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When Institutions Lose Neutrality: Electoral Violence and Democratic Transition in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Electoral violence is a major obstacle to democratic consolidation and peaceful political transition in Bangladesh. This article explores how perceived institutional weakness and lack of neutrality are related to electoral violence and problems of democratic transition. The study has been conducted through a quantitative cross-sectional survey of 197 respondents from all eight administrative divisions of Bangladesh, and explores the perception of rule of law, partisan administration, effectiveness of the Election Commission, neutrality of law-enforcement agencies, independence of judiciary, democratic institutions and institutional reform. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, composite means, Chi-square tests, one-way ANOVA and Pearson correlation. The findings suggest that 93.9% of the respondents perceived electoral violence as a serious political problem and 91.4% of the respondents admitted difficulties for peaceful political transition. Weak rule of law ($M = 4.6837$) and partisan administration ($M = 4.6701$) were the top-rated transition-related factors. Seventy-one percent thought the Election Commission was ineffective or very ineffective, and 65.0% believed law-enforcement agencies were not neutral during elections. And 60.9% thought democratic institutions were not strong enough. The respondents were highly supportive of institutional reform. The depoliticization of public administration was the highest priority. Transition factors correlated strongly with preferences for institutional reform ($r = .891$, $p < .001$). These findings are interpreted as evidence of a perceived institutional neutrality deficit: the gap between formal existence of democratic institutions and confidence in their impartiality, effectiveness, and credibility. The study argues that credible electoral administration is necessary for strengthening democratic transition, but so too are rule of law, judicial independence, impartial law enforcement, professional public administration and wider institutional accountability.

Keywords: Electoral violence, institutional neutrality, electoral integrity, democratic transition, Election Commission, rule of law, institutional reform, Bangladesh

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1. Introduction

Elections are assumed to be a formal mechanism for the institutionalization of political competition as legitimate authority and the peaceful transfer of power. But in fragile and developing democracies, elections can become sites of coercion, confrontation, intimidation and political conflict rather than mechanisms for peaceful political choice. Electoral violence is not just a general form of political disorder but a specific type of political violence associated with electoral competition that can affect participation, electoral legitimacy and democratic stability (Höglund, 2009; Birch, Daxecker, & Höglund, 2020). In circumstances of fierce political competition and fragile or disputed democratic institutions, disagreement over the rules, administration and credibility of elections may make political actors more likely to reject institutional channels and instead resort to extra-institutional confrontation.

In such contexts, the importance of the quality of democratic institutions is particularly high. Elections are inseparable from the institutions that organize political competition, enforce the rules of the electoral game, adjudicate disputes and restrain the use of state power. The judiciary, election management bodies, law enforcement agencies and public administration determine the credibility of electoral rules and the extent to which competing political actors feel they are operating on a reasonably level playing field. According to institutional theory, political institutions serve to reduce uncertainty by establishing rules, procedures and expectations to organize political interaction (North 1990; March & Olsen 1984). Similarly, electoral governance scholarship indicates that organizational independence, professionalism, accountability and impartiality matter to the quality and legitimacy of elections (Mozaffar and Schedler 2002; Norris 2014). The mere presence of institutions does not guaranty democratic stability. More importantly, it is also about whether the institutions can credibly and impartially discharge their constitutional responsibilities.

The problem is articulated in this article with the concept of institutional neutrality. Institutional neutrality in this context refers to the perceived independence and impartiality of key state institutions – specifically the Election Commission, judiciary, law enforcement agencies and the public administration – in the running of political and electoral competition. This idea does not mean that all institutions perform the same functions. Rather, it offers an analytical framework for exploring how concerns about partisan administration, weak rule of law, institutional weakness and the perceived lack of impartiality of state agencies may converge to undermine confidence in electoral governance. Where institutions are perceived as politically biased, selectively applied or lacking independence, electoral competition may be less predictable and political actors may be less incentivized to place their trust in formal procedures for dispute resolution.

Bangladesh provides a significant context to study this relationship. Since the early 1990s, when parliamentary democracy was restored, the country has experienced cycles of competitive elections, political confrontation, opposition boycotts, street mobilization, constitutional disputes and election-related violence. The parliamentary elections of 1991 constituted an important step in the restoration of representative government, but political developments since then have revealed the continuing difficulties of institutionalizing mutually accepted rules of electoral competition. The constitutional crisis of the February 1996 election was partly due to disputes over the non-partisanship of the election-time administration, which eventually led to the institutionalization of the non-party caretaker government system (Ahmed, 2011; Lewis, 2011). Elections were held under this system in 1996, 2001 and 2008. The long caretaker period endorsed by the military in 2007-2008 also raised doubts on the issue of constitutional and democratic accountability.

The abolition of the caretaker government system in 2011 once again brought the political contestation back to the neutrality of electoral administration. The row strained already difficult relations between the main political parties and added to a bitter political climate ahead of the parliamentary election in 2014. The opposition boycott, political confrontation, violence, and dueling claims to electoral legitimacy all reflected a larger institutional problem. Disagreement was not simply over which political party should win an election but over the legitimacy of the institutional arrangements under which electoral competition as such was conducted. The experience of Bangladesh thus illustrates how the conflict in the governance of elections could be linked to issues of institutional impartiality, political trust and peaceful transfer of political power (Riaz, 2021).

There is a large body of scholarship on electoral violence and democratic instability in Bangladesh. Research

has been done on confrontational party politics, political polarization, caretaker government system, constitutional disputes, Election Commission, judicial independence and politicization of state institutions. But these dimensions are often addressed separately. The electoral violence is modeled as a function of party competition or political intolerance. Institutional studies tend to examine the formal powers or workings of an organization. This division makes it more difficult to understand the broader institutional context in which electoral violence and threats to democratic transition take place.

The present article fills this gap by exploring whether respondents' perceptions of electoral violence and challenges to peaceful political transition are associated with more general concerns about the rule of law, partisan administration, institutional weakness, the effectiveness of the Election Commission, the neutrality of law enforcement agencies, and judicial independence. The article conceptualizes electoral violence not as a security problem on election day, but as part of a larger crisis of electoral governance where the credibility and perceived impartiality of democratic institutions become central to the acceptance of political competition. The main research question of this article is: How perceived institutional weakness and lack of neutrality is related to electoral violence and problems of peaceful democratic transition in Bangladesh?

2. Literature Review

Electoral violence occupies a special place in the general literature on political conflict because of its direct connections to the processes of political competition and the distribution of state power. Fischer (2002) defines electoral violence as the use of coercion or violence to affect an electoral process or its result. Electoral violence may take place before, during or after elections, and may include intimidation, physical attacks, destruction of property or coercive political mobilization (Höglund, 2009). Similarly, Birch, Daxecker and Höglund (2020) define electoral violence as a separate form of political violence with causes and effects that differ from both conventional protest and non-violent electoral manipulation. This strategic understanding matters because it points to the institutional and political conditions under which coercion becomes an attractive instrument of electoral competition.

The effects are not just confined to the immediate physical insecurity. Electoral violence may prevent participation, discourage voters and candidates, undermine trust in elections and jeopardize the legitimacy of elected governments. The fear of losing access to state power may also increase the incentives for political actors to manipulate or disrupt electoral competition in highly competitive political systems. Elections are therefore especially vulnerable in contexts where there is strong political competition but weak or distrusted institutional means of regulating that competition. Research on electoral contention also shows that election-related violence can take place throughout the electoral cycle and involve state and non-state actors (Daxecker, Amicarelli & Jung, 2019).

This insight connects the electoral violence literature with the broader concept of electoral integrity. Electoral integrity, according to Norris (2014), is the degree to which elections are held in accordance with accepted democratic standards throughout the electoral cycle, and not just on the day of the election. More recently James and Garnett (2026) argue that election quality should be understood in an age of increasing institutional, technological, legal and political complexity and conceptualize electoral integrity around the capacity of elections to empower citizens and sustain political equality." This broader approach is useful to the present study because it moves analysis beyond the counting of ballots to the wider institutional environment in which electoral rights are administered and protected.

Electoral management bodies (EMBs) are at the core of this institutional environment. Mozaffar and Schedler (2002) distinguish between rule-making, rule application and rule adjudication and argue that credible elections require institutions that can effectively perform each of these functions. International IDEA has also highlighted that impartial management is a key requirement for ensuring a credible electoral contest; and that the independence of EMBs has legal, structural, functional and resource dimensions (Joseph, 2021). So formal autonomy matters, but it's not everything. Also important is the ability to put rules into practice and resist political pressure.

Again, comparative evidence supports this. For example, Langford, Schiel and Wilson (2021) argue that EMBs that are more autonomous and capable are correlated with lower levels of electoral violence and concerns regarding electoral legitimacy. Their findings also serve as a warning that it is a mistake to assume that the just constitutionalization alone suffices. Autonomy and capacity are more substantively related to electoral

outcomes. This implication is directly relevant to the institutional neutrality. The democratic value of an institution is not just its existence or its constitutional description as independent, but its capability to carry out its functions with credibility and impartiality.

This distinction is reflected in a wider discussion between *de jure* institutional independence and *de facto* institutional impartiality. Appointment processes, budgetary dependence, administrative subordination, informal pressure or selective implementation can hollow out formal safeguards. Or a formally constrained organization might be able to preserve some credibility by resorting to norms of professional conduct, transparency, and oversight. Institutional neutrality is therefore most appropriately understood as the product of legal design, organizational capacity, behavioral impartiality and the wider accountability environment.

This environment is marked by the importance of the judiciary. Electoral justice means the mechanisms to ensure that electoral actions are conducted according to the law, and to protect or restore electoral rights when violations take place. The provision of independent adjudication can reduce the incentives for political actors to resolve disputes through street confrontation by providing an authoritative institutional mechanism for the resolution of grievances. More generally, Larkins (1996) and Helmke and Rosenbluth (2009) demonstrate why judicial independence matters for democratization and rule of law. The electoral-justice system of International IDEA also establishes credible electoral processes on the basis of impartial and independent dispute-resolution mechanisms (International IDEA, 2010).

Public administration and law-enforcement agencies also hold strategically important positions. Electoral processes require the involvement of administrative officials to enforce rules and security agencies to prevent violence against voters, candidates, election workers and polling places. But these same institutions are endowed with coercive and administrative powers that can distort political competition if they are perceived to be used selectively. Politically motivated administration can cause uneven distribution of state resources, and coercion, and politically influenced policing can increase mistrust by appearing to protect some actors while coercing others. Effectiveness should not be confused with neutrality of law enforcement: an institution can be operationally capable, but perceived as politically biased.

Bangladesh provides a particularly useful case for examining these relationships. Since the reintroduction of parliamentary democracy in the early 1990s, a recurring confrontation between the country's major political parties has dominated electoral competition. Existing scholarship has associated democratic instability with political mistrust, adversarial party competition, constitutional disputes, and weaknesses in the institutional management of elections (Lewis, 2011; Riaz, 2021). The institutional arrangements of elections were particularly attacked during the political crisis of the mid-1990s. Disagreement over whether an incumbent government could credibly run a national election was partly due to political mobilization and the disputed February 1996 election. Subsequently, the introduction of a non-party caretaker government was an effort to address the problem of electoral neutrality by temporarily separating election-time administration from the elected incumbent government (Ahmed, 2011).

Elections held under caretaker rule did not resolve political conflict and the long caretaker period of 2007–2008, backed by the military, raised its own constitutional and democratic concerns. But the differences in electoral administration continued to show the importance of institutional trust. The collapse of the caretaker system in 2011 revived the debate on how to ensure electoral neutrality under elected governments and sparked the political tensions around the 2014 parliamentary election. Rather than a single event, Riaz (2021) situates these changes in a broader trajectory of democratic backsliding, emphasizing institutional and political processes.

Three conclusions are drawn from the literature. First, electoral violence and failed democratic transition are closely linked to the quality and legitimacy of electoral governance. Secondly, formal institutional independence and actual institutional neutrality are two different things. Electoral credibility is also a function of capacity, impartial implementation, rule of law, judicial oversight, professional administration and neutral law enforcement. Third, though there is a lot of research on electoral violence, political parties, caretaker government and specific institutions in the literature of Bangladesh, there are comparatively fewer perception-based empirical studies which examine these institutional dimensions together. This article fills this gap, studying institutional neutrality as an inherent problem of electoral governance.

3. Methodology

The study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey design with descriptive and explanatory components. The descriptive part was used to analyze the respondents' perceptions on electoral violence, democratic transition, institutional effectiveness, and institutional reform. The study was conducted in all the eight administrative divisions of Bangladesh, i.e., Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, Khulna, Sylhet, Barisal, Rangpur and Mymensingh. Participants in total numbered 197. The sample consisted of general citizens, students, academics and researchers, teachers, business persons, service holders, political representatives, lawyers and civil society participants. Respondents also included participants from different gender, age, education and residential categories. Geographical distribution was uneven with most respondents from Dhaka and every administrative division was represented.

Primary data was generated using a structured questionnaire developed from the literature on electoral violence, democratic transition, political leadership, institutional effectiveness and institutional reform. The questionnaire contained multiple-choice, multiple-response, dichotomous, and five-point Likert scale items. Likert response options ranged from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25. Categorical variables and institutional perceptions were summarized using frequencies and percentages. We computed means and standard deviations for the Likert scale items. For those respondents who were able to choose more than one institutional problem or reform priority, multiple-response analysis was used. Internal consistency was assessed by Cronbach's alpha for reliability analysis. The main constructs were summarized with a composite mean analysis. Pearson Chi-square tests and cross-tabulation were used to examine selected associations between demographic variables and categorical responses. One-way ANOVA was used to compare demographic groups, and Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine associations among composite constructs.

4. Results

The study found a high level of concern regarding both electoral violence and peace-loving political transition. Of the 197 respondents, 185 (93.9%) considered electoral violence a serious political problem in Bangladesh. Only 3.0% answered negatively, while another 3.0% considered it partially a problem. Similarly, 180 respondents (91.4%) stated that Bangladesh had faced problems in ensuring peaceful political transition. Only 3.0% answered negatively and 5.6% selected 'Partially'. Within this purposively selected sample, concern about election-related conflict and difficulty in peaceful political transition was therefore widespread.

Respondents evaluated seven factors associated with transition incapability using five-point Likert scales. The highest-ranked factor was weak rule of law ($M = 4.6837$, $SD = 0.7922$). The second was partisan administration ($M = 4.6701$, $SD = 0.8377$), followed by lack of political trust ($M = 4.6497$, $SD = 0.8170$). Leadership conflict also received a high mean ($M = 4.6244$), while weak democratic institutions and constitutional crisis each recorded $M = 4.6041$. Military influence, although ranked last among the seven items, still received a high mean of 4.5939. The high scores across all items show that respondents viewed transition difficulties as multidimensional; particularly relevant here is the prominence of rule of law, administrative partisanship, institutional weakness, and political trust (Table 1).

Table 1. Factors Associated with Transition Incapability

Transition factor	Mean	SD	Rank
Weak rule of law	4.6837	0.7922	1
Partisan administration	4.6701	0.8377	2
Lack of political trust	4.6497	0.8170	3
Leadership conflict	4.6244	0.8151	4
Weak democratic institutions	4.6041	0.9344	5
Constitutional crisis	4.6041	0.8664	5
Military influence	4.5939	0.9189	7

Note. Five-point Likert scale; N = 197. Source: author's survey data from the MPhil thesis.

Participants showed mostly negative estimation of the Election Commission's effectiveness in leading free and fair elections happenings. A total of 110 respondents (55.8%) described the Commission as very ineffective and 30 (15.2%) as ineffective. Combined, 71.0% gave a negative assessment. Eleven respondents (5.6%) were neutral, while 9 (4.6%) rated it effective and 37 (18.8%) very effective, producing a combined positive assessment of 23.4%. A one-way ANOVA found no statistically significant differences in these assessments by gender ($p = .174$) or occupation ($p = .303$), but evaluations differed significantly by educational qualification ($F = 2.693$, $p = .032$).

Concern was also substantial regarding law-enforcement neutrality. Only 17 respondents (8.6%) answered that law-enforcement agencies remain politically neutral during elections. By contrast, 128 respondents (65.0%) answered “No,” while another 52 respondents (26.4%) selected “Sometimes.” Thus, even among those who did not completely reject the idea of neutrality, more than one-quarter regarded it as inconsistent or context-dependent. This pattern is particularly important because electoral security institutions exercise coercive authority; perceived selectivity can therefore affect both political trust and the legitimacy of election-related policing.

Respondents attached strong importance to judicial independence in facilitating peaceful political transition. A total of 166 respondents (84.3%) considered judicial independence very important, and another 20 (10.2%) considered it important. Combined, 94.5% rated judicial independence as important or very important. Six respondents (3.0%) were neutral and five (2.5%) considered it very less important. A Chi-square analysis found no statistically significant association between administrative division and respondents' evaluation of the importance of judicial independence ($\chi^2 = 12.607$, $df = 21$, $p = .922$), suggesting that strong support was geographically widespread within the sample.

Confidence in the overall strength of democratic institutions was limited. Only 13 respondents (6.6%) answered that democratic institutions in Bangladesh were strong enough. In contrast, 120 (60.9%) answered “No,” while 64 (32.5%) responded ‘Partially’ (Table 2). These evaluations are consistent with the high ratings given to weak rule of law, partisan administration, and institutional weakness as transition-related concerns.

Table 2. Selected Institutional Perceptions

Indicator	Response	N	%
Election Commission effectiveness	Very ineffective / ineffective	140	71.0
Law-enforcement neutrality	No	128	65.0
Judicial independence for transition	Important / very important	186	94.5
Democratic institutions strong enough	No	120	60.9

When respondents were asked which institutions required major reform to reduce electoral violence, the Election Commission was selected most frequently, by 139 respondents (71.3% of cases). It was followed by police administration (49.2%), political parties (48.2%), media (45.1%), and local administration (43.1%). The judiciary and parliament were each selected by 33.3% (Table 3). Because multiple responses were allowed, these percentages indicate the share of respondents selecting each institution rather than mutually exclusive categories. The pattern supports an ecosystem interpretation: the Election Commission was the leading reform priority, but respondents located the problem across several institutions involved in political competition and accountability.

Table 3. Institutions Identified as Requiring Major Reform

Institution	N	% of cases
Election Commission	139	71.3
Police administration	96	49.2
Political parties	94	48.2
Media	88	45.1
Local administration	84	43.1
Judiciary	65	33.3
Parliament	65	33.3

Respondents expressed very strong support for all proposed institutional reforms, with mean scores above 4.6. Depoliticizing public administration received the highest mean ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.70$) (Table 4). Other highly rated measures included strengthening parliamentary practices, reforming electoral laws and regulations, strengthening local-government institutions, ensuring neutrality of law-enforcement agencies, increasing transparency and accountability, constitutional reform for political stability, ensuring media freedom and expression, strengthening the independence of the Election Commission, and strengthening judicial independence. The comparatively lower rankings of Election Commission and judicial independence should not be read as low support: their mean scores remained approximately 4.63 on a five-point scale.

Table 4. Composite means and correlation relevant to institutional reform

Construct / relationship	Statistic
Transition factors	$M = 4.63$, $SD = .772$
Institutional reform	$M = 4.66$, $SD = .713$
Transition factors $\times$ institutional reform	$r = .891$, $p < .001$

Note. Pearson correlation is two-tailed; $N = 197$.

Composite analysis reinforces the breadth of reform demand. The transition-factors construct produced $M = 4.63$ ($SD = .772$), while the institutional-reform construct produced $M = 4.66$ ($SD = .713$). Pearson correlation analysis found a strong positive relationship between transition factors and institutional reform ($r = .891$, $p < .001$). This means that respondents who assigned higher importance to factors associated with transition incapability also tended to express stronger support for institutional reforms. The broader original study found similarly high associations involving the leadership-role construct, but the present article restricts its interpretation to the institutional relationship in order to maintain conceptual focus.

Taken together, the empirical findings reveal a coherent pattern. Respondents who perceived serious problems of electoral violence and political transition also expressed substantial concern regarding institutional effectiveness, neutrality, rule of law, administrative partisanship, and institutional reform. This does not demonstrate a causal sequence, but it provides a strong empirical basis for examining institutional credibility as a central component of respondents' understanding of electoral conflict.

5. Discussion

The primary takeaway from the results is that electoral violence in Bangladesh cannot be framed as a problem of election day security or partisan confrontation. The respondents' evaluations situate electoral conflict within a broader context of institutional mistrust. Almost 94 per cent viewed electoral violence as a serious political problem and over 91 per cent believed that Bangladesh had faced problems in peaceful political transition. The most strongly endorsed factors of transition were weak rule of law, partisan administration, and lack of political

trust. These perceptions imply that respondents perceive electoral conflict to be related to the institutional conditions under which competition is organized and disputes resolved.

This pattern corresponds to the institutional theory. Predictable, credible and consistently applied rules diminish uncertainty for institutions. Where the rule of law is perceived as weak and public administration as partisan, institutions may generate uncertainty about the impartiality of the administration of political competition. In such a situation, it may not be enough to have an Election Commission, courts, police and administrative bodies to create confidence. The key question is whether political actors and citizens expect neutral functioning of the institutional rules.

The findings thus provide evidence for an institutional neutrality deficit. Three results are particularly striking. First, 71.0% of respondents rated the Election Commission as ineffective or very ineffective. Second, 65.0% said law enforcement agencies were not neutral in elections. A further 26.4% thought neutrality was only a sometimes thing. Third, 60.9% did not believe that democratic institutions were strong enough. These measures capture different aspects of governance, but together they suggest a lack of confidence in the institutional environment for electoral competition.

The importance of analytically distinguishing between formal independence and perceived neutrality is stressed. International IDEA argues that EMB independence has legal, structural, functional and resource dimensions. A comparative study by Langford et al. (2021) finds that both autonomy and capacity are associated with lower electoral violence and higher electoral confidence. These insights are useful to explain the Bangladesh findings. In fact, even a constitutionally established electoral authority may have formal powers, but find it difficult to generate confidence if respondents question its capacity, impartiality or insulation from political influence. In the same way a good police force might be a good police force, but it could be a bad police force democratically if the enforcement is seen as selective.

Hence, the negative evaluation of the Election Commission is one of the most important findings of the article, but not to be considered in isolation. The most frequently selected institution that needed reform was the Commission, but respondents also called for change in public administration, policing, electoral law, parliament, judiciary, media and local institutions. This is consistent with an interpretation of institution-ecosystem. Even a highly independent Election Commission would be seriously handicapped if the administrative officials were seen as partisan, the security agencies as selective, or electoral disputes as not resolvable through credible legal channels.

The rule of law is especially prominent in this ecosystem. The respondents ranked the weak rule of law as the top transition-incapability factor. The findings suggest that they are concerned not only about electoral procedure, but also about the larger legal environment in which political rights, administrative power and electoral rules are enforced. Differential application of the law to incumbents and opponents undermines confidence in formal dispute resolution mechanisms. At that point, political actors may see protest, boycott or confrontation as more effective than institutional remedies.

This interpretation is strengthened by strong support for judicial independence. More than 94% of respondents said peaceful political transition was important or very important. Judicial institutions can settle electoral disputes, interpret constitutional rules, limit illegal administrative acts and provide an alternative to political confrontation. This function fits with the broader literature on electoral justice and democratic consolidation: stable competition depends in part on credible mechanisms for political losers to challenge violations without rejecting the entire constitutional process.

Law enforcement is a different but similar problem. Just 8.6 per cent of respondents thought that law-enforcement agencies were always neutral during elections. Security agencies in electoral environments have a dual role: to prevent violence but also to exercise coercive authority in a non-partisan way. A well-functioning security apparatus but politically selective could reduce some forms of disorder, and at the same time, undermine electoral legitimacy. Thus, neutrality is part of effectiveness, not an optional add-on to ethics.

The second highest transition factor was partisan administration and the highest ranked reform measure was depoliticizing public administration. These two results are fully consistent with one another and they are one of the clearest internal consistencies of the survey. Those who saw politicized administration as a major problem of transition also strongly supported its depoliticization as a cure. This has important theoretical implications because public administration is often seen as background infrastructure rather than as an integral part of

electoral governance. But elections require bureaucratic resources, local administration, logistics, enforcement and interaction with electoral authorities. So administrative neutrality is part of a level political playing field.

The outcomes of the reform also suggest that respondents conceive of democratic stability as a systemic package, rather than a single organizational fix. Mean scores on all ten reform measures were very high. The support level shows that respondents view electoral violence as part of a wider system of governance that includes accountability, law, administration, representation, and public communication. This supports the argument by James and Garnett (2026) that electoral integrity today is complex, and the quality of elections depends not on a single institution but on a network of nodes.

This interpretation is strengthened by the correlation between transition factors and institutional-reform preferences ($r = .891$), but it must be handled carefully. It does not show that reform will reduce violence, nor does it show that the transition problems that respondents perceived were caused by institutional weakness. More modest is the direction: those who perceived stronger transition-related problems also expressed stronger demand for institutional reform. Thus, the result is evidence of a coherent structure of attitudes in the sample rather than a causal effect.

This institutional explanation helps us understand why the caretaker-government arrangement was so controversial historically. But a more important question is why such an arrangement gained legitimacy among the respondents. It was seen as a confidence-building mechanism to reduce the extent of incumbent influence over elections. But long-term democratic consolidation requires permanent institutions that can generate such confidence without the need for repeated exceptional arrangements (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Indeed, this distinction also shields the article from the diminution of the institutional challenge to Bangladesh to the simple question of constitutional engineering. In fact, changing formal rules cannot create institutional neutrality. Appointment procedures, resources, professional norms, organizational capacity, legal enforcement, transparency and political acceptance all matter. The empirical findings point to a reform agenda that combines constitutional safeguards with administrative and behavioral reforms.

Evidence leads naturally to policy implications, but these should be framed as priorities supported by respondents rather than as experimentally tested solutions. Firstly, administrative depoliticization should be taken seriously as a transition problem because partisan administration was highly rated as a transition problem and depoliticization received the strongest reform support. Second, the Election Commission needs credibility and formal constitutional authority; reform should address autonomy, capacity, transparency, appointments, resources and public communication. Third, law enforcement institutions need precautions against selective use of coercive authority. Fourth, credible dispute resolution requires judicial independence. Fifth, electoral reform should be linked to parliamentary accountability, local government, media freedom and transparency, rather than being treated as a technical exercise in itself.

6. Conclusion

This study inspected the association between perceived institutional weakness, electoral violence, and complications in democratic shift in Bangladesh by investigative indication from the defendants across divisional areas. The results found considerable concern about the present situation of electoral process. Electoral violence was observed as a critical party-political issue by 93.9% of participants, and 91.4% thought the country had faced complications in nonviolent political transition.

The institutional evidence was equally significant. Weak rule of law, partisan administration, and lack of political trust received the highest ratings among factors associated with transition incapability. Seventy-one percent of respondents evaluated the Election Commission negatively, 65.0% stated that law-enforcement agencies were not politically neutral during elections, and 60.9% did not consider democratic institutions sufficiently strong. At the same time, respondents demonstrated exceptionally strong support for institutional reform, including administrative depoliticization, stronger parliamentary practices, electoral-law reform, neutral law enforcement, transparency, Election Commission independence, and judicial independence. The strong positive association between transition factors and institutional-reform preferences further indicates that respondents who recognized more serious political and institutional problems were also more supportive of institutional change. Taken together, these findings support the article's central interpretation: electoral violence in Bangladesh is not understood by respondents merely as a problem of public disorder but as part of a broader crisis of electoral governance.

Nevertheless, institutional neutrality remains central because institutions constitute the mechanisms through which democratic systems are expected to manage political conflict. For Bangladesh, democratic stability therefore requires more than regular elections. It requires institutions capable of convincing political competitors that electoral rules will be administered fairly, legal disputes will be resolved independently, coercive authority will be exercised impartially, and future political competition will remain open. Future research should test the institutional-neutrality argument with larger probability samples, direct measures of institutional performance, and longitudinal designs. Mixed-method studies combining surveys with elite interviews, election-observer reports, administrative records, legal case analysis, and constituency-level comparison could distinguish perceived bias from objectively measurable institutional behaviour. Comparative research across South Asia could also examine whether institutional neutrality deficits are associated with lower acceptance of electoral outcomes or higher electoral contention in other polarized systems.

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