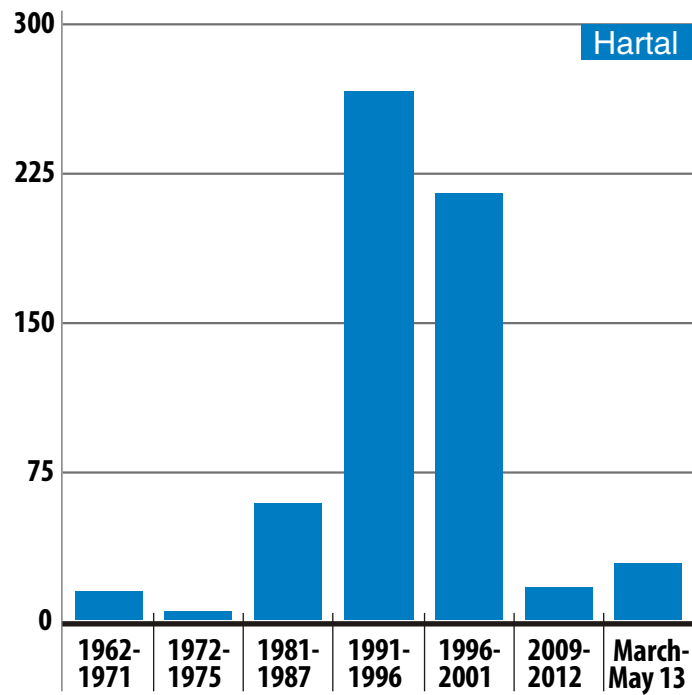


Note on Hartal, Blockades and Sieges

Hartal - or strikes that violently enforce closure of urban areas - have unfortunately become the way all opposition forces in Bangladesh demonstrate their political clout and disrupt governance in the hope of forcing change. The Islamists are no exception.

Hartal over the years.

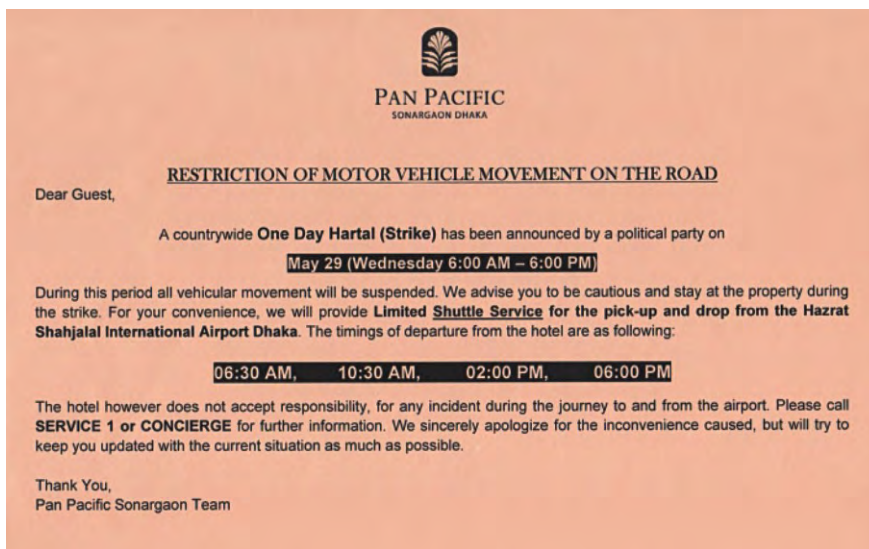


It was the announcement of the verdicts in the war crimes trial that triggered a new phase of angry street protest, bringing trade to a grinding halt and damaging infrastructure, not to mention the loss of human life. Every time I arrived in Dhaka for the research for this report there was a hartal and I had to travel to my hotel under police escort. It's not good for the country's image or attracting foreign investment. Hartal are so frequent that hotels print hartal notices to distribute to every guest.

The month-long violence, grisly terror and blood-letting, death and destruction unleashed by intermittent Hartal have now gathered full steam to explode into a dark spectre of full-blown cataclysmic Armageddon... By all indications, the country is teetering on the brink of potential danger of a long-running and bloody civil strife.¹ The Daily Star, March 2013

However, hartal vary enormously in terms of levels of violence and some are relatively peaceful and just lead to a reduction in traffic on the normally congested and polluted streets of the capital. In Dhaka people have developed coping strategies. They quickly adjust to work at weekends instead and many offices and factories remain open if the staff live locally. The British Council, for example, has a "hartal policy" online for its examination schedules², which also applies "in the case of blockades or sieges".

In the three months from February to April of 2013 there were more hartal than in the previous three years: 23 in total. Indeed until February 2013 there had been relatively few strikes for some years in Bangladesh.



Hartal in 2013:

February: 5 nationwide strikes

March: 9 nationwide strikes and six regional ones.

April: 8 nationwide and 5.5 regional strikes.

May: 6

Casualties (according to The Daily Star)⁴

Killed on a hartal day: 89

Injured on a hartal day: 1578

Killed in police violence: 192

Breakdown of 3400+ Injured in police violence:

January: 565

February: 940

March: 1195

April: 514

May: 186

Hartal and street protests have been called by Jamaat-e-Islami in protest over the sentencing of its leaders in the war crimes trial, but also by a wider grouping of Islamists alarmed by what they see as growing threats to Islam from secularists. The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party has supported other strikes and also called its own strikes with its allies to insist that a neutral caretaker government should oversee the next elections.

Asked about the return of the hartal to the streets of Dhaka, the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister, Dipu Moni, conceded in April 2013 that the level of violence was worrying, but argued there had been many more hartal⁵ between 1996 and 2001 when her party had last been in power.⁶ However, it's fair to point out when last in opposition the Awami League also called a huge number of anti-government strikes.

VARIOUS HARTAL NUMBERS

1962-1971: 15 days of hartal in East Pakistan

1972-1975: 5 days of hartal

1981-1987: 59 days of hartal

1991-1996: 266 days of hartal (80 according to UN chart FIG 2)

1996-2001: 215 days of hartal in the country.⁷ (56 up to 2000 according to UN chart FIG 2)

2001-2006: Awami League called 176 days of hartal

2009-2012: BNP called 17 hartal⁸

Economic Impact:

The economic damage to the country from frequent political strikes is significant. A former finance adviser to the caretaker government, A.B. Mirza Azizul Islam, said he believed the country's GDP would be reduced by 0.5 to 0.6% because of political instability. "It hampers exports, it hampers production, it hampers transport,"⁹ he said.

The association representing the country's largest export industry, the readymade garment sector, the BGMEA, estimated factories were losing approximately £17 million¹⁰ daily in 2013 as a result of strikes.¹¹ The garment sector is particularly vulnerable to unrest because of the time sensitivity of exports that need to feed modern supply chains.



COURTESY THE DAILY STAR

Hartal also have longer term effects, discouraging foreign and local investment. Attempts have been made to estimate what the country's growth might have been if it weren't for the stoppages. Economists complain there appear to be no proper record kept of hartal days to help them calculate their impact. It's also not clear if the cost of a hartal is a full day of productivity, or less in practice, since some economic activity does always continue. Conversely the long-term impact on the country's development could be much greater than one day's loss of trade.

The World Bank calculated that during the 1990s, 5% of GDP was lost annually to hartal¹². A 2005 UNDP study thought it might actually be less - around 3-4%. UNDP pointed out that regional and localised hartal occurred more often and lasted longer than nationwide hartal. It observed that hartal tend to happen around periods connected to regime change.

This cost of hartal chart is from the 2005 UNDP report.

TABLE 4.1 YEARLY COST OF HARTALS, MILLIONS TAKA					
	GDP ¹	GDP/ DAY	HARTAL DAY ²	GDP LOSS OF HARTALS	GDP LOSS %
90/91	1,325,226	4,477	1	4,477	0.3
91/92	1,392.01	4,703	5	23,514	1.6
92/93	1,455,680	4,918	7	34,425	0.2
93/94	1,515,139	5,119	13	66,543	4.4
94/95	1,589,762	5,371	27	145,012	9.1
95/96	1,663,241	5,619	28	157,334	9.5
96/97	1,762,847	5,956	7	41,689	2.4
97/98	1,844,436	6,231	8	49,850	2.7
98/99	1,934,370	6,535	28	182,981	9.5
99/2000	1,934,291	6,535	15	98,022	5.1
Average	1,,641,700	5,546	14	80,385	4.5

1. Constant market prices
2. National

NOTE: Half-day hartals are counted as full days
SOURCE: Own calculations based on BBS data (Statistical Yearbook 2000) and hartal statistics (Figure 1)

Chart by Nasreen Khundker taken from March 2005 UNDP report, "Beyond Hartals: Towards Democratic Dialogue in Bangladesh"

Hartal in February, March and April 2013.

FEBRUARY 2013

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					1	2 Half-day strike in Bogra Jamaat
3	4 Half-day strike in Rajshahi & Rangpur division BNP	5 Daylong countrywide strike Jamaat	6	7	8	9 Half-day strike in Greater Chittagong Jamaat
10	11	12	13	14	15	16 48-hours srike in Cox's Bazar Jamaat
17 48-hours srike in Cox's Bazar Jamaat	18 Daylong countrywide strike Jamaat	19	20 Half-day strike in Rajshahi division Jamaat	21	22	23 Half-day strike in Pabna district Jamaat
24 Daylong countrywide strike 8-Islamist party	25 Half-day strike in Manikganj district 8-Islamist party	26	27	28 Daylong countrywide strike Jamaat		

MARCH 2013

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
31 Strike in Khulna district BNP Chapainawabganj & Sirajganj district BNP-Jamaat					1	2
3 Countrywide strike Jamaat	4	5 Countrywide strike BNP	6	7 Countrywide strike BNP-Jamaat	8	9 Strike in Narayanganj Sangskritik Jote
10	11	12 Countrywide strike BNP-Jamaat	13	14 Strike in Noakhali & Kurigram district BNP	15	16
17	18 Countrywide strike BNP-Jamaat	19	20 Strike in Sylhet district Jamaat	21	22	23
24 Strike in Sylhet Division & Jessore district Jamaat	25 Strike in Chittagong district Jamaat	26	27 Countrywide strike BNP-Jamaat	28	29	30

APRIL 2013

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
	1	2 Countrywide Half-day strike BNP led 18-party & Shibir	3	4	5 Countrywide Daylong strike in protest of Hefajat's long march 23 secular organizations	6
7 Half-day strike in Rajshahi, Natore, Chapainababganj Jamaat	8 Countrywide Daylong Hefajat	9 Countrywide 36-hrs strike BNP led 18-party	10	11 Countrywide Daylong strike Shibir	12	13 Half-day strike in Joypurhat, Kulna Jamaat-Shibir
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21 Daylong strikein Rangpur, Rajshahi division BNP	22 Half-day strike in Sirajganj BNP	23 Countrywide 36-hours strike BNP led 18-party 60-hours strike in Rajshahi, Chapainababganj # Shibir	24	25	26	27
28 Half day strike in Rajshahi, Barisal division Jamaat	29	30				