THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Protests at the Phulbari and Rampal coal mine

Shelley Feldman¹

Introduction

Bangladesh has become an icon of dramatic economic growth and is also recognized for having made “the greatest progress in human development indicators in recent decades” (UNDP 2010). Moving up the development hierarchy of countries, from a low to a lower-middle income country, has often been associated with increasing democracy as a form of rule and participation. The promise of increasing democratization, accompanied by good governance, is assumed to help steer market-led development reforms. These twin goals of development and democracy have inspired Bangladeshi elite for many years, even as key indicators of their success highlight the neocolonial or dependent character of the country’s political economy. These aspirations are fuelled by a desire for the country to continue on “its journey to upper middle-income status, in close cooperation with the government, stakeholders, and development partners,” where development partners include continuing support and dependence on bi- and multilateral assistance that contributes to shaping development policy (e.g. World Bank 2020). Yet, governance in recent decades is characterized by a rise in autocratic practices which raises these critical questions: Can the country realize the promise of strengthened democratic rule while also achieving sustained economic growth with the support of donors and development partners? Or, with indications of democratic backsliding, is a rise in autocratic practices a more likely long-term consequence? The discussion below focuses on answering these critical questions.

Rounaq Jahan (2020) and Ali Riaz (2020), two eminent political scientists of Bangladesh, draw attention to old and new challenges to democracy, the rise of autocratic practices, and the making of one-party rule. Like other political scientists, they highlight the economic and institutional correlates of a process of democratic decline across world communities (Lührmann et al. 2018, 2019; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Cassani and Tomini 2020). They focus on these correlates to explain failures in electoral politics and the rise of one-party rule, or on challenges to democratic rule, such as declines in the rule of law and freedom of individual expression and social media (Riaz 2019). While this approach reveals the processes entailed in the consolidation of executive power and the challenges this poses for parliament and the judiciary, it gives far less attention to practices of governance and everyday practices of rule, including securing rights to democratic engagement such as exercising demands

for recognition and for government accountability, including through protest and popular mobilization.

In this chapter, I draw attention to state practices involving large-scale infrastructural development as sites where challenges to demands for democratic participation expose the (re)making of state–society relations. Attention to the practices through which state–society relations are constituted thus offers a window on the declines in democracy and processes of legitimation that secure or enforce rule. I argue that current government interventions in the form of large-scale rural infrastructural development projects increasingly override or elide consideration of democratic participation, in particular, popular representation and demands for accountability. I focus, by way of example, on the protests that have risen in opposition to development projects promoting coal extraction, which are often elided in decisions about policy choices to expand opportunities for economic growth and where far too little attention is paid to how land will be acquired, compensation paid, and livelihoods ensured. I argue that by repressing popular mobilization and protest, the government has decentred civil society from its role as central to democratic practice. In highlighting protests at sites of investments in coal extraction, a central feature of the current government's development strategy, I expose the contradiction between the adoption of a neoliberal growth strategy and participatory democracy.

The discussion is organized as follows: I first situate decisions about the country's development trajectory in relation to its aspiration to move up the development hierarchy of countries. I follow with a brief comment on civil society and its contradictory relation to democratic practices before turning to a discussion of the energy sector and the construction at coal extraction sites. Here I emphasize issues raised by the protest movements, including environmental degradation, land grabbing, corruption, and transformations in everyday soci-ality. Finally, I turn attention to the government's response to these protests that has marked a decline in democratic participation and decision making. Available secondary evidence for this discussion comes from two resource extraction sites: Phulbari, Dinajpur and Rampal, Khulna, the latter adjacent to the Sundarbans (Gardner et al. 2012; Ahasan and Gardner 2016; Chowdhury 2016; Faruque 2018; Chowdhury 2016, 2017; Mahmud, Roth and Warner 2020; Misra and Mookerjee 2017). These sites are two among a number of coalfired power plants under construction which garner support from the government, often in concert with support from China and India (Gallagher et al. 2021) but, distinctive about the Phulbari and Rampal sites is the ongoing opposition they have faced, offering a window on contestation between local communities and the government.

Eclipsing democracy and the rise of autocratic rule

By the dawn of the twenty-first century, the fragility of the country's democracy had become increasingly evident, especially after the military-backed Caretaker Government that ruled Bangladesh from 2007 to 2008. Riaz (2020) views the period between 1990 and 2009 as one of semi-authoritarianism where democracy is being eroded and power is being concentrated in the hands of the executive. Such monopolization indicates that rather than a replacement of the executive, such as is common in coups, backsliding in Bangladesh is more akin to processes where there is a weakening of checks on executive power and a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of an opposition to challenge executive preferences. Under Sheikh Hasina, it has entailed a process that consolidated executive power by defying the procedural norms of liberal democracy. Under her rule, this was made especially evident when she removed the system of a caretaker government and the strategic manipulation of the electoral process in favour of incumbents. This change was accomplished by ignoring the “objections

of the members of civil society and opposition political parties,” effectively undermining the efficacy of elections and undercutting institutions of accountability, as well as opportunities for voice and representation (Riaz 2020: 9).

Mass mobilization against autocratic rule is not new in Bangladesh. Opposition politics has often been characterized by popular protest, including *hartals*, which could bring the country to a standstill, and also by the pro-democracy alliance that led to the ouster of the Ershad regime – the second military regime to hold power in the country since 1977 – and ushered in democratic elections. Such mobilization and resistance continued to characterize the conflict between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) under electoral democracy, first through hartals, confrontation, and violence, and, subsequently, through house arrest and the crippling of parliament and other democratic institutions. As I suggest below, the BNP and the AL have fought for leadership since 1991 even as they broadly share policy priorities and, to some extent, policy practices.

Popular protest also marked the 2013 Shahbag movement seeking the death penalty for those sentenced and convicted of crimes committed during the independence-war in 1971. This initially peaceful struggle for justice for the events of 1971 has been recognized as a watershed moment representing grassroots mobilization against the country’s continuing corruption and dysfunctional political culture, exposing the tension between recognition of Bangladesh as a secular state and a religious backlash that led to government repression of the unrest which ensued. Repression also framed the spontaneous protests of students in Dhaka that emerged following the death of two children by a speeding bus that brought Dhaka to a standstill. Not only was the protest met with tear gas and rubber bullets, with police injuring more than forty, and arresting mostly the young for protesting against institutional corruption, but the demand for accountability in how licences were issued or road safety insured was not addressed. A number of journalists, including the renowned photographer Shahidul Alam, were also charged or detained. Defined as an embarrassment, the government blocked internet services so as to inhibit further mobilization (BBC 2018). This led to an international response, including calls to stop the government’s “violent crackdown” on “overwhelmingly peaceful student protesters” that signal the place of repressive tactics in securing rule, even under the guise of electoral democracy.

Moreover, Sheikh Hasina’s reelection in both 2014 and 2018 was boycotted by the major opposition party, the BNP. Defining her “landslide victory” as neither free nor fair (Feldman 2015; Riaz 2020) further undercut trust in the electoral process and confirmed allegations of creeping authoritarianism, given the silencing of political rivals as an emblematic feature of democratic backsliding. Regrettably, what began in 1991 as a political environment which sought to uphold the five principles of democratic rule: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian is, instead, characterized as an electoral autocracy (Jahan 2020; Mechova, Lührmann, and Lindberg 2017; Riaz 2020). Further, contributing to AL’s loss of credibility and the institutionalization of one-party rule is the erosion of civil and political rights, including the failure to adjudicate crimes against civil rights activists, secular bloggers, and political protesters. She has, for example, negotiated with those who sought the death penalty for bloggers and wanted school textbooks to remove secular and Hindu references. In other instances, however, she has employed repressive measures such as directing security forces to detain opposition leaders without judicial due process, and, in still other instances, has failed to investigate and adjudicate those who murdered writers and bloggers who wrote on “controversial freethinking or atheistic topics,” or on LGBT issues (BBC 2016; Hussain 2017; Saez 2018). In these cases, balancing democratic governance with her political interests and economic policies has led to a backsliding on democratic principles, with contradictory effects for her legitimacy.

Aspiring economic growth and inclusion in the global economy

While framing Bangladesh's economic growth in terms of its desire to continue its journey to upper middle-income status is relatively new, demands for improving the country's performance in the global economy have long been part of the conditionalities of the WB, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Asian Development Bank, and other International Financial Institutions (IFI). These demands have been accompanied by the promise of a neo-liberal development strategy that offered both greater economic prosperity and the potential of a "third wave" of democracy. Accordingly, achieving the promises of development and democracy has entailed opening the economy to export-led growth supported by structural adjustment conditionalities set by the WB and the IMF, that would support new forms of participation in circuits of bi- and multilateral lending, capital investment strategies, and integration into the global economy.

New and expanded investments from China, however, have changed the aid landscape which increasingly showcases large-scale infrastructure development (Sarkar 2014). As Hussain (2019) argues, China's one-belt-one-road strategy resembles "a grandiose globalized version of the US Marshall Plan," and all that is implied by the influence sought by China's commitment in the region. While relations with China have long been a feature of South Asian engagement, especially regarding their interest in Chattogram, the location of Bangladesh's major port and the Bay of Bengal, current relations sustain interest in "Bangladesh's unique geo-political position" which bridges South and Southeast Asia via a modern Silk Road that is marked by trans-Asian highways and railways (Mannan 2019: 55). This commitment, coupled with the growing demand for energy, has led China, as well as India, to become leaders in a "new international energy order," each investing heavily in Bangladesh (Mannan 2019) where Chinese investments focus on large bridge and infrastructure projects, export processing zones (EPZs), special economic zones (SEZs), and coal extraction.

To be sure, since the mid-1970s, the World Bank has occupied a central position in the dissemination of development knowledge and practice and, along with the IMF, has been instrumental, not only in shaping the contours of the Bangladesh economy, but also in shaping relations with the NGO community. NGOs, for their part, began in rehabilitation efforts following the 1971 war and as a resource of rural mobilization. By the later 1970s, however, opportunities for NGO collaboration with bi- and multilateral aid agencies institutionalized their development role, thereby transforming a significant proportion of the sector from civil society institutions concerned with mobilization and conscientization, as well as processes of democratization, to institutions offering services and resources that acted increasingly as parastatals (World Bank 2013). This means, for example, that an increasing number of NGOs offer microcredit (Grameen Bank) and primary village education (BRAC) to support or contribute to government institutions already in operation in contrast to those which promote conscientization and advocate for justice and rights as a voice of civil society. Recognizing the multiple roles played by NGOs reveals how the institutionalization of NGOs alters state-civil society relations.

Such changing state-civil society relationships have created new subjectivities by reconstituting the liberal subject as primarily wage earners and small-scale entrepreneurs who are increasingly dependent on individualized credit, thereby transforming rural production relations that included wage labour, but, also, in-kind exchanges, sharecropping arrangements, and relations of subsistence production. In rural areas, this shift has been enabled by the dramatic expansion of NGOs that provide resources and services and are to be distinguished from those that work with and represent civil society and advocate for change. In urban areas, the dramatic increase

in export production has similarly contributed to creating new subjectivities, particularly of women, by providing employment for millions, while contributing to the country's sustained growth rate through participation in the country's export regime.

An export-led development strategy has been embraced by both military and democratic regimes, including various forms of one-party, oligarchic rule. In the transition from import substitution to export-led growth, for example, the policies of both Zia Rahman (1977–1981) and Mohammad Ershad (1982–1990) responded similarly to the structural adjustment requirements of the Bretton Woods institutions, including Ershad's adoption of a New Industrial Policy (NIP) which attempted to “restore macroeconomic balance and improve prospects for the emerging private sector” (Quadir 2000: 208). As Naomi Hossain (2017) reminds us, international donors had been pressing the government to deregulate and privatize the economy for some time, and the military governments were receptive to this challenge. Between 1972 and 1982, such reforms largely responded to internal and short-term exogenous economic shocks. But, since that time, the reform process sought to “change the entire direction of the economy towards a private enterprise dominated market economy” (Sobhan 1993: 925). Each regime stabilized its military rule with large-scale rural development projects, decentralization strategies, and an increased role for NGOs that contributed to building a political network through the distribution of resources and patronage (Quadir 2000: 197). As Shamsul Haque (2002: 414) argues, each regime was able “to coopt and use large NGOs as substitutes for opposition political parties.” Consequently, the country's NGO elite have operated as a distinct section of the national elite who, alongside bureaucratic and political elites and a network of industrial and corporate capital, intersect with international capital that is reputed to be characterized by widespread corruption and competitive clientelism (Lorch 2018).

Neoliberalism or democracy: a contradictory relation?

The deepening crisis of the Ershad regime was felt especially by intellectuals and students who were central to the 1990 mobilization which brought military rule to an end. The election which followed in 1991, under Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, chief justice of the Supreme Court, was described as “free and fair” by local nongovernment and foreign observers alike. But this election result revealed the growing consolidation of the elite who, according to Talukdar Maniruzzaman (1992: 217–218), by benefiting from foreign aid during previous regimes secured its place as “a new class of beneficiaries, consisting of private intermediaries who acted as commission agents, both legally and illegally, for foreign suppliers of goods and services financed by the aid.” As Maniruzzaman continues, aid helped

industrialists who borrowed money from aid-financed DFLs or who ran their factories on foreign exchange provided as commodity or as program aid to finance recurring imports [and] helped construction contractors on aided projects and local consultants working under various aid-financed programs of technical assistance.

This class also benefited from a policy of patrimonialism and crony capitalism (Feldman and Geisler 2011) that included “the massive transfer of public wealth to private hands” (Maniruzzaman 1992: 218). These relations, coupled with relatively inexperienced political and administrative personnel, failed to provide the basis for long-term democratic rule, even as it held the promise of doing so.

Khaleda Zia's coming to power in 1991 had support from some segments of this emergent elite and further aided in promoting the neoliberal development agenda by simplifying the regulatory role of government agencies. In the words of Fahimul Quadir (2000: 206), Zia assumed "a promotional rather than regulatory role in facilitating the development of the private sector," a commitment that corresponded to pressure from the donor community. Moreover, the Policy Framework Paper (PFP) negotiated between the IMF and the Government of Bangladesh in 1990 continued through the first democratic BNP government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia who made efforts to remove remaining "barriers to the development of a liberal-capital model" and further the programme of economic liberalization as a vehicle to consolidate the ruling elite. This was accomplished by allowing "business elites to use economic restructuring as the primary tool to attain their financial and economic objectives" (Quadir 2000: 208).

Sheik Hasina also endorsed the PFP and the Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF), acknowledging that there has been little difference between the economic policies of the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Sheik Hasina, however, was "said to be concerned about their political image [and] ... reportedly told the Fund that advanced publicity about the negotiation of a possible ESAF arrangement would be politically damaging" (note 24, p. 225, note 35). Such ambivalence reveals that a political environment characterized by extreme polarization, requires balancing a program of economic liberalization with the challenges of democratic governance. While this balance has been a concern of prior governments, each has sought to create legitimacy differently. How did Sheikh Hasina balance economic liberalization, on the one hand, with governance, on the other hand? The balance she chose seems to have tipped in favour of economic growth over democracy in order to facilitate the country's shift from aid-focused policy to an investment-oriented strategy that largely corresponds to efforts to move the country up the development hierarchy. It is also a strategy that is best accomplished through public-private partnerships in infrastructure investment (Amin 2016). From a policy perspective, this has entailed support for free trade and limited government intervention and the development of infrastructure, including roads, highways, and transportation, as well as support for the energy sector and a dramatic increase in the number of SEZs to attract investment.

I now turn to examine Sheikh Hasina's relation to the energy sector in the resource extraction areas of Phulbari and Rampal, two sites of ongoing mobilization against the construction of open-pit coal mining. At these sites, protest against the siting and extension of these large-scale development projects has faced repression and other forms of state intervention that limit freedom of speech and assembly, including extra-legal practices that expose a governance strategy that is increasingly autocratic.

The energy sector

As the cases of the Phulbari and Rampal energy projects will show, development goals, along with increased domestic energy demands, led to prioritizing energy production over democratic participation in decisions made in the energy sector. Under military rule, the WB and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) began their support of the energy sector through production-sharing contracts (PSCs) with multinational oil companies (Muhammad 2014). During the first democratically elected BNP government PSCs were signed with gas companies that include Chevron, Santos, Cairn Energy, and Shell. These energy deals were struck when the country's need for electricity was evident and daily load-shedding had a direct effect on productivity that threatened the country's export sector, prompted an uproar among the urban middle classes, and challenged

popular support for the government. In 1996, the National Energy Policy (NEP) recognized the urgency of ensuring proper exploration, production, distribution, and the rational use of energy sources. It also acknowledged the rapid changes in global, as well as domestic conditions. Since then, they have prioritized energy diversification of available indigenous commercial energy resources where coal is assumed to play an expanding role in providing the country's future energy needs. More recently, the International Trade Administration offered advice to US and international businesses indicating that the Bangladesh government plans to increase power generation beyond expected demand to propel growth in the export-oriented economy and meet the needs of a growing middle class. The plan calls for raising US \$70 billion in total investments in the sector over the next 15 years (Bangladesh Trade Guide 2020).

Increased domestic demand for energy, coupled with pressure from the donor community, have thus helped to secure policy reforms adopted by the government via the PSCs (Muhammad 2006). Anu Muhammad (2006), in his detailed history of the sector, argues that Bangladesh was once able to meet its need for gas but, under PSCs, would eventually have to purchase its own gas using foreign currency. At this time, power generation came mostly from gas and oil, but the need for more energy turned attention to coal-based power stations which were central to new PSCs signed with multinational oil companies. These agreements were signed despite findings by scientists that extracting and burning the world's remaining coal reserves would be the world's single biggest contributor to global warming thus tipping the scale towards irreversible climate change.

Yet, as coal production in the global north has declined, often in response to concerns about climate change, investors have turned to sites in the global south. This put pressure to move ahead on the Phulbari project involving not only collusion between multinationals and Bangladesh in shaping the country's investment climate, but also aggressive efforts by the US which were not surprising "given that there was 60 percent of US ownership" in the project (Chowdhury 2016: 91; Muhammad 2014). For their part, the government continues to expand its plans to build coal-fired power plants to reduce the increasing gap between its energy demand and supply, with the goal of diversifying its energy mix (Kotikalapudi 2016). However, as Chaitanya Kumar Kotikalapudi (2016) points out, this strategy builds on a weak energy governance structure, violations of environmental norms, a refusal to engage the public through consultations, the cooptation of the development narrative, and a lack of transparency and accountability which, together, reveal a failure to maintain democratic norms.

Moreover, since much of the production will be for export, it is worth heeding Joseph Stiglitz's remark: "A country that sells off its natural resources, privatizes its oil company, and borrows against future revenues, may experience a consumption binge that raises GDP, but the accounting framework should show that the country has actually become poorer" (quoted in Muhammad 2014: 62; Kotikalapudi 2016: 161). Thus, whatever benefits the country may reap in its growth rate from such energy policy will be only short term with immediate concerns that include the relationship between energy resources and security that have exposed how corruption, poverty, inequality, and repression "go hand in hand with the exploitation of natural resources" thereby challenging the balance between development and democratic governance (Muhammad 2014: 59).

The cost to be paid for the relation between corruption and repression on the one hand, and natural resource exploitation, on the other hand, may be experienced most acutely by those living in resource-extractive communities who protest, collectively, to protect their rights, lives, and livelihoods. Most such opposition movements have identified land grabbing, displacement, the loss of rights to what they view as common property, and the

environmental havoc that results from open-pit mining as their central concerns. Also significant is the importance dwellers at sites of extraction give to the loss of “sociality, dignity, and personhood” (Nuremowla 2016: 3). In Phulbari, for example, in only one mining community, 14,660 acres (23 square miles) will be destroyed, 80 percent of which is farmland, including ponds, fruit and timber trees, as well as businesses, homes, schools, health facilities, mosques, temples and churches, graveyards, and two archaeological sites (UN News 2012; Jahan 2014: 16). This will not only have serious environmental consequences, but will displace, by some estimates, 220,000 people, many of whom are indigenous and vulnerable. Such displacement is accompanied by the loss of employment, and, given a shortage of “empty” land, resettlement will be difficult, if not impossible, for those seeking to engage in agricultural production. Further, the project threatens the country’s food security by transforming one of its most fertile agricultural regions into an open-pit mine with its attendant infrastructure (UN News 2012) and damaging the most massive aquifer in north-western Bangladesh resulting in the depletion of the groundwater in the immediate vicinity, as well as outside the mining zone (Muhammad 2014).

Faced with the impacts on their lives and the environment, rural dwellers attempted to signal opposition to these projects. But their efforts to engage government were met with intimidation and violence. Muhammad (2014) and others (Gardner et al. 2012; Chowdhury 2016; Faruque 2018) detail the bloody uprising in Phulbari in 2006 where 50,000 people had gathered to protest against the open-pit coal mine (Nuremowla 2016). Three people were killed at the site and hundreds more were injured when semi-military (BDR) forces, usually charged with guarding the border, fired on the crowd, exposing the government’s deployment of forces that threatens the right to protest and portends continuing state intimidation and violence against protesters (Gain 2006).

Perhaps based on the need to balance development policy and an increasingly elusive democracy, the government agreed to three conditions for moving forward: Asia Energy, the PSC partner, would be forced to leave, there would be no open-pit mining anywhere in the country, and any future decisions regarding coal development would include community input. However, despite the apparent success of the protest, and the agreement signed between the government and the community, pressure to resume the project won out. But, as people’s resistance continued, so did the government’s repressive response. These government actions led a group of UN experts to question the transparency and legitimacy of project operations, noting concerns over the repression of human rights defenders who peacefully protested at the mine. As one UN rapporteur noted in support of the freedom of peaceful assembly and association, “People must be informed throughout, and must not be intimidated out of exercising their rights to express their opinions and peacefully assemble” (UN News 2012).

Again, in 2016, ten years after government agreements made with protesters, there was again a lack of transparency and accountability regarding the government’s decision to move forward on the project. This time, Phulbari protesters joined with climate activists in London, during the annual general shareholders meeting of GCM, formerly Asia Energy, where they continued to press their demands to stop the project. In 2019, however, GCM Resources confirmed that it had entered into a bilateral agreement with China Nonferrous Metal Industry and Power Construction Corporation of China (PowerChina) to jointly manage the Phulbari Coal Mine project. And, in February 2020, they said they had secured a US\$1.5 million increase to its existing loan facility of US\$3 million with Polo Resources Ltd, raising the total loan amount to US\$4.5 million (Global Energy Monitor). Still, as Ahasan and Gardner (2016) point out, activists continue to protest decisions that privilege partnerships with foreign companies who

exploit the country's natural resources and the profits that are captured by multinationals and corrupt government officials.

While the government has moved ahead with the Phulbari project in spite of continued opposition to open-pit mining, opposition has also occurred in Rampal, an area 14 kilometers from the Sundarbans Reserve Forest, where the government is moving ahead with the development of another coal power plant without consideration being given to its impact on the environment or on people's lives. The Rampal plant is owned by the Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Company (BIFPCL) as a joint venture between the National Thermal Power Company (NTPC) of India and the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB). The Indian company, Bharat Heavy Electricals (BHEL), will construct the plant in a financial agreement reached in 2017, with debt financing provided from the Indian Export-Import Bank. Covering 1,834 acres of mostly agricultural land, the coal plant will threaten the livelihoods of over two million inhabitants who depend upon the Sundarbans forest's resources to meet their daily needs. Its adverse effects will threaten agricultural and fisheries production as well as food security (Muhammad 2013).

The plant would also leach toxic substances from deposited coal burned ashes that contain many heavy metals including arsenic, lead, mercury, nickel, vanadium, beryllium, barium, cadmium, chromium, selenium and radium, which are dangerous if released into the environment (Chowdhury 2017). Discharging toxic water into the Passur River, and oil and chemical wastes from coal-carrying vessels will likely further contaminate the water, a worry that is already evident from the recent capsizing of a vessel carrying 350,000 litres of furnace oil that capsized in the Shela River in 2014, followed by another cargo vessel capsizing only a year later in the same river (Mookerjee and Misra 2017).

Residents at Rampal will also face greenhouse gas emissions and anticipated climate change that will increase the salinity of the water and contribute to drinking and irrigation water shortages in the coastal regions. Moving ahead on the Rampal project also threatens the rich biodiversity of the Sundarbans and, once operational, will permanently destroy the Sundarbans' ecosystem, a natural defence against extreme weather events. The eight million tons of CO₂ that it will emit each year will harm local residents and contribute to global warming (UNESCO n.d.; Sourcewatch 2015; Human Rights Watch 2020). In addition, it will leave the south-western coast of Bangladesh vulnerable to storms, cyclones, and other natural disasters. As noted by environmental scientists, including Abdullah Harun Chowdhury, who forcefully identifies the long-term effects of the Rampal plant: "most of the impacts of coal-fired power plants are negative and irreversible, [and cannot] be mitigated" (Chowdhury 2017: 85).

In response to these social, economic, and environmental concerns, and similar to protests mounted against the Phulbari project described above, from November 24 to 26, 2016, more than 10,000 people marched from Dhaka to Khulna to "Save the Sundarbans" and persuade the government to drop its backing for the construction of coal plants near the Sundarbans. Soon thereafter, a report by the United Nations World Heritage Centre and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's World Heritage Programme recommended that the proposed coal plant be relocated to prevent harm to the Sundarbans. This was followed by an open letter from prominent Indian organizations to the prime minister of India urging him to withdraw support for the project in a context where a "similar proposal to build a thermal power plant in ... West Bengal ... was turned down ... for being too proximate to the forest" (Misra and Mookerjee 2017: 5). According to Earthjustice, this growing pressure was met by forceful government pushback, including threats, harassment, and unlawful detention of protesters. Not only has the government portrayed activists opposing the plant as terrorists, but "prominent

opposition figures have even received anonymous death threats” (<https://earthjustice.org/blog/2016-november/environmental-defenders-are-under-threat-in-bangladesh>). Such responses have characterized the government’s reaction to protest over the mine for some time. In August 2016, for example, a student activist was arrested for criticizing Sheikh Hasina’s position on the mine (Earthjustice 2016), and in October of the same year, police in Dhaka attacked peaceful protesters with tear gas shells and water cannons, leaving about 30 people injured, some critically (Dhaka Tribune 2016). Protesters also demanded transparency and accountability and opposed extra-legal forms of violence against their efforts. But, for its part, the government held to its contention that the siting of coal plants “will have little to no impact on the forest, saying they will use the latest technology to mitigate pollution” (The Guardian 2016).

Open-pit coal mining clearly offers the Government an opportunity to secure cheap electricity. However, supporting mines located either in Phulbari or Rampal fails to account for other development goals that include ensuring the safety and livelihoods of its large population or a commitment to food security and ecological sustainability. Moreover, the Government’s decision leaves open to question whether coal production is the only way to secure cheap electricity to sustain economic growth. And, crucial for this discussion, are the questions: How will legitimacy for the AL be maintained, if popular protest is suppressed, ignored, or responded to with legal and extralegal violence? And, will autocratic rule increasingly shape not only the electoral system but, also, other relations of governance? Stated differently, what we are witnessing in Bangladesh is an increasingly fragile balance between development goals and autocratic rule that seeks to achieve development goals at any cost.

Conclusion

To complement discussions of autocracy focused on the consolidation of executive power, I have examined democratic backsliding at the grassroots level in the context of attempts by various governments to balance the twin goals of economic ascendance and democracy. With the adoption of a neoliberal development strategy, viewed as central to economic growth, I have examined investments in two open-pit coal mines, one in Phulbari and a second in Rampal. Such investments expose long-term contestation over the siting and construction of these mines for reasons of ecological and social sustainability. Opposition by thousands of local community members has highlighted the consequences of removing thousands of acres of productive agricultural land and its people under circumstances which result in displacement, dispossession, insecurity, and the disruption and destruction that such loss portends for community solidarities. Opposition also garnered the support of a national and international community who, like community members, acknowledge the need for energy security, but are concerned with the environmental costs of open-pit mining, including the costs to biodiversity, CO₂ emissions, pollution of waterways, and climate change. Yet, none of these concerns have been adequately addressed with policies that would secure the lives of residents and the sustainability of the environment. Instead, protests have been met with authoritarian responses that include exclusion, intimidation, police fire, and, significantly, extra-legal forms of violence without the possibility of adjudication.

The analysis of these sites reveals that investment in open-pit mining is one outcome of bureaucratic and economic elite interests in moving up the development ladder by sustaining short-term, if high, rates of economic growth. Evidence also suggests that the cost of open-pit mining leads to long-term ecological devastation, despite claims to the contrary, and social instability and loss. It has also come at the cost of the instantiation of democratic rule in 1991 and the failure to maintain the basic tenets of democracy and, instead, has given rise to

autocratic rule. Significantly, the failure to maintain these basic tenets of democratic rule is the result not of internal interests alone, but corresponds as well to pressures from the multi- and bilateral aid community and private sector to adopt policies that strengthen Bangladesh's integration into the global economy while maintaining its dependent status.

As I have shown, both class pressures and those of the international aid regime have shaped decisions regarding energy development for more than forty years, but, today, coal mining has come to hold a central place. This is the case even as a major investor in one open-pit mine rejected the opportunity to build a similar plant on the other side of the Bangladesh–Indian border, and when the global north has sought to find more sustainable forms of energy production. I conclude by acknowledging the challenges involved in balancing resource extractive growth policies while sustaining democratic norms and the promise of democratic governance. But, as the Phulbari and Rampal examples show, those who seek economic, social, and ecological security, when living under governments that apply autocratic rule to achieve partisan development interests, have neither rights nor voice in securing a sustainable future. Or, as this development contradiction exposes, when class and international pressures for economic growth prevail, democratic participation falls by the wayside and is relegated to the realm of the ideal.

Note

- 1 This work was supported by Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement: grant number 665958.

Bibliography

- Ahasan, A. & Gardner, K. 2016. Dispossession by “Development”: Corporations, Elites and NGOs in Bangladesh. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], 13, 1–17.
- Amin, M. R. 2016. From Aid to Investment: A Paradigm Shift in Sheikh Hasina's Development Policy. *The Daily Star*. 4 February. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- Bangladesh Trade Guide. Bangladesh Country Commercial Guide, Power and Energy www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/bangladesh-power-and-energy. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- BBC. 2016. Bangladesh LGBT editor hacked to death. www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36128729. Accessed 17 January 2020.
- BBC. 2018. Bangladesh protests: How a traffic accident stopped a city of 18 million. 6 August. www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45080129. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- Cassani, A. & Tomini, L. 2020. Trajectories and Modes of Autocratization in the Early 21st Century. *Partecipazione e Conflitto, The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*, <http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco/article/viewFile/23062/19316>, 1539–1558.
- Chowdhury, A. H. 2017. Environmental Impact of Coal-based Power Plant of Rampal on the Sundarbans (World's Largest Mangrove Forest) and Surrounding Areas. *MOJ Ecology & Environmental Science*, 2, 85–98.
- Chowdhury, N. S. 2016. Mines and Signs: Resource and Political Futures in Bangladesh. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 22(1), 87–107.
- Dhaka Tribune. 2016. Police foil Rampal protesters in march toward Indian High Commission. www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2016/10/18/police-foil-rampal-protesters-march-towards-indian-high-commission/. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- Earthjustice. 2016. Environmental defenders are under threat in Bangladesh. <https://earthjustice.org/blog/2016-november/environmental-defenders-are-under-threat-in-bangladesh>. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- Faruque, M. O. 2018. Mining and Subaltern Politics – Political Struggle against Neoliberal Development in Bangladesh. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 26, 65–86.
- Feldman, S. 2015. Bangladesh in 2014: Illusive Democracy. *Asian Survey*, 55, 67–74.

- Feldman, S. & Geisler, C. 2011. Land Grabbing in Bangladesh: In-Situ Displacement of Peasant Holdings. Future Agricultures Consortium, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK.
- Gain, P. 2006. 'Killings in Phulbari Ignite Unstoppable Protest: Local Communities Stand Strong against Open Cut Mining', Dhaka, Society for Environment and Human Development.
- Gallagher, K. S., Bhandary, R., Narassimhan, E. & Nguyen, Q. T. 2021. Banking on Coal? Drivers of Demand for Chinese Overseas Investments in Coal in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Vietnam. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 71, 1–10.
- Gardner, K., Ahmed, Z., Bashir, F. & Rana, M. 2012. Elusive Partnerships: Gas extraction and CSR in Bangladesh. *Resources Policy*, 37, 168–174.
- Global Energy Monitor Wiki n.d. Rampal power station. www.gem.wiki/Rampal_power_station#cite_ref-bankt_11-0. Accessed 28 December 2020.
- Hance, J. 2016. Thousands to march against coal plant threat to Bangladesh's Sundarbans forest, *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/mar/02/thousands-to-march-protest-coal-plant-threat-bangladeshs-sundarbans-forest. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- Haque, M. S. 2002. The Changing Balance of Power between the Government and NGOs in Bangladesh. *International Political Science Review*, 23, 411–435.
- Hossain, N. 2017. *Bangladesh – The Aid Lab: Understanding Bangladesh's Unexpected Success*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Human Rights Watch. 2020. www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/18/bangladesh-coal-plants-threaten-worlds-largest-mangrove-forest. Accessed 8 December 2020.
- Hussain, I. 2019. Encircling India: China Tightens South Asian Noose. In: Hussain, I. (ed.) *South Asia in Global Power Rivalry: Inside-out Appraisals from Bangladesh*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd., 101–123.
- Hussain, M. 2017. Bangladesh Criticized for Slow Progress in Blogger Murders. www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/bangladesh-criticized-slow-progress-blogger-murders. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- Jahan, F. 2014. Phulbari: Where Grassroots Gathered Against Global Capital. *BANKwatch*, XII, 16–18.
- Jahan, R. 2020. Challenges to Democracy: Old and New. *The Daily Star*. 15 September. Accessed 17 September 2020.
- Kotikalapudi, C. K. 2016. Corruption, crony capitalism and conflict: Rethinking the political economy of coal in Bangladesh and beyond. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 17, 160–164.
- Lorch, J. 2018. Civil Society and Mirror Images of Weak States: Bangladesh and the Philippines, Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lührmann, A. & Lindberg, S. I. 2019. A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New about It? *Democratization*, 26, 1095–1113.
- Lührmann, A., Mechkova, V., Dahlum, S., Maxwell, L., Olin, M., Petrarca, C. S., Sigman, R., Wilson M. C. & Lindberg, S. I. 2018. State of the World 2017: Autocratization and Exclusion? *Democratization*, 25(8), 1321–1340.
- Mahmud, M. S., Roth, D. & Warner, J. 2020. Rethinking “Development”: Land Dispossession for the Rampal Power Plant in Bangladesh. *Land Use Policy*, 94, 1–13.
- Maniruzzaman, T. 1992. The Fall of the Military Dictator: 1991 Elections and the Prospect of Civilian Rule in Bangladesh, *Pacific Affairs*, 65, 203–224.
- Mannan, M. 2019. “Shining” or “Suffering” South Asia? China’s South Asian Footprints. In: Hussain, I. (ed.) *South Asia in Global Power Rivalry: Inside-out Appraisals from Bangladesh*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd., 49–80.
- Mechkova, V., Lührmann, A. & Lindberg, S. I. 2017. How Much Democratic Backsliding? *Journal of Democracy*, 28, 162–169.
- Misra, M. & Mookerjee, S. 2017. Why New Delhi must Withdraw from the Rampal. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 6 May.
- Mookerjee, S. & Misra, M. 2017. Coal Power and the Sundarbans: Subaltern Resistance and Convergent Crises. In: Kapoor, D. (ed.) *Against Colonization and Rural Dispossession: Local Resistance in South/East Asia-Pacific and Africa*. London: forthcoming in Zed Books.
- Muhammad, A. 2006. FDI in Bangladesh, People’s Uprising in Phulbari and the Right Signal. *Countercurrents.org*, 22 September.
- Muhammad, A. 2013. “Rampal power plant: A project of deception and mass destruction”. [Bdnews24.com](http://bdnews24.com) – The Opinion Pages. 19 September. <https://opinion.bdnews24.com/2013/09/19/rampal-power-plant-a-project-of-deception-and-mass-destruction/> Accessed 7 December 2020.

- Muhammad, A. 2014. Natural Resources and Energy Security—Challenging the “Resource-Curse” Model in Bangladesh. *Economic & Political Weekly*, XLIX, 59–67.
- Nuremowla, S. 2016. Land, Place and Resistance to Displacement in Phulbari. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal (SAMAJ)*, 13.
- Primorac, Marina. 1998. *External Evaluation of the ESAF*. Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund.
- Quadir, F. 2000. The Political Economy of Pro-market Reforms in Bangladesh: Regime Consolidation Through Economic Liberalization? *Contemporary South Asia*, 9, 197–212.
- Riaz, A. 2019. How New Autocrats Curb Press Freedom. *The Daily Star*. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- Riaz, A. 2020. The Pathway of Democratic Backsliding in Bangladesh. *Democratization*, 28(1), 179–197.
- Saez, L. 2018. Bangladesh in 2017: Bloggers, Floods, and Refugees. *Asian Survey*, 58, 127–133.
- Sarkar, N. M. 2014. Bangladesh-China Relationship at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century. *Peace and Security Review*, 6, 72–96.
- Sobhan, R. 1993. Structural Maladjustment Bangladesh’s Experience with Market Reforms. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 28, 925–931.
- Sourcewatch 2015. Bangladesh and Coal. www.sourcewatch.org/index.php/Bangladesh_and_coal. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- UN Development Programme (UNDP). 2010. Human Development Report: Asian countries lead development progress over 40 years. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/PR6-HDR10-RegRBAP-E-rev5-sm.pdf>. Accessed 7 December.
- UN News. 2012. Open-pit coal mine project in Bangladesh threatens human rights – UN experts. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2012/02/404922-open-pit-coal-mine-project-bangladesh-threatens-human-rights-un-experts#.VIISzovF98E>. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- UNESCO. Decision: 39 COM 7B.8, The Sundarbans (Bangladesh) (N 798). http://whc.unesco.org/archive/advisory_body_evaluation/798.pdf. Accessed 8 December 2020.
- World Bank. 2013. Strategic Framework for Mainstreaming Citizen Engagement in World Bank Group-Supported Operations (<https://consultations.worldbank.org/consultation/engaging-citizensimproved-results>) addressing the relationship between NGOs and their programming. Washington, DC: World Bank. Accessed 7 December 2020.
- World Bank. 2020. Globally Bangladesh is a Model for Poverty Reduction: World Bank [Press release]. www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/01/29/globally-bangladesh-is-a-model-for-poverty-reduction-world-bank. Accessed 7 December 2020.