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Dominating Dhaka

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Abstract

Throughout Bangladesh's history, its capital Dhaka has witnessed intense political competition, including numerous coup, mass uprisings and, more recently, a violent rivalry between the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Over recent decades, rallies, strikes, street fights and small bombings have been common, and while undesirable normatively, are taken as a sign of lively political competition. It is then striking that since 2015 the opposition have largely failed to disrupt the city, with the ruling Awami League achieving a level of dominance unseen in the country's history. These events beg an obvious question: how has this been achieved? This paper argues that fundamental to this transition has been a shift in the character of the coercive organisations available to both ruling and opposition parties. The Awami League has strategically empowered the security agencies, enabling widespread arrests, intimidation and new surveillance technologies. This has eroded the organisational strength of the opposition, who, crucially, are also suffering the legacy of previous decisions, particularly the killing of gangsters in their last term in office, which today deprives them of the type of street muscle needed to compete. The BNP are left overwhelmed, having to negotiate and resist everyday forms of repression. With the security agencies central to sustaining political order in favour of the ruling party, these forms of governance will continue, and there are signs that an even more ambitious urban security agenda is emerging.

Keywords: Bangladesh, violence, state, political parties, gangsters, urban, surveillance

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Trigger warning: This paper contains description of torture methods.

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1. Introduction

On the outskirts of Dhaka overlooking a small lake is an obscure bamboo hut balanced on stilts, kept secure by padlock, and served by a thin rickety walkway. This is the hideout of a politician named Imran,¹ and where we met in early 2018. Imran is one of a small number of locally elected politicians in Dhaka representing the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Nationally the BNP were elected to office in 1991 and again in 2001, during decades that saw intense and close-run party-political competition. Since 2008, however, they have dramatically diminished as a political force, with the ruling Awami League (AL) party achieving a dominance solidified through three consecutive electoral wins, representing a political continuity unprecedented in Bangladesh's history. The year 2018 was a particularly challenging one for the BNP, beginning with the conviction and imprisonment of the party's leader and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on corruption charges, and ending with a massive electoral defeat in the general election. In previous decades, the BNP would have responded to alleged electoral rigging and persistent intimidation and violence towards their members through *hartal* (general strike) and a mass movement. In the past, tens of thousands of activists have taken to the streets of Dhaka, bearing weapons and often throwing small bombs, bringing the city and wider country to a standstill. Of late, however, the BNP have only mustered limited street agitations, and become in many people's eyes a 'press club party', organising sit-downs with journalists and foreign diplomats to voice their frustrations, and left to make requests to the police to hold political events, rather than asserting themselves through muscle and public support on the streets.

The lives of BNP supporters such as Imran have become increasingly insecure, facing arrest and intimidation by state security agencies and ruling party activists, and having to navigate intense surveillance. To attend the limited street agitation that the BNP has managed in 2018, Imran had to take circuitous routes into the city centre and move through inconspicuous areas to avoid detection and the mass arrests that have hindered the BNP's attempts to mobilise. Because of his status as one of the few elected local BNP politicians in Dhaka, and his role in protests, he also has a number of police cases against him, and during particularly intense periods was regularly taken into custody. The hideout was therefore where he would seek refuge to avoid arrest, a place that few knew about, where he could sleep at night on the small bed at the back covered by a mosquito net, and look out calmly at his fish growing in the lake below, fattening lucratively before being taken to market. To meet me that day, he had had to shake off a couple of police informers who were stationed permanently outside his house, and reported on where he went and who he spoke to, and while we were together he was cautious not to answer calls from unknown numbers or disclose his location during the calls he did take. As of early 2019, Imran – like many of his fellow BNP activists – is in jail.

¹ All respondents have been anonymised.

Imran's case illustrates in microcosm the situation and decline of the BNP as a powerful political force, and implicitly the rise of the ruling Awami League, whose dominance is increasingly being seen as authoritarian in character. This transition can be felt most strikingly in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka city, which has been the epicentre of political mobilisation throughout the country's history. Despite decades of intense party political competition through the 1990s and 2000s, since 2015 there have not been any significant *hartal* in the capital, and while not without protest, we are witnessing the lowest levels of public violence that the city has seen for decades. This observation begs a challenging question – how has this been achieved?

In addressing this question, this paper is motivated by a larger comparative research project examining the significance of capital cities to political order (or the 'political settlement') at a national level². Within this framework, we see political order in Bangladesh – as in many other societies – as stemming not from a central state holding a monopoly on violence, but through the formation of a 'ruling coalition' which dominates rivals. While a ruling coalition is often seen as a network of societal elites, it can be extended analytically to incorporate the array of local actors constituting the strength of a political regime (Jackman 2018a, 2018b). Our interests then lie in understanding how regimes seek and maintain dominance in capital cities, the precise forms of control exercised in these spaces, and how this interacts dialectically with attempts to contest this by opposition coalitions. We posit two forms of intervention used by political regimes to achieve dominance – generative, those which create benefits; and repressive, those which deploy coercion and violence – although acknowledge that in practice these often intertwine.

This paper focuses on the latter of these two forms of intervention, examining how the ability for coercion and violence – or 'muscle' for short – within ruling and opposition coalitions is built and changes over time, enabling and limiting the forms of contention and control possible. Ruling coalitions typically incorporate a myriad of coercive organisations, both within and beyond the formal state, to compete and inflict costs on rivals (Jackman 2018a, 2018b). Violence can be seen as a skill in which particular actors specialise and use entrepreneurially, hence we can speak of 'violence specialists' (North et al. 2009) and 'violent entrepreneurs' (Blok 1974). Studying how and why the organisation of coercion within ruling coalitions changes over time is then fundamental to understanding attempts to establish and contest dominance. Analyses of how coercion is organised in authoritarian states are, however, oddly lacking (Policzer 2009; Art 2012; Greitens 2016). This raises significant areas for analysis. One is an identification of what this coalition looks like, as Art (2012: 370) puts this straightforwardly: 'who exactly are the "thugs" that many contemporary dictators seem to rely on to suppress the opposition?' But, more profoundly, we must understand the strategies deployed by both ruling and opposition coalitions with regards to coercion, how these are shaped by historical

² A working paper by Tom Goodfellow and David Jackman is forthcoming from this project through ESID.

processes, and the consequences these have on creating, sustaining and contesting dominance.

The core argument developed is that the means of violence available to both coalitions has significantly changed over recent decades, empowering the ruling party, and leaving the opposition without sufficient capacity to contest and disrupt. This is the result of both historical legacies, and deliberate contemporary strategies, which converge to limit the capacity of the opposition to disrupt Dhaka city. Three factors are crucial, which are examined as a rough chronology to how events have unfolded. First, the BNP are organisationally weak in Dhaka, as the result of historical events from when they were last in office in the early 2000s. The decline of politically aligned gangsters at their own hands during this period deprives them today of the type of muscle in Dhaka that they could use to try and disrupt the urban political order. Second, to consolidate power, the ruling party have politicised and empowered state security agencies, most notably the police and intelligence agencies. The depth of reliance on state security forces has only previously been seen in Bangladesh's history during periods of military rule. This has led to brute forms of control, such as arrests, harassment and imprisonment of the party's rank and file, and the securitisation of Dhaka city. Third, and finally, this has led to more complex forms of coercion, such as intense surveillance, supported by an investment in street-level informers, as well as a range of new digital technologies to monitor phones and social media. There are, furthermore, signs of a radical vision for how Dhaka could be controlled through technology in the future. In the face of such technologies, opposition activists today are left largely helpless, and rely on everyday forms of resistance – such as hideouts, changing appearances, circuitous routes and adapting their use of mobile phones – to avoid the eyes of the regime.

It should be clear from the outset that these factors are focused in on as they are deemed the most pressing source of contention and prominent form of control. They are not, however, exhaustive of the other ways – both generative and repressive – in which the ruling coalition has solidified control over Dhaka, nor of how other groups are attempting to disrupt this. For example, student-led street movements have recently coalesced in the capital around issues of injustice and posed serious threats to the stability of the city and government, leading to significant concessions and coercion (Jackman 2019). The economic successes that the country has seen over the Awami League's past two terms in office have also served as a source of strength, promoting a developmental discourse exemplified in their status as a lower middle income country, reduced rates of poverty and a rapid expansion of digital technologies. In Dhaka, development progress is visible, not least in the large-scale infrastructure projects, including new flyovers, the impressive lakefront and transport route, Hatirjeel, and plans for sky train and metro. There is some indication that particular groups may also be induced through state resources. In the run-up to the 2018 election, for example, the prime minister publicly proclaimed that apartment blocks would be built on the city's outskirts to house those currently living in slums, and which would be available for the same price as a shack (The Daily Star 2018a).

This paper is based on research conducted in Dhaka between February and September 2018. This primarily took the form of 50 interviews (lasting between 30 minutes and five hours) as well as informal conversations with activists and leaders within the BNP and Awami League, auxiliary organisations connected to both parties, and journalists. Many of those interviewed were key individuals mobilising in Dhaka for the BNP, almost all of whom were on bail or had outstanding police cases against them. Many were staying away from their home to avoid arrest, and as of early 2019 a number are now in jail. Meetings were arranged in obscure or private locations, such as private homes, restaurants before opening hours, or cafes in inconspicuous areas. All respondents are anonymized; however, a broad indication of status, through terms such as senior, junior, local and national, is used. Respondents included former ministers, senior leaders in the wings of both parties, as well as junior activists and elected representatives. This paper also draws for background from urban political economy research conducted in the city between 2013 and 2015 (Jackman 2018a, 2018b).

2. Urban politics and opposition in Bangladesh

2.1. Urban politics in Bangladesh

Following the return to parliamentary democracy in 1990, Bangladeshi politics has been characterised by intense competition between the country's two major political parties, the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party. In practice, parliament has been largely boycotted by the opposition (Khan 2015, Ahmed 2018), with competition instead taking place on the streets through violent mobilisation and demonstrations of strength, particularly within urban areas. When in office each party has typically politicised state institutions and directed them against the opposition, while exploiting privileged access to the state and market to support party infrastructure. The intense control held by the party over the state has led to descriptions of Bangladesh's political system as a 'partarchy' (Hassan and Nazneen 2017) and 'party-state' (Suykens 2017), defined by the convergence of these institutions in supporting a political regime. When in opposition, both parties have waged protests and violence to undermine the authority of the incumbent and demonstrate their inability to maintain political order. Although parties often deny and condemn violent excesses at the hands of their activists or security forces, such competition became characteristic of a political system where continued political order and stability depended on each coalition systematically accessing positions of power, a system Khan (2010) termed 'competitive clientelism'.

The coercive organisations mobilised by either the BNP or AL are built primarily around the deep-rooted party infrastructure. The character and organisation of both parties to a great extent mirror each other, being at core dynastic, highly centralised, organised at all administrative levels, factional, and supported by powerful auxiliary organisations representing particular interest groups, such as students (*chattra*),

youth (*jubo*) and workers (*sramik*).³ Viewed as a whole, both parties and their associated organisations can be seen as pyramids, organised as a myriad of factions linked through patron-client relations (Khan 2010, Suykens 2017, Jackman 2018b). While often perceived as having weak ideological foundations, differences do to some extent correspond to the wider political coalitions they can draw upon. Both parties have formed strong coalitions incorporating minor parties, and historically this has been important to electoral success. The Awami League are in alliance with the Jatiya Party, as well as left-leaning parties such as the Bangladesh Workers Party and National Socialist Party, while the BNP are aligned to the prominent Islamic party, Jamaat-e-Islami, who formed an important political ally during their two terms in office during the early 1990s and 2000s.⁴ Networks organised around both parties have dug deep into society, and can be found across all sectors and interest groups, down to local markets, colleges and other institutions.

A central repertoire of contentious politics used by the political opposition, and one which particularly impacts urban areas, are general strikes, or *hartal*. Prior to Indian partition, *hartal* were associated with the non-cooperation movement, and part of the Gandian repertoire of non-violent direct action. During the Liberation struggle and subsequently, however, *hartal* became a common tool by which interest groups demonstrated their dissatisfaction and strength, often violently, and thereby attempted to weaken the incumbent, achieve concessions or ultimately bring about regime change. Even outside of formal elections or periods of explicit political conflict, *hartal* are common. The number of *hartal* in the three years following independence was, for example, roughly comparable to those immediately preceding it (UNDP 2005: 17), and the scale and frequency of these intensified considerably with the anti-Ershad movement and competitive clientelism. Typical features of *hartal* through the 1990s and 2000s were shuttered shops, quiet streets, arson, Molotov cocktails and street fights with the security forces. Such political violence is concentrated in election periods. Data collated by Suykens and Islam from the period 2002-2013 suggests that within this time frame, violence peaked nationally in 2006 and 2013, constituting 14.5 and 27.3 per cent, respectively, of all incidents, both years being the final year of a BNP or AL term in office (Suykens and Islam 2015). On average, violence associated with *hartal* constitutes roughly a quarter of all violent events, rising in key years, most notably 2013, the pivotal year prior to the early 2014 general election (ibid). It is important, however, to recognise that while *hartal* are a central political tool, they represent only one among many. In the democracy movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, the following were also observed: blockades, rallies, meetings, marches, human chains, hunger strikes, sit-ins, sieges, street fights and vigils (Uddin 2006).

³ Note that such groups are generally referred to with the term *League* if associated with the AL, and *Dal* if associated with the BNP.

⁴ During the 2018 election, the BNP formed part of the 'Jatiya Oikya Front' (National Unity Front), led by the lawyer, Kamal Hossain. As of 2013, Jamaat-e-Islami has been de-registered as a political party in Bangladesh; however, many leaders and networks stood as BNP candidates in the 2018 general election.

With party political networks stretching deep and wide across society, violent competition between parties marks all areas of the country. According to one analysis, political violence in major cities constitutes around one-quarter of all incidents in the country, with the levels of lethal violence roughly commensurate across rural and urban areas when considering relative population sizes (Suykens and Islam 2015).⁵ The same dataset estimates that 15 per cent of all incidents of political violence occur in Dhaka district, which is considerable, given that there are 64 districts in Bangladesh. Dhaka city is the site of most *hartal* violence (17.5 per cent of total, with the next nearest, Chittagong, at 5.1 per cent), although as a district Dhaka has a lower level of casualties (across the period 2002-2013) even than far smaller cities such as Bogra, and comparable to Satkhira. Furthermore, the levels of political violence occurring in Dhaka have decreased slightly between 2002 and 2013, with the levels of wounded and lethal casualties decreasing more markedly (*ibid*). What this data suggests is that while political violence in Bangladesh is not particular to major cities, Dhaka city and district experience relatively high levels of such incidents.

Events in Dhaka are also of greater significance than those seen elsewhere. Political violence in the city can reflect the machinations of the local political economy, but is often more symbolic of national struggles. Dhaka University (DU) in particular has a central role in the country's political life (Andersen 2013; Suykens and Islam 2013; Ruud 2014; Suykens 2018; Jackman 2019), such that movements or incidents which occur there and in surrounding areas are often seen as indicating the political pulse of the nation, and inspire similar events around the country. Coups and mass movements to bring regime or constitutional change have focused on Dhaka and hence political movements that mark the city can quickly spread elsewhere. As such, both parties typically draw from their wider networks and factions across the country to mobilise people in the capital. Within the capital itself, students represent a core 'muscular' constituency for the organisation of political violence, serving as a motivated and easily mobilised labour force living at the centre of the city. More widely in Dhaka the power of the central parties as well as auxiliary organisations differs between areas, corresponding to the character of the local political economy. For example, in areas with large universities or colleges, the student wing are likely to be dominant, and in areas with a concentration of labourers such as markets, the workers wing is likely to have power. All such groups are routinely involved in political protest and violence. More brute forms of violent entrepreneurs, in the mould of gangsters and mafia, have also historically sat alongside the party, wielding significant power at the local level in Dhaka, and shaping the character of urban

⁵ This comes with the large caveat that the authors define 'urban' as relating to only city corporations, of which there were 11 at the time of their analysis, and now 12 in Bangladesh. There are then dozens of other towns in Bangladesh, which oddly seem to be classified under 'rural' in their analysis. We should also be cautious when interpreting such data for the purposes here, not least because it is reported by journalists and therefore reflective of what merits being, or can be, published, and the sheer diversity of incidents included under the bracket of political violence. In my own research, I have witnessed a number of locally significant events of political violence that have not reached the media, and assume this is common around Bangladesh.

politics. As will be argued below, it is in relation to these historical political economies that contemporary politics should be read.

2.2. The decline of the BNP

To begin to examine the degree of political control achieved by the ruling coalition in Dhaka, it is important to sketch out the wider events and institutional developments over the past decade or so which have bolstered the dominance of the Awami League and appear to have contributed to the BNP's decline as a political force. Central to this narrative is the removal of the system of caretaker government (Hassan and Nazneen 2017, Khan 2015, Ahmed 2010). Through the 1990s and 2000s, the intense political competition seen between parties was moderated by the role of a non-partisan government administering elections, headed by a senior civil servant (most often a Chief Justice), thereby preventing the incumbent from utilising the tools of the state to skew electoral results. The system was institutionalised in 1996 through the 13th amendment to the constitution, following the BNP's attempts to directly administer the election themselves (which they did, in early 1996), leading to widespread violent protests in the form of *hartal* led by the Awami League, alongside pressure from civil society (Khan 2015).

While the system successfully facilitated two further elections, attempts by the BNP to manipulate the system at the end of their term in office in 2006, was followed by a prolonged period of military-backed caretaker government between 2007 and 2009. Moving beyond its mandate, the government introduced reforms in the 'good governance' mould, and targeted its political parties and leaders, whom they perceived as a root cause of the country's political challenges (Ahmed 2010). A key policy widely labelled as the 'minus two solution' attempted to remove both parties' leaders, contributing to a deep mistrust in the system of caretaker government, and paving the way for the Awami League government to later repeal the act with a vague air of legitimacy through the 15th amendment to the constitution in 2011, which deemed the system unconstitutional, on the basis that such governments were not elected and therefore non-democratic. This has been key to the consolidation of power under the Awami League over the past decade (Khan 2017, Hassan and Nazneen 2017; Ahmed 2010), ending any possibility of cooperation between the parties over electoral process.

During the Awami League's first and second term in office, a raft of further institutional changes and political manoeuvrings has had the effect of destabilising the opposition and bolstering the power of the ruling party. The 'International War Crimes Tribunal' has convicted a number of senior leaders within Jamaat-e-Islami and the BNP, and Jamaat has, since 2013, been de-registered by the Election Commission and banned as a political party in Bangladesh, preventing them from officially contesting general elections, and undermining their organisational power. Given their alliance with the BNP, this has also weakened the BNP, both electorally and on the streets. The media and other 'civil society' organisations have been affected by what appear to be attempts to undermine their ability to voice political

opposition to the government, including the recent Digital Security Act, which rights groups and the 'Editors Council' of senior newspaper editors in Bangladesh claim gives the police arbitrary power to arrest and seize material related to digital platforms, under the threat of severe jail sentences. Meanwhile further key institutions of the state appear to be in alignment with the ruling party. The previous Chief Justice, for example, has claimed he was forced to resign by the government after resisting the 16th amendment to the constitution, which would give the government power to remove judiciary. It is important also to note that the past decade of the Awami League government represents the longest stretch in recent history where the army has not taken an open and significant role in political life. In mid-2018, General Aziz Ahmed was appointed as the new Chief of Army Staff, two weeks prior to which his younger brother, Joseph (a notorious gangster, who was imprisoned in the late 1990s), had received a rare presidential pardon.

With the system of caretaker government repealed, the Awami League government directly administered general elections in 2014 and 2018, the first of which they won uncontested, following the BNP's decision to boycott, and the second of which they won by a landslide. In terms of political representation, Dhaka and the wider country has then been almost completely dominated by Awami League or their coalition partners for the past five years.⁶ The BNP's decision to boycott the 2014 election followed the strategy seen during the 1990s and 2000s, whereby attempts by the ruling party to manipulate the political system to too great an extent were met with a wave of massive political protest and violence, which forced them to reconsider. Unlike in previous instances, however, the opposition party was unable to wage a sustained and sufficient political campaign against the incumbent, nor mobilise international pressure, the public and, ultimately, the military. During 2014-2015, the BNP and the coalition they lead appeared to resort to increasingly extreme and desperate measures to demonstrate their strength and disrupt Dhaka city, such as petrol bombings (Jackman 2018b), which arguably undermined their image, and supported the ruling party's characterisations of the opposition as corrupt and violent.

The decline of the BNP intensified in 2018, with the unprecedented conviction of the their leader Khaleda Zia on corruption charges, and his imprisonment in Dhaka Central Jail. This led to a brief escalation in political mobilisation, with the BNP announcing *hartal*, street protests, marches and hunger strikes, most of which were

⁶ Municipal elections in 2015 brought the AL candidate, Anisul Huq, to power in Dhaka City North Corporation (the city is divided into north and south city corporations) amidst allegations of vote rigging and a last minute boycott by the BNP, represented by Tabith Awal (the son of a prominent business backer of the BNP). Huq's sudden death in 2017 led to a by-election scheduled for early 2018 being postponed by the Election Commission, in a move seen by some as an attempt to obstruct a risky election in the year prior to a general election, and which was won in early 2019 by the Awami League uncontested from the BNP amid low voter turnout. This decision by the Election Commission came after an order from the High Court following writ petitions from Union Parishad Chairmen in areas to be included within the new boundaries of the DNCC. This was perceived by the opposition as a strategy to deliberately engineer the postponing of the election, fearing an upset in a crucial general election year similar to those seen in municipal elections in Sylhet (won by BNP) and Rangpur (won by Jatiya Party).

met with a huge number of arrests, violence from Awami League activists, truncheon charges, water cannons, beatings and arrests by the police; and all with relatively little impact on daily life in the city compared to previous protests. Even during the December 2018 general election period, the BNP were largely unable to make any mark on Dhaka city, which – similar to much of the country – remained mostly calm. This narrative then presents a significant empirical question crucial for understanding Bangladesh's political transition: why has the opposition been unable to mobilise in sufficient force in Dhaka to oppose the AL's abandonment of the caretaker government system and its increasing dominance over Bangladeshi society?

3. A legacy: When the BNP killed their own muscle

The first argument in response to this question is that the BNP are weak organisationally in Dhaka as a result of their own activities when they were last in power in the early 2000s. Ruling coalitions in Bangladesh in part achieve dominance over rivals through drawing together the strength of diverse actors capable of using violence. Throughout Bangladesh's history, ruling and opposition coalitions have mobilised an array of violent entrepreneurs, both within and outside the party and state, enabling them to dominate through different means.⁷ The character of these actors, however, shifts over time, enabling new forms of control and contention. To understand the weakness of the BNP in Dhaka, we need to view the current period as shaped by earlier shifts in the urban political economy and the character of violent entrepreneurship in this context.

Alongside the intense party-political competition witnessed through the 1990s and early 2000s rose powerful gangsters, often identified as a '*group*', and referred to through Bengali terms, such as *shontrash*, *mastan*, *godfather*, *mafia* and *don* (Jackman 2018a). Nationally, Dhaka was an epicentre for such figures, by virtue of being radically larger and economically more important than other cities in the country. These gangsters were for the most part politically aligned, but organisationally distinct from the parties. Notorious figures rose to power, became almost mythologised in public imagination, and their names struck fear into the city. They ran extortion rackets, illegal businesses such as the drugs trade, grabbed cuts of tenders, and provided much needed muscle and resources to politicians, often at a very senior level. Their rule, as well as the accompanying competition for territory and supremacy, led to widespread violence and insecurity. Businessmen were regularly kidnapped and extorted, and the security forces were perceived as simultaneously too weak and too collaborative to confront them.

The BNP came back to power in 2001 with a public commitment to rid the country of 'top terror', including many gangsters in Dhaka city. This effort eventually found success through the formation of the now much feared Rapid Action Battalion (RAB),

⁷ A notable early example in the country's history being the formation of the 'Jatio Rakhi Bahini' (National Security Force) by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a paramilitary group drawn from Awami League ranks designed to counterbalance the power of the army, and have personal loyalty to him.

who, along with the police, killed many such figures in what have been labelled as '*crossfire encounters*', and often interpreted as extrajudicial killings. The threat of *crossfire* scared off other figures and groups into hiding abroad, and many members were arrested. These events continued also under the caretaker regime of 2006-2008, and have radically reshaped the urban political economy, as well as directly setting the stage for the political transition seen in recent years. Violently wresting control away from violent entrepreneurs, who were operating at one step removed from the party and state, brought new forms of coercive strength to the domestic security apparatus of the state. With this came the capacity to more effectively coerce from the political centre. The popularity of RAB's activities also to some extent normalised extrajudicial practices in the public imagination, giving a tacit legitimacy to extreme forms of state coercion within Bangladeshi political culture. Nationally, one estimate puts the number of people killed extrajudicially between 2001 and mid-2018 at 3,209 (Odhikar 2018a). More generally, according to Suykens and Islam (2015), state enforcement agencies are one of the actors most likely to be involved in political violence, and between 2002 and 2013 were responsible for a quarter of all incidents, and 53 per cent of all lethal casualties.⁸

Crucially and ironically, these events also directly disempowered the BNP, and created the conditions for the AL to solidify power within Dhaka's political economy. The absence of gangsters controlling the informal economy created a power vacuum, and following the BNP's term in office came the years of the caretaker government and the subsequent election of the AL in 2009. Since then, the AL has then been able to consolidate power at the grassroots, with many of their ward-level leaders and affiliates of the party playing similar roles to the once powerful gangsters. This has meant that while both parties are organised down to the grassroots, it is the AL who have been able to capitalise on the space left by the decline of gangsters, and expand their organisational strength on the streets. It furthermore means that the BNP are unable to draw upon such gangsters to confront the ruling party. All BNP leaders interviewed acknowledge this as an important dynamic to their weakness in Dhaka. An elected BNP representative in the city put it like this:

'Why does the BNP have such a terrible situation today? I think our madam [Khaleda Zia] made a bad decision ... She was the first one who made RAB, special section, from police. As she made this new division, she had to give them some tasks, and she gave them the task of cleaning up the BNP-minded criminals, *shontrash* [terrorist, gangster]. This was a mistake. These were the first government-employed law enforcement group who started the culture of crossfire, and many of the "BNP minded" *cadre-bahini* (militia, group) were killed by RAB ... When the BNP is the ruling party, most of the

⁸ While such actors do not figure prominently within contentious politics in Dhaka today, a number of groups beyond the formal political apparatus are drawn upon to wage political violence, including manual labourers (market and transport labourers) (Jackman, 2018b), street traders, as well as children and young adults living on the streets who are involved in the implementation of more extreme forms of political violence, such as bombings and arson (Atkinson-Sheppard 2015; Jackman 2018b).

cadre are on their side, but they killed many of those gang members, they were the victim of crossfire, many left the country, and many joined the AL. This is reflected in the situation now. Now we need to revolt, make a movement, but how can a normal *cadre* lead the movement? We ordinary people cannot participate in the same way. You and me, we have our families, our wives, and we think of them when we take a step in the movement. But when an illegal person approaches the movement, he won't think about anything.'

Senior leaders within the party substantiate such a perspective, stating simply that were such gangsters around today, they would be able to utilise them to disrupt the political order in Dhaka. The fact that they are not appears to be a sore point internally within the party. One interpretation of these events, as expressed by a senior party member, is that the BNP inherited a list of the '23 top terror', which had been drawn up during the AL government in the late 1990s, and gave RAB a free reign to kill these figures. Because the list had been decided under the AL, it naturally included more 'top terror' who were aligned to the BNP than to AL. When the BNP came to power, most AL-aligned gangsters went into hiding, and hence those that the RAB could kill were in general more closely connected to the BNP. Another interpretation also expressed is simply that the party knew what it was doing, but decided to make the decision for the good of the nation. Whatever the interpretation, many members across the party lamented this decision. For example, as a senior leader described it:

'BNP killed its own people, we encouraged it because we wanted to get rid of these *mastan* [thug, gangster], and a lot of people blame us for killing our own people, but it was in the interest of the people. Sometimes some people say the BNP did the wrong thing by killing their own *mastan*, leaving only the AL *mastan*. But it was a conscious decision, maybe killing was not a good idea, they should have gone through due process, but it was a conscious decision to get some peace and sanity in the country.'

This was often described as a 'self-sacrifice' made by the party for the people, meaning that now they are at a double disadvantage – not only did they kill their own political muscle, but the AL have had two terms in office to build their organisational strength at the grassroots, while the BNP have been sidelined. This 'sacrifice' then forms part of the opposition's political rhetoric to illustrate the contrast between themselves and the AL: while the BNP killed such criminal elements, the AL – the opposition alleges – have allowed black money and criminality in politics. This is not, however, to suggest that were such gangsters still operating, then the BNP would be able to successfully mobilise against the government. Rather, the level of manpower, political empowerment and technology seen within the security forces today would easily outmatch any such threat. As one college-level president of the *Chattra dal* described: 'In light of present politics, it was a mistake, but for the betterment of our country, it was not a mistake. With this much ferociousness from the police and RAB, it wouldn't matter if the *shontrash* were here'.

4. Recent years: State security agencies securitise Dhaka

A second process which helps explain how the AL has achieved dominance in Dhaka city lies in how they have strategically empowered security agencies. Over the past two terms in office, the police and other security agencies have radically grown in importance for the ruling party. While such agencies have always been utilised politically by the incumbent, the extent of investment, degree of dependency, and depth of politicisation of the police, all suggest a magnitude of change not seen in Bangladesh since the country's return to a parliamentary democracy. At the national level, it is clear that the police have been a budgetary priority in recent years. The share allocated in the 2017-2018 budget for 'public order and security' increased by over 10 per cent to Tk 22,851 crore,⁹ the vast majority of which was allocated to the 'public security division' of the Home Ministry, which includes the Bangladesh Police and Ansar (an auxiliary domestic security agency). In the 2018-2019 budget, this figure increased again by a further Tk 3743 crore. Such investments can be seen on the streets of Dhaka, with a visibly greater police presence, new vehicles and equipment. Raw budgetary figures, however, conceal deeper changes in the nature of urban policing. There is a widespread perception – both among the opposition and wider public – that Dhaka is receiving a disproportionate share of the national resources. BNP leaders frequently described a sense of feeling outnumbered, with the ratio of BNP activists to police inverting, from a typical situation where the BNP activists greatly outnumbered the police, to one where the police outnumber the BNP. One senior leader put it like this: 'the politics of the whole country depends on the capital, and this is why the government are posting people from other districts to Dhaka. More than 50 percent members of the police are just here'. The specifics of this claim are likely inaccurate, but the sentiment bears truth.¹⁰

Not only have the size and resources of the police changed, but allegedly so also has the background profile of the officers stationed in Dhaka. It is widely claimed that the police are increasingly direct AL members, particularly associated, in the case of recruits, with the *Chattra League* (student league). One way this has allegedly been achieved is through recruitment processes. As part of the procedure, approval from the local police station (*thana*) where one is registered as residing is required (most often a home district). Known or even suspected affiliation with the BNP or Jamaat-e-Islami is very likely to halt recruitment at this point, and it is claimed that many candidates who have successfully qualified on all other grounds, have fallen at this hurdle. A former BNP minister expressed a common sentiment:

'There is a joke in Bangladesh that before you get any appointment anywhere there is a DNA test to see if you belong to the AL, or whether your father belongs to the AL, or whether your grandfather belongs to the AL. So if you pass this test, that is the first point, and then the second point is your loyalty to towards the current political position. Even getting admission in the

⁹ The increase is in nominal terms. Note one crore is ten million.

¹⁰ Note that other agencies in addition to the police operate or are regularly deployed in Dhaka, including RAB, Border Guards and Ansar.

colleges or schools, your DNA has to be approved. The police go 100 per cent by the DNA.'

This politicisation of the police in Dhaka can also be seen in the home district backgrounds of the police appointed, particularly among senior roles. Not only do the police increasingly come from AL backgrounds, it is alleged, but they are also tied to the prime minister through having roots in her home district, Gopalganj, as well as other surrounding AL strongholds, such as Faridpur. Across Dhaka, opposition activists claim that the officer in charge (OC) of the local police station (*thana*) are '*Gopali*' (as people from Gopalganj are derogatorily termed). A mid-ranking police officer who previously worked in intelligence in the capital estimated that between 60 to 70 per cent of OCs in Dhaka are from Gopalganj. An elected BNP leader in Dhaka described the situation:

'Of all the *thana* here in Dhaka more or less 80 per cent people are from Gopalganj. The local *thana* here is being run by X, who is from *Gopalganj*. Actually it is not only about *Gopalganj*, but someone needs to be close to the family of the prime minister. They are keeping people not only from *Gopalganj*, but bringing people close to the family here to Dhaka, and they have a special tie and communication with them. Starting from constable to the higher post, there are many *gopali* in the police, Detective Branch and RAB.'

This politicisation is symbolised in political discourse by the fact that BNP activists now often refer to the police as the 'police league', thereby associating them with branches of the AL such as the Chattra League (the student wing of the AL). Beyond Bangladesh, it has been argued that reorganising the 'social composition' of the security forces to better ensure loyalty is a common strategy to ensure dominance (Greitens 2016: 27).

One reading of these dynamics is that they reflect the dependence of the ruling party on the police to maintain power. A modern, well-trained police force is a normal aspiration for a state, however the police – as well as other security actors, such as RAB and the intelligence agencies – have played a fundamental role in maintaining the authority of the ruling party over the past decade, a responsibility for which they need to be both empowered and rewarded. In the case of Dhaka, the police have convincingly demonstrated their ability to quell opposition, most critically during the 2013-2015 period, when the BNP and opposition appeared to turn to a strategy of petrol bombings to demonstrate the inability of the state to protect its citizens. Other threats controlled by the police and other agencies are numerous, including a real and potent revived threat of terrorism, populist Islamic parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami, and movements, such as Hefajat-e-Islam, and, most critically, the wide and deeply rooted network of BNP activists.

Through the past decade, and most notably during and since the 2014 election, BNP activists have been arrested, faced criminal charges and been imprisoned in huge

numbers, and in some instances even disappeared, allegedly at the hands of the state. The scale of this is extraordinary. In January 2018, the BNP claimed that since 2007 over 50,000 cases had been launched against almost 1.2 million BNP activists (Prothom Alo 2018a). In September 2018 alone, the BNP claimed that 3,000 cases had been instigated against 300,000 of their activists, with 3,500 activists and leaders arrested (The Daily Star, 2018b). Such actions have led to an intense atmosphere of fear and anxiety among BNP activists, knowing that they could be arrested, imprisoned or worse. The effect has been to radically deplete and weaken the ranks of activists relied upon by the opposition to organise *hartal* and other forms of political protest. As one activist described:

‘We always have to spend our time in fear, under threat, even at night. RAB or the police could attack our houses to arrest us. I have younger brothers, and they can come and capture them at any time, they aren’t following any rules, the fear is that they arrest my brothers. This is why I hide outside, and suggest that my brothers who are a bit older stay outside ... under this current situation I cannot do anything, I cannot work, because I have to hide all the time’

In addition to such arrests, BNP activists and human rights groups allege that many activists face torture, in a strategy seemingly designed to both extract information, but also destroy the morale and motivation of the opposition to contest the ruling party. A college-level *Chattra dal* leader portrayed the situation:

‘They are torturing all of the arrested men. They are inserting sticks into their backside, they are clipping your tongue and giving you electric shocks, and pulling out all ten nails. It is a very common practice nowadays, very frequent. Our members have experienced this. This happens in remand. When the court gives one or two days of remand, during this time the police do whatever they want in the *thana* ... Last week one of our members was going to remand and had a stick inserted into his backside, and from that has internal bleeding, and is now admitted into hospital.’

More extreme still, human rights groups and activists allege widespread disappearances, with the whereabouts and conditions of BNP members unknown. The human rights organisation Odhikar (2018b) estimates that between 2009 and 2018, there have been 505 disappearances, allegedly at the hands of the state, of which the majority were conducted by RAB, followed by the detective branch of the police and then the police.¹¹ Such a possibility is reported to be a constant fear for opposition activists, even for student leaders:

‘137 people are missing only from the *Chattra dal* over the past five years. They have arrested our president. Missing is a new trend for our country,

¹¹ This includes, but is not confined to, the disappearances of people associated with the political opposition.

once you go missing, you will never come back, we don't know where your graveyard is, if you are dead or alive, we just know that you are missing.' (College-level *Chattra dal* leader in Dhaka)

Such dynamics not only represent a political strategy to control the opposition, but appear also to be an opportunity for the police to profit from extortion, an arrangement that police sources suggest has the tacit agreement of political leaders. Following a round of arrests (during a political protest, for example) activists described firsthand how police divide those arrested into different camps. Some face police cases and possible imprisonment, and others are simply threatened with the plan of extorting them. A large number of activists and leaders arrested are thus routinely released on condition of payment. One Dhaka University hall-level leader of the *Chattra dal* described this:

'When many of our activists are arrested, the police will first contact their family and say "give us two lakh, or five lakh or ten lakh taka, or we will crossfire your son". The family will of course say "please, don't crossfire him", but they also have to negotiate to make sure they don't receive a long jail sentence ... the police make sure that they are paid in cash, they won't document it, but ask a family member to come to the *thana*, and use a junior worker, like a constable, and exchange it in an area where there is not CCTV cameras. They have many techniques for earning illegal money.'

While such dynamics are more frequently observed in Dhaka, due to the concentration of political activists and mobilisation, they can also be seen throughout the country. More particular to Dhaka, however, are the ways in which the growth and dependence on the security forces has enabled the control of the capital spatially. The conviction of Khaleda Zia in early February 2018 represents a critical window to analyse such strategies.

The imprisonment of the leader of the BNP by an AL government was unprecedented and deprived the BNP of an active figurehead for the 2018 general election. At the time, it also necessitated a show of force and loyalty by BNP members and supporters. When it became clear that Khaleda Zia would be convicted and imprisoned in her final sentencing on 8 February in the court of Bakshibazar in old Dhaka, the government implemented a number of strategies to ensure its grip on the capital. Central to this was the almost entire isolation of the city from the country, which was described in some newspaper reports at the time as 'delinking'. Additional checkpoints were established at all of the eight entry points into the city.¹² Intense searches were conducted on the railway, waterways and highways leading to the city, and all terminal junctions reportedly had new CCTV cameras installed to monitor them. Hotels were instructed to collect the ID cards of their guests and submit these

¹² These were described by The Daily Star (2018c) as 'Postogola Bridge, Sadarghat, Abdullahpur Bridge, Dhaur Bridge in Ashulia, Babubazar Bridge, Gabtoli, Jatrabari and Sultana Kamal Bridge at Demra'

to the detective branch on a daily basis. Bus companies reportedly received instructions from police not to rent out buses, and many companies stopped operating altogether during this period. All of this was an effort to reduce the capacity for the opposition to bring in activists from outside to disrupt the capital. A ban on all processions and the carrying of sticks or other weapons was implemented under police instruction. The strategy for arrests also shifted, away from the blanket arrests of opposition members, to the careful targeting of more senior BNP leaders responsible for mobilising activists (Dhaka Tribune 2018).

On 8 February itself, traffic was almost non-existent, hardly any vehicles entered the city, and any that did had their passengers and luggage searched. Ironically, the level of quiet and yet anticipation of violence resembled that only seen on *hartal* days. All of the security agencies were deployed, with RAB guarding entrance points, 10,000 police were reportedly positioned on the streets, along with 20 platoons of the Border Guard (49 further platoons were deployed outside of Dhaka). Apps such as Uber and the local equivalent, Pathao, stopped their services and many schools shut for the day. Despite the ban on processions, AL activists paraded around the city. The *Chattra League*, for example, occupied key areas of Dhaka University campus to prevent the *Chattra dal* from mobilising, including the important TSC (Teacher Student Centre) at DU. Previously elected officials in Dhaka had talked of the AL in every ward in the city mobilising to prevent the BNP, and one report indicated the head of a transport union committing 15,000-20,000 transport workers to guard the city's terminals. Khaleda Zia's motorcade came from her residence in Gulshan to old Dhaka surrounded by BNP activists, who described to me seeing small gatherings of loyal supporters waiving the convoy at key intersections, braving the law enforcement and ruling party muscle. BNP activists fought in small skirmishes with the police and AL, and were met at Bakshibazar itself by a huge number of security forces lining the streets, with a mobile jammer also reportedly installed by the police to prevent news, or more specifically fake news, of events spreading. If any moment in Bangladesh's recent history symbolises how power has changed in Bangladesh, it was then, with the police-backed political order on full display.

5. The present: Avoiding the eyes of the regime

With the battle on the streets seemingly won, new modes of control have risen in importance to keep threats in check. The empowerment of the security agencies has brought a significant expansion in street-level and digital surveillance, and this represents one of the key means by which opposition forces are now contained. In the case of digital monitoring, the techniques and technologies used have largely grown under the AL's last two terms in office, a period that has coincided with the proliferation of smart phones and social media supported by a 4G network. This has created an environment in which people often have to closely guard what they say, fearing the repercussions of stepping out of line. This section examines such surveillance, the impact it has on the opposition, and how it is being resisted.

5.1. Street and digital surveillance: Informers and new technologies

Street-level informers working for the security agencies, such as the police and RAB, closely monitor BNP leaders and activists. In Bangla, informers are known as *source*, *former* or, in student circles, *tiktiki* (lizards). BNP leaders and activists all portrayed informers as critical for the state to keep tabs on the movements and plans of the opposition. In some cases, particularly for elected representatives and high profile leaders, informers literally followed them, while for others it was more a matter of informers monitoring their activities when they attended to their businesses, or met with other BNP members. This monitoring represents a significant burden, meaning that opposition party members are often unable to continue their political or business activities, or even go home, fearing arrest or worse. A senior *Chattra dal* leader described his situation:

‘The police know where I am going, who I’m speaking to, where I’m sitting, they have their *source* nearby watching. The Chattra league leader has also threatened me. I cannot even sit in my own business, because if the police see me there they will catch me.’

Some *source* are full-time informers. Such actors can be found in all areas of Dhaka, and in many cases well informed locals will know precisely who the *source* are. In Kawran bazaar – the city’s largest marketplace – for example, the identity of informers is public knowledge, with labourers able to pick out who works for RAB or the police. However, people across society, professions and classes actively feed information to the police and security agencies, and some opposition members described fearing that even fellow members of the BNP were discreetly working for the ruling party.

Crime reporters and opposition activists described the number of informers operating in Dhaka increasing significantly since around the 2014 election. Unlike other areas of the police budget, there are no audits for informers, and it is not publicly known how much the state spends on maintaining these networks. Part of the strength of the *source* networks in Dhaka is the origins of such figures. It is common for *source* to have a criminal past, or even present, and to therefore be well integrated into the networks that the police need to monitor. Arrests serve as an opportunity for police to recruit new informers, with the police offering people arrested for serious crimes a route out, and new opportunities. It is even common for informers to be allowed to continue with petty crimes (such as selling drugs, or running a small extortion racket) as a reward for providing information. During the spate of bombings in Dhaka in 2014-2015, I witnessed this firsthand. Following the arrest of a local labour leader for orchestrating bombings at the behest of the BNP, the leader managed to be released from prison, but only on the condition that he became a RAB informer. Other local informers in the area studied also had a criminal background, and some were leveraging their power for other opportunities, such as running extortion rackets.

Beyond the streets, the rapid proliferation of new communication technologies over the last decade – most importantly mobile phones, social media and communication apps such as Whatsapp – has brought new forms of state surveillance. Among opposition party activists, there is an overwhelming sense of being closely monitored digitally by the state; and that their locations, messages and phone calls could be tapped. A former minister put it like this:

‘My phone is online with them, I know that. Everything I say on this phone they are tracking online the whole time. It’s even possible that what we are discussing now, when the phone is just there, they can still hear me. They might be listening now.’

The techniques, organisation and extent of the surveillance behind such experiences are, however, difficult to gauge. Reports indicate that security agencies have purchased extensive surveillance hardware and software from foreign companies. This includes the purchase of ‘FinSpy’ and ‘FinFly USB’ from the company Gamma Group, a technology that infects targets through malware, enabling the monitoring of communication devices and reportedly even encrypted information. This was in use at least between 2012 and 2014 (Wikileaks). In 2014, RAB reportedly attempted to buy the software ‘IMSI Catcher’, enabling the tracking of mobile phones and potentially also voice interception, from the Swiss company Neosoft (Privacy International 2015); and in 2015, there are reports that the Italian company, ‘Hacking Team’, marketed their technology to RAB (Prothom Alo 2018b). A key organisation supporting the security agencies is the ‘National Telecommunications Monitoring Centre’ (NTMC) in Dhaka, mandated – according to the objectives outlined on their website – ‘to establish national-level lawful interception platforms for all kinds of electronic communications as directed by the government’. In 2015, the German company, Trovicor, was contracted to improve the government of Bangladesh’s surveillance systems, focusing on the NTMC (Spohr 2015). As of 2018, there are reports that the NTMC is significantly increasing its surveillance capacities, with social media a priority target (The Independent 2018).

Even without sophisticated monitoring, mobile phones contain sensitive information – for example, the contacts list of political activists (demonstrating who is linked to whom, as well as the actual details of individuals), photos (indicating political affiliations and personal contacts), and messages (detailing opinions and plans, for example). As a result, it is common to see suspected opposition party activists or criminals being stopped by police on the streets, forced to open their phones and have their messages, contacts lists and Facebook accounts inspected. A senior leader in the *Chattra dal* described this:

‘this phone has my Facebook account on it, it has photos, groups, my likes. I won’t take this out with me because if the police catch me they will check it ... if you had called me yesterday, you wouldn’t have got through because all of my numbers were switched off. After they arrest one person, they will get them to call the others to find their location and then arrest them.’

As described above, a common strategy for the police to use following the arrest of an activist, is to finecomb through their list of contacts, forcing the prisoner to make phone calls to each of the important contacts, ask where they are and what they are doing, as a lure to identifying and catching them.

Such practices can be observed across the country, although they are concentrated in Dhaka, due to its unique political importance and size. There are, however, strategies that appear to be particular to Dhaka, and which aim to bring the city under digital surveillance. Attempts to integrate technology into the governance of the city precede the return of the current ruling party. The late 1990s saw a plan to modernise the Dhaka metropolitan control room and, by 2007, plans for a ‘command, control and communications system’ (C3S) under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police were being implemented, establishing 155 surveillance cameras at key intersections, priority areas, transport terminals and other entrances to the city (The Daily Star 2007). While this scheme is widely deemed to have failed, it is clear that the government has far greater ambitions. Under the remit of the ‘Development of Dhaka City Digital Monitoring System’, the government is at the early stage of implementing a plan to install a total of 50,000 CCTV cameras (starting with an initial 16,000), all feeding into a ‘Central Command and Control centre’, where 550 officials will monitor the city over 60 monitors (The Daily Star 2017a). Speaking at a launch event in 2016, the prime minister reportedly described this system as enabling the state ‘to instantly monitor any case of accident, fire and criminal activity in any part of Dhaka city using information technology and to take necessary measures accordingly’ (The Daily Star 2016). Key features of this technology are the ability to track vehicles through their registrations, detect and pinpoint particular noises (gunshots for example), and – perhaps most ambitiously – facial recognition. Known ‘criminals’ will be automatically identified through the technology in a system resembling that recently introduced in many Chinese cities. Indeed a Chinese company is associated with the contract for the programme, and there are reports of a Memorandum of Understanding for Chinese state funding to support the project under the title of ‘Safe Dhaka City’. While only at a nascent stage, if feasible such technology could radically transform the means of control available to the ruling party.

5.2. Everyday resistance: Hideouts, routes and disguises

In the face of digital and street surveillance, most opposition party leaders and activists are largely powerless, left depressed and frustrated, unable to openly mobilise, run their businesses, or continue with a normal family life. They do, however, resist, deploying everyday tactics to avoid the eyes of the regime. These tactics include: staying at hideouts, changing appearances, taking convoluted routes, secret relationships within the state, and adapting the use of mobile phones and social media. Such activities are a critical part of the daily attempts that the opposition use simply to survive, as well as to subvert the ruling party.

As discussed above, most activists interviewed were avoiding the police, either because they had outstanding police cases against them, or because they feared

that, were the police to catch them, they would face arrest, a beating, new trumped-up charges, extortion or possible imprisonment. A basic strategy used to avoid the security agencies was to live away from home, either at critical moments or permanently. During the period in early 2018 when Khaleda Zia was imprisoned, all activists interviewed (below senior leadership) were staying away from home, relying on friends or distant relatives to house them, and they described others as moving temporarily outside of Dhaka. The *Chattra dal* president of one college in Dhaka described his situation:

'I haven't been arrested. I have cases against me but have not been arrested. The police can't find me, I go to campus very early. They don't know where my residence is. I live in a different *thana* to my campus, so the police can't come there, and my name is not associated with the residence, it is hidden, it is in a friend's name. But I can also be arrested from anywhere. Since 8 February we have all been rotating, living in a different place every day.'

Others described having specific hideouts that were not homes, but secluded or unknown places where they knew they could go to lie low temporarily. Examples given were the homes of distant relatives, or small properties within their extended families. In the case of the politician discussed at the beginning, the small hut was his secret place, a fair distance from his home, where he could rest the whole day without anyone finding him and, if needs be, sleep there at night.

Avoiding the expected is critical to resisting the regime. The network of informers described above keep a close watch on the daily movements of important activists, reporting to the local police and wider agencies. Strategies to avoid them are therefore critical, as the leader described:

'During the time of the ruling party, most of the people take the side of the government, so most people are working as their source ... There are always two people keeping their eyes on my house, so when I come and go they are always monitoring, it is their responsibility to inform the police ... Whenever I go outside, I try to confuse them. Today, for example, I came out of my home and started by having a conversation with some local people. I needed to cross the river by boat, but I didn't straight away. I didn't take the boat. Instead, I went here and there, in different directions. After 30 minutes I took a boat, but from the riverbank, not the terminal, I signalled to a boatman I know who understands what I need. Then, after getting off the boat, I didn't take an auto directly, I spent some time with my friends, and then suddenly left and took an auto to come here.'

Far more important than speaking to a researcher, such daily strategies to avoid the state are key to mobilising on the streets and attending other political events. When the BNP announce an event without police permission, all of the security agencies, down to local police, are on full alert, key junctions and transport terminals are closely monitored, and people are regularly stopped and searched on the streets. As

such, creative approaches to attending protests are needed. The basic principle followed to attend these events is that activists go independently or in very small groups, all eventually converging, but not until absolutely necessary. This was described as a 'technique', with people joining the event – for example, if it is a march – at different points. Activists also purposefully take different and often convoluted routes to reach their final destination, not taking the same route twice, and thereby not creating a pattern.

A further technique is concealing one's identity, for example through a disguise. This can be important for all levels of the party. A *Chattra dal* leader described the situation for senior leaders: 'because our leaders are targeted by the AL, they are marked, they often change their dress after the procession, as a way of leaving freely, so the police won't recognise them'. Another activist described this strategy:

'If I want to get to an event, I will go through a different area like Mirpur [an area in the North-West of the city], and always use public vehicles like a public bus, never a private vehicle like a CNG [auto rickshaw]. I am a person who has an idea about the look and approach of people, especially the police, I understand when they look at me, I can guess what they are thinking. So when we go, we just wear our usual clothes, not trousers, but lungi. Suppose I work in a factory. then I will not wash my hands on that day, or if I work in a workshop. I will leave my hands with oil on, or I will take a tool bag, so they think I am just a tradesman, and so if the police check us, they will see we are ordinary people'

Informally, the BNP also rely in small ways on contacts within the police. Despite the politicisation of the police described above, there are still many supporters of the BNP working there, particularly at the lower levels. Such contacts are critical to early alerts that they are being hunted, that the police will search their house, giving them time to reach a hideout. One activist described having 'spies' in the police, who feed them information. During violent confrontations with the police, such support can also become evident. Examples include the police purposefully firing their weapons badly so as not to hurt the BNP, or pretending to lose them in a chase:

'The BNP police sometimes help us. We can understand where they are coming from. We don't want them to get themselves in trouble, but they are helping us in some ways. For example, imagine I am running, and the police are running after me, the police who are from my side politically will catch up and say "why don't you turn right or left", and then when I turn, they will go straight, and say "where have they gone, I can't see them!"'

Such support, however small, is highly risky for the police involved, and BNP activists described the phones of BNP-supporting police members also being tracked. Indeed, ultimately such strategies face a highly sophisticated challenge – the tracking of mobile phones and interception of voice calls. Combating such a threat is difficult for the BNP, in part because of how advanced the method is, but in part also because

the understanding of what the government can and cannot do is unclear. Hence BNP members spoke of phones being tracked, listened to, of certain technologies coming from country X or Y, without knowing where the boundaries are as to what the government does or does not do. Activists have had to respond through day-to-day techniques that try to shield their locations and activities, but for the most part without any clear sense of the whether such techniques are effective.

Activists are then in general highly cautious when using mobile phones. Some have SIM cards registered in other people's names, do not answer from unknown numbers, lie to people about where they are when speaking on the phone, or give purposefully ambiguous responses. A former minister described putting his phone under a book during sensitive conversations. One activist described this cautious approach:

'usually I have communication over the phone with my known people, but I don't share my location with them or what I am doing, only with some specific people who I know very well and are doing politics with me, only with them will I say what I am doing. For the others, I will say false information. If I am here I will say I am there, and if I am there I will say I am here.'

The popularity of social media – and particularly Facebook – has created new means of surveillance, as well as of communication. Activists, particularly the younger ones, rely on certain apps, for example Viber and Whatsapp, to communicate, although there are rumours that the state can even monitor these now, having bought technology from abroad. When on the streets, many therefore leave their smart phones at home, instead taking a simpler model not connected to social media, fearing that if the police catch them, they will search through their photos, Facebook accounts, and contact lists, looking for incriminating evidence. A Dhaka University-based *Chattra dal* leader described adapting his phone use accordingly:

'I save my president's number in the contact list not under his actual name, but under the name of a girl, because most of the time without any reason police will check our phones, open them and search for information, photos ... I have followed strict ways for avoiding this, like in my photo gallery, you won't see any political photos, but you can access them by a hidden album ... it's a "technique", but it destroys our mentality.'

Similarly on Facebook some prominent activists do not list their political affiliation, and regularly deactivate their accounts during particularly turbulent periods, fearing that it serves as a way for the government to track them. However small, effective or not, such tactics constitute an integral part of how the opposition navigate Dhaka, and attempt to pursue their political agenda against the might and eyes of the regime.

6. Conclusion

The seismic political transition observed in Bangladesh over the past decade has to date been studied primarily in terms of formal institutional developments, exemplified in an amendment to the constitution abolishing the system of caretaker government which had regulated the intense and violent political competition between the BNP and Awami League through the 1990s and 2000s. Alongside this amendment has been a raft of further developments and legal manoeuvres commented upon widely in the media, which seem to have enabled the ruling party to consolidate power. These include the international war crimes tribunal, the banning of Jamaat-e-Islami, new legislation to monitor digital technologies, a repressive approach to domestic media and other 'civil society' organisations, challenges to the independence of the judiciary, most notably involving the resignation of the previous Chief Justice, and the imprisonment of the BNP's leader, Khaleda Zia. By contrast, this paper has contributed to our understanding of this transition by drawing attention elsewhere, towards the underlying shifts in coercive capacity across both ruling and opposition coalitions, which have arguably enabled many of the dynamics outlined above.

The puzzle presented early in the paper was how the Awami League has achieved the level of dominance it seems to have managed. Taking Dhaka city as the focus of our analysis, given its centrality to the country's political life, it was noted that the city has a long history of significant political mobilisation, a reputation for violence and – at least historically – for gangsters, making the puzzle all the more important. Unrest in Dhaka has been at the heart of almost all major political transitions in the country's history (Jackman 2019). The story told reveals the disproportionate significance that the political economy of Dhaka plays in national politics, as well as the role of historical fortuitousness, or lack thereof, in shaping political transitions, alongside deliberate strategy. The roots of the current transition were argued to lie almost two decades back, when the BNP inadvertently undermined their capacity to mobilise muscular cadre through the formation of Rapid Action Battalion and subsequent killing of gangsters and other violent entrepreneurs. This period sparked the rise of widespread extrajudicial practices which have underpinned the threat of violence posed by the regime today, and begun a journey of increasing domestic state coercive capacity.

It seems plausible that the rapid expansion of this capacity in the early 2000s empowered the future incumbent to better resist the opposition, increasing their capacity to hold off the opposition's attempts to mobilise, and thereby incentivising them to deploy this strategy when in power. It was then fortuitous timing for the Awami League that they returned to power when they did. The subsequent intense politicisation and empowerment of domestic state security agencies seen over the past decade can be felt across Bangladesh, however it manifests itself in particular ways in the capital, as seen through the alleged favouritism given to police officers and other officials from the prime minister's home district. Although at an early stage, there appears to be serious intent to develop more sophisticated technological forms of surveillance, which may enable more efficient forms of coercion and greater urban

control. This capacity is shaped by an international political economy, in which private firms and foreign governments are aiding modes of surveillance within a security apparatus that stands accused of serious and widespread repression. Ultimately, how the party has been able to achieve the consolidation of power through domestic security agencies must also be explained through a factor briefly touched on here, but which should be the subject of future research, namely the relationship between the military and party. This lies beyond the story of Dhaka city itself, suggesting that while controlling the capital is central to the stability of the regime, there are larger deals and machinations at play.

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