



Political Leadership, Polarization, and the Failure of Democratic Transition in Bangladesh: Evidence from a Perception-Based Study

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Abstract

Electoral violence and difficulties in peaceful transfers of power have repeatedly challenged democratic consolidation in Bangladesh. This article examines how respondents connect political leadership, political polarization, party behaviour, and expectations of democratic leadership to electoral conflict and democratic transition. The analysis draws on a quantitative cross-sectional survey of 197 respondents from all eight administrative divisions of Bangladesh. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analyzed with descriptive statistics, reliability tests, cross-tabulation, Chi-square tests, composite means, and Pearson correlation. The findings show that 89.8% of respondents rated political polarization as high or very high, and the association between age group and perceived polarization was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 85.722$, $df = 12$, $p < .001$). In addition, 89.8% agreed or strongly agreed that political parties contribute to electoral violence. Respondents evaluated existing leadership critically: 68.0% stated that political leaders did not play effective roles in reducing electoral violence, while personality-centered (87.7%), confrontational (81.5%), and authoritarian (71.8%) leadership were the most frequently identified features of political culture. At the same time, respondents strongly endorsed political tolerance, compliance with electoral law, fair participation of all parties, and avoidance of provocative rhetoric as leadership responsibilities. The expected leadership-role construct had a composite mean of 4.67 ($SD = .703$) and was strongly associated with transition-related problem recognition ($r = .876$, $p < .001$). The article interprets the contrast between negatively perceived leadership culture and strongly endorsed democratic leadership norms as a leadership legitimacy gap. Because the study is purposively sampled and perception-based, the results are interpreted as associations rather than causal effects or population estimates. The analysis suggests that reducing electoral conflict requires not only institutional reform but also leadership restraint, pluralist party competition, political tolerance, and credible commitment to democratic rules.

Keywords: Political Leadership; Political Polarization; Electoral Violence; Political Parties; Democratic Transition; Democratic Consolidation; Bangladesh.

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1. Introduction

Democracy requires more than elections and the formal existence of representative institutions. It also depends on how political leaders and parties behave within those institutions. Competitive politics necessarily involves disagreement, but democratic stability rests on the capacity of rivals to accept one another as legitimate competitors, exercise restraint, follow mutually binding rules, and preserve the possibility of future alternation in power. Political leaders therefore do more than seek office: through their rhetoric, organizational choices, treatment of opponents, and response to electoral outcomes, they can strengthen or weaken the norms that make competition compatible with peaceful political transition.

The leadership dimension becomes particularly important under conditions of political polarization. Polarization is not synonymous with ordinary ideological difference. Comparative research increasingly treats its most damaging forms as relational and conflictual: political camps become mutually distrustful, political identities harden, and opponents are portrayed not simply as wrong but as threatening or illegitimate. McCoy et al. [1] describe pernicious polarization as a process in which diverse social and political differences become organized around an antagonistic Us-versus-Them divide. Schedler [2] similarly emphasizes political intolerance and the breakdown of basic democratic trust as central to polarization that endangers democratic coexistence. In such settings, compromise can be framed as betrayal, electoral defeat can appear existential, and political actors may prioritize partisan survival over democratic restraint.

The consequences are important for democratic transition. Svobik [3] argues that polarization can weaken democracy by making partisan interests outweigh democratic principles, while Graham and Svobik [4] show experimentally that stronger partisanship and polarization can reduce citizens' willingness to punish undemocratic behaviour by co-partisan politicians. More recent work on democratic backsliding also highlights the role of elite norm violations: political leaders may normalize conduct that stretches or violates democratic rules, and supportive publics may in turn legitimate those violations [5]. These studies point to an interaction between elites and polarized constituencies rather than a purely institutional account of democratic erosion.

Bangladesh offers a particularly relevant case. Since the restoration of parliamentary democracy in the early 1990s, national politics has been shaped by intense rivalry between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), recurring electoral disputes, opposition boycotts, hartals and blockades, street confrontation, and episodes of election-related violence. Lewis [6] describes the country's party system as deeply adversarial, while Rahman [7] argues that Bangladesh exhibits pernicious polarization rooted in elite competition and weak party-system institutionalization. Hassan and Nazneen [8] show how violence has been used instrumentally within an elite political settlement, particularly around succession and control of state power. Riaz [9] later situates these patterns within an incremental pathway of democratic backsliding.

This article conceptualizes that contrast as a leadership legitimacy gap. The concept is not a directly measured survey scale and should therefore be understood as an analytical

interpretation of separate survey items. It refers to the distance between a leadership culture perceived as personality-centered, confrontational, and authoritarian and a normative expectation that leaders should exercise tolerance, restraint, legal compliance, and inclusion. In a polarized political system, such a gap may weaken the ability of political elites to act as credible guarantors of peaceful competition.

The article asks three questions: How do respondents perceive the character and effectiveness of political leadership in relation to electoral conflict? To what extent do they perceive polarization and political-party behaviour as challenges to democratic stability? What forms of leadership do they consider necessary for peaceful elections and political transition? The central argument is that difficulties in democratic transition in Bangladesh are associated not only with weak institutions but also with a political environment in which respondents perceive polarization to be severe, parties to be deeply implicated in electoral conflict, and leadership culture to be insufficiently democratic. The evidence does not establish that polarization or leadership behaviour independently causes transition failure. Rather, it shows a coherent pattern of perceptions linking adversarial competition, leadership dissatisfaction, and strong demand for democratic leadership norms.

2. Literature Review

The literature relevant to this study lies at the intersection of political leadership, democratic consolidation, polarization, party competition, and electoral violence. These strands are often studied separately, but their interaction is especially important in political systems where elections are high-stakes contests and where party identities are organized around durable elite rivalries.

Political leadership has long been treated as a central element of democratic stability. Burns [10] distinguishes leadership that mobilizes followers around shared purposes from leadership based primarily on transactional control. Although his framework was not designed specifically for electoral violence, it highlights the normative and relational dimensions of leadership. Dahl's [11] account of polyarchy similarly depends on competition, inclusion, and the acceptance of organized opposition. Diamond [12] argues that democratic consolidation requires not only formal institutions but political actors who respect rules, tolerate opposition, and constrain their own use of power. Levitsky and Ziblatt [13] later describe mutual toleration and institutional forbearance as crucial democratic norms: elected leaders can hollow out democracy when they treat rivals as existential enemies or exploit every available legal power without restraint.

These arguments have become increasingly important in the literature on democratic backsliding. Bermeo [14] shows that contemporary democratic erosion often occurs through incremental executive aggrandizement rather than sudden coups. Riaz [9] applies a similar perspective to Bangladesh, tracing a gradual decline in democratic competition and institutional constraints. Abels et al. [5] emphasize elite norm violations as a mechanism that can push democratic systems toward danger, especially when polarization, misinformation, and public acquiescence weaken informal safeguards. The implication is that leadership choices matter not only because leaders control institutions, but because they signal what forms of conduct supporters should regard as acceptable.

Polarization adds a second dimension. Classic party-system theory recognizes that meaningful competition requires differentiation, and not every form of polarization is necessarily harmful. Ideological clarity can improve representation and accountability. The democratic danger arises when conflict becomes socially encompassing, mutually delegitimizing, and intolerant. McCoy et al. [1] conceptualize pernicious polarization as an Us-versus-Them alignment that compresses multiple differences into opposing camps and increases the risks of democratic gridlock, erosion, or collapse. Their approach is particularly relevant to cases in which elite narratives and political organization transform ordinary competition into identity-laden conflict.

Schedler [2] refines this discussion by arguing that the distinctive democratic core of dangerous polarization is not simply distance or dislike, but political intolerance and the collapse of basic democratic trust. When actors view opponents as enemies of democracy, they may regard violations of ordinary rules as necessary forms of self-defence. This logic resonates with Svoboda's [3] argument that polarized voters may trade democratic principles for partisan outcomes. Graham and Svoboda [4] provide evidence that partisan loyalty can reduce electoral punishment of norm violations. Orhan [15], using comparative evidence, likewise connects affective polarization with democratic backsliding, while cautioning that polarization's effects vary across contexts and forms.

Political parties are key mechanisms through which polarization is produced, organized, and translated into action. Parties can aggregate interests, structure competition, and provide channels for peaceful succession, but they can also intensify zero-sum conflict when party systems become personalized or when access to state resources is treated as existential. Sartori's [16] analysis of polarized pluralism focused on ideological distance and anti-system competition. In newer scholarship, attention has shifted toward relational hostility, affective division, and elite strategies. Parties are therefore relevant not only as electoral organizations but as producers of political identities and cues about acceptable conduct.

This connection is especially important in the study of electoral violence. Höglund [17] treats electoral violence as coercive action surrounding electoral competition and emphasizes the role of actors, stakes, and institutional context. Birch et al. [18] further identify electoral violence as a distinctive subtype of political violence, not simply an extension of generalized disorder. Where political leaders perceive elections as winner-take-all struggles, incentives for intimidation, mobilization, and coercion may increase. Political parties can also exercise influence through organized youth wings, local brokers, patronage networks, and relationships with coercive institutions.

Bangladesh scholarship demonstrates many of these dynamics. Lewis [6] emphasizes the confrontational nature of national party politics and the weakness of internal party democracy. Hassan and Nazneen [8] show that violence has been instrumentally embedded in negotiations over the political settlement and succession of power. Rahman [7] offers one of the most directly relevant analyses, arguing that Bangladesh combines weak party-system institutionalization with pernicious polarization. Her account stresses that elite-driven polarization is tied to the historical development of party competition and that major political divisions have become mutually reinforcing.

Research on political coercion also shows how party organization extends beyond formal electoral structures. Jackman and Maitrot [19] document a party-police nexus in Bangladesh in which party politics and coercive capacity are intertwined. Their study is not a direct measure of national leadership culture, but it reinforces the broader point that party competition can be embedded in networks that shape the use and management of violence. Such patterns can deepen the stakes of electoral competition and reinforce perceptions that political victory determines access not only to office but to protection, resources, and coercive leverage.

The country's highly personalized political leadership is another recurring theme. Bangladesh's two major parties have for long periods been organized around dominant leaders and family-linked political legacies. Personalization does not automatically imply authoritarianism, but it can weaken internal deliberation, succession mechanisms, and autonomous party institutions when authority is concentrated around individual leaders. In such settings, partisan identity may become inseparable from loyalty to leaders, while compromise across party lines can be portrayed as weakness or betrayal. Elite rivalry can thus reproduce polarization through organizational incentives as well as political rhetoric.

The literature also highlights an important tension between democratic norms and political practice. Citizens and political actors may express general support for elections and democracy while tolerating undemocratic behaviour when partisan stakes are high. This tension is central to contemporary research on backsliding and provides a useful lens for the Bangladesh survey. The present study does not measure respondents' own partisan vote choices or willingness to tolerate undemocratic co-partisans. Instead, it measures perceptions of leadership culture and the normative roles respondents expect leaders to perform. The difference matters: strong endorsement of tolerance and legal compliance cannot be treated as evidence that such norms are consistently practiced, but it can reveal the standards against which leadership is judged.

Three gaps therefore motivate the article. First, scholarship on Bangladesh has richly described political rivalry, party violence, institutional weakness, and democratic erosion, but fewer perception-based studies examine political polarization and leadership culture together. Second, existing accounts often focus on elite behaviour or macro-regime outcomes, while the survey used here captures how politically aware respondents evaluate both existing leadership and desired democratic leadership. Third, the distinction between perceived leadership performance and normative leadership expectations is rarely made explicit. By separating these dimensions, the article avoids treating agreement with statements such as 'leaders should maintain tolerance' as evidence that leaders actually do so. Instead, it uses the contrast to analyse a possible legitimacy gap in leadership under polarization.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design with descriptive and explanatory components. The present article re-analyses the leadership- and polarization-related portions of that dataset in order to produce a focused manuscript rather than a condensed reproduction of the thesis.

The study covered all eight administrative divisions of Bangladesh: Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, Khulna, Sylhet, Barisal, Rangpur, and Mymensingh. A total of 197 respondents participated. The sample included general citizens, students, businesspersons, service holders,

academics/researchers/teachers, political leaders or party representatives, lawyers, and a small number of civil-society participants. Respondents also varied by gender, age, educational qualification, and rural-urban location. Geographical coverage was national in the sense that every division was represented, but the distribution was uneven, with Dhaka accounting for 54.8% of respondents.

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire contained demographic questions and substantive items on electoral violence, political transition, leadership, institutions, and reform. For the present article, the key measures are: perceived level of political polarization; perceived contribution of political parties to electoral violence; perceived effectiveness of political leaders in reducing electoral violence; leadership-culture characteristics; and four Likert-scale items on the leadership roles considered necessary for peaceful elections. Selected transition-factor items and the composite transition-factor score are used to connect leadership expectations with the broader transition problem.

Expected leadership roles were measured on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represented strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 25. Descriptive statistics included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Multiple-response analysis was used for leadership-culture characteristics. Cross-tabulation and Pearson Chi-square were used to examine the relationship between age and perceived polarization. Reliability was assessed with Cronbach's alpha, while composite mean analysis summarized the Transition Factors and Leadership Role constructs. Pearson correlation was used to examine association between these constructs. The overall 21-item scale in the original study produced Cronbach's alpha of .985 (standardized alpha .986). The seven-item Transition Factors construct had alpha .985, and the four-item Leadership Role construct had alpha .984. These values indicate very high internal consistency.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic Information of the Respondents

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents in terms of gender, age and location. Regarding gender, majority of the respondents had a gender of male with a total number of 111 (56.3%) of the total study participants. 84 respondents (42.6%) were female and only 2 respondents (1.0%) were third gender. In terms of age, the highest number of respondents was in the 31-40 years age group, i.e., 66 respondents (33.5%). The second age group of 41–50 years was followed by 59 responders (29.9%). The age group of 20-30 years consisted of 30 (15.2%) respondents and 27 (13.7%) were below the age of 20 years. The smallest group was the respondents above 50 years which accounted for 15 (7.6%). Most respondents were from rural areas (117 (59.4%) of the sample) in terms of location. Out of the total, 78 (39.6%) respondents were from urban areas and only 2 (1.0%) respondents were from the hill-track areas. The demographic profile reveals that the respondents were varied in terms of gender, age and location, offering a broad spectrum of opinions on electoral violence, political transition, leadership and institutional effectiveness in Bangladesh.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Respondents

Variable / Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Gender group				

Male	111	56.3	56.3	56.3
Female	84	42.6	42.6	99.0
Third Gender	2	1.0	1.0	100.0
Age group				
Below 20 years	27	13.7	13.7	13.7
20–30 years	30	15.2	15.2	28.9
31–40 years	66	33.5	33.5	62.4
41–50 years	59	29.9	29.9	92.4
Above 50 years	15	7.6	7.6	100.0
Location type				
Rural Area	117	59.4	59.4	59.4
Urban Area	78	39.6	39.6	99.0
Hill-Track Area	2	1.0	1.0	100.0

4.2. Highest Educational Qualification of the Respondents

Figure 1 shows the educational qualifications of the respondents who took part in the study. 35.0% (69 respondents) of the respondents have completed SSC/HSC, which is the largest proportion. This was followed by those with education below SSC/HSC level (48, 24.4%). These two groups together made up almost three-fifths of the whole sample (59.4%). A considerable number of the respondents had Bachelor's degrees, with 44 respondents (22.3%). Furthermore, 15 respondents (7.6%) had a Master's degree, indicating the participation of people with higher educational background who could have a more comprehensive understanding of political and institutional issues. The study also included 19 illiterate respondents (9.6%) to ensure that the views of less educated citizens were represented. The highest level of education was an M.Phil degree for 1 respondent (0.5%) and a PhD degree for 1 respondent (0.5%).

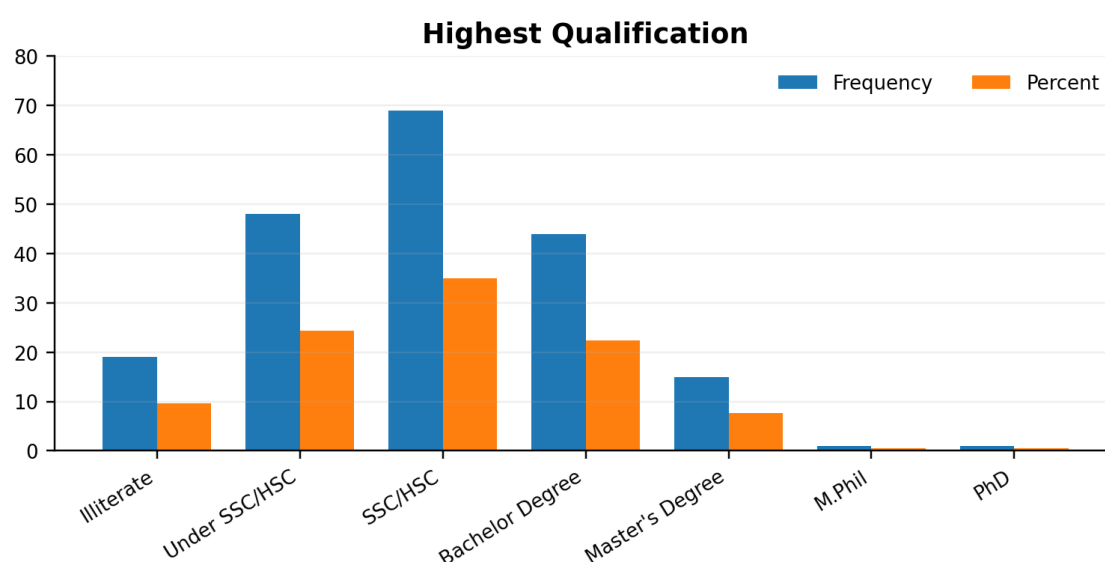


Figure 1. Highest Educational Qualification

4.3. Political Polarization

The results reveal a consistent pattern of severe perceived polarization, strong attribution of electoral violence to political parties, dissatisfaction with political leadership performance, and high support for democratic leadership norms.

Political polarization was perceived to be very high by 146 respondents (74.1%) and high by 31 (15.7%). Fourteen respondents (7.1%) selected moderate and six (3.0%) selected low. Thus, 177 of 197 respondents, or 89.8%, placed polarization in the high or very high categories. This is one of the clearest descriptive findings in the dataset and establishes the background against which leadership and party behaviour are evaluated.

Table 2. Perceived Level of Political Polarization (N = 197)

Perceived political polarization	N	%
Very high	146	74.1
High	31	15.7
Moderate	14	7.1
Low	6	3.0

Age group was significantly associated with perceived polarization (chi-square = 85.722, df = 12, $p < .001$). The crosstabulation shows that very-high polarization was selected by 6 of 27 respondents below age 20, 22 of 30 aged 20-30, 55 of 66 aged 31-40, 51 of 59 aged 41-50, and 12 of 15 above age 50. The below-20 group differed markedly because many selected moderate. This pattern helps explain the significant Chi-square statistic, but the small cell counts and purposive sample mean the result should not be generalized as a national age effect.

Respondents also attributed a major role to political parties in electoral violence. One hundred fifty-eight respondents (80.2%) strongly agreed that political parties contribute to electoral violence and 19 (9.6%) agreed. Twelve (6.1%) were neutral, seven (3.6%) disagreed, and one (0.5%) strongly disagreed. Combined agreement was therefore 89.8%. The concentration at 'strongly agrees' suggests that party behaviour was not viewed as a marginal factor by the sample.

4.4. Leadership Performance

Perceptions of leadership performance were substantially more negative. Only 23 respondents (11.7%) answered that political leaders play effective roles in reducing electoral violence. One hundred thirty-four (68.0%) answered No, while 40 (20.3%) selected Partially. A Chi-square test examining educational qualification and this leadership-effectiveness item did not reach conventional statistical significance (chi-square = 19.030, df = 12, $p = .088$), suggesting that the critical evaluation was not confined to a single educational group within the sample.

Table 3. Multiple-Response Assessment of Leadership Culture

Leadership culture	N	% of cases
Personality-centered	171	87.7
Confrontational	159	81.5
Authoritarian	140	71.8
Cooperative	33	16.9
Democratic	23	11.8

The multiple-response leadership-culture item produced an even sharper profile. Personality-centered leadership was selected by 171 respondents, representing 87.7% of cases. Confrontational leadership was selected by 159 respondents (81.5%), and authoritarian leadership by 140 (71.8%). By contrast, cooperative leadership was selected by 33 respondents (16.9%) and democratic leadership by 23 (11.8%). Because respondents could select multiple

characteristics, the total number of responses was 526 and the case percentages sum to more than 100%.

Table 4. Expected Roles of Political Leaders in Ensuring Peaceful Elections (5-Point Scale; N = 197)

Expected leadership role	Mean	SD	Rank
Maintain political tolerance	4.6904	0.8021	1
Follow electoral laws and code of conduct	4.6853	0.7231	2
Ensure fair participation of all political parties	4.6701	0.7612	3
Avoid hate speech and provocative statements	4.6548	0.7509	4

The normative leadership-role items point in the opposite direction. Maintaining political tolerance had the highest mean ($M = 4.6904$, $SD = 0.8021$), followed by following electoral laws and codes of conduct ($M = 4.6853$, $SD = 0.7231$), ensuring fair participation of all political parties ($M = 4.6701$, $SD = 0.7612$), and avoiding hate speech and provocative statements ($M = 4.6548$, $SD = 0.7509$). All four means are above 4.65 on a five-point scale, indicating very strong agreement with these proposed democratic leadership responsibilities.

The composite Leadership Role score was $M = 4.67$ ($SD = .703$), the highest of the three major constructs in the original study. Transition Factors produced $M = 4.63$ ($SD = .772$). The strong mean for Leadership Role should be interpreted as a normative result: respondents strongly valued tolerance, inclusive participation, legal compliance, and rhetorical restraint. It is not a direct rating of actual leadership performance.

Table 5. Composite Scores and Association

Construct	Statistic	Value	Interpretation
Leadership Role	Composite mean	4.67 (SD .703)	Very high normative agreement
Transition Factors	Composite mean	4.63 (SD .772)	Very high problem recognition
Transition Factors x Leadership Role	Pearson r	.876, $p < .001$	Very strong positive association

The relationship between transition factors and leadership role was very strong and positive ($r = .876$, $p < .001$). Respondents who assigned higher importance to problems such as weak democratic institutions, lack of political trust, leadership conflict, partisan administration, and weak rule of law also tended to assign greater importance to responsible leadership roles. The correlation does not establish causal direction. Instead, it shows that problem recognition and demand for democratic leadership were closely aligned within respondent evaluations.

Selected transition items reinforce this interpretation. Lack of political trust received $M = 4.6497$ ($SD = 0.8170$), leadership conflict $M = 4.6244$ ($SD = 0.8151$), and weak democratic institutions $M = 4.6041$ ($SD = 0.9344$). These items do not directly measure polarization, but they indicate that respondents linked political transition difficulties to both relational and institutional weaknesses. The leadership-focused article therefore situates polarization and leadership within a wider context of mistrust rather than treating them as isolated attributes.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that respondents perceive Bangladesh's democratic-transition problem through a combination of severe polarization, adversarial party competition, and a substantial

gap between existing leadership culture and desired democratic leadership. This pattern is consistent with the comparative literature but also has features specific to Bangladesh's party system and political history.

The first major result is the breadth of perceived polarization. Nearly nine in ten respondents rated polarization high or very high. This does not by itself establish that Bangladesh was objectively more polarized than other democracies, because the study uses a single perception item rather than comparative polarization indices. Yet the result is meaningful in context. It indicates that respondents experienced political divisions as an unusually salient feature of political life. McCoy et al. [1] argue that pernicious polarization is relational: multiple disagreements are reorganized into antagonistic camps. Rahman's [7] Bangladesh-specific analysis similarly describes polarization as elite-driven and tied to a weakly institutionalized party system. The survey evidence complements these accounts by showing that high polarization was also widely recognized among the study's respondents. Schedler's [2] focus on political intolerance and basic democratic trust provides a useful interpretive bridge. The underlying thesis identified political intolerance as the most frequently selected cause of electoral violence (89.1% of cases) and lack of political trust as a highly rated transition factor. These findings, combined with the polarization result, suggest that political conflict is perceived not merely as ideological disagreement but as a problem of mutual acceptance. When actors do not trust rivals to respect rules, electoral competition can become pre-emptive and defensive: each side may justify exceptional tactics on the grounds that the opponent would do the same or worse.

The second major result concerns political parties. The fact that 89.8% agreed or strongly agreed that political parties contribute to electoral violence demonstrates that respondents locate agency within organized politics rather than treating violence as spontaneous social disorder. This finding is compatible with Höglund's [17] actor-centred understanding of electoral violence and with Bangladesh research showing that political organizations can mobilize coercive networks. Hassan and Nazneen [8] describe violence as instrumental within political bargaining, while Jackman and Maitrot [19] show how party influence and policing can become interconnected. The survey cannot identify which party, mechanism, or level of organization is responsible, but it indicates broad perception that party's matter.

The third result is the negative evaluation of actual leadership performance. More than two-thirds of respondents stated that political leaders did not play effective roles in reducing electoral violence. This finding matters independently of institutional performance. Leaders can reduce conflict by signaling acceptance of rivals, restraining activists, discouraging inflammatory rhetoric, participating in negotiation, and accepting lawful dispute-resolution mechanisms. Conversely, leaders can intensify conflict by delegitimizing opponents, tolerating coercion, or treating electoral rules as contingent on partisan advantage. The survey suggests that respondents did not generally view leadership as fulfilling the conflict-mitigation role they expected.

The leadership-culture findings sharpen this interpretation. Personality-centered, confrontational, and authoritarian leadership were overwhelmingly more common selections than cooperative or democratic leadership. These are perception categories, not objective

regime classifications, and respondents could select several at once. Still, the pattern is difficult to dismiss as random. It indicates that participants associated leadership with concentration of authority and adversarial behaviour rather than institutionalized pluralism. Elite Theory is useful here because leader-centered party systems give a small number of elites disproportionate capacity to shape organizational behaviour and the boundaries of acceptable competition. Personality-centered leadership is especially significant in relation to party institutionalization. Strong parties can survive leadership change, process internal disagreement, develop policy positions, and discipline activists through rules that are not reducible to a single person. Highly personalized parties may instead depend on loyalty networks and top-down decisions, limiting the autonomy of internal institutions. The survey does not directly measure internal party democracy, but the high selection of personality-centered leadership is consistent with scholarship describing Bangladesh's parties as centralized and leader-dominated. This can magnify polarization because disagreement between leaders may become disagreement between entire political camps.

The authoritarian label should also be interpreted carefully. The survey asked respondents to characterize leadership culture; it did not apply a validated authoritarian-leadership scale. Thus, the 71.8% figure cannot be used to claim that Bangladesh's leadership objectively meets a particular psychological or regime-type threshold. It nevertheless indicates that authoritarianism was a common descriptive association among respondents. This is consistent with broader research on democratic backsliding, which emphasizes that elected leaders can weaken pluralism through incremental norm violations and concentration of power rather than abrupt regime replacement [14], [9], [5].

Perhaps the most analytically useful finding is the contrast between existing leadership perceptions and expected leadership norms. Respondents who described leadership as personality-centered and confrontational simultaneously gave exceptionally high scores to political tolerance, fair participation, legal compliance, and avoidance of inflammatory speech. This is the basis for the concept of a leadership legitimacy gap. The gap does not mean respondents reject leaders or democracy. Rather, it indicates a perceived mismatch between leadership culture and standards of legitimate democratic conduct.

The strong correlation between Transition Factors and Leadership Role ($r = .876$) reinforces those respondents connect leadership norms to broader democratic problems. But interpretation must remain precise. The correlation is not evidence that leaders who maintain tolerance empirically produce lower violence, because the study did not measure observed leader behaviour and subsequent violence over time. Rather, respondents who more strongly recognized transition problems also more strongly endorsed responsible leadership. This may be understood as a demand-side relationship: perceived crisis increases the salience of leadership restraint and democratic responsibility.

The age-polarization association deserves similar caution. The Chi-square statistic is large and significant, but the crosstabulation shows that the youngest category produced an unusual distribution, with many respondents selecting moderate polarization. The sample sizes within some cells are small, and purposive recruitment may have introduced cohort-specific selection effects. It would therefore be inappropriate to conclude that age causes polarization perceptions.

The result is better treated as a signal for future probability-sample research on generational political experience.

The article contributes to scholarship in three ways. Empirically, it provides perception-based evidence connecting polarization, party behaviour, leadership culture, and desired leadership norms in Bangladesh. Conceptually, it distinguishes leadership performance from leadership expectations and develops the leadership legitimacy gap as an interpretive device. Theoretically, it connects Democratic Consolidation Theory, Elite Theory, and Political Culture Theory by showing how leader-centered organization, adversarial political culture, and weak mutual toleration can converge around the problem of peaceful succession. These contributions are modest and should be tested with better measurement, but they provide a focused research agenda that can travel beyond a single thesis chapter.

6. Conclusion

This article examined political leadership and polarization as dimensions of electoral conflict and democratic transition in Bangladesh. Using survey data from 197 purposively selected respondents across all eight administrative divisions, it focused on perceived political polarization, the perceived contribution of parties to electoral violence, evaluations of leadership performance and culture, and expectations concerning democratic leadership behaviour.

The findings are striking in their consistency. Political polarization was rated high or very high by 89.8% of respondents. An identical 89.8% agreed or strongly agreed that political parties contribute to electoral violence. Sixty-eight percent stated that political leaders did not play effective roles in reducing electoral violence. Respondents overwhelmingly characterized leadership culture as personality-centered, confrontational, and authoritarian, while relatively few selected democratic or cooperative. At the same time, they expressed very strong agreement that leaders should maintain political tolerance, follow electoral law, ensure fair participation of all political parties, and avoid hate speech and provocative statements.

For Bangladesh, this implies that reforms directed only at electoral administration will be incomplete. Political parties themselves require stronger internal institutionalization, more predictable leadership succession, greater tolerance of dissent, and clearer sanctions against incitement and violence. Cross-party dialogue should be routinized around rules of competition rather than limited to moments of acute crisis. Political leaders should publicly commit to fair participation, legal compliance, non-violent mobilization, and acceptance of constitutional dispute-resolution procedures.

In conclusion, peaceful democratic transition requires more than the technical conduct of elections. It requires political leaders and parties capable of treating competition as recurrent, opposition as legitimate, law as mutually binding, and electoral defeat as temporary rather than existential. The survey evidence suggests that respondents recognize these norms and perceive a significant distance between them and existing leadership practice. Narrowing that distance is therefore not a secondary cultural objective; it is part of the political work required to reduce electoral conflict and make democratic transition more predictable and sustainable.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

Participation in the original survey was voluntary; respondents were informed of the academic purpose of the study, confidentiality was maintained, and personal identities were not disclosed.

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