SHEIKH HASINA OF BANGLADESH

The making of a strongman regime

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Introduction: what is a ‘strongman’?

Sheikh Hasina Wazed has been prime minister of Bangladesh since January 2009. Over these years, Bangladesh has seen a marked deterioration in its democratic status, with human rights bodies and international organisations voicing concern and objections over stage-managed elections, increasing surveillance, enforced disappearances and a legal regiment that stifles criticism (Human Rights Watch 2021). Sheikh Hasina and her party, Awami League, have slowly, meticulously and successfully built what in reality is a one-party state. Sheikh Hasina herself has become without question the most powerful leader in contemporary Bangladesh, in reality unchallenged by any political rival inside or outside of the political party she is leading. This chapter will employ the concept of strongman to investigate the case of Sheikh Hasina’s prime ministership and ask how this change from electoral democracy to an authoritarian regime came to pass. What are the main elements in the construction not just of an authoritarian regime, but one in which there is an unquestioned leader?

The Introduction to this Handbook points out that there is a marked increase in forms of autocratic rule in South Asia, a development which is part of a wider trend. While authoritarian regimes exhibit some similar features, they are also different from one another. Efforts to analyze and understand this development and such regimes have over time given rise to a plethora of concepts, including authoritarian, autocratic, semi-democratic and sultanist. Derivatives such as ‘sultanistic’ have been tried out, as well as ‘neo-sultanistic’, ‘authoritarian populist’, ‘illiberal populist’, ‘semi-authoritarian’, ‘electoral autocracy’, ‘constitutional autocracy’ and others. The number of terms led an exasperated Collier and Levitsky (1997) to group all in the wide category of ‘hybrid regime’.

The point of introducing yet another term, strongman, is to shift focus from regime type to regime construction. The tendency inherent in the effort to define regime types is to ignore the creation and formation of a regime (Young 1999). Observers look at the end product rather than the process by which such a regime is formed, its actual coming-into-being. But regimes are not simply there; they are constructions, coalitions of forces built over some time. This is all the more evident in the case of the current phase of transition, from functioning electoral democracies to hybrid regimes. While studies on an earlier form of transition could focus on

how elites let power slip, the current form of transition must focus on how disbursed power is increasingly centralised, how the many lose power to the few.

The argument here is that there is an active building process behind this transition, an active building of a regime. The term strongman also helps us shift focus to an observable fact, that much of the actual building process happens around one person. In the case of Bangladesh, this person is Sheikh Hasina. For the Philippines it is Rodrigo Duterte, for India Narendra Modi and for Cambodia Hun Sen. For Sri Lanka it seems to happen around the Rajapaksa family, or at least two of the brothers. There are many other similar cases.

There is reason to believe, and this chapter will make that suggestion, that this one person or family is of crucial importance to the regime changes. However, the challenge inherent in the term strongman is not to over-emphasise the role of the one leader. We need to keep eyes open for the other forces that engage with the leader, that support him (or her). Hence I shall prefer the term 'strongman regime'.

Strongman regimes are what Lai and Slater (2006) refer to as 'personalised regimes'. These are different from a 'junta' or a 'party machine' regime in which the leader is restricted by a larger group of people. This useful distinction should be modified to allow an understanding of the dynamics in which a regime moves from one type to another. The concept strongman regime encourages us to investigate the dynamics of the relationship between the strongman and the regime.

By drawing on the Bangladesh case, this chapter will focus on three aspects. First, a constitutional tweaking has facilitated the building of a coalition of state institutions and forces. Crucially, this coalition drew support away from Awami League's rival while also being a self-sustaining coalition in which different elements are mutually supportive. Secondly, the ideological construction of Sheikh Hasina and her family as exceptional and crucial to the country's identity, its very DNA, is important because it provides legitimacy to the regime. The narrative justifies the regime's focus on economic development rather than on maintenance of a liberal democracy. And, thirdly, the regime has implemented a legal framework that effectively stifles criticism and silences the opposition. Legal protection and tweaking is crucial to strongman regimes' maintenance (Morgenbesser 2020), and in the Bangladesh case it has proven to be an effective tool in the mutual support of the ruling coalition.

The 'strongman' term is justified because behind these developments and at crucial junctures, are politically savvy if risky choices. The leader is not just a figurehead but the core person. She has used what leverage she had with success although the challenges have been substantial. The transition from electoral democracy to an authoritarian regime was not a smooth, gliding process. It was a process characterised by conscious choices and determination as well as the ability to take advantage of opportunities as these arose. Hence the term strongman.

Constitutional tweaking and building a coalition

The Awami League government under Sheikh Hasina has successfully and with great dexterity shaped state institutions in a way that ensures their continued cooperation in maintaining its rule. Crucial in this were first its handling of a formidable rival state force, the military, and second two constitutional amendments.

When Sheikh Hasina became prime minister in January 2009, it was her second stint in office. She had been in power once previously, sitting a full term from 1996 until 2001 when her party lost the election. She returned to power after her party had won the December 2008 election with a convincing majority.

That election, however, was held two years late. Despite its nominally democratic constitution, the country had in 2007–2008 been ruled by an essentially unconstitutional government

that had been backed by the military and implicitly supported by foreign governments and at least initially by substantial proportions of the middle classes. This government, known as the Caretaker Government, had pursued a 'minus two' agenda, seeking to send both Sheikh Hasina and her rival Khaleda Zia, the chairperson of Bangladesh Nationalist Party BNP, into permanent exile (Hagerty 2007). The Caretaker Government and its backers blamed the two political leaders for many of the country's ills, including corruption and violent political unrest. That this agenda did not succeed was largely due to intense political work, involving mobilisation and argumentation. One very clear lesson for Awami League and Sheikh Hasina when returning to government positions in January 2009, was that the rule of politicians was not a given. The armed forces constituted a real potential adversary.

The need to build bridges was made even clearer only a little more than a month later, when a mutiny erupted in the Pilkhana cantonment in Dhaka of the border security force Bangladesh Rifles (Momen 2010). The mutiny lasted two days and left about 80 people dead. It was probably caused by the overbearing attitude of army officers commanding the force. Army officers and their families living in the cantonment also bore the brunt of the mutiny. Sheikh Hasina had herself led the response, as minister of defence, and had emphasised the need to avoid further bloodshed. Although many army officers were enraged by the mutiny and the killing, the prime minister's calm and negotiated approach was appreciated by others.

After this, a conscious effort was made to bridge the gap of distrust and suspicion between Awami League and the armed forces. Relatives of the Pilkhana victims were given housing and government jobs. A number of transfers in the armed forces ensured promotion of Awami League sympathisers. Sheikh Hasina increased their budgets, attended ceremonies in person, and emphasised the army's contribution to the country's liberation. She took particular care of the 9th Infantry Division which is stationed in Savar and protects the main access route to the capital from any revolting army faction elsewhere in the country.

As she was building closer relationships with the armed forces, one serious challenge was that BNP had traditionally been seen as closer to the military than Awami League. BNP's leader Khaleda Zia was a rival for the military's affections being a former general's widow and had been living in a house in Dhaka cantonment since the 1970s. In 2011, Sheikh Hasina had her evicted from this house.

The Hasina government also expanded the role of the military. The 9th Infantry Division was in 2011 expanded to include special units in connection with the new bridge being built across the Padma. These new units included an engineering corps. This policy was replicated in several other cases and the military is increasingly involved in construction and contracting. One striking case is the Rohingya settlement built on the island Bhasan Char by the navy. The settlement has capacity for 100,000 refugees and is fitted with cyclone shelters and a solid protective embankment. The costs have not been disclosed. Companies hired by the military to execute such tasks are often manned and owned by retired officers and provide a welcome income in addition to the pension. The armed forces' welfare organisation (Sena Kalyan Sangstha) is successfully involved in a number of commercial and industrial ventures, including petrochemicals, cement-production, shopping centres and the Dhaka Radisson Hotel. The profit helps provide services to armed forces personnel, including retirees.

Sheikh Hasina has also ensured that the military can continue its attractive engagements in UN peacekeeping operations (Bangladesh is among the top three nations to provide troops for such operations). These not only allow welcome field experience for the military but also handsome salaries for the individual personnel.

A number of other perks have been instituted for bureaucrats and military officers above a certain rank (Prothom Alo 2018). In addition to the use of an official car, the perks include loans

for buying a private car as well as generous maintenance costs for that car, and housing loans well below the going market interest rate. For bureaucrats there are several fellowship programmes for foreign degrees. In the words of one observer, these are ‘benefits for allegiance’ programmes.

In a different development, the Hasina government in 2011 abolished the Caretaker Government instrument arguing that Bangladesh was now a mature democracy (15th Amendment, June 2011). With this the government ensured political oversight over the election process. The Caretaker Government instrument had been introduced into the constitution in 1996 after massive street protests against the then BNP government’s manipulation of the election process (Kochanek 1997). The Caretaker Government instrument was the instalment three months before an election of a neutral government headed by the last retired Supreme Court judge. The CTG as it is known ensured free and fair elections. It was in operation for the second election in 1996, which Awami League won, and in 2001, which Awami League lost and after which Sheikh Hasina resigned as prime minister. However, at the end of its period, in 2006, the BNP government again sought ways of manipulating the CTG by inter alia changing the retirement age for Supreme Court judges (Hagerty 2007). The unrest and street violence that followed justified the *de facto* military coup of January 2007. The lesson for Awami League was that in the ‘toxic’ political culture of the country (Islam 2013), even a constitutional provision would not ensure a level playing field. The amendment that abolished the Caretaker Government instrument was the logical outcome of this experience.

BNP protested against the abolition of the Caretaker Government instrument and engaged in violent and disruptive street protests. However, in the end they were ineffectual. Public opinion may also have swung against them. Moreover, the brutality of the protests provided the government with justification for dealing with the situation as a law and order problem rather than as legitimate political protest. But the police also pushed the boundaries of legitimate police action. It used with great effect what one senior police officer called ‘the Khulna model’, which was to put ten opposition leaders behind bars – ‘and fifty others will go into hiding’ (private communication; also Human Rights Watch 2018b). Because of BNP’s boycott, 154 of the 300 members of parliament were ‘elected’ unopposed and without a vote. The voter turnout was extremely low (some put it at less than 25 percent). BNP, the former ruling party, ended up without representation and the role as official opposition went to Jatiya Party, a party closely aligned with Awami League (its founder–chairman was special advisor to the Prime Minister and members of the party served as cabinet ministers).

The point to underline is that none of this was strictly illegal or unconstitutional, however contrary to the spirit of democratic competition it may have seemed. In a sense, Awami League had successfully outmanoeuvred its main rival largely due to the rival’s own tactical errors.

Another challenge turned opportunity was a very heated national debate and national mobilisation that took place in parallel to the election unrest. This development followed from Awami League’s election promise to try the 1971 war criminals. This was a long-standing demand among many Awami League supporters and progressives. The vocal Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee had been established by leading intellectuals when Jamaat-e Islam leaders were introduced into government positions by Khaleda Zia in 1992 and had continued its pressure ever since. Jamaat leaders had opposed independence in 1971 and many had actively engaged in collaboration with Pakistani forces and committed atrocities against freedom fighters. In 2009 Awami League decided to act on its promise and set up the International Crimes Tribunal. The first indictments were issued in 2010 and the first verdicts passed in 2011. This started a period of intense cultural debate and conflict in the country. In February 2013 at least 100,000 progressives gathered at Shahbag in Dhaka because of fear that the government was too lenient towards the war criminals (De 2015). In May the same year the Islamist

organisation Hefazat-e Islam mobilised several hundred thousand in what was widely seen as a counter-demonstration at Shapla Square in Dhaka to press for more Islamist policies, including laws against blasphemy and non-Islamic practices (Bouissou 2013). In the midst of all this, alleged atheist bloggers were targeted by violent jihadists and some were killed in bloody acts of violence.

During these months of heated debate and mobilisation, Sheikh Hasina and Awami League sought to strike a balanced agreement (Lorch 2018). The progressive Shahbag movement was partially co-opted and neutralised. More of a concern was the Islamist mobilisation. The Hefazat was a newcomer on the scene and represented the traditional (*qawmi*) Islamic clerics (*ulama*) and their many Islamic seminaries (*madrasa*). The Hefazat's capacity to mobilise had made a deep impression and the demands had resonated well even among Awami League supporters (Fair and Abdallah 2017). The Hefazat represents a theological tradition different from and often opposed to that of Jamaat. Sheikh Hasina seems to have acknowledged this with clarity and a degree of cynicism, and later that year she reached out to Hefazat leaders. Over the months and years that followed, her government implemented policies that were controversial among her core supporters because they reflected Hefazat demands. These include changes in the school textbooks (less progressive, less 'Hindu'), acceptance of *qawmi* madrasas as on par with government schools, the removal of a statue of a 'Greek goddess' (in fact, Lady Justitia) from the Supreme Court building, and a substantial increase in the salaries of madrasa teachers (Lorch 2018). She was later praised by Hefazat as 'Mother of Qawmi'. It is arguable that the government with some success has incorporated the *qawmi* ulama in the periphery of its grand coalition.

In another amendment to the constitution (16th Amendment, 2014), parliament was made superior to the Supreme Court and given the power to dismiss judges if allegations of incapability or misconduct against them are proved (*Dhaka Tribune* 2017). With this, judicial oversight over parliament was abolished and the judiciary made beholden to parliament and in reality to the ruling party. In connection with a judicial review of the amendment, the Chief Justice supported a view of the amendment as unconstitutional. A few months later he was forced to leave the country and subsequently dismissed (Riaz 2021). The next Chief Justice accepted the amendment as in line with the constitution. In the same amendment, a provision was introduced to the election law that made it mandatory for the court to hear the election commission's view first before issuing any judgment on an election complaint. The election commission is nominally independent of the executive, but in reality subservient to it.

These are the eye-catching developments. Quietly most major news outlets and television channels have been brought into the ambit and many owners or their family members made member of parliament or given other forms of preferential treatment (*Dhaka Courier* 2019; Riaz and Rahman 2021). Also important in the expanding coalition have been the law-enforcement agencies, of which the main ones are Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), the various branches of the police (Detective Branch, Special Branch, Criminal Investigation Branch), and Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI, the military intelligence). Members of these institutions plus the civil administration willingly employed double standards in dealing with opposition and government candidates during elections (Riaz 2019). There were instances of trumped-up charges against opposition candidates and their candidacy annulled by officials on flimsy grounds. Some 30,000 cases are alleged to have been filed against opposition activists and leaders and 8,000 allegedly arrested, causing each personal problems and inhibiting political space for the opposition. Officials in polling stations allowed activists to stuff ballot boxes and the police often turned a blind eye to acts of violence and intimidation by Awami League activists. The police was particularly visible during the 2018 election and many considered the

police to have ‘delivered’ the outcome, including many in the police force. News outlets and organisations such as Transparency International Bangladesh documented extensive irregularities in almost all constituencies and the partisan role played by police or the administration in more than half of the constituencies (*The Daily Star* 2019).

Within the first few years in power, Awami League had in effect neutralised or co-opted major loci of power and authority in the country. The military, the bureaucracy and the judiciary had been significant alternative sources of authority and power in independent Bangladesh’s early history. The traditions of the ‘vice-regalism’ (Shah 2014) ran deep in institutions that were partly rehabilitated after 1975 by the autocratic governments of Ziaur Rahman (1975–1981) and H.M. Ershad (1982–1990), who relied on the established classes to replace Awami League appointees (Baxter 1984). That these had remained formidable loci of power was proven by the 2007–2008 military-backed Caretaker Government, but by 2014 they had been co-opted into an Awami League coalition.

In addition, Awami League’s rival BNP had committed tactical errors and marginalised itself from its constitutional rights while also proving to be dependent on the easily vilified Jamaat for its street presence. Crucially Sheikh Hasina had also ensured that Shahbag did not develop into an alternative locus of power on the progressive left.

Family and exceptionality

Central to ideological justification of her regime is that she is her father’s daughter. Her father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was the independence movement’s leader and the country’s leader until he was murdered along with most members of his family in 1975. Sheikh Hasina was then abroad and returned to Bangladesh only in 1981. After a short debate which the *roko* (blood) faction won, she has been the supreme and largely uncontested leader of her party – formally re-elected at regular intervals. She is now on her fourth general secretary. After the 2018 election, she surprised observers by easing out most senior party leaders from ministerial positions, including her own cousins and her daughter’s father-in-law (Khalidi 2019). It was an exercise of supreme control.

That Sheikh Hasina is ‘Bangabandhu’s daughter’ is deafening in a muted way. Her father’s special place in the nation’s history is emphasised and reinforced in numerous official and public acts. And yet in this there is no direct suggestion that her being Bangabandhu’s daughter makes her genetically fit or dynastically endowed to be prime minister. Her exceptionality is reinforced more indirectly.

A clue can be had from the documentary film, ‘Hasina: A Daughter’s Tale’. This professionally made documentary directed by her nephew was released a month before the 2018 election in cinema halls all over the country. Here she is portrayed as an ordinary housewife, seen in her kitchen, making food for her family or talking happily with her grandchildren. These footages of contemporary happiness are contrasted by photographs and footage of her father and her reminiscences about him and what he meant for her both personally and politically. The soft approach of the documentary underlines the brutality of the assassination in 1975, the bloody attack on him that also killed her three brothers, her mother and several other members of her family.

This legacy of blood and loss is crucial to the creation of her political persona. She is an ordinary person with an extraordinary background, someone with strong leadership qualities but whose political outlook and aims have been shaped through terrible personal horror. She mentions her father in every speech and faithfully attends to his name and memory. Her undisputed and unquestionable loyalty makes her the nation’s leader because it

connects her personally and intimately to the father of the nation, its eternal leader (Ruud, forthcoming).

Shortly after her coming to power, his status of father of the nation (*jatir janak*) was given constitutional foundation, his portrait was to be found in all public offices and schools and he was given special legal protection against defamation. Over the years, an official cult has been constructed around him and his legacy. Several public holidays and national celebrations are directly or indirectly associated with him, such as his declaration of independence speech, his homecoming after the war and the assassination of him and his family – marked every year as the ‘day of mourning’. His birth is celebrated as the national children’s day but known as ‘Mujibur’s birthday’. His centenary is celebrated as ‘Mujib year’. A range of government agencies, buildings, educational institutions, streets, tournaments and parks are named after him, mostly by Sheikh Hasina’s governments. Generally the more prominent institution in any sector is named after him, such as the national football stadium, the country’s largest conference centre, the country’s first satellite, a heavily armed missile frigate and the prestigious Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University. Major national investments include the Bangabandhu Bridge across the Jamuna and a large new international airport planned near Dhaka (to be called Bangabandhu International Airport).

Every Awami League poster has images of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina. And Awami League posters are everywhere, in every street and street corner, on every wall across the country. As Kuttig points out (2020), banners and posters are pervasive visual and material expressions in an environment where ‘visibility means everything’ (Blom Hansen 2004). The specialness of the family is part of the official cult, to a large extent reinforcing the sense of mourning and loss as legitimising strategy (Mookherjee 2007). Sheikh Hasina and her sister have special state protection as members of Bangabandhu’s family (since 2009). Her son, known as Joy, is often included on the posters. Sheikh Hasina’s mother is in some contexts referred to as Bangamata (the mother of Bengal). Her brothers are commemorated with ceremonies, and several sport clubs, tournaments and arenas are named after them. There is, for instance, a professional football club named after one brother, Sheikh Jamal, the name added to the original name in 2009, and an international football cup was set up and named after another brother, Sheikh Kamal, in 2015. The official crest of the cup bears his portrait.

It should be noted that many beyond Awami League share in the sentiment of Bangabandhu’s specialness. It is not uncommon even for critics of Sheikh Hasina’s government to refer to her father as ‘the greatest Bangali of all times’. The phrase originated in 2004 in a BBC Bangla Service poll in which Mujibur Rahman came out ahead of Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Sometimes Mujibur is called ‘the greatest Bangali of a thousand years’. Bangladesh was, of course, born in a terrible war of liberation that saw bloody violence and destruction as well as acts of daring resistance and sacrifice. Stories and memories of the war are to most Bangladeshis even fifty years on deeply emotional (Mookherjee 2015). To many of those who took part, Bangabandhu was a great source of inspiration.

The specialness of Bangabandhu and the specialness of Sheikh Hasina’s family are complemented by another legitimising strategy: the assertion that Bangabandhu’s vision was not just a great source of inspiration behind the independence movement, but *the* greatest; that the people were mobilised by his ‘dream’ for the country. The idea of Bangabandhu’s ‘dream’ is important in the official narrative and he is often referred to as the ‘dreamer of the Bengali nation’. The dream remains undefined but is generally thought to be a Sonar Bangla, a Golden Bengal, prosperous and free from hunger and poverty. Occasionally references are also made to his ‘ideology’, but historically Mujibur never formulated an ideology and what activists and supporters referred to as Mujibism was little more than a cult around his personality.

Nonetheless there is a strong emotive resonance in the way Bangabandhu's dream is understood today. In popular renderings, Bangabandhu as a person showed respect to high and low, ate simple food and treated all as his equals. These are values that are generally thought to have mobilised people to the suffering and sacrifice of the independence war. His daughter makes oblique reference to this aspect of the narrative when she claims that she is in politics to alleviate the suffering of the poor.

This 'dream' is central to how his daughter is exceptional. Sheikh Hasina and her party insist that they have come to power to fulfil the task he has started, to fulfil his 'dream', but that they have done so only 'after 30 years'. The great horror of the assassination is equal only to the bright future that was lost in that act. The sacrifice of the war was wasted in that atrocity, which makes it all the more imperative for the nation four or five decades later to strive to fulfil the promises embedded in that struggle. Bangabandhu's 'dream' and the emotive appeal of a country free from hunger and poverty are held up as the ultimate goal of the government and the country, and Sheikh Hasina's unquestioned loyalty to this 'dream' renders her uniquely appropriate to fulfil it. The connection is drawn in many contexts. One example is in the justification for the Digital Security Act (to which we shall return), as 'the revival of the Golden Bangladesh of the father of the nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman [...] The great dreamer has given his own successor to fulfil the dream of Golden Bangladesh, Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina' (Bangladesh Government 2018).

There is also a practical side to this dream of a country free from poverty and hunger. Sheikh Hasina's government has seen economic development as central to its legitimacy and has worked towards this with not inconsiderable success (O'Neill 2018). On important social indicators, including life expectancy, food consumption and literacy rates, Bangladesh has moved up ahead of India. Economic growth has been substantial and in 2018 Bangladesh fulfilled all eligibility criteria for graduation from Least Developed Country to Middle Income Country. While the country is still characterised by mind-boggling economic differences between rich and poor, growth is visible in most parts of the country.

Infrastructural development and 'megaprojects' are very much part of the agenda: coal plants, a nuclear plant, and bridges, roads and a light railway in Dhaka (Mirza forthcoming). When in 2012 the World Bank pulled support for the Padma Bridge project after allegations of corruption in high circles, Sheikh Hasina angrily responded that Bangladesh would construct the bridge with its own funds. The decision to go ahead committed her political standing to a huge, daunting project in a striking mark of a strongman leader. The country would develop, she would pursue her father's 'dream', with or without the help of others.

Sheikh Hasina's place in the narrative as the successor who ensures the fulfilment of Bangabandhu's dreams is an obliging construction, committing her to the past but also allowing her liberty to interpret his dream. She is a forceful politician in her own right, but it is her unique loyalty to her father's legacy – interpreted as the ambition of the nation – which ultimately legitimises her as the country's leader.

Violence and the law

However, a narrative is not sufficient to keep a regime afloat, and critics need to be silenced. It is possible to argue that politically, Bangladesh has always been a violent place (Jahan 2005, Tripathy 2014). There are many stories of politically motivated violence in the early years of the independent republic and even more from the years of military dictatorships. During the democratic years, up until 2006, violence had several forms. There were firearms in student

hostels, bodies could be found floating in rivers or street gutters, Islamists in particular cut tendons of activists from rival camps, buses were burnt during street confrontations and general strikes (known as *hartal*) often included violent encounters and beating of anyone caught out.

From 2009 onwards and in particular after 2014, the forms have changed from vandalism and individual acts of violence to state orchestrated forms of repression (Suykens and Islam 2015). According to one report (Odhikar 2020a), the number of injured dropped from 24,000 in the year leading up to the 2014 election to 4,700 injured the year leading up to the 2018 election.

There are two significant developments behind this shift in political violence. One is the increased deployment of law-enforcement agencies against opponents rather than the deployment of party or student front activists. We will return to this in the next section. A second development is legal changes and in particular the introduction of laws effectively banning online criticism of the rulers. The legislation has permitted space for law-enforcement agencies to act with impunity and has created an atmosphere of apprehension that effectively does away with the need for street confrontations (Lacy and Mookherjee 2020).

The introduction of first the Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT act of 2006, amended 2013) and the Digital Security Act (Bangladesh Government 2018) has done much harm to the country's democratic credentials. In the EIC Democracy Index, a significant contribution to Bangladesh's fall between 2010 and 2020 is the drop in its score on 'civil liberties'. This was particularly due to the infamous Section 57, introduced to the ICT act in 2013. This section heralded 'significant' limitations on individual freedom of expression and serious challenges to democracy (Feldman 2015). It carried sentences of up to 14 years' imprisonment and 1 crore taka (approx. 100,000 euros) in fines, or both, for posting false, provocative or sensitive news however interpreted. The Digital Security Act (DSA) that replaced the ICT act has often been characterised as 'draconian'. It maintained the level of sentences but broadened the applicability of the law. The DSA gained much notoriety as a means of intimidation. According to one report, there were on average three cases a day, and in 2019 alone 1,135 persons were arrested in 732 cases under this act (Prothom Alo 2020a).

The DSA has commonly been applied to critics of government policies. Human Rights Watch (2018a) has held that the government made use of the DSA to detain political opponents and critics of its response to the ongoing pandemic. Under the law anyone in Bangladesh can be arrested for posts that are alleged to negatively affect the nation's image, including criticism of government policies (Committee to Protect Journalists 2020). The law has been widely criticised by international rights bodies including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, by Bangladeshi civil rights bodies and in newspaper editorials. They claim that the authorities 'increasingly used the DSA to harass and indefinitely detain activists, journalists and others critical of the government and its political leadership' (Human Rights Watch 2021). Lacy and Mookherjee (2020) have called the law 'a new technique of governmentality'.

Crucial here is that arrests have also been made for criticising the judiciary or other political leaders (Human Rights Watch 2018a). The case of Shafiqul Islam Kajol is illustrative. This editor of a lesser-known local newspaper was in 2020 picked up from a street in Dhaka and 'disappeared'. The police, as is common in these cases, claimed no knowledge of what had happened to him. While he was missing, a case was filed against him under the DSA, claiming that he had shared posts defamatory of certain Awami League leaders on Facebook. When he reappeared after 53 days he was immediately arrested (or rearrested) for his alleged crime under the DSA. He was released after seven months in jail.

A widely circulating interpretation is that he was picked up after the publication of an article on the arrest of an Awami League leader. The leader allegedly ran a secret escort agency where some senior Awami League leaders and members of parliament were said to have been clients. The case against Kajol was filed by a member of parliament. The case named others but Kajol was the only one arrested. It is alleged that he was singled out 'because some Awami League politicians suspected that he had incriminating information of the goings on in this escort agency and they feared exposure' (Netra News 2020).

This may or may not be true. The connection between Kajol's disappearance and his Facebook post is not established. The point is that it suffices to be rumoured to scare people away from criticising ruling party leaders and that the police and the judiciary seem happy to play along. Kajol's case is a good illustration of how the police, the judiciary and the ruling party together constitute a mutually protective coalition. The willingness of the police and the judiciary to protect leaders quite far down the political hierarchy is increasingly evident. In an illustrative case (*Prothom Alo* 2020b), the police arrested a 25-year-old village man 'on allegation of criticising leaders of ruling Bangladesh Awami League on Facebook'. The case had been filed by the local president of the Awami League volunteer front.

'Criticising leaders of ruling Bangladesh Awami League on Facebook' is the operative phrase. In an online survey of Bangladeshi journalists (Hasan 2019), almost all respondents claimed it was near impossible to pursue objective news reporting on certain issues because of the existence of a 'censorship machine'. Key actors in this censorship machine include a pro-government political apparatus, key government offices and certain leading politicians, the security agencies, and interestingly fellow journalists. Outside journalism, there are 'digital vigilantes' as well as 'the vast multitude of sycophants and attention seekers' motivated by personal rivalries or hoping for rewards (Lacy and Mookherjee 2020). The system shields itself from criticism in particular on certain 'no-no' topics (Riaz and Zaman forthcoming; Haq forthcoming). These include the prime minister and her family, the armed forces, and the official narrative about the war of 1971. But this political sensitivity and the DSA are opportunities widely exploited by individuals and by the system. While the prime minister earlier claimed that Bangladeshi journalists enjoy utmost freedom (*The Daily Star* 2020), she has also held that spreading false propaganda is not protected by freedom of speech (*The Daily Star* 2021).

Even more sinister than the DSA are the extrajudicial activities of law-enforcement agencies. 'Crossfires' or 'encounters' gained particular notoriety. The victims were often alleged criminals or radical opponents of the regime (such as Islamists and jihadists). A brief 'war on drugs' in 2018–2019 saw 395 alleged drug peddlers killed in 'crossfires' according to one report (*The Daily Star* 2020). Another report claims there were 225 extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh in 2020 (Odhikar 2020b). Another extrajudicial method is that of enforced disappearances ('*goom*'). Some have disappeared not to be seen again while others do reappear after a while, such as the journalist Kajol mentioned above. According to one report, there were 31 enforced disappearances in 2020 (Odhikar 2020b; Barua 2020).

The enforcement agencies and branches of the government seem to act on assumed directives rather than on direct orders, and they seem occasionally to operate in competition with one another. In an interesting development, the number of extrajudicial killings dropped drastically after July 2020 when a former army officer was shot and killed by police officers. This caused an uproar from the military side and the police officer and his accomplices were arrested. The sharp drop in extrajudicial killings after this indicates that the government could stop the practice when it wanted to but also that the police was largely operating independent of political directives.

The strongman leader

Sheikh Hasina is a strongman leader, but not necessarily of the same mould as other strongman leaders. The specialness of her family and her own unquestioned but constantly re-emphasised loyalty to her father and his dream constitute the central trope of an exceptionality and one that justifies her leadership as logical and necessary for the nation. Her specialness is not expressed in the same manner as Rodrigo Duterte (Curato 2015) or Donald Trump, for whom transgression into 'bad manners' of the boss mould was a trademark of their populist appeal and claim to represent 'ordinary' people (Moffitt 2016). But she does transgress, in ways that emphasise her personal rule. She on occasion disregards finer constitutional or moral niceties, and often (but not always) publicly so. A small but telling example found place in connection with allegations of corruption against the vice-chancellor of Jahangirnagar University in 2019. Both students and teachers staged demonstrations demanding a judicial inquiry, whereupon the prime minister warned them that if they were unable to prove their allegations they would be punished and government funding for public universities would be withdrawn (*Dhaka Tribune* 2019).

These transgressive acts are part of her masterfully brazen style that underlines her position as the strongest leader, the one whose control over the state machinery can threaten any action – possibly illegal, often transgressive, definitively doable. This is classic strongman ploy, as if saying 'I dare you to oppose me!'

Conclusion

A strongman regime centres on and depends on one person. It is a regime because it is a solid edifice, it has durability and resistance to external shock and pressure. It is unshaken by economic upheavals and unfazed by inept handling of disasters such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Such regimes often rely on ideological constructions such as the nationalistic cult the Bangladeshi regime has built around its father of the nation and his family, to which also the prime minister belongs, and on laws and agencies that protect against criticism. But the prime minister has also proven herself to be eminently pragmatic and this is perhaps one of her strongest points. She has forged solid bonds with forces that cold-shouldered her father, including the armed forces and the bureaucracy. She has neutralised the increasingly formidable challenge of Islamism. And she has harnessed the support of the somewhat sullen but ultimately cornered progressives.

The weakness of a strongman regime is its reliance on that one person – who not only provides legitimacy but also the political strength and prowess of the regime. Sheikh Hasina has been instrumental in building a regime that is self-protecting and mutually supportive. But the dangers are real. A rivalry between the police and the military and the ever-present need in Islamist quarters to assert themselves constitute potentially fundamental threats to the edifice. Threats such as an economic downturn that ruins elite privileges are still untested for the cohesion of the regime.

Currently the strongman regime appears solid, but because it is a strongman regime and not a junta or another form of authoritarian coalition regime, it relies on the continued presence of the steady hand of the prime minister and on her ability to legitimise the regime through her family association and her actions. Succession will be a huge challenge and the risk involved is considerable.

Note

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