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Managing coercion and striving for dominance in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Managing coercion is often central to the pursuit of political dominance, and yet also a neglected field of study. The sources of coercive capacity within a political regime differ markedly, and include the formal apparatus of the state, political parties, and an array of more ambiguous actors often connected to both. Underlying how such actors are managed are strategic choices, which shape the character of governance and politics, and come with trade-offs and risks. This paper examines the management of coercion in Bangladesh, a context where the ruling party has seen an unprecedented decade in office, yet serious questions have been raised about the means by which this has been achieved. Our analysis highlights the intensification of long-established practices, including the politicisation and empowerment of domestic security agencies, and the use of the law to repress. The way in which coercion is now organised in Bangladesh, more closely reflects the first few decades of the country's history.

Keywords: Bangladesh, coercion, political dominance, political parties, security agencies, police

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1. Introduction

Political dominance in many societies is achieved, in part, through coercion. The way in which coercion is used, however, is complex, and at its most stark can be seen in how the ability to use and threaten violence is organised, and in the ways this bolsters the authority of the regime in power. Typically, this is achieved through a range of actors, including state security agencies and political parties, as well as more ambiguous actors connected to both. Managing these, and directing them towards threats, is then a central political task, which brings trade-offs and risks, and can radically shape governance and the political trajectory of a society. Despite the now substantial body of literature examining so-called 'authoritarian' political regimes, and the global sense of an upsurge in reliance on repressive measures to limit opposition, this is a neglected field of study. One review article, for example, describes our understanding of coercion as 'thin' (Art 2012), and another commentator recently points to the topic as 'strikingly under-examined' (Greitens 2016: 7).

This paper examines the management of coercion to pursue political dominance through the case of Bangladesh, a country where for the first time a political party has been in power for a decade, having won three consecutive general elections, each with a landslide. The main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), are in tatters, having been effectively cornered and undermined, with a weakened party infrastructure, their leader in prison, and little scope to mobilise on the streets. At a formal institutional level, our understanding of how Bangladesh has arrived in its current political state is relatively clear and well documented. After the country returned to a system of parliamentary democracy in 1991, general elections were administered in a relatively neutral manner through a system of 'caretaker government'.¹ The country's two primary parties, the Awami League and BNP, alternated in power until the ruling Awami League were re-elected in 2009, and repealed the caretaker government system through a constitutional amendment in 2011 (Hassan and Nazneen 2017; Khan 2015). This has enabled the party to directly administer subsequent elections (in 2014 and 2018) under what are widely perceived as questionable circumstances.

What is less clear, however, is how the ruling party has made the constitutional amendment and then withstood the ensuing resistance and protest. Over preceding decades, when the now opposition party directly administered an election, or attempted to bias the caretaker government system, pressure from the Awami League, civil society and ultimately the military was brought to bear, and general strikes (*hartal*) shut down cities. By contrast, attempts by the BNP and other political

¹ In this 'caretaker government' arrangement, a non-partisan government was appointed to administer elections, headed by a neutral figure (most often a Chief Justice), thereby preventing the incumbent from utilising the tools of the state to skew electoral results, and cyclically moderating the politicisation of state institutions by each party when in office.

opposition to confront the government on the streets over the past decade have failed miserably – the opposition can barely hold public gatherings, let alone *hartal*, and have had little traction in attempting to galvanise a wider movement against the ruling party. The question this then raises is: how has this been achieved?

A full answer to this question has many facets, and our analysis concentrates on only one important aspect to this: how the coercive apparatus of the regime has been recrafted.² In the pursuit of dominance, the regime appears to have strategically empowered and successfully patronised state security agencies, who now form the bedrock of the regime's grip on power. Nationally, the mandate, strength and political function of the police in particular have risen, reflected in higher budgets, new prestige, and politicisation of the rank and file. Locally, the nexus between MPs and police officers has intensified. We argue that this has helped undermine the BNP in multiple ways – through threatening the political dynasty at the party helm, arrests and intimidation of leaders and activists, reducing the financial backing of the party, and by fostering division. The implications of this are only now emerging. At the local level, this is re-shaping local politics, undermining the informal cross-party safety nets on which leaders and activists from both parties have traditionally rested when out of office, and there are signs of tensions between party and state. When viewed through Bangladesh's history, the current coercive apparatus is unique: a strong political party, an acquiescent military, and politicised and powerful domestic security agencies.

This paper is based on research conducted through 2018 in three research sites: the capital Dhaka, and two prominent provincial cities, anonymised here as Pariganj and Dalipur. These latter two sites were chosen as being traditionally BNP strongholds, enabling us to better discern and analyse the state of the opposition party, and contemporary political changes. With the exception of the landslide electoral victory for the Awami League in 1973 (prior to the founding of the BNP), Pariganj city's primary constituency (Pariganj-2) was only won by the party in the contentious 2014 election, and Dalipur city (historically partly under Dalipur-8, and now represented by Dalipur-6) by the Awami League in 2008. Across these sites, we conducted over 100 interviews with political leaders and activists, journalists and civil servants. Respondents included current, candidate and former MPs and city mayors, former ministers, city ward-level leaders, district- and city-level party leaders, party activists, police officers, and national and regional journalists. Direct quotations from respondents have been anonymised, and where necessary the precise location of dynamics analysed have been left unsaid.

² Much has not then been examined here. More broadly, we should note how the middle classes have been arguably placated through strong economic growth and wider development (thanks to a reviewer for highlighting this, see also Jackman and Maitrot [2020, forthcoming]). Wider factors also include military co-optation, repression and co-optation of the Islamist group, Hefazat-e-Islam, the banning of Jamaat-e-Islam and the International War Crimes Tribunal, the alleged forcing out of a Chief Justice, the emergence and repression of new student movements (Jackman 2019a), the complex legacies in coercive organisations (Jackman 2019b), and a sense of emerging economic challenges connected to the transition, including the banking crisis and loan defaults (Riaz 2019).

2. Managing coercion

In most societies, political regimes routinely use coercion to limit the activities of rivals and sustain political dominance. What this means empirically varies, however it can include intimidation, street confrontations, arrests, surveillance and more extreme measures, such as disappearances and extrajudicial killings. The capacity of a regime to use coercion derives not only from the formal apparatus of the state – the military and domestic security agencies, for example – but other actors, such as political parties and criminal groups, categories which in practice can be highly porous. The coercive strength of a regime is hence often based not on the state holding a monopoly on violence, but on the inclusion of a range of ‘violence specialists’. The use of diverse violence specialists in the service of a regime means that actors who are diametrically opposed in ideal terms can in fact be interdependent (Goldstein and Arias 2010; Staniland 2017; Jackman 2018a; Arias 2017). Criminal groups or ‘terrorist’ organisations can be patronised and deployed by politicians or security agencies, for example. The precise character of these relationships differs, and various typologies have been recently proposed to capture the nature of these interactions (Barnes 2017; Staniland 2017; Arias 2018). One way of conceptualising this in broad terms is seeing a political regime as a ‘ruling coalition’, a network of actors organised across society, containing ‘members who specialize in a range of military, political, religious, political, and economic activities’ (North et al. 2009: 18), in which diverse actors specialising in violence form one important part.

The range of actors capable of coercion and relied upon by a political regime, can be considered a ‘coercive apparatus’. The form these take varies considerably. Political regimes are often rooted in a particular set of organisations (as well as networks and factions within these), be they within the military, a political party, trade union or other group, with which they are closely identified. They also inherit an institutional legacy formed over decades, which shapes the nature of prominent organisations, as well as wider norms surrounding political practice, influencing what is deemed moral, legitimate or otherwise. A coercive apparatus is also shaped by strategic choices. Indeed, managing this capacity for coercion is a central task for political regimes, one which in part determines their ability to dominate rivals and see off potential threats (Policzer 2009; Levitsky and Way 2010; Svobik 2012; Greitens 2016). A crucial question this then raises – and one which it has been argued is often neglected (Policzer 2009; Art 2012; Greitens 2016) – is how regimes craft this coercive apparatus in a manner that enables them to pursue political dominance.

A primary way in which the ability to coerce is crafted is through the creation, empowerment and disempowerment of particular organisations, for example, the formation of new security agency, the disbanding of others, and strategically prioritising certain political groups over others. In practice, making such changes is a delicate task, one which brings numerous risks, which have ‘received little scholarly attention’ (Policzer 2009: 4). To the extent necessary, coercion must be used in a manner that does not undermine the moral legitimacy and popularity of a regime. A

reliance on coercion can also shift power relations within the state, empowering certain organisations to make greater demands (Svolik 2012: 10). Without sufficient monitoring and control, these can threaten the regime itself (as is common, *ibid*), and there is thus a need to 'calibrate their need for a powerful coercive apparatus against their interest in self-preservation and maintaining control' (Policzer 2009: 4).

Actors hence need to be strategically empowered in a manner that maintains stability within a regime, and does not too greatly upset the balance of power within the regime (within and between state and party actors, that exist in coalition). All decisions then bring 'organizational tradeoff' (Greitens 2016), which in the longer term can limit the potential to deal with other threats that emerge.³ This can have a significant bearing on the character of governance and politics, and direct the political trajectory of a society. The ways in which the organisation of coercion changes within political regimes, is then crucial to understand.

3. Coercive organisations in Bangladesh

Throughout Bangladesh's history since 1971, the authority of all political regimes has relied – in different ways - on the use of coercion. Despite a regularity of elections, these have rarely been 'free and fair' by international or domestic standards, and even when deemed to be so, the capacity to intimidate and use violence has still often been a key skill on which the success of candidates has rested (Ruud 2018; Maitrot and Jackman 2019). All regimes have routinely deployed the apparatus of the state and party to dominate rivals using extra-legal practices, ranging from breaking up demonstrations, to arbitrary arrest and extrajudicial killings; and political opposition has attempted to disrupt the incumbent through violent forms of street mobilisation, centring on *hartal* (general strikes). The ability to use violence and coercion within this context is not then marginal to the country's political life, but central; and indeed all regimes have ultimately fallen in part due to their inability to manage their coercive apparatus to sustain dominance over rivals.

The way in which the capacity to use coercion has been organised within political regimes has, however, differed markedly. The role of the military has been central, and it is tempting to draw a distinction between periods of 'civilian' and 'military' rule, measured by the extent to which the military has imposed itself on public life. Through such a reading, Bangladesh would be seen as having begun life under a civilian parliamentary democracy with the Awami League coming to power under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1971-1975), before his assassination by disgruntled military

³ A result, then, is that the coercive apparatus created by political regimes differs in important ways. Greitens (2016) proposes one way of conceptualising these differences, rooted in the 'dominant perceived threat', which comes either from above (an elite military coup) or below (mass revolt). In her model, this results in two distinct and mutually exclusive forms of coercive apparatus. If the dominant perceived threat comes from elites, the institutional response is to create a security apparatus that is internally divided, in order to mitigate the potential for elite collaboration. Key characteristics of this are that it is 'fragmentary' (defined by having multiple actors with overlapping roles) and 'exclusionary' (not inclusive of groups within society). By contrast, if the perceived threat is a mass revolt, internal unity and inclusion among security apparatus is an advantage and key characteristic.

officers. This led to a period of 15 years which saw two former military chiefs come to power under martial law, become president, form political parties and ostensibly 'civilianise' their regime. Hence President Zia (1975-1981) founded the BNP, and Ershad (1982-1990) the Jatiya Party. Then, in the face of mass political movement against Ershad's rule, the military withdrew support, leading to a return to civilian parliamentary democracy from 1990, after which we have seen the military take a step back from public life, giving support to the system of 'caretaker government', which for two decades administered elections in a relatively free and fair manner. This reading would be furthermore strengthened by the fact that during periods of 'military' rule, military officers played a significant role in domestic governance. Hence, under Zia, we see military officers take senior roles in public corporations, work as police superintendents, and find homes in Zia's Council of Ministers and, later, most superintendents under Ershad similarly having military backgrounds.

A core contention of this paper is that during period of civilian rule in Bangladesh, coercion within regimes has been organised in very different ways, radically shaping the character of governance. In particular, regimes have differed in the extent to which domestic state security agencies have been empowered, and utilised by the regime to limit opposition. Historically, there are two periods of particular note that inform our understanding of contemporary politics in Bangladesh. The first is the country's first regime, which saw the formation of the 'Jatio Rakkhi Bahini' (National Security Force) (JRB), and the second is the BNP's regime from 2001, which saw the formation of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). We examine these briefly in turn.

In the aftermath of Liberation, the Awami League, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (known as 'Bangabandhu', friend of Bengal), came to power, later winning a landslide electoral victory in 1973. Of the many challenges faced by the regime, perhaps the most pressing was building a coercive apparatus capable of maintain a basic level of order. The regime faced many threats, including a powerful leftist contingent and military discontent. They also faced a plethora of militia (*bahini*) which had grown in the struggle against Pakistan, and which, however, after independence, 'became marauders and ravaged the countryside' (Khan 1981: 553). In response to this situation, the regime formed powerful new party wings, and quasi state security agencies, in an attempt to assert party discipline from the centre, limit leftists and contain the military. These were drawn from the ranks of the *bahini*, which had fought for liberation, and integrated into newly formed Awami League organisations, including the *Jubo League* (Youth League), '*Lal bahini*' (Red Force) the armed contingent of the *Sramik League* (the workers' wing of the Awami League), and the lesser known '*Nil bahini*' (Blue Force).

Most important of all these forces was the founding of the 'Jatio Rakkhi Bahini' (national security force) (JRB), a quasi-state paramilitary group directly loyal to Mujib, to whom they took an oath, which grew to around 25,000 members. One widely held view is that they were 'the AL's armed branch' (Codron 2007: 32). The JRB were used as a counterweight to the military, which Bangabandhu distrusted. While not

equal to the military in sheer numbers, the JRB had superior resources, for example having access to AK-47s, while the military was left with rifles dating from World War II (Lindquist 1977), only three aged tanks (Mascarenhas 1986: 37), and many soldiers lacking even a uniform (ibid: 34). While the JRB had some success in providing order, and controlling black-market trading and smuggling, they also developed notoriety as the henchmen of the regime, involved in corruption and associated particularly with extrajudicial killings, particularly of leftist groups. The JRB exacerbated mistrust and resentment of the regime within the military, party organisations fractured, and in the face of poor discipline Bangabandhu the JRB introduced a one-party state under the 'Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League' (Bangladesh Peasants and Workers' League) (BAKSAL), in an attempt to reassert control, before being assassinated. What we then see in the case of Bangladesh's first regime is an elected government without the military on side, relying on extrajudicial practices to dominate rivals, implemented through a paramilitary organisation. This radically shaped the character of governance, and led to the introduction of a one-party state.

The second episode in Bangladesh's 'civilian' history relevant to our analysis is the BNP's term in office between 2001 and -2006. From 1990, the character of the parliamentary democracy that had emerged was one in which two parties, led by political dynasties, fought ferociously to achieve dominance over rivals, against an institutional backdrop in which the military, whilst to a degree politicised, ultimately supported the system of caretaker government which administered elections. Parliament in practice was largely dysfunctional, often boycotted, and violence was the core skill on which political authority rested, and which both parties built and deployed in their attempts to dominate rivals. Through this period, then, both parties extended their networks, seemingly permeating almost all areas of public life, and building strong auxiliary organisations, ostensibly representing particular interest groups, such as the powerful student (*chattra*), youth (*jubo*), and worker (*sramik*) bodies, associated either with the Awami League (*league*) or BNP (*dal*). *Hartal* (general strikes) were central to the opposition's political repertoire, while the incumbent politicised and deployed the apparatus of the state against the opposition in a manner similar to that of previous regimes. The coercive organisations on which political regimes rested through the 1990s were therefore primarily the party structures themselves. This period, however, also saw the dramatic rise of violence specialists outside or only loosely within party structures, and often in popular discourse identified as terrorists (*shontrash*), thugs (*mastan*), and collectively as 'top terror' (Jackman 2018a). This incorporated underground leftist parties (*choromponti*), Islamist figures (such as the notorious Bangla Bhai), and gangsters (the likes of *Picchi* Hannan and Ershad Shikder, for example).

These figures – particularly those in the mould of gangsters or mafia – had considerable territorial control, and were in some cases very wealthy. They were often politically patronised by MPs, ministers and political parties, whilst at the same time being threats to these very same actors, on account of their brute capacity for violence, street-level manpower, weapons and reputation for ruthlessness. The

influence these figures had over local governance and politics brought high levels of public violence and crime, which the BNP committed to addressing once back in power in the early 2000s. They achieved this primarily through radically increasing the domestic coercive capacity of the state in the form of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). RAB was formed under the Ministry of Home Affairs, drawing personnel from police and military, and quickly became popular in Bangladesh, through controlling so-called 'top terror', who had previously been beyond the grasp of state security agencies. The methods deployed were extreme – alleged extrajudicial killings – and reminiscent of those deployed by the JRB, although with a reasonable degree of public support, given their effectiveness in controlling crime. The strength and success of RAB gave the BNP a further tool to dominate rivals, and the then opposition Awami League reportedly feared that they would serve this purpose (HRW 2006: 19).⁴ The BNP furthermore attempted to manipulate the caretaker government system (manoeuvring for the appointment of a Chief Justice to lead the caretaker government who was felt to be BNP leaning), resulting in intense pressure from the Awami League, and ultimately the military returning to public life through intervention and emergency rule, which facilitated the forming of a caretaker government popularly known as the '1/11' government (taking power on 11 January 2007), which lasted an unprecedented two years between 2007 and 2009.

4. The rise of the police–party nexus

For the third time in Bangladesh's history of parliamentary democracy, we are observing a period during which the ruling party has dramatically empowered domestic state security agencies. From a primary reliance on the vast networks and groups constituting the Awami League and their affiliates to dominate rivals, the regime now primarily depends on the apparatus of the state, most notably the police. A crucial difference between this and previous episodes examined above (the early 1970s and early 2000s), is that the military appears acquiescent. Examining how military support has been achieved is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it is appears relevant to note that two weeks prior to the appointment of the latest chief of army staff in mid-2018, his younger brother, Joseph (a notorious gangster who was imprisoned in the late 1990s), had received a rare presidential pardon. Prior to the controversial December 2018 election, the general had described the electoral atmosphere as the best in the country's history. In the following sections, we examine different facets of this recent transition: first, the empowerment and politicisation of state security agencies; second, the character of the nexus between police and politician locally; and third, how this reconfiguration of the coercive apparatus has undermined the opposition, and is re-shaping local politics.

⁴ In fact, BNP politicians today argue that RAB killed many more figures aligned to their own party than the Awami League, and that this has contributed to their weakness today, particularly in Dhaka (Jackman 2019b).

4.1. State muscle

‘We don’t call them the police, we call them the “police league.”’

Senior BNP elected politician, September 2018.

Since the Awami League returned to power in 2009, in a landslide electoral victory conducted under a military-backed caretaker government, the character of their political authority has shifted. From the perspective of critics, this is expressed in a common sentiment that the distinction between party and state has been entirely eroded, or as a senior *Chhatra dal* leader put it: ‘there is no state now, it is all Awami League machinery’. A senior BNP leader on the party’s executive committee (the ‘standing committee’) portrayed this change:

‘If you want to keep the citizens out of the electoral process, the government’s character changes immediately. It does not remain a democratic government, the dependency goes from people to the law and order authorities, RAB, civil servants, and basically, state-sponsored favours and terrorism This democratic deficit means that parliament is non-functioning, the executive wings politicised, with the law and order authorities politicised, and the judiciary politicised and under control. So the government’s dependence has gone from the people to the organs of the state, which they need to control, because they are the ones basically in control [of the country].’

While such rhetoric is undeniably partisan, across our sites, political leaders in both the AL and BNP described the role and power of the security agencies, and in particular the police, as significantly increasing in recent years. In the provincial cities, some opposition leaders portrayed the police as not counting for much locally prior to 2014, while now the AL were ‘surviving on the basis of the police’, as it was often framed. A number of opposition members described the police as having just become ‘government sticks’ (*lathi*).

Both opposition and ruling party leaders (privately) acknowledge that the police have become increasingly important politically to the Awami League over the past two terms in office. The roots of this shift are traced differently by our informants. Most common is to see it as originating in the experience around the 2014 general election, when the BNP were mobilising in force against the government through *hartal* and petrol bombings, and the government relied heavily on the security forces to control them. During this period there were also the ‘International War Crimes Tribunal’, conflict with and banning of Jamaat-e-Islami, protests by the Islamist group, Hefazat-e-Islam, and terrorist attacks on intellectuals and foreigners. One interpretation is that it is through the police’s response to all of these events that they became visibly more important to the regime. For others, however, it can be traced back to the 1/11 government, where the experience of military-backed state repression of party leaders influenced the party to set a new course by solidifying its political grip on the police and other security agencies. A further factor identified the tarnished image of RAB over the past decade, with certain units of the force

convicted of orchestrating politically motivated murders at the requests of local leaders, most notably in Narayanganj.

For the opposition, this dependency signals a crisis of legitimacy for the ruling party, and a breakdown in the chain of command, signalling that the police are 'out of control', with traditional political authority over the police reversing. A senior locally elected BNP politician in one site described this:

'police have become absolutely powerful, now they are controlling everything, we call them the "police league". The government have only been able to push us into the corner using the police, RAB and other forces'.

Referring to them by the term 'league' associates them with other Awami League affiliate organisations (Jackman 2019b). It should be clear that such rhetoric serves the BNP's purpose, portraying their political opposition as illegitimate and weak. The allegation levelled is that this newfound power has given the police liberty to enmesh themselves in illegal activities to a far greater extent, seen, for example, in the widespread (alleged) extortion of BNP members by the police force. In Pariganj, it is alleged that this increased role has also empowered the police to seek illicit sources of income, a prominent one being the extortion of drug dealers and wealthy people who buy drugs (the police are 'running around freely extorting people', as a senior local BNP leader there described it).

Institutionally our informants suggest that the politicisation of the police force can be seen in the background to police members, with officers increasingly recruited, it is alleged, from the Chhatra League, the student affiliate to the Awami League.⁵ There are, of course, many BNP- and Jamaat-leaning police officers in the force, but police sources describe them as having been given obscure postings, unimportant roles, or having become 'officers on special duty' (OSDs), meaning that they are paid, but have no day-to-day role, which is a relatively common fate for members of the bureaucracy not aligned to the ruling party. The BNP-aligned police members still serving were described as more often coming from the lower ranks – the constables, who lack considerable power to help the party. A second feature to this politicisation is the appointment of police officers to key roles who are not only aligned to the Awami League, but come from the prime minister's home district of Gopalganj. It is alleged that this is widespread in Dhaka (Jackman 2019b), and it also extends to one of our further research sites, situated close to that district. A senior BNP leader in the city described the situation:

⁵ It is useful here to make comparisons with a more extreme case of political dominance. In China, for example, it has been argued that the durability of the Chinese Communist Party has rested on the way in which state coercion has been managed. Central to this has been an increase in the 'cohesion' and 'scope' of the police, seen in the significant and privileged place that police chiefs play in the bureaucracy, and the increased reach that police have throughout society (Wang 2014: 14).

'Many of the OCs in different police stations in Pariganj are from Gopalganj, and many also held important posts in their student life in the Chhatra League. There was never before so many with these backgrounds posted in important positions. In Pariganj, the OCs, DC, judges in CMM [chief metropolitan magistrate] court are all from Gopalganj.'⁶

The increasing power of appointees directly from Gopalganj has permeated political discourse through jokes, such as:

'There is a story of the Chhatra League leader who is riding in a CNG, and he gets stopped by a police officer. He says "how dare you stop me, I am a Chhatra League leader". And the police officer replies "and I am from Gopalganj". The leader is silent.'

The implication is that the home district background of a police officer usurps the traditional informal authority of political leaders over lower-level echelons of the security agencies.

Formally it is clear that the police have also received increasing privileges and resources from the ruling party in recent years (Jackman 2019b). In budgetary terms, the police and other domestic security agencies have seen significant benefits. A World Bank public expenditure review report from 2015 estimated that over the preceding 10 years, the share of the budget allocated to 'public order and security' had remained largely stable (World Bank 2015: 18). More recent data suggests that this budget has, however, significantly increased. Analyses from the Centre for Policy Dialogue indicate that the share of budget allocated towards 'public order and security' has significantly increased since around 2014, with the actual share of budget typically being significantly greater than that predicted. Between 2013 and 2018, for example, the share of budget increased as follows: 5.1 to 5.6 to 5.8 to 6.6 to 6.5 percent, where it remained for 2016-2018. In the 2017 financial year, for example, the allocation for public order and security/safety increased by 54.5 percent from the previous year (CPD 2016), representing 6.2 percent of the total (although the actual spending was 6.5 percent). Of this increase, 45.1 percent was allocated to the police, with the intention – as indicated in the budget speech – of recruiting 50,000 new posts. While the share of budget allocated in 2018 decreased to 5.7 percent, actual spending remained stable at 6.5 percent, while increasing in actual size, due to overall expenditure increases.

Such budget increases have led to improved salaries and visibly better equipment, such as high-end police cars. One officer in charge (OC) of a local police station (*thana*) describes these changes:

⁶ Of the 24 OCs in Pariganj (there are 12 thana, 24 OCs (OC and OC-Investigation), eight of which are from Gopalganj (although note that there is a gopalganj population, given their proximity).

‘In the last 10 years, Sheikh Hassina has done a lot for the police. She has done a lot for everyone, but most for the police. She’s increased our salaries, increased our status. They have given many advantages to the police: our salary is now 50K, there are first class officers, we have better rations.’

More subtly, this growth in police power is portrayed as being a matter of how ‘honour’ and ‘respect’ are given, and of who listens to whom.⁷ Prior to the 2018 general election, there were reports that police were lobbying for greater resources and status in a proposal to the Home Ministry, labelled a ‘polls treat’ in one newspaper (The Daily Star 2018). The police were requesting additional positions at a number of senior levels (11 Grade I, 42 at Grade II, 46 at Grade III, 83 at Grade IIII and 313 at Grade V) (ibid). The report also notes that, months prior to the election, four additional inspector generals were promoted to ‘Grade I’ status; and the inspector general of police holds the rank of senior secretary, while the bureaucrat formally above him in the Home Ministry (the public security division secretary) holds a lower rank of secretary. Only a month after the 2018 general election, there was a mass distribution of medals to the police and RAB, with 349 ‘Bangladesh Police Medals’ (BPM) or ‘President Police Medals’ (PPM) awarded to police chiefs in all major cities, including all district chiefs and reportedly also those involved in election monitoring. This represents a steady increase in the distribution of prestige over the past five years, with, for example, 105 medals distributed in 2014, 182 in 2018, and 349 in early 2019 (The Daily Star 2019a). Furthermore, over 500 policemen were awarded the IGP (Inspector General of Police) Exemplary Good Services badge for services in 2018.

4.2. The police–MP nexus

Local political influence on the police can be felt most clearly through the relationships between MPs and district and *thana* police officers, particularly at the level of OC. It has been argued that MPs and operate as a ‘nexus’ (Ruud 2018) – interdependent, and with each advancing economic and political interests through the relationship. Across our sites it is claimed that OCs form an integral and crucial tool wielded by local politicians to assert authority and dominate local rivals. While such interdependencies may always have existed, it is again their intensity, and the extent of the political role that police play, which is felt to be distinct. There are widespread claims, for example, that police are now directly involved in engineering elections, as was allegedly the case in the two district cities studied in the last general election. To begin to understand this relationship, it is first important to recognise that MPs and more senior party leaders have considerable power to alter the careers of individual police officers. A senior district-level Awami League politician in one research site described this relationship:

⁷ There is also a perception that the social and educational background of the police has improved, with people of relatively high social standing now working there, in contrast to previous decades.

'The police officials of this district, like SP [district superintendent] and OC, have good relations with the MP. Whoever comes as OC and SP here, the MP has power over them. If a new MP comes, the existing police officials will be withdrawn. The OC, SP moves as per the desire of the MP. If MP thinks these officials would serve his purpose and do unethical works for him, he will bring them here. MP will manage the minister to make the transfer of his chosen police officers to the city. The MP convinces IGP [inspector general of police] to post certain police officials in this area. As MP brings the police officers here, so they remain bound to obey the MP.'

One mechanism for such transfers is to give a 'demand order' (DO), with an application by the MP to transfer a certain OC to a police station in their constituency. Prior to an election, for example, it is allegedly common for such manoeuvrings to take place, with loyal police officers stationed locally to support the campaign of the incumbent MP, moving on those felt to be disloyal or reluctant to play such a role. In one city studied, for example, of the 24 OCs (full OC and OC-investigation, the second in command) across the 12 *thana* in the city, three OCs were reportedly moved on prior to the 2014 election, partly because they were perceived as being unwilling to sufficiently support the AL. Ministers similarly arrange the transfer of OCs to constituencies to distribute patronage.⁸

A further crucial and connected factor shaping these relationships is the widespread need for police officers to make sizeable payments to receive a transfer or promotion to a position of greater authority, or in a desirable location. Despite its prevalence, this dynamic is only rarely and briefly recognised in analyses of state bureaucracy in Bangladesh. Kashem (2004), for example, notes the practice of payments to selection committees and senior management for positions within the police. Serving police officers described this as routine and ubiquitous, with one describing not only having paid a significant sum for his current position, but also having paid considerable sums to avoid being transferred to undesirable locations. A senior police officer described how one OC under his command had paid 60 lakh taka to a senior police official, 30 lakh to an MP and a further 5 lakh to the men around the MP to get his position. Some journalists claim that the figures are even higher, with up to 3 *crore taka* paid for becoming the OC in certain constituencies. One claim heard was that the incoming police superintendent in a district studied had paid 10 *crore taka* (approximately 1 million pounds) to receive the posting, which would have to be recouped when in power. Such a large figure is very likely an exaggeration, but the scale of such payments should not be underestimated. The fee paid is not uniform, because not all postings are equally lucrative. Transferring to a border city is, for example, particularly rewarding, as there is significant illicit trade, which the police, it

⁸ Whether such relationships form also depends on the character of politics conducted by local politicians, and it is important to recognise variation here. In Pariganj, for example, the AL mayor was described as not interfering to a great extent with the police, not, for example, requesting transfers of OCs. One reason for this was that his strength derived from doing 'populist' politics and not the 'muscle' politics associated with the then MP and his political rival.

is alleged, can play a hand in regulating and extracting black money from. Once in office, OCs can then be bound by loyalty to the MPs who have arranged their positions, knowing also that, were a new MP to come to power, they may be moved on, and lose access to the resources they can appropriate locally.

One effect of these dynamics is a political entrepreneurialism within the police, where officers are seeking status through the political machinery, beyond formal bureaucratic constraints. One OC investigation described his strategies to become the senior OC position in his *thana* in terms of his relationship to the local MP, whom he would be helping in the upcoming general election, while also claiming to be known personally to the prime minister. In addition to political loyalty, he described needing to pay 70 *lakh taka* for the position, and that others were 'bidding' for the position. The same officer described the businesses he had built locally since being in that position – brick fields, a car rental business – which he reported was common among police officers. He even claimed that many of the senior officers in the force had used the money they amass to buy homes abroad, in countries such as Malaysia and Canada. Whether true or not, he certainly believed it to be the case, and it shaped his aspirations for his current role.

This political entrepreneurialism within the police can also be seen in the way that officers portray themselves on social media, such as Facebook, with regular updates of their photos with local politicians, and the hauls of weapons or drugs they have seized. Institutionally and individually, police are then entrepreneurs, seeking to ingratiate themselves with political leaders in order to receive positive media coverage and be filmed maintaining law and order. Journalists even allege locally that the police pay more unscrupulous journalists to publish favourable news stories about themselves, published with the hope of attracting senior political attention (see also Ruud 2019). At the national level, there are claims that police officers are now seen doing the jobs of Awami League politicians, retelling the story of Bangabandhu, praising the prime minister, and explicitly advocating for the Awami League. Just prior to the election, an OC in Shatkira district, for example, was withdrawn after he publicly called for people to vote for the Awami League, and a video of this went viral. One effect of these relationships, as described by a senior officer, is that OCs can in instances have greater political authority than the police officers senior to them, having built up relationships with local politicians and ministers, thereby enabling them to usurp the bureaucratic hierarchy.

4.3. The opposition's catch 22: Illegal and weak

'When we don't bring out a procession, they say we are weak; when we do, they say we are subversive.'

Chhatra dal leader, Dhaka, February 2018.

The shift in character of coercive apparatus outlined above has brought sustained and intense pressure on the organisational capacities of the opposition party, which has eroded the strength of its networks, and challenged the morale and resolve of activists. Over the course of the Awami League's past terms in office, the state of the

BNP has dramatically declined, creating palpable dismay among members, with blame being cast on different factors and leaders, and almost disbelief that the party's condition has deteriorated to such a degree. A prominent leader in one research site, who has been a member of the party since its founding, lamented this:

'I can say the current government is illegal, it came to power without a real election. But the fact is that the government has successfully passed these years in office, and BNP couldn't do anything. One minister recently said we never took permission for holding a programme, and now we hear BNP complaining we sought permission and were denied. I'll tell you one thing. The people were supposed to support BNP for all the wrongs the AL is doing now, but they don't have confidence in BNP. The BNP neither have people's support, nor organisational capabilities. People feel they are deprived and oppressed by the regime, but how can they rely on a party that can't even protect itself?'

When the apparatus of the state remains broadly neutral in party political competition, as seen under at least some of the caretaker government elections (1990 and 2008, in particular), it is primarily the strength of political networks which is brought to bear. Each uses its respective muscle, finances, ideology and policy agenda to outdo its rival. With the apparatus of the state politicised to the degree it appears to be, the opposition simply cannot match the combined strength of the regime. One senior and elected BNP politician described it like this: 'We have no lack of activists. But BNP is vulnerable to the administration. We can't take arms against the police or against RAB or against BGB [Bangladesh border guards]. This is where BNP is weak'. The BNP loudly allege that the ruling party has used the police and security apparatus to repress their leaders and activists, and, across all our research sites, opposition party members described a raft of police cases levelled against them. A city and district committee BNP member in one site describes his experience:

'I have never had a single GD [general diary] against me in the police station. Today I am accused in seven cases. I am number 4 in the list of 175 terrorists that the local police have prepared, despite never even having a GD before. The cases are under Explosive Act, Police Act, and Public Safety Act. For conviction in any of these cases, I may have to serve 20 years in jail. I am a small worker, and this is my situation. Now think of those members who play important and brave roles. They have 25-30 cases. All of these are false cases. Now after the Eid, the government will launch crackdown on the terrorist, it means we have to flee, some of us will be arrested and heavily beaten up. You will be tortured. If you are lucky to have some reference, like I have a brother who is a [newspaper] editor, who can go and testify that I am good man and ask why they were harassing me, then I will be put into jail in order to save me.'

That there are 'fake' cases placed against opposition party activists cannot be seriously questioned, particularly when newspaper exposés reveal disabled, elderly and even dead party activists who have police cases of arson and other crimes against them. One explanation for what drives this, is that police are motivated by a strict system of targets, for how many BNP members they arrest in each area. The opposition claim that in each and every union and ward,⁹ the police are under instructions to capture a certain number of their activists (one figure cited was 50). For many members, this represents a significant burden and risk – it associates them with ordinary criminals, can cause a loss of social standing, and be a significant hardship. In a climate of extrajudicial killing and disappearances, this has created what one senior party leader described as a 'fear psychosis', where the limits of the possible have been pushed to the extreme, and the sense of risk for ordinary opposition members has expanded dramatically, making political mobilisation a significant risk.

At the same time, it is similarly unrealistic to claim that the government is making entirely unfounded accusations against the opposition. During the 2014 election period, the BNP's ability to wage *hartal* and close down major cities was reduced, and the party appeared to use their networks to orchestrate extreme acts of violence resembling acts of terror, such as widespread petrol bombings of buses and other vehicles (Jackman 2018b). Cases made during this period continue to be pursued now. Whatever one makes of the ruling party, these events contributed to a loss in moral authority of the opposition, and fuelled the Awami League's capacity to characterise the BNP as a party of violence, corruption and misrule. Since this period, the BNP have continued to mobilise violently to demonstrate their strength on the streets, and it seems only turned to an explicit strategy of non-violence through much of 2018 out of desperation, a need to conserve resources before the general election, and perhaps an attempt to claw back some moral authority.

One government strategy then – and a major advantage in using the security agencies to quell opposition – is the ability to claim that such cases reflect their efforts to maintain law and order. What this of course obscures is that a core skill in Bangladeshi politics is the ability to compete violently – and whether one uses the state or party infrastructure, the skill is the same. As the quote at the beginning of this section suggests, the political game to discredit the opposition is to appeal simultaneously to contrasting principles. When the BNP have launched processions, *hartal* and other forms of street protests, the government has appealed to the law, and been able to accuse them of subversion and illegal violent mobilisation for protesting without police authorisation, for bearing arms, for causing public damage. This has been used to justify the government responding with massive force – 'we announce a small programme and the government announce war', as a senior *Chhatra dal* leader described. At the same time, when the BNP fail to mobilise in this way, senior AL politicians ridicule them as weak for their inability to play the political

⁹ The lowest administrative units in rural and urban areas, respectively.

game, and they fail to convince the wider electorate that they can be a reliable and serious contender for political power.¹⁰

Under the cover of maintaining law and order, the opposition's organisational capacities have also been eroded through depleting the financial base of the party. Being in power brings widespread business opportunities, from access to illicit sources, such as protection rackets at the local level, to tenders, access to loans from government banks on favourable terms, and the freedom to pursue other business opportunities. The BNP have now been denied such privileges since 2006, reducing their capacity to fund activities. In addition, they claim police are increasing extorting their rank and file, and harassment is preventing them from running their businesses. As a leader in Dhaka described:

'When I am hiding, all of my businesses are shut down, I can't run them, I have a sand business, stone and bricks, sometimes I also sell land ..., When I am hiding, I can't do any of these things. It's not only about the land, but also about the other businesses, supplying stones or mud, if I can't regularly supply it, then why would they go with me, they will go with other people.'

Seeking favour among political elites, it is alleged that bureaucrats and the police find routes to hindering the businesses of BNP members. As a result, funding party activities has become a struggle, particularly with court cases, bail costs, police bribes and medical costs needing to be met across the country by the tens of thousands of BNP activists who have been arrested. These pressures mean that for the younger generation, joining the party is a relatively unattractive proposition compared to joining the Awami League, and many of the BNP politicians interviewed at the local level describe their party activists as aged and poor.¹¹

¹⁰ The BNP's weakness should not, of course, be entirely ascribed to the effects in a shift in coercive apparatus described here. The party's own strategies have also contributed to their weakness. The BNP's decision to boycott the 2014 general election, and the subsequent landslide AL victory, left the BNP having suffered a significant loss of face in the 2009 elections, and without a single MP following 2014. Had they run in the 2014 election, they may not have won, but it is plausible they would have gained a significant number of seats, enabling them to sustain organisational strength, hold some leverage over the administration, and appropriate some resources for their political infrastructure.

¹¹ Nationally, this weakened party infrastructure has been exacerbated by a lack of visible and strong leadership. The imprisonment of the party leader, Khaleda Zia, in early 2018, combined with the longstanding exile of her son, Tarique Rahman, created a quandary for the party, with no active figurehead available to visibly lead the party. Selection processes for MP candidates instead had to take place with Tarique Rahman via skype. Meanwhile, other senior leaders are, they describe, being approached by the government, offered lucrative business opportunities, tempting them to stand in the election (thereby winning some parliamentary seats and access to rents that go with it). In the run-up to the 2018 general election, the general secretary of the Awami League regularly praised a senior party leader, in what one could portray as an attempt to sow suspicion and division among elites of the party. This builds on previous breaks within the party, such as in 2008, when the BNP split factionally with the general secretary, and a number of the standing committee members formed a separate committee and approached the election commission to be recognised as the main BNP during the caretaker government. While seemingly unsuccessful to date in

A final way in which this shift in coercive apparatus is undermining the BNP is through eroding the cross-party safety nets on which activists and leaders typically rely locally. While the 1990s and 2000s were characterised at the national level by violent inter-party conflict, the intensity of this violence was not reflected locally in the district cities studied. In fact, respondents described a history of cordiality, 'mutual understanding', and even friendship and support between leaders across the parties. This is not to say that inter-party violence has not occurred or resulted in casualties in these cities, but rather that overriding this was a sense of agreement (see Maitrot and Jackman 2019) – for example, that control over illicit economies would be controlled by the ruling party, who, when it was the opposition's turn, would stand down and not attempt to impede them. This even extended to providing protection to opposition leaders when in power. There are a number of reasons for this. When there is the real expectation that your party will fall from power, maintaining such relationships can be seen as a sensible strategy to bring a degree of protection when out of office. These relationships also stem from the fact that such leaders and activists come from the same town or area, have grown up together, may have been schoolmates or have family ties, and that cross-party alliances are built as a way of gaining the upper hand in intra-party conflict.

The intense politicisation of the police has brought clear incentives to arrest and detain BNP members. In some cases, this makes it more lucrative for police to undermine local cross-party ties, and equally more risky for political leaders to attempt to sustain them. At one extreme, then, are cases where local informal cross-party relations have significantly eroded. A locally elected BNP leader in Dhaka, for example, described his positive relations with local AL leaders, but how they had become distant, and people had stopped socialising with him:

'Most of the SI [sub-inspectors] who are posted to Dhaka are controlled by the SP. Think if I was caught by the police before, maybe at the time some AL leader would come and tell them to free me, because we have a family relation, if he understands the environment is OK he may give some bribe to the SI, but now if the SI is looking for a promotion he will call the SP directly and say they have caught a BNP-Jamaat person, and there is an AL person here trying to free him and disturb it. If the case is like this, then the AL leader won't try to influence the SI to free the Jamaat person, because it becomes a negative and risky issue for him.'

The erosion of such cross-party ties is highly significant at the local level, reshaping local political culture to further polarise political camps, and undermining the social ties from which party politics has operated.

creating new splits, as the party's resolve is worn down from being out of power, the temptation and likelihood of such a split increases.

5. Conclusion

Political regimes build and depend on a coalition of actors to establish authority, exercise coercion and hinder threats. The way this is managed poses risks, creates trade-offs, and ultimately shapes the character of politics and governance in societies. Organisationally, different forms of coercion offer advantages and disadvantages. In Bangladesh, political parties are a complex mesh of different actors, within which power is diffuse, decentralised and the subject of regular and intense competition. Relying on such an organisation to control opposition poses a huge number of problems, not least that cross-party ties are a useful tool in intra-party competition, which can create organisational tensions and inconsistencies. The type of coercion that a party is capable of is, furthermore, at the more blunt end of the spectrum. By contrast, state security agencies, if they can be sufficiently persuaded and influenced, offer a more centralised and professional organisation, with a richer array of coercive tools at their disposal. The use of state agencies offers the further potential advantage that their activities can be framed as maintaining law and order, and therefore appeal to ideal notions of governance.

Within the context of Bangladesh's own political history, the key characteristic of the current coercive apparatus is that the regime has managed to build strong domestic security agencies, alongside both a strong party, and an acquiescent military. Arguably, this combination has not hitherto been seen, particularly during a period of (at least ostensibly) parliamentary democracy. In terms of the extent to which, and ways in which, domestic security agencies are being used politically, it is also difficult not to draw comparisons to the early 1970s. This reconfiguration introduces two important dynamics to the country's political life. First, it suggests that domestic security agencies are now a major political player and, indeed, in current political discourse, there is much chatter about the new swagger of the police. The opposition – and many commentators – portray this as a dependency that will need to be sustained, as negotiations over resources around the 2018 general election seem to suggest. A more extreme perspective from one BNP activist is this: 'The Awami League are feeding a crocodile and hoping it doesn't bite them'.

Second, this raises a possible tension between this form of political authority, and the established party base. Through 2018 and since, there have been signs that the party chief is keen to tidy up the more criminal elements and practices within the party and state. With longer time horizons, the state of the nation is more obviously the result of the ruling party's actions. Examples of misrule and corruption cannot so easily be deflected, can threaten the moral authority of the government, and potentially motivate street movements (Jackman 2019b). It is here that the party itself represents a liability, with widespread criminality and violence deeply embedded in the dominant modes of governance and the practice of politics. A flagrant example of this has been the involvement of political leaders and activists (and police) in the drugs trade, which has been the focus of a controversial 'war on drugs', in which there have allegedly been hundreds of extrajudicial killings. There are signs of an even more ambitious agenda, with post-election calls for a 'war on corruption'. This

raises the possibility of tension within and between the bureaucracy and party, and may also expose weaknesses in the capacity of party elites in their attempts to bring such change. There have been widespread reports – heard also during this fieldwork – that the war on drugs has in practice served locally as a means of factional conflict, with political leaders manipulating lists of suspects, leading to the persecution of political rivals, with potentially deadly consequences. Such efforts can also lead to direct confrontation between the state and party, as seen in early 2019 in Narayanganj, with the feud between an infamous Awami League MP and local police chief.

More broadly, a central question for observers of Bangladesh is the degree and nature of contemporary political competition. Khan (2017) argues that Bangladesh has become a ‘vulnerable authoritarian coalition’, characterised by strong excluded coalitions relative to the ruling coalition, but weak internal factions relative to the leadership. His analysis questions the extent to which such a coalition can persist, arguing that changes ‘probably’ do not ‘reflect a real change in the latent power underlying political networks in the country’ (ibid: 29), and that therefore such networks may mobilise in new or unforeseen ways, threatening the legitimacy and stability of the Awami League.¹² The ‘latent power’ underlying networks is very difficult to gauge, although it is now very clear that the organisational capacity of the BNP to mobilise seriously on the streets is almost entirely defunct. The extent to which the party can attract new younger recruits after almost 15 years out of power, and established leaders can bear the police cases and pressure this brings, should be seriously questioned. This then directs our attention back to the crucial task of managing the capacity for coercion within the ruling coalition in the years to come. A task for future research is to understand this in the context of key emerging challenges, such as sustaining economic growth, and the pervasive question of party succession.

¹² Hassan and Nazneen (2017) have similarly speculated that, in the absence of meaningful political opposition, more extreme ideologically motivated groups may gain traction and threaten the country’s political stability.

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