicates political violence in the election period decreases the public trust on the democratic institutions (Macdonald, 2016). Citizen’s trust in the democratic process is essential. The Electoral violence against religious minority weakens this trust because this violence shows that the state is failed to control the violence in the election cycle every time and provide enough security to the citizen to participate in the election process.

Another crucial political indicator is human rights and law. In the democratic process, human rights and the law are essential to upholding the ethos of democracy. The Human Rights and Rule of Law Indicators considers the relationship between the state and its population insofar as fundamental human rights are protected and freedoms are observed and respected (The Fund for Peace, 2018). From this point of view violence against the religious minority has consequences over the human right condition of the state. One of the critical issues here is, whether the political and civil rights of the minority is maintained or not? Existing situation indicates that the presence of violence in a way creates a sense of fear among the religious minority. This sense of fear is an obstacle to practice the political right of voting. Use of violence against the minority is a common tool in Bangladesh to terrorize them in the election time (Rafi, 2008). This process of intimidating a particular group is a violation of their political rights. Bangladesh as a state is failed in numerous times to provide security and ensure the minority people to exercise their political rights. Also, the civil right of the minority people is violated here. Because as minority people are a target for their religious identity, then it violates their right to practice freely one’s religion in the democratic state. All these shows that violence against the religious minority creates a fragile situation for the state of Bangladesh.

**Conclusion**: Violence against the religious minority is an important issue for measuring state fragility. From the above discussion, it is clear that there is a positive relationship between the violence against the religious minority and state fragility. It indicates that if the violence against the religious minority increase then the state fragility increases proportionately in the discussed categories. In this study addressing the minority situation in electoral violence in Bangladesh parliamentary election will add the scholarly contribution to this field. This study will help us to get a better understanding of the long-standing community tension in the country and its effect on electoral politics. Also, this will help to understand how electoral violence perpetuates the sense of fear within the society and alienate one portion of society. Altogether all this will help us to understand how these effects a countries position on state fragility scale.

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