Allies among Enemies: Political authority and party (dis)loyalty in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The authority of political leaders in Bangladesh rests on diverse qualities, not least of which are the muscle and finance they can mobilize, and the relationships they can craft with senior party members. These are utilized to confront rivals both within and outside their own party. In some instances, the intensity of intra-party competition can be so severe that a further quality emerges: the capacity to find allies among enemies. Building local inter-party alliances can bolster the authority of politicians, yet be to the detriment of party coherence. This argument is developed through an analysis of mayoral and parliamentary elections held in the past decade in a small Bangladeshi city, where a ruling party member of parliament (MP) and opposition mayor appear to have developed such a relationship. This has thwarted the electoral ambitions of their fellow party members and has posed a serious challenge to party discipline. While political competition is often seen as being either inter- or intra-party, here it is focused around inter-party alliances. This portrayal suggests we need to give greater emphasis to the decentralized and local character that political authority can take in Bangladesh.

Introduction

In 2017 television channels and newspapers in Bangladesh broadcast images of a striking scene: a politician from the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) bending down to touch the feet of the prime minister in a sign of respect. The scene was notable for a number of

reasons. For years the BNP had been alleging widespread intimidation, election rigging, false police cases, and even the disappearance and extrajudicial killing of a number of their activists at the hands of the government. The politician furthermore was not a lowly leader but one of the seniormost elected opposition figures in the country, who was being inaugurated for a second term as mayor of a city. From the perspective of BNP members, then, here was one of their key leaders showing public deference to their rival, while their own party chief Khaleda Zia was facing court cases and likely conviction. Locally, in the politician's constituency, some members of the party later spoke of 'repercussions from top to bottom of the party' for the act, and were dismayed at what struck them as disloyalty. What also makes the scene remarkable—as the smiling prime minister patted the politician on the back and read the inauguration oath—is that a major reason the mayor had been elected was because one of the Awami League's own politicians had plotted behind the party's back to enable his election.

This article tells the story behind this scene to examine a central theme in political analysis from South Asia and beyond: the character of political authority. Recent literature has illuminated the criminal and coercive character this often takes in the region,[1] where political 'bosses' resemble 'godfathers' and rely on intimidation, violence, and patronage for their careers, built from a base of a muscular cadre. At the same time, political leaders must also look within the party hierarchy, crafting relationships with party seniors to progress their careers. When conceptualizing how these skills are deployed, it is common to identify two forms of political competition—that between rival parties (inter-party) and that between party rivals (intra-party or factionalism). The central argument developed in this article is that a local political leader can also have a further important skill at play: the capacity to find allies among enemies. Intra-party rivalries can be so severe that they encourage personal local alliances across parties, which can

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[1] See Anastasia Piliavsky (ed.), *Patronage as politics in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Milan Vaishnav, *When crime pays: money and muscle in Indian politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); David Jackman, 'The decline of gangsters and politicisation of violence in urban Bangladesh', *Development and Change*, vol. 50, no. 5, 2018, pp. 1214–1238; D. Jackman, 'Violent intermediaries and political order in Bangladesh', *European Journal of Development Research*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2018, pp. 705–723; and Lucia Michelutti, Ashraf Hoque, Nicolas Martin, David Picherit, Paul Rollier, Arild Engelsen Ruud and Clarinda Still, *Mafia raj: the rule of bosses in South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

undermine a party's wider political ambitions, but bolster the authority of the politicians who build them. This argument is developed through the case of a small Bangladeshi city, anonymized here as 'Dalipur',[2] which has a sitting mayor from the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and a local member of parliament (MP) from the ruling Awami League (AL). While nationally these parties are at loggerheads, locally these figures have developed an informal alliance, which functions to the personal benefit of both, enabling them to dominate party rivals, but hindering each party's wider local electoral ambitions.

The case also has significance for understanding Bangladesh's current political landscape, casting light on the character of political authority on a wider level. Nationally, the ruling Awami League has steadily consolidated power over state and society during the past decade, increasingly deploying security agencies to scupper opposition and taking a firm stance on the more flagrantly criminal elements within the party and associated bodies such as the youth (*jubo*) and student (*chattra*) wings.[3] The party chief of the BNP was imprisoned from February 2018 until recently, its leaders face a barrage of police cases, and the party's rank-and-file are largely cowed and disillusioned. All of this indicates a highly centralized political machine. By contrast, the case here illuminates a more decentralized arrangement, where local authority can sit at a distance, but not detached, from Dhaka's interests. Local politicians seek patronage and blessing from the higher echelons of their parties, yet, equally, with a consolidated base, they can find leverage close to the top of the party and manipulate local events to thwart the interests of their party chiefs.

The primary fieldwork on which this article is based was conducted by the authors in Dalipur in June 2018. Research included 25 interviews with local politicians and activists from both parties, journalists, businessmen, and members of the local police force, which were between one and three hours' long. Alongside this we conducted a number of informal interviews with local residents (transport workers, labourers, small business owners) and participant observation of political events,

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[2] Note that the names of politicians in 'Dalipur' have also been anonymized.

[3] Affiliate and auxiliary organizations to the BNP and Awami League are associated with the terms '*dal*' (group) and 'league' respectively. Hence the BNP's student wing is the Chattra Dal (Bangladesh Jatiobadi Chattra Dal) and its youth league, the Jubo Dal, and the Awami League's equivalents are the Chattra League (Bangladesh Chattra League) and the Jubo League.

including *iftar* parties.[4] Findings from this were then developed and verified iteratively through, first, informal phone conversations with key informants; second, a series of further interviews with informants after the 2018 general election (conducted by a research assistant); and third, a review of relevant media sources. The article proceeds as follows: the next section frames our analysis through literature on political authority in South Asia, before our case material examines political rivalries in Dalipur, elections in the city between 2008–2018, and cross-party alliances.

Cultivating political authority in South Asia

Much recent literature from South Asia has highlighted the profound disjuncture between normative visions of democratic politics and how it unfolds in practice, demonstrating that violence, criminality, and patronage are integral to the functioning of democracy on the ground.[5] With this has come a new academic vocabulary, with terms such as 'goonda', 'mafia', 'bosses', and 'godfather' increasingly used to denote the prevalence of muscular and criminal forms of politics in the region.[6] This responds in part to the political vernacular on the sub-continent, where many such terms are commonly used, as well as to a perception that the region's politics is becoming increasingly criminalized. By one estimate, for example, 34 per cent of elected parliamentarians in India's Lok Sabha faced criminal charges as of 2014, of which 21 per cent were 'serious' (relating to murder or kidnapping, for example). This is a sizeable increase from 2004 when 24 per cent faced cases, of which 12 per cent were 'serious'.[7]

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[4] *Iftar* is the daily meal with which Muslims end their fast during Ramadan.

[5] See Pamela Price and A. E. Ruud (eds), *Power and influence in India: bosses, lords and captains* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010); Piliavsky (ed.), *Patronage as politics*; Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Eva Gerharz, 'Spaces of violence in South Asian democracies: citizenship, nationalist exclusion, and the (il)legitimate use of force', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 45, 2017, pp. 613–638; Vaishnav, *When crime pays*; Jackman, 'The decline of gangsters'; Jackman, 'Violent intermediaries'; Bart Klem and Bert Suykens, 'The politics of order and disturbance: public authority, sovereignty, and violent contestation in South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3, pp. 753–783; and Michelutti et al., *Mafia raj*.

[6] See Piliavsky (ed.), *Patronage as politics;* Jackman, 'The decline of gangsters'; Michelutti et al., *Mafia raj*; and Klem and Suykens, 'The politics of order and disturbance'.

[7] See Vaishnav, *When crime pays*. While such a shift appears real, it has also been recognized that muscle is nothing new to the region's politics, with *goondas* (criminals, thugs, gangsters), for example, long identified in both urban politics and crime.

A central concern of this literature is the character of political authority. This is portrayed as coercive, criminal, and also heavily localized—with leaders 'sovereign' within their respective territories—relying on a muscular cadre and the distribution of patronage, which they must carefully manage to sustain.[8] Hence, political leaders deploy thugs and gangsters, they 'create a crowd'[9] to show strength, and embody this in their own comportment. This is a skill honed in 'performances' through which people build reputations and which is also sustained and embedded within wider practices of patronage and group mobilization. On the ground, leaders engage in widespread criminal practices such as extortion and racketeering as a routine part of political life,[10] understood within a moral framework where corruption is less to do with legality and more with the failure to fulfil personalistic obligations.[11] Such dynamics also routinely intersect closely with labour politics.[12] In Bangladesh this politics has been symbolized by, at the lower level, a concern with gangsters and a violent cadre in politics,[13] and, at a higher level, with the 'godfather' profiles of political bosses, typically MPs.[14] While not all senior politicians warrant such a label, to write of 'godfather politics' alludes to the muscular character that politics in this context often has.

The authority of such political godfathers is not, however, constituted solely through their capacity to mobilize local muscle and finance, but also through their relationship to the political centre, with parties simultaneously appearing heavily centralized, and this connection

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Although the popularity of particular vocabulary may be new, the style of politics may be less so. See Jackman, 'The decline of gangsters'.

[8] In particular, see Klem and Suykens, 'The politics of order and disturbance'; Michelutti et al., *Mafia raj*; and A. E. Ruud, 'The mohol: the hidden power structure of Bangladesh local politics', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2020, pp. 173–192.

[9] A. E. Ruud, 'To create a crowd: students leaders in Dhaka', in *Power and influence in India*, (eds) Price and Ruud, pp. 70–95.

[10] Nicolas Martin and Lucia Michelutti, 'Protection rackets and party machines: comparative ethnographies of "mafia raj" in North India', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2017, pp. 693–723.

[11] Piliavsky (ed.), *Patronage as politics*, p. 169.

[12] Jackman, 'Violent intermediaries', and Julian Kuttig, 'Labour power and bossing: local leadership formation and the party-state in "middle" Bangladesh', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2020, pp. 193–214.

[13] Ruud, 'To create a crowd'; A. E. Ruud, 'The political bully in Bangladesh', in *Patronage as politics*, (ed.) Piliavsky, pp. 303–325; Jackman, 'The decline of gangsters'.

[14] A. E. Ruud, 'The Osman dynasty: the making and unmaking of a political family', *Studies in Indian Politics*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, pp. 209–224.

having a significant bearing on the fortunes of political leaders.[15] Put simply, political 'bosses'[16] look up to bigger bosses. The 'art of bossing'[17] is thus one where political leaders navigate different fields, seeking to both solidify their base and cultivate relationships with senior party members and, ultimately, the party chief. One means by which a politician's worth is measured is through their capacity not only to confront rivals in opposite parties, but also rivals within their own party.[18] Engaging in intra-party conflict (often termed factionalism, 'grouping', or *daladali* in a Bengali context) is a means of building authority within a party, essential to dominate rivals physically, and serves a 'signalling' function to party seniors that you merit attention as an up-and-coming leader.[19] It is thus a crucial aspect to building political authority within one's locality, as well as with the 'high command',[20] and enables a leader to build connections with senior party officials who have power over political appointments.

A key space in which these skills are tested are elections to public office. Rather than primarily channelling the ideological preferences of voters, elections are more fundamentally institutions through which the strength of leaders, factions, and coalitions is demonstrated.[21] In the run-up to parliamentary elections, contenders deploy the art of 'muscle' politics, mobilizing their followers in shows of force, engaging in clashes with rivals, issuing electoral promises, and distributing resources to influence voters. A crucial task for parties is to select the right local candidate. The precise qualities sought vary, in part according to the party's strategy. However, factional conflict is useful to discern the leader with the greatest support base and aptitude. The build-up to elections is hence often highly fractious, with political 'bosses' looking

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Michelutti et al., *Mafia raj.*

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ruud, 'To create a crowd'; Bert Suykens, '"A hundred per cent good man cannot do politics": violent self-sacrifice, student authority, and party-state integration in Bangladesh', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2018, pp. 883–916; Jackman, 'Violent intermediaries'; Nicolas Martin, 'Corruption and factionalism in contemporary Punjab: an ethnographic account from rural Malwa', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2018, pp. 942–970; and Julian Kuttig, 'Urban political machines and student politics in "middle" Bangladesh: violent party labor in Rajshahi city', *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2019, pp. 403–418.

[19] Suykens, '"A hundred per cent good man"', p. 901.

[20] Ruud, 'To create a crowd', p. 95.

[21] Mushtaq Khan, 'Bangladesh: partitions, nationalisms, and legacies for state-building', SOAS University of London Working Paper, 2010.

above and below in the hierarchy in their attempts to build and sustain their authority.

Elections then are windows into both the character of local politics, as well as an overarching politics where parties attempt to reconcile the interests between the political centre and the periphery. As such, they can thereby reveal where the power lies within broader party hierarchies. In the context of Bangladesh, for example, there is a common perception that power resides firmly in the hands of party chiefs and those closely connected to them. Studies, however, reveal a more complex picture, where leaders close to the top respond readily to inducements, pressure from below can significantly shape party decisions, and official party candidates are usurped by others. At the lower echelons of the party, such as aspiring student leaders in Rajshahi, the allocation of student posts appears to be administered in a more-or-less top-down manner, albeit shaped by the mediation of local political bosses.[22] Wider studies directly contest a vision of power as centralized within political parties, arguing that this view needs to be moderated by an appreciation of the influence that clientelist relations and local leaders have on party decisions.[23] One example of this is when intra-party factionalism has a highly detrimental impact on party resources and stability, even undermining official candidates, contrary to the expressed wishes of the party chief.[24] The case below develops this line of argument to highlight how local politicians can contradict and clandestinely undermine wider party interests, going so far as to build local cross-party alliances.

Dynasties and rivalries in 'Dalipur' city

Dalipur is a small Bangladeshi city close to the Indian border that was upgraded in status from 'municipality' to 'city corporation' in 2011, elevating its political representative from a municipality chairman to city mayor. In parliament, it was traditionally a stronghold of the opposition BNP, only won by the Awami League in 1973 and then not again until in 2008, after which it has remained in power. Despite the

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[22] Kuttig, 'Urban political machines'.

[23] Adeeba Aziz Khan, 'Power, patronage and the candidate nomination process: observations from Bangladesh', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2020, pp. 314–336, and Ruud, 'The mohol'.

[24] Ruud, 'The Osman dynasty'.

hold that the Awami League has had on the nation's politics throughout this period, Dalipur was one of seven city corporations that elected non-Awami League mayors in 2012/2013.[25] The mayor of a city corporation is a much-coveted position, bringing significant authority, power over budgets and tenders, and, in the case of the opposition, providing a lifeline to the party locally.[26] Hence it has national political significance. An opposition win can be a sign to the wider electorate that the incumbent has lost public support and be a source of momentum for the opposition in national politics. There is a long history of this. In early 1994, for example, during the final stages of the BNP's term in office, the Awami League won electoral victories in the Dhaka and Chittagong municipal elections, which, it has been argued, were an indictment of the BNP's public policies and galvanized the opposition.[27] In 2012/2013 the BNP enjoyed significant success in mayoral elections, enabled in part by a relatively 'free and fair' electoral environment, although this failed to translate into electoral success in the 2014 general election, which the party boycotted. As of 2020, Dalipur is one of only two city corporations controlled by the BNP.

Across Dalipur, politicians, journalists, and the police describe the city's political life in consistent and simple terms: political loyalties are divided into four primary groups (*dal*), with two supporting each party. Within the Awami League, the groups are led by an aged political leader Shamsul Mollah and by the current MP for the city's constituency (Dalipur-six) Abdul Haque. On the BNP's side, the groups are built around the current mayor Majid Nasim and the current secretary of the district BNP committee and MP candidate Nabil Uddin. Each of these leaders has extensive support in the city, commanding networks within their parties' respective affiliate organizations and commanding considerable vote banks. All have also had serious criminal charges and public allegations levelled against them, including murder, attempted murder,

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[25] There are currently 12 city corporations in Bangladesh. Of the seven to elect a non-Awami League mayor in this period, most supported the BNP, one was from the Jatiya Party, and another a 'rebel' Awami League candidate.

[26] Although city corporation status, along with wider fiscal changes, have brought increased budgets for public works, city corporations are still heavily controlled by central governments for many of their activities such as recruitment, taxation, and planning. See Pranab Panday, *Reforming urban governance in Bangladesh: the city corporation* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[27] Stanley Kochanek, 'The rise of interest politics in Bangladesh', *Asian Survey*, vol. 36, no. 7, 1996, p. 707.

and corruption. The city's recent political history, our interlocutors said, could be understood through the competition and alliances between these four groups. This section therefore introduces these figures, sketching their political careers and local reputations.

Shamsul Mollah is an Awami League stalwart in the region, having been a Chhatra League leader before liberation, vice-president of a prestigious local college, and a freedom fighter, who enjoys close ties to the Sheikh family.[28] He claims to have had a key role in establishing the Awami League in the region, maintains that Bangabandhu requested his attendance when he travelled to the area, and describes how Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stayed in his home when touring the district. Although never an MP, he was twice general secretary of the party's Dalipur district committee, an elected position, as well as a Upazila chairman, and at the time of research, the 14-party alliance spokesperson in the district.[29] Mollah portrays himself as a local philanthropist, having established and patronized a number of mosques and over 15 educational institutes in the area, many of which are named after the Sheikh family. The founding stone for one, named after Bangabandhu's wife, Sheikh Fazilatunnessa Mujib, was laid by the prime minister herself. Although the figurehead of this group, he is also elderly and more recently it has been his eldest child Nasreen Ayesha Ahmed and eldest son Mostafa Mollah who have contested the mayoral and parliamentary elections respectively. Mollah has also accompanied the prime minister on trade and diplomatic trips abroad. While a distinguished leader to some, to his detractors he has a criminal image who is associated with land grabbing from Hindu families, corruption, oppression, violence, and murder in factional party disputes. Some opposition activists described him as tarnished by the fact that one of his close relatives was killed in 'crossfire' with the Rapid Action Batallion (RAB), thereby associating him with criminality, and that he himself is no better than infamous terrorists, the only difference being that he is educated.

Abdul Haque MP, meanwhile, is a former municipality chairman who stood unsuccessfully as a parliamentary candidate in the early 1990s and 2000s. He is famed for bringing the city under Awami League control

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[28] The Sheikh family is a political dynasty at the helm of the Awami League. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (known as 'Bangabandhu', friend of Bengal), the country's first leader post-independence, is considered the 'father of the nation'. The current prime minister Sheikh Hasina is his daughter, and a number of wider family members are MPs.

[29] The 14-party group is a political alliance led by the AL.

from 2008 and having broad appeal across the city. Shamsul Mollah described him as having been a lower ranking follower of his after independence, who joined him when he set up Chhatra League committees in the area. However, Haque broke away from his leadership and emerged as a rival, beating him in a municipal chairman election in the 1980s. To his supporters Haque is renowned for caring for his activists, providing them with whatever they need. His time in office over the past decade is, however, tarnished by a long list of criminal accusations that have been informally made against him. These include that he grabs land, has extorted businesses (including a prominent local sweet brand), requires a cut of local land deals, informally receives 35 *lakh taka* a month from the local export processing zone (with prominent jute and garment residuals sectors), and, perhaps most controversially, that he protects local drug traders. Many informants maintained that the MP has formed a 'syndicate' with the police to shelter drug smugglers from India, from which they all profit. Even prior to gaining power, he was accused of involvement in a murder case by the caretaker government, and many wonder how he has accumulated the wealth he seems to have in recent years. His rivals also allege that he has donated money to schools aligned to BNP-Jamaat, has appointed a new public prosecutor with a Jamaat background, and is distant from the people, rarely visiting the houses of party workers.

On the BNP's side, the current city mayor Majid Nasim's political lineage comes through his father, a prominent Muslim League leader, and also his cousin, the decorated freedom fighter Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) Sayeed Hossain. Sayeed, as he is commonly referred to, was vice-president of the United People's Party (UPP) early on in his career, a party founded in the early 1970s that was part of Zia Rahman's political alliance.[30] He was then elected five times as an MP for the BNP and served as the minister for energy and mineral resources, environment and forest, and shipping. The BNP's popularity in Dalipur was attributed largely to Sayeed and his dominance over local politics. One of Sayeed's strengths locally was his appeal across religious communities: he did not engage in communal politics and was close to prominent Hindu leaders who had influence over the sizeable minority vote in the city. Nasim was a loyal follower of Sayeed, and was involved

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[30] Zia Rahman was the founder of the opposition BNP.

with the Chhatra Dal from the late 1970s, then the Jubo Dal as district leader, before becoming the first elected municipality chairman in 2006.

During much of this period the BNP in Dalipur city was broadly united under Sayeed's command. Two factors changed this, however: Sayeed's death in 2006 and the emergence of a caretaker government in the same year which launched corruption charges against Nasim, forcing him to go into hiding.[31] One Awami League rival alleged that 'The last caretaker government made a list of 52 most corrupt people across the country, and Nasim was third.' With Nasim in hiding, and without Sayeed's authority to hold the party together, new leaders emerged, most notably Nabil Uddin. He had previously run elsewhere as an MP candidate, but in the city had only been the convenor of a *thana* committee.[32] Nabil, the last of the protagonists introduced here, is a prominent local industrialist, a significant investor in the jute industry, and a central committee member. He is someone who 'doesn't do politics, politics is just his business. He is not a political figure', as a rival put it. For politicians on both sides of the party divide, his primary quality is his financial clout. In Nasim's absence (as the mayor himself described it), Nabil became prominent and now dominates local BNP committees.

These men and their supporters dominate local politics, making it difficult for political candidates to emerge outside of these four groups. The character of the competition between these groups is often violent. As one leader said: 'I have everything to resist chaos. I have licensed arms as a freedom fighter, if anyone comes to do anything to us, I have an arrangement to deal with that. If you have this [pointing his finger as if a gun], no-one will dare to do anything.' Another leader described a readiness to fight if needed, that his rivals know he won't give up ground if a clash breaks out. The violence varies in form and severity. During fieldwork (conducted primarily during Ramadan) *iftar* parties were being disturbed, with their platforms and seating arrangements vandalized by rival groups as a show of force. A clash in the city centre broke out between the two BNP factions over the distribution of posts in the city's Chhatra Dal committee (on which none of Nasim's men was given a post) and rival Chhatra League groups similarly clashed,

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[31] Nasim previously also had to go into hiding during part of the Ershad regime, after he was implicated in a murder case.

[32] A *thana* is a local police station or the administrative area under the authority of a police station.

leading to injuries and police arrests. More notably, there had been a recent murder of a Chhatra League leader aligned with the MP, with those accused including the sons of Shamsul Mollah, in a case they reject as a conspiracy. Similarly, there was a long history of conflict between the BNP factions involving affiliate groups such as the Jubo Dal (the BNP's youth wing), in which pistols and rifles were a common sight. It is thus against a backdrop of political dynasties, rival groups, and violence that we turn to examine the politics of elections in the city.

A brokered and broken agreement

The degree of intra-party competition between these rival groups has shaped local politics in a way that threatens to undermine both parties' electoral ambitions, while arguably promoting the personal interests of leaders in office. To understand this we can trace how these rivalries influenced recent mayoral and parliamentary elections. The competition between the Awami League's Mollah and Haque was so significant throughout the 1990s and early 2000s that the late BNP MP and former minister Sayeed reportedly publicly declared that he had two workers in Dalipur: Mollah and Haque—in other words, their rivalry did the BNP's job for them, enabling the BNP to dominate local politics.

In the run-up to the 2008 general election, therefore, this rivalry was mediated by a current senior minister in the party chief's office, in the hope of bringing stability to the local party. The agreement was that Haque would be made the Awami League's candidate for MP in the 2008 election, and that Mollah would be the AL's mayoral candidate. As Mollah described it: 'The party chief said to me, "BNP wins the election every time. This time help Haque become MP, and next time I shall provide for you."' The objective sought, then, was a local balance between the contending groups. Mollah agreed to follow the plan and supported Haque, who beat the BNP's candidate Nabil by a margin of over 20,000 votes. Shortly after winning the election, however, it is claimed that Haque was aggressive towards his party rival, spoiling and disrupting the many education institutes his family owned. Despite the agreement, Shamsul Mollah and his family failed to win any locally elected position in either the parliamentary (2014 and 2018) or mayoral (2012 and 2017) elections.

Mayor Nasim was first elected as chairman of Dalipur municipality in 2006 during the BNP's last term in office.[33] The election was non-partisan,

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[33] This was before Dalipur received city corporation status in 2011.

so rather than compete with the BNP's sheaf-of-paddy electoral symbol, he instead used that of a duck, with his Awami League opponent competing with a pineapple symbol. Although undeniably popular, even members of Nasim's group agree that the election was rigged, as one described: 'When Nasim was first elected mayor I personally sealed 186 votes. We were in power. This is the electoral system of our country. Before the election, we also gave voters TK1000 and made them swear upon the Quran holding it that they would vote for us.' When the caretaker government came into power, Nasim was suspended and went into hiding for 22 months, before returning and fighting his case in the Supreme Court. It was perhaps partly with such events in mind that the 2012 Dalipur election was the first in the country in which all voters used electronic voting machines (EVMs). This, along with the significant presence of security agencies, meant that voting conditions were widely viewed as comparatively 'free and fair', despite a number of arrests on grounds of electoral bribery and alleged intimidation in the run-up to the day.

The use of EVMs followed a trial in a number of voting centres for the Narayanganj city corporation in 2011 when a 'rebel' Awami League candidate Selina Hayat Ivy beat the Awami League-backed Shamim Osman. Dalipur saw an even worse loss for the Awami League, with Shamsul Mollah losing by a considerable margin to the BNP's Nasim. Why the Awami League decided to arrange the election in this way is an open question, with some locals speculating that they wanted to demonstrate their popularity on the basis of the development works they had instituted. Activists aligned to Shamsul Mollah accused Haque of failing to campaign for him, sending a message to his followers that Mollah did not have his support. For Mollah's rivals, however, it was his own fault and the result of his criminal image.

In response to this loss, Shamsul Mollah's family decided to compete in the 2014 parliamentary election, but failed to receive the party nomination, with it going to the incumbent MP Haque instead. In a pattern similar to one seen across the country, the eldest son Mostafa stood as an independent candidate, becoming an Awami League 'renegade' or 'rebel'.[34] The family, however, lost again, with Mostafa

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[34] In 2014 'renegade' candidates were common and, in fact, many beat the officially selected 14 party alliance candidate. In Dalipur-three and Dalipur-four, for example, independent candidates beat the Jatiya Party candidates who had been allocated the seat as part of its alliance with the Awami League.

officially registering over 38,000 votes to Haque's 59,000. It was widely alleged (by journalists, Awami League rivals, and BNP politicians) that Haque had rigged the election. BNP leaders maintained that Haque, realizing he was losing to Mostafa, went directly into the field himself and led the rigging. In Mostafa's own words:

Basically the real result was different. The intelligence agencies congratulated me for the win, as I was ahead of the incumbent MP by 15 thousand votes, but the result was altered when it was declared. There was someone very powerful who did that. While the then DC [District Commissioner] for Dalipur was transferred he disclosed to my father that actually I won the election and that it was because of an adviser to the Prime Minister that I lost. But we could not say much about it as our party is in government.

Afterwards, Mostafa went to the Supreme Court with the intention of filing a case, but he said that he was convinced not to by the then home minister. Although a 'rebel', Mostafa claimed that this did not bring any negative consequences from the party after the loss.

The 2017 mayoral race

Following successive defeats for the Shamsul Mollah family, daughter Ayesha was given the Awami League ticket for the 2017 mayoral election. The perception locally was that Sheikh Hasina had a soft spot for Ayesha, who had previously served as acting mayor when the city was a municipality and was vice-president of the Awami League Dalipur city unit. In giving her the ticket, the intention was to stop the rivalry and provide a balance between competing groups within the party. Once again, however, the Shamsul Mollah dynasty failed, with the BNP's incumbent mayor Nasim winning, despite reports of ballot stuffing by Awami League cadres. It was again widely claimed that their intra-party rival Haque was behind this loss. In fact, his rivals argue, he has a long history of this. As Mostafa described it:

Haque always go against Awami League candidates in every election in Dalipur city. He is responsible for Awami League defeat of all the elections in Dalipur, he ran in the national election as independent candidate, and helped BNP to win. He doesn't actually belong to AL.[35]

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[35] Previous electoral boundaries had meant that much of the southern part of the city was incorporated into a different constituency, Dalipur-eight, and it was this district for

While denied by Haque's followers, locally it is firmly felt that Haque had been actively manoeuvring against Ayesha in the mayoral election. Prior to the election, there were signs that the senior party leadership was making a significant effort to ensure an Awami League victory. Politically, this was a crucial year prior to the general election, and a loss would signal weakness and give momentum to the BNP's attempts to destabilize the government and lead a mass movement to topple them. As has been common, the police arrested a significant number of local BNP activists in the run-up to the vote, often, the opposition allege, on trumped up charges. The allegation is that despite being directly instructed by the party chief to support her campaign, Haque was instead inactive. A close follower of Mayor Nasim described the consequences:

> In any election here, if the MP remains quiet, BNP wins. In the election, Haque didn't help Nasim directly, he just didn't act, he was indifferent. And that made the victory of Nasim possible. Awami League had deployed all its wings to ensure the victory in the election, but that failed. Now the party chief realized that there is no benefit being angry. Haque was totally inactive during the election, this is why Awami League candidate lost.

Others, however, claim that Haque went further: he played the election, frustrated that a candidate he had supported was not given the party ticket and keen not to see the power of his rival grow. With the intention of resolving the intra-party conflict, the Awami League had used its extensive resources to bring about a victory for the party. Haque was given the responsibility of working in the south of the city, which is his electoral base. In practice, he failed to campaign, with some claiming his men even instructed locals to vote for the BNP. Mayor Nasim hence won more votes than expected on this side of the city. In the north, meanwhile, a prominent minister with close connections to the city had been given the responsibility of managing the campaign. He assured Ayesha that he would make sure she won, and hence she invested less time there. It is alleged, however, that Haque arranged for the border guards to mobilize in that part of the city to ensure that the victory was 'free and fair' and that the Awami League could not manipulate the

which Sayeed had been MP. In the 2001 general election Haque ran as an independent against the official Awami League candidate, dividing the Awami League vote, leading to victory—with a very significant margin—for Sayeed. As a result, he was reportedly expelled from the Awami League for a number of years, even becoming an Awami League MP without being a member of the Awami League.

vote. Journalists interviewed one figure who alleged that Haque paid the guards three *crore taka*, while also instructing the media to attend to that side of the city, ensuring that the fairness at the polling booths was maintained and thereby preventing the Awami League from manipulating the vote in this BNP-leaning constituency. A previous mayoral candidate described the 2017 election as follows: 'The party asked Haque to work for the party nominee, but he secretly supported Nasim, now that is open. Everyone knows it. The party wanted to control him, but couldn't. He told the party that he was supporting the party candidate, but he did the exact opposite.'

A second facet to how the election unfolded as it did is the wider relationships with senior party figures that local politicians have to cultivate. These figures are important insofar as they can influence key party decisions. Such relationships are often instrumental in receiving party nominations, but they can also be used to sway the appointment of local party committees and extend one's power base in other ways. Potential nominees and elected politicians build such relationships throughout their careers, becoming aligned to particular figures. One source of weakness, then, for the Shamsul Mollah dynasty is their relative lack of success compared to Haque in maintaining such ties. The Shamsul Mollah family is now aligned closely to a former mid-ranking minister; meanwhile, Haque has managed to maintain a relationship with a more senior and current minister.

Journalists and Haque's rivals claim that, although the personal attachments behind such relationships are important, more fundamentally they are managed financially, with Haque relying on the black money that he has accumulated while in office. A common claim heard about this election was that Haque had used his ties to pay off the senior party officials (a party organizing secretary and joint general secretary) sent to help Ayesha. This, informants allege, also helps to explain how he was able to control the subsequent Awami League committee announced in the city, with the figure of three *crore taka* again circulating in terms of the sums involved. Mostafa described this as follows:

It's wrong to say that the central committee people were sent here to help my sister win the city corporation election, because it was totally a game. They didn't even let me work for my sister's election … The MP [Haque] was supposed to be expelled from the party for his role during that election, but in fact he was given control to form the city committee just after. The people who were sent by the high command helped the committee to pass. But if they had conveyed the right report to the party chief, would she have made him president of the city committee knowing his role in the election?

In the aftermath of the mayoral election, there is a sense that the central party's attitude towards Haque shifted. According to local journalists, Haque was on the list of a hundred MPs to whom the party was likely not to give the party nomination again. However, through managing his senior party connections, Haque now has absolute dominance in forming committees in Dalipur and was re-elected again in the 2018 general election. The allocation of positions on committees can be a way for senior party officials to manage local factionalism, placating those who have lost out elsewhere. The suggestion here, however, is that through influencing senior party figures, the opposite has happened, with well-established leaders being neglected. A follower of Mayor Nasim described it like this:

In the past, Sheikh Hasina didn't like Haque for the 'grouping'. Now he has proven that he has power. So she's left him to do everything. Sheikh Hasina tried to control the 'grouping' but it didn't work. Instead of demotion, now he is rewarded. He is everything in the city now.

The perspective from the losing faction is that Shamsul Mollah has been involved in Awami League politics since Bangabandhu's time and remained committed even after his assassination in 1975. Having been imprisoned and part of the Liberation struggle, he has made significant sacrifices for the party and yet he has not been given 'the chair' and therefore has not received his fair recompense. It is furthermore claimed that when the question of who would be the next 'district administrator' was raised and Shamsul Mollah was proposed because he had yet to receive any position, Haque was able to persuade senior Awami League leaders, through his senior minister contact, to allocate the position elsewhere. Locals described the party high command thinking that if Haque was not given the charge of forming committees, there would be chaos, so it would be better to support the side which has the strength.

A not-so-secret alliance

A highly controversial sub-plot to the factional rivalry within both the Awami League and BNP locally in Dalipur—and one that helps explain the strength of Haque and weakness of Shamsul Mollah—is the relationship that has formed between the BNP mayor and local Awami League MP. It was often described as an 'open secret' that there has been cooperation between the two. Despite the mayor formally

outranking the MP and local top police officials, in practice the hierarchy is reversed, with the latter having 'no obligation to obey me', as the mayor put it. It was widely mentioned that the MP and mayor are so close that they call each other 'brother', with the MP seeing the mayor as his younger brother, and the mayor referring to the MP as his elder brother. Others referred to it as an '*apni*' and '*tumi*' relationship.[36] Images are spread locally through Facebook of the two together; at the time of research, one photo in circulation showed them hugging each other in public, both smiling. When they attend events together some people claim the onlookers are confused as to who belongs to which party.[37]

The precise nature of this relationship is debated and disputed locally, and the subject of much discussion and conjecture. Some described it as an 'alliance', others a 'mutual understanding'. One BNP politician aligned to Nasim described it as 'a subtle understanding for personal benefits'. There are, broadly speaking, two narratives locally for this relationship, one positive and the other negative. The first narrative is that the relationship is a pragmatic necessity to ensure that both figures can work for the public good. Loyalists to Nasim remembered the conflict between the BNP and AL after the mayor was first elected in 2012, and maintained that an understanding developed from this as a means to secure local peace. Mayor Nasim describes the relationship:

If I quarrel with the MP and minister, I'll go to jail, and I won't be able to work for the people who elected me. This won't benefit people. So I won't tell a lie, I try to make an understanding with the MP and minister. I twice talked with the chairperson of my party, who told me to keep working, she said 'I was prime minister three times, I know how to run office.' Because of this understanding with the MP, and the minister, I got works of TK400 crore. If my party was in

power, I would have got more, but whatever I get now, I have to work with that for the people. As I made this understanding I get some cooperation from them, otherwise they won't give me works. I also do some works for the DC, SP [Police Superintendent], administrative officials, which is not my duty, still I do for the sake of the 'understanding'.

As a representative of the local government, he submits proposals to the Ministry for Local Government and Rural Development, who forward it to the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC), a body which recently allocated 84 *crore taka* to the city. The administrative process, however, requires political authorization and without the support of the MP, the claim is that the allocation of the funds would be blocked. For some of his supporters, then, the relationship is portrayed less in terms of them as individuals, and more as a relationship between two positions of formal authority. It was an arrangement to 'keep his chair', a necessary step to avoid being put in jail, as has been the fate of other elected BNP mayors elsewhere in Bangladesh. It is also a political necessity for both men to ensure their popularity and to fulfil their political mandate to their constituents. Some local supporters go so far as to depict the relationship as a mature political compromise, an example of cooperation that is exemplary in Bangladesh, which if followed elsewhere, would bring a harmony to the nation's politics. Not only is this important for the mayor, but also for the MP who needs to deliver benefits locally. As it is local government that receives the funding, were they not to get the work, the lack of local visible development could lessen the MP's popularity.

Mayor Nasim, however, claims the relationship brings him little political benefit, citing how the RAB recently ransacked his entire house and arrested his two brothers. Despite their understanding, no Awami League leader came to their aid. Others aligned to him similarly described the relationship as being of little benefit to the mayor. For example, although there is cooperation, Haque leaves no space for the BNP to mobilize or develop their agenda locally. As one party member described it:

We can't hold rallies. We have asked permission to hold a rally in the town many times but were denied for everyone. The Mayor has a relation with the police, but the relationship has no worth because the police are ultimately controlled by the MP. Getting clearance from the MP is important for police permission. Police are the government's servant, the control of the administration is in hands of the government, and the MP is the government representative, so the

administration can't do anything bypassing the MP in the system that we have. The system has become even worse in the last ten years.

A second, and contrasting, local narrative of this relationship portrays both in a rather more negative light, however. This raises allegations of widespread corruption, personal gain, and factional rifts in both parties, supporting the story told above about how Haque undermines his Awami League rivals. From this perspective, the relationship is central to the Haque–Shamsul Mollah rivalry and part of how the MP has undermined rivals within his party. The most common refrain heard across the city from political insiders discussing the relationship between Haque and Nasim is '60/40', often said bluntly as if nothing more needs to be said. This refers to the division of resources the two allegedly appropriate through their elected positions, with 60 per cent going to the 'big brother' and 40 per cent to the 'little brother'. This relates primarily to their ability to distribute public works tenders, some of which are funded by international donors, but allegedly also involves extortion rackets and other forms of black money outlined earlier. A well-established BNP leader not aligned to Nasim nuanced the 60/40 arrangement:

One hundred per cent of tenders are distributed illegally in Dalipur. Even the allotment of a shop is one hundred per cent illegal. It is distributed like this: the MP will take 35 per cent of the works, the 36 councilors of the city corporation take 35 per cent, and the remaining 30 per cent goes to the Mayor. Then they sell these to X, Y, Z, taking 12–15 per cent commission, no less than 10 per cent. Now if I get a work of TK1 crore, then first thing I have to do is give them TK12 lakh.

One alleged outcome of such practices is that poor quality inputs are used in the process, to maximize profit and manage the payments required to receive the contract. Local businesspeople interviewed were scornful of the development seen in Dalipur, which they perceived as minimal compared to that in comparable cities.[38] They described public works being undertaken without a serious plan and, in some cases, being done

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[38] A local businessman, and previous Awami League leader aligned to the Shamsul Mollah faction, described contracts for public works going to BNP contractors: 'Suppose, 100 tender are given, the MP will take 60 of those, the mayor rest 40. Awami League workers are deprived. The MP sells these 60 works he gets to the BNP men. If you take me there, I can show you that BNP men are working every project. I was a class-1 contractor. But for the last ten years I have no work. For ten year! How can I afford to maintain my family?'

twice. For some, the lack of development seen in Dalipur is an indication of the mayor's corruption and inefficiency. For his supporters, any lack of development is due instead to the government creating obstacles to their public works and neglecting the city because the mayor is from the BNP.

In line with this second narrative is the claim that the relationship enables Nasim to offer a degree of protection to his BNP followers, despite the party's status at the national level. At a time of widespread repression, this is a rare commodity. In the run-up to the 2017 mayoral election, for example, a number of Nasim's followers who were arrested were later released after he reportedly requested the MP to intervene with the police on his behalf. In such instances, the MP is seen to oblige in order to keep the mayor beholden to him. This cross-party arrangement has exacerbated the factional divides within the BNP locally, creating a resource stream for some and not for others, and has led to claims that the mayor's faction is serving their own personal interests at the expense of the party's. A BNP city and district committee member not aligned to Nasim described it as follows:

> We don't even get the smallest support from the mayor. BNP gets no privileges from him. He has been elected with the symbol of BNP, but actually he serves the interests of the MP. He's a coward. He doesn't have that mental strength to go against the government as a worker of BNP. That's why he's doing business, maintaining a liaison with the ruling party, and sharing works with them.

Some even claim he purposefully downplays his BNP identity by underusing the party's symbol during events. A local journalist described that when Nasim was first elected as mayor, the two groups from the BNP united for processions and events in the city. When the MP saw that, he made 'arrangements' with Nasim. Now, when Nasim has a procession, the police simply follow it, but when the other faction holds a procession, police baton-charge them. A district and city committee BNP member not aligned to Nasim described this:

> The benefit of the negotiation for the MP is that he has been able to intimidate us considerably. Nasim's men are informing the MP what we are doing at the field level. They are also suggesting whose names should be to put on the list of the accused in the cases, and who should be harassed by the police.

During the 2017 mayoral election, supporters of Nabil (Nasim's BNP rival) claimed that in fact they had worked constructively on the mayor's side to help him win, partly to show that at a national level the BNP could defeat the Awami League under free and fair conditions. After the election, however, the mayor claimed they had actually mobilized for the Awami

League. The intention behind this, they explained, was that if the Nabil group was acknowledged as helping, that relationship would cost the mayor a considerable share of the public works. This would have reduced his income and that of his group and weakened him relative to his BNP rivals. The claim was therefore a strategy to create a distance between the BNP factions. Similar to the allegations levelled against Haque, Nasim's detractors allege that it was only through amassing illicit money and paying off party seniors that he managed to win the nomination again. Despite being able to offer his followers some protection, this puts Mayor Nasim at odds with his wider party.

With the BNP failing in the elections in which they do compete, and boycotting many others, the party is represented by very few elected politicians. Meanwhile, leaders across the party rank-and-file are allegedly being tortured and falsely accused in criminal cases. To have a leader and his group enjoying relative safety, while also seeming to compromise the party, is a source of significant resentment. This was exacerbated by Nasim's decision to bow down to the prime minister and touch her feet as a sign of respect (as is common with elders in a South Asian context) at his inauguration ceremony in 2017. Photos showing the prime minister smiling and patting him on the shoulder were widely shared. Even a close follower disagreed with this:

There will be repercussion from top to bottom in our party for this. He can exchange greeting at best, but he can't bow publicly, being the chief of a body. You know none of the other mayors from BNP have done this. They have many cases, they are away from office for a long time, but here he can sit in his chair.

Whether it is a direct result of this or not, the fact is that Nasim has managed to stay out of prison, whereas many of his fellow BNP mayors have spent years of their tenure jailed or too intimidated to attend their office.

Conclusion

The authority of political leaders in Bangladesh and wider South Asia is increasingly portrayed as coercive and criminal in character, with such dynamics understood as constitutive of, rather than contrary to, democracy and wider political life.[39] Crucially, politicians are seen as

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[39] Vaishnav, *When crime pays*; Michelutti et al., *Mafia raj.*

existing and competing, through patron-client networks, where they operate vertically within parties: upwards to senior leaders and downwards to their base.[40] This article in part corroborates and builds on this work to explore where power is located in such hierarchies. The case study of Dalipur is complex. On the one hand, our analysis highlights the importance for local politicians of cultivating relationships with senior party members. There are allegations in Dalipur, which are widely believed locally, that it is only thanks to such ties that the ruling Awami League MP managed to cling to power in the 2014 election. Such relationships have to be carefully cultivated, are fragile, easily disrupted, and seemingly swayed by money. In the run-up to the 2018 parliamentary elections, Mostafa, the son of the Mollah dynasty, described looking for a senior party figure who could help him win the ticket, and how he contemplated selling all his share of the family land to be able to afford it. While ultimately unsuccessful in his ambition to receive the party ticket, his family did receive some reward when Ayesha, the eldest child, was allocated one of the 50 MP seats reserved for women, which is likely to have been an attempt to placate this losing faction of the Awami League in Dalipur.

More controversially, however, the case of Dalipur contests the view that power is heavily centralized within such networks, in this regard tallying with other recent work from Bangladesh.[41] The argument developed here is that a surprising source of authority for local politicians can be found in undermining their own party. Deeply pragmatic local leaders can build informal arrangements with their opposition to damage the authority and prospects of their party rivals, a dynamic we dub finding 'allies among enemies'. In our case, this alliance serves both the mayor and the MP in different ways. By virtue of his status, the mayor has greater access to resources for public development works than the MP, despite being a member of the opposition. It is an open secret in Dalipur that the mayor and MP share these resources, enabling a degree of personal enrichment and the power to distribute resources to their followers. Were an Awami League mayor to be elected, this resource stream would be likely to dry up for the MP and directed towards a competing Awami League faction. With a BNP mayor in power, however, the MP has leverage and can play the role of gatekeeper to the police and government, thereby

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[40] Price and Ruud (eds), *Power and influence in India*; Piliavsky (ed.), *Patronage as politics*.
[41] Ruud, 'The mohol'.

maintaining the mayor's dependency on him. For the BNP mayor, the prospect of a local BNP MP would further diminish his strength within the local party, where his supporters are already excluded from the city and other local party committees, despite him being in office. For both the mayor and MP, then, cross party alliances appear to represent a preferred outcome to supporting their fellow party members in other local elections.

Ultimately, this argument also indicates that there are significant explanatory limits to understanding local political life through the prism of vertical, party-based patron-client networks, and it offers an important contribution to wider literature on the region. In Dalipur, it is partly by usurping the wishes of the central party that political authority manifests in its decentralized form. This suggests that the authority and careers of local politicians in Bangladesh—as is likely to be the case across wider South Asia—need to be read not only in terms of how they operate vertically within their own party network, but also the extent to which they look outside of their parties for sources of support and strength. The shape political competition takes here is not simply within or between parties, but crucially between inter-party alliances. On the other side of this divide, Mostafa spoke in similarly positive terms of his relationship to the BNP mayor's own party rival Nabil, and how it would be useful in his positioning for the then forthcoming election. Transcending party boundaries in this manner can thus enable complex games, in which politicians achieve leverage over both intra-party rivals and the interests of senior party figures, enabling them to manoeuvre for status.

Contextually, these dynamics must be read against the backdrop of the Awami League's attempts to dominate the country's politics and diminish the organizational strength of the BNP. Intra-party conflict can be a useful means by which party seniors judge the relative strength of contending groups within the party, enabling them to best decide who to allocate the party ticket to. When unable to discipline such competition, however, it can foster party weakness. Our case suggests an inability of the party chief to discipline the MP, given his control locally, while also highlighting the fickleness of senior party officials around the prime minister.[42] Counter-intuitively, in Bangladesh these dynamics may in

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[42] In emphasizing the weight of local politicians in determining these elections, these arguments mirror the wider literature from Bangladesh that is concerned with

fact also be a means by which the ruling party can achieve hegemony and the opposition, a slither of power. A prominent Awami League leader in the city reflected: 'can BNP come to power through their programs? No. So for them it's better to have a share than run political activities. And it's also good for the Awami League to control them by giving them a share of the money. If the Awami League don't give them this, BNP won't come under their control.' Nationally, it may well be through accepting and even cultivating such local compromises that the Awami League can contain opposition in the longer term, while also offering the BNP a route to maintaining a minimal party infrastructure: as a local BNP leader described Mayor Nasim: 'something is better than nothing. It is better to have a blind uncle, than no uncle at all.'[43]

decentralization. It has demonstrated how the character of governance, services, and developmental outcomes differ dramatically across the country as a result of particular local social and political arrangements. See Jean-Paul Faguet, 'Transformation from below in Bangladesh: decentralization, local governance, and systemic change', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 51, no. 6, 2017, pp. 1668–1694.

[43] A Bengali proverb.