The Osman Dynasty: The Making and Unmaking of a Political Family

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<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/inp> **Arild Engelsen Ruud¹****Abstract**

The Osman Dynasty in Bangladesh is several generations deep and combines legitimate mobilization politics with money-making businesses and ‘godfather’ tactics. This article focuses on two aspects of dynasty formation: its relationship to the wider political context and the issue of dynastic succession. The brittle nature of the national sovereignty in a traumatized postcolonial and post-war society of 1970s and 1980s constituted an environment in which local powerfuls could establish themselves through a combination of legitimate political activism and muscle politics. And yet there were rivals and challenges and succession was not assured. The reasons for the dynasty now seemingly unable to able to pass the torch to a fourth generation, underscore the changed circumstances. This article will thus argue that local dynasty formation constitutes a historically specific phenomenon.

Keywords

Bangladesh, political dynasticism, dynastic succession, Awami League, godfather rule

Introduction

In the provincial city of Narayanganj, in Bangladesh, six members of the Osman family have been members of parliament (MPs). In addition, the family has played a substantial role in the political history of the district also when not MP, including the early years of Awami League and the independence movement. In some ways the family *is* Awami League in the district and city of Narayanganj. Over the years the family has also invested heavily in the large garments industry, and it is accused of extensive extortion and intimidation. Today the family is still dominant, but it is no longer unrivalled, and this article asks how a dominant dynasty can lose its grip.²

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The literature on dynasticism offers several explanations for the phenomenon of dynasticism in politics. Some of the literature from the United States, for instance, suggests that political power is somehow self-perpetuating. The longer a person holds power, the more likely it is that some form of 'political capital' will be formed and associated with the family name (Dal Bó, Dal Bó, & Snyder, 2009; also Laband & Lentz 1985). This 'brand name advantage' works because the first holder of office comes to represent symbolic values or 'symbolic estate' that is passed on to the heir (Feinstein, 2010; Kurtz, 1989). Another suggestion is that a family is identified with a particular line of trade as a 'family business' (Kurtz, 1989), not unlike families associated trades such as music or media. From Bangladesh it has been suggested that 'patrimonial leadership' has taken root because 'the people are emotionally attached through patron-client relations' to the top leaders of the two main parties (Rahaman, 2008), which seems to be a South Asian variety of the 'name branding' argument. Another study suggested simply that dynastic and family politics in South Asia are 'vote catchers' (Amundsen, 2013). The problem with these explanations is that it is not clear why the electorate should believe a politician has the same qualities the father had.

A second set of explanations points to factors within the electorate. Much of the material for these explanations has been drawn from Asian examples and has a tinge of exoticism. The term 'filiation' has been suggested to designate the cultural notion that personal qualities such as courage or assertiveness can be inherited (Becket, 1993). Other studies point to traditional forms of authority (Patrikios & Chatzikonstantinou, 2014). This seems to be borne out in a survey from the Philippines, in which it is shown that dynastic representatives tend to be wealthier than non-dynastic ones and also to come from poorer and less educated constituencies (Mendoza, Beja, Venida, & Yap, 2012). From Bangladesh it is suggested that

[i]n the absence of social cohesion, political consensus, strong ideological commitment or effective organizational structures, charisma, patrimonialism, and patronage have become the only mechanisms for building and sustaining political support. (Kochanek, 1995)

In other words, fragmented and politically uncommitted societies will tend towards strong leaders and dynasties. But it is not clear how South Asian societies can be termed politically uncommitted or why political disagreement should lead to dynasties rather than stronger political organizations (see for instance Shastri et al., 2017). Village-level evidence from Bangladesh suggests instead that rural voters tend to prefer candidates who are wealthy, well-educated and experienced in politics but that this has more to do with a realization of the difficult and demanding game of politics than with inherited qualities (Ruud, 2011).

A third set of explanations suggests that dynasticism is caused by political parties' desire to survive and grow. Thompson (2012) argues that dynasticism is widespread in modern Asian political systems because notions of inherited charisma—however phoney—help legitimize leadership succession and minimize internal conflict. Dynasticism becomes a strategy to consolidate political control. In a parallel argument and from a comparison of Indian political parties, Chhibber (2011) points out that dynastic succession occurs where party organizations are too weak to risk succession struggles. Robust party organizations also make it more difficult for party leaders to handpick a successor. This argument has much to commend itself also if seen from Bangladesh—where both main political parties have poor organizations. But while Chhibber's argument fits the top leaders, our concern here is with the formation of dynasties further down—not party leaders, but regional dynasties.

The story of Bangladesh in the 1970s and the success and practices of local dynasty formation such as the Osmans partly exemplify what Hansen and Stepputat (2006, p. 300) call the postcolonial legacy

of the colonial state's incomplete, tentative and fragmented rule. The Osmans' position in Narayanganj has been that of rulers and de-facto sovereigns in a country where, at times and in certain places, the national government's writ has been fragile—'palimpsest of sovereignty' in Comaroff and Comaroff's terminology (2006, p. 9). Narayanganj is not the only place where such rule has been practiced in Bangladesh, but it is a prominent example. A number of reports suggest high levels of entanglement between the illicit and the licit in Bangladesh and Narayanganj is a good example of this development in what in an Indian context has been called 'Middle India' (BRAC, 2006; Ruud, 2010; Suykens, 2016; for 'Middle India' refer to Harriss-White, 2015). Numerous studies suggest that illegal methods are increasingly gaining a foothold and that the rule of strongmen is on the rise both in the world of electoral politics and in the neoliberal economic environment of contemporary South Asia (Hansen, 2001; Hansen & Stepputat, 2005; Harriss-White, 2003; Michelutti, 2008; Vaishnav, 2017; Witsoe, 2013). Harriss-White's evocative 'shadow state' is a world where deal-making and rent-seeking thrive on clientelism and violence (Harriss-White, 2003).

And yet the Osmans are not crime-bosses of the kind found in Latin-America; they are politicians. An earlier study on leadership and influence in South Asia highlighted how politicians may incorporate elements of the fixer, the middleman, or the hustler (Price & Ruud, 2010). Their imperative is to gain and maintain a domain (Price, 2005). In a forthcoming volume on 'bossism' in South Asia, it is suggested that bosses do not seek money necessarily, but the command that money can buy. 'This command is what defines them. Bosses do not only want to make money, they want to rule' (Michelutti et al., 2018).

The story of the rise and possible decline of the Osmans of Narayanganj offers two distinct but related lessons for our understanding of the formation of political dynasties in a South Asian context. The first lesson stems from the transition between the second and the third generations of the dynasty, and the historical narrative will show that national circumstances played a crucial enabling role. Rather than suggest universal mechanisms drawn from cultural notions or from organizational logics, the lesson here is that the political development of that particular period was superbly conducive to a form of muscular political mobilization and networking that helped the third generation to establish itself in politics, business and crime. Local factors were also important, including a certain 'strong-man' cultural element to which we shall briefly return, and more crucially the network of allies that the three brothers of the third generation represented. These notwithstanding, the succession from a weakened second generation to a regenerated third generation was facilitated by a national political climate in which autocrats sought local clients to bolster their regime—allowing these to turn into local patrons with wide licences.

The second lesson to be gleaned from the story of the Osmans of Narayanganj is that even the strongest dynasties will eventually face the potentially ruinous challenges of succession. A dynasty, even a strong dynasty and even a dynasty several generations deep, is no guarantee for continued political power. In this particular case, the threat to the family's political fortunes is compounded by the violence and brutality popularly associated with the family's name and with individual family members. Efforts to protect the dynasty, including a wayward nephew who allegedly turned to murder, have backfired and seriously threaten the family's future. Much political capital has been spent to defuse an alarming situation and serious rivals have gained more than a foothold. The circumstances are no longer such that the methods that were so successfully employed in the transition between the second and third generation are appreciated.³

³ Because the people in this story at the time of writing continue to wield influence and be attacked, the narrative and details have no end. Nonetheless, end of 2017 has been treated as a cut-off date and events after this are not included here.

Early History

Shamim Osman is the MP for Narayanganj-4, a constituency that embraces the sprawling northern part of the industrial city of Narayanganj. He was elected unopposed in 2014.⁴ He was also MP of the same constituency from 1996 to 2001.

His brother Selim Osman is the MP of Narayanganj-5, adjacent to Shamim's constituency. Selim was elected in a by-election in 2014 when the former MP of that constituency died. That former MP was Nasim Osman, their elder brother. Nasim was first elected MP in 1986, and he was re-elected in 1988, 2008 and 2014.

The brothers Nasim, Selim and Shamim are sons of AKM Shamsuzzoha, popularly known as Zoha. Zoha was first elected MP in the 1970 election. This parliament was not constituted until after the bloody liberation war in 1971. In the first national election after the war, in 1973, Zoha was elected MP.

Zoha's father was Khan Saheb Osman Ali, political activist, businessman, social worker, and MP. He was elected to the provincial parliament in 1946 on a Muslim League ticket.⁵

The political importance of the family is suggested by this listing of its MPs. And yet its influence has been based on more than parliamentary seats. The Osmans were very much an Awami League family, in fact the family to some considerable extent *was* the Awami League in Narayanganj and they are closely associated with the whole history of the Awami League. The family's political journey started when Khan Saheb Osman Ali as a young man took part in the Khilafat movement and later became a local pro-independence movement leader for the Muslim League. Years later, while Member of the Assembly (elected in 1946), he with others broke away from the Muslim League to join what was to become Awami League. Here his two sons also joined and took active part in the struggle against West Pakistani overlordship and later for secession and independence. One son in particular, Shamsuzzoha, popularly known as Zoha, carried the mantle onwards and was twice elected to parliament (1970 and 1973). A significant dip in the family's fortunes followed after the 1975 coups and countercoups that established military regimes in the country, but Zoha's sons Nasim, Selim and Shamim rebuilt the power and position of the family to the extent that they become known as the lords of Narayanganj. This is one of the two stories we will investigate in particular in this article. The other story is the story of the next succession and the threats to the family's position that are playing up. First, however, it is necessary to outline with more detail the nature of the family's history and its claim to rule in Narayanganj.

The patriarch, Khan Saheb Osman Ali, was not only a politician. In addition to his political engagement he set himself up as a successful businessman in Narayanganj, which was one of the few industrial places in the eastern parts of pre-partition Bengal. He had businesses before partition that were extended afterwards. In particular, he set up the first jute business in the province, in Narayanganj, and came to be among the town's wealthiest people. He also built a reputation as a philanthropist, and he was already married into a politically influential family. The combination of his political, financial and philanthropic activities made him one of the most prominent leaders of the town in the 1950s. When the emerging national leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, visited Narayanganj, it was with Osman Ali he stayed. As a founding member of Awami League, Osman Ali was engaged in the language movement of 1952 and was imprisoned for a while. He actively participated in constitutional movement of 1962, the Six-point

⁴ The 2014 election was marked by an opposition boycott. About half the members of parliament were elected unopposed and without a vote.

⁵ In addition to these five MPs over three generations from the same family, there was also Sarah Kabori Sarwar. She was famous as a film-actress and sister-in-law of Zoha. She was elected MP from Narayanganj-4 in 2008. However, she was estranged from the family including her husband by the time of her election.

Movement and the Mass Upsurge of 1969. The family's prominent role in Narayanganj and national political history in this period is highlighted in Mujibur's autobiography (Rahman, 2012). Family history and local lore maintain that Awami League was established in their house, but this is not supported by other evidence. None the less, as wealthy and educated, the family belonged to and largely constituted the politico-cultural elite of this provincial town.

The educated elite and in particular younger members in what was then East Pakistan felt deeply aggrieved by what they saw as West Pakistani dominance. A majority of positions in the government apparatus, in businesses and in the powerful army were occupied by people from the West Pakistani provinces. The Bengalis were greatly outnumbered in the higher echelons, even in East Pakistan, causing widespread resentment among educated Bengalis and a feeling that opportunities were blocked. The demand for greater autonomy coalesced around issues of language, literature and identity, and gained particular traction among students in colleges and universities, but also among the salaried classes and even into the army. In Narayanganj, Osman Ali himself and his sons Zoha and Mustafa Sarwar were deeply engaged in the emerging independence movement. Both sons became prominent leaders in the 1960s. Mustafa Sarwar set himself up as a successful businessman in jute, and Zoha was elected MP in the 1970 election.⁶ By independence Zoha had become the foremost party leader in town. His prominence was such that when one-party rule was introduced 2 years later, Zoha was made member of the 118-strong central committee of the ruling Baksal party.⁷ The family was close enough to the ruling family of the country for the sons to be friends and go to school together. According to his own testimony, Selim Osman bought fish for Mujibur every Sunday and did a lot of mischief with his friend, Mujibur's son. According to Shamim Osman, Mujibur's son Sheikh Kamal had planned to attend Nasim Osman's wedding—except the assassination of Mujibur and his family happened just days before.

Loss and New Opportunities

Immediately after the assassination of Mujibur and much of his family in the bloody coup in August 1975, what had been the crucible of the Osman family's success, its position within the ruling elite and its closeness to the ruling family, became a liability. They suffered considerable losses. Zoha was arrested, the elder son went into hiding and their house and businesses were expropriated. Some Awami Leaguers supported the new regime, but most did not and many of those who had been powerful Mujibur loyalists were targeted by the new regime. According to family lore, the second son Selim made a living selling chicken in Dhaka markets while the eldest son Nasim worked as a bus and truck driver. Nasim is also said to have been engaged in the armed resistance against the new regime, under the leadership of Kader Siddique, the famous Tiger of Tangail.

So how were the family's political fortunes rebuilt? When the repression softened a little, the three sons of Zoha became active in Narayanganj—one in Awami League politics and two in college. By the time Zoha was released from prison in 1981 after the assassination of Zia, the sons had come a long way in rebuilding the family's position. Their success was due to the fact that the family in spite of set-backs was not without resources. These included its history and name. The country's liberation was only a decade back in time and had come as the culmination of a movement that had started another 15 or even

⁶ The 1970 election was the last election in united Pakistan and Zoha was elected to the provincial assembly. This assembly never met. The 1973 election was the first election in independent Bangladesh.

⁷ Baksal was formed by a merger of several political parties, although the Awami League was clearly dominant. One-party rule was in place only for a few months in 1975, before the assassination of the country's president and coup.

20 years further back. The liberation movement had been one of political mobilization, ideological honing, hard organizational work and sacrifices, and its 'spirit' was still very much a reality. Even if individuals had defected to the new regime, Awami League in Narayanganj had basically held together (nationally the threat of a division was more serious). The Osmans were still closely associated with this legacy and with the party, and they could draw on the support of its organization and its supporters at different levels.

There were also various businesses. Zoha's brother Sarwar continued to control a substantial jute business. Into the second half of the 1970s, Selim, Zoha's second son, also set him himself up in business. He established one of the earliest garments factories in the country, the first in a tremendously successful line of business.

In addition to a relatively strong organization among the educated, Awami League in Narayanganj also had 'muscle'. The organized labour force was particularly important. The Adamjee Jute Mill had been set up in the 1950s with government help in Siddhirganj, not far from the Osman's family turf in Chashara. At its height it employed some 17,000 men. Zoha and his associates mobilized the workers through the local unions for the nationalist movement and after independence maintained a close relationship with this huge force. The mill was nationalized after the war and as MP Zoha had naturally come to wield considerable influence over its operation. As with most nationalized enterprises in Bangladesh after liberation, Adamjee suffered increasingly from labour unrest and overstaffing.

The close local association of party politics and muscular politics was not unique to Narayanganj. It had developed rapidly in many parts of the country in the years following independence. This is a less explored aspect of the early history of Bangladeshi political culture but evident enough in contemporary accounts. This development had been propelled by the unusual circumstance of the war, the destabilization of the country by a series of constitutional crises and coups, the general poverty and the proliferation of armed groups. By the time the third generation of Osmans were making their political debut, violence had already become part of the country's political culture. It is within this history their rise took place.

The origin for the proliferation of armed groups after independence lies in the wartime development of the resistance forces. The Mukti Bahini, the armed wing of the independent government-in-exile, consisted of both regular soldiers defected from the Pakistani army and political activists, and groups of volunteers. As a force the Mukti Bahini never completely coalesced into a coherent and disciplined army, and after independence some of the elements contributed unruly politicized groups and irregular armed forces. In addition, there were other groups, including the famous band of independent strongman Kader Siddique, and various leftist groups.

The effort to disarm these after the war was only partially successful. Within the first year of independence, law and order had become a major political issue. The country was massively disturbed and famished, and armed gangs engaged in robberies and in large-scale smuggling across the border to India. There were even armed attacks on police stations at a rate that reached 'alarming proportions' (Jahan, 2005, p. 119). The government called in the army on several occasions to quell smuggling and mayhem, but efforts were often frustrated because the criminals had political protection (Ahmed, 2014; Jahan, 2005, p. 169; Mascarenhas, 1986; Tripathy, 2014, p. 229).

In addition, new forces were set up and armed by the government or the ruling party. The first was the *Rakkhi Bahini*, an official force of many thousand officers but few guidelines (Tripathy, 2014, p. 231). Soon after, it was followed by the *Gram Protirokkha Bahini* (Village Defence Force), the *Swechchhasebak Bahini* (Voluntary Force) and the *Lal Bahini* (Red Force). These were followed by the Bangladesh Rifles, an armed border guard. In reality all these forces depended on their loyalty to the ruling party for salaries, protection and patronage.

The many forces constituted mechanism through which rivalry over resources turned violent. Clashes between armed groups ‘were common’ (Jahan, 2005, p. 130). The unrest spread throughout the country and the countryside in particular. Of the Village Defence Force it was said in a contemporary testimony that in reality it ‘meant the suppression of political opposition’ (Hartmann & Boyce, 1983, p. 182). In addition, other militias also continued to operate, such as the Maoist *Shorbohara* movement and local groups of criminals (*mastans* and dacoits).

No less than five MPs and 3,000 party activists were assassinated in the first 3 years of independent Bangladesh, and this situation helped legitimize the declaration of emergency in late 1973 and the constitutional changes that in 1974 led to the establishment of a one-party state (Jahan, 1976, p. 364). This law and order situation was also used to legitimize the government that took power a few months after Mujibur’s assassination as it promised rule-based governance and an end the violence. But in spite of all pretence to the opposite, General Ziaur Rahman’s regime also used armed vigilantes to establish its political presence in different parts of the country. The Jubo Complex was a youth organization for economic and social development while ‘In practice the 93,990 members spread throughout the land were essentially groups of young toughs and thugs kept on leash for use in elections, demonstrations, referenda or simply to smash the opposition whenever Zia or the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) required it’ (Mascarenhas, 1986, p. 129). Zia’s political party, BNP, also had a youth wing, a student wing, a volunteer wing and other organizational set-ups through which activists and leaders could expect government patronage and protection in exchanged for certain services.

In spite of its efforts, however, the new regime’s writ did not always go very far. Narayanganj was one such place. Awami League had rebuilt and could muster considerable street presence. With a party man as mayor of the municipality and its organization largely intact, the party was sufficiently strong to ‘protect’ large groups of people from the interference of the police or administration. The collaboration extended further and included the workers unions.

While the elder son, Nasim, was active building himself up in the organization and the second son, Selim, was setting himself up in business, the third son, Shamim, ran for the position as vice-president of the student union at the college where he studied. On the day of the vote, students who turned up were told to go home, ‘the vote is over’. According to one version there were quarrels and fistfights between the supporters of Shamim and those of his rival, and according to other versions the fight was violent, and one student was killed. Whichever story is correct, force was used and the election was rigged.⁸ The police did not interfere.

The sham election underlines the brittle hold of the Zia regime and the role of muscular politics in Narayanganj. Zia legitimized his regime on steering the country away from the disorder Awami League had created a few years earlier and he had established BNP to oppose its broad influence (Rashiduzzaman, 1978, 1979). In Narayanganj, however, the local Awami League was too entrenched and its powerholders so influential that the new government platform had little penetration.

After his election as VP of the Tolaram student union, Shamim started operating in the shadowlands of student movement, labour unrest and increasingly extortion—or so it is alleged (on student politics in Bangladesh, refer to Ruud, 2010; Suykens, 2018). His modus operandi was a band of muscular supporters who took money from local businesses in exchanged for protection—at first in their home area of Chashara but later expanding to large parts of the city.

The arms they used ranged from cut rifle to machetes and sticks [*lathi*]. Hockey sticks were very popular. Nowadays there are more updated technologies, such as pistols. But not in those days.

⁸ Where not referenced the local stories are based in interviews conducted with Narayanganj political leaders, community leads, activists, cultural workers and journalists over several field visits between 2013 and 2017.

One informant called it a 'reign of terror.' The group used to threaten any budding student leader that threatened Shamim's position. A very considerable part of the reputation for brutality that has followed Shamim Osman down the years was established during this early period. It was not just Shamim, but his family that earned a bad reputation.

They are notorious murderers. In 1973 they murdered the student leader Rokon. Many other murders followed. Their murders began in the first regime of Awami League. All in order for them to keep on to power.

It is also alleged that 'torture cells' were set up. Whether true or not, the allegation was often sufficient to intimidate people. The atmosphere of fear that had been created was sufficient to ensure compliance. But there were many who gave voluntarily. The logic of the situation was that rich businessmen gave regularly and decent amounts in order to be able to call upon his intervention and that of his gang when needed—against recalcitrant labourers or trade union leaders for instance, or in the well-known 'tender business' in which the objective is to physically prevent rival tenders from being submitted.

Main Elements of Restoration

A crucial element at this juncture in the family's fortunes was the successful establishment of new linkages, new networks. It has often been suggested that successful families 'hedge' their fortunes by aligning with opposing factions or parties (Khawaja & Mian, 2005). Some individuals shifted to BNP in the 1970s, but the political gap was so wide Awami Leaguers tend to think of it as treason. Jatiyo Party, however, the party set up by general-turned-president H.M. Ershad, was closer to Awami League because BNP regarded it as a rival.⁹ Jatiyo was even more a motley crew of the disgruntled and the ambitious than BNP. Ershad generously lubricated support from local power holders with licenses and government support. Corruption reached new heights, violence against opponents was increasingly common, and armed gangs became integral to everyday politics.

In Narayanganj, one of the powers that interested Jatiyo Party was the Osman family. With his father's blessing, Nasim Osman joined Jatiyo Party and was made MP in 1986 and again in 1988. This was a major turn of events in the family fortunes, because it enabled the eldest brother to extend a protective hand to his siblings.

So why was an Osman chosen in the first place? It seems partly to be due to the family's political pedigree, which bought considerable legitimacy to a shaky regime. But above all it was because of the political influence the family already had. As members of the progressive faction of Awami League they enjoyed the implicit support of most of the educated middle classes. Their loyalty to Mujibur Rahman and his legacy, to a set of ideals, would override reservations. And the family skilfully played in several directions. When Mujibur's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, returned to Bangladesh in 1982, Zoha was one of the few in the party to come forward in her defence and support—both organizationally and personally. Moreover, the Osmans had maintained credible street presence in Narayanganj using their influence among workers and the proletariat of the city, both jute mill and harbour labour, and the gangs of toughs that had coalesced in the interface of extortion, weapons and political protection. It is widely held that

⁹ So close in fact Jatiyo Party is sometimes referred to as the Awami Jatiyo Party and election posters for Nasim Osman sported photos of Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina.

the Osmans were good organizers. It was this force that the Ershad regime wanted to harness, to bolster its power and authority.

While the elder brother established links to the *régime du jour*, the second brother, Selim, very successfully expanded his businesses partly under the protective umbrella of the MP and certainly making the most of the Jatiyo government's neoliberal and World Bank inspired industrialization policies. He was part of the development that saw the original four or five spinning mills in Narayanganj slowly expand over the years to over four hundred mills, employing more than two hundred thousand workers. He owns himself 18 factories now, his major business company being called Wisdom Attire. As a major businessman in the region, he enlisted the assistance of central politicians and set up the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers in 1996 and has served as its chairman ever since. He has also served as president of Narayanganj Chamber of Commerce and of the Narayanganj Club.

All the while the younger brother, Shamim, was busy establishing himself as a local leader, influential on his own terms. His rise showed his hybrid authority from the beginning: part street smart, part violent, part political activist. In his home neighbourhood of Chashara and to a considerable extent throughout the city, Shamim's reputation was and still is mixed. One of his opponents today said of him 'I know Shamim Osman for many years, from the mid-1970s. At that time, he was not this dangerous man what he is today. He was popular.' Shamim was crucial to the slow solidification of Awami League's support base in the 1980s and to its organizational strength. He personally became popular both among organization leaders and Awami League supporters. He built a force that was able to withstand what many locally understood as repression by the police—nightly searches, demands for bribes, arrests on petty charges and other forms of state supported harassment. Shamim in particular but other family members too were deeply engaged in protection of individuals, and very much so for members and leaders of the party organization. There would be cases filed against individual Awami Leaguers—for possession of illegal firearms, or other trumped-up charges—and Shamim and the Osmans would help. In some individual cases they physically prevented the police from entering certain streets or houses. Such acts made Shamim in particular a popular leader and proved that he was forceful and clever. He is also remembered as someone who took a clear stance against communalism and occasionally got physically involved.

I don't know whether he is still secular. But once in our college days, we came to know that [someone planned to attack] a Hindu temple. Shamim Osman organised us and together we guarded the temple so that no one could attack it. We went there as members of Chhatra Sangram Parishad [an umbrella platform of student organizations against the autocracy], and Shamim Osman came personally. Shamim has always been a militant against Jamaat.

He was also in the forefront of the anti-Ershad movement in Narayanganj. This national movement has in popular memory turned into a formidable popular struggle and brought together almost all political parties in the country—including the largest two, Awami League and BNP. Students and student organizations were particularly active, in a persistent demand for the restoration of democracy. In Narayanganj Shamim Osman emerged as the leader of the protests, partly due to his position as vice-president of the student organization at the city's largest college and partly due to his personal abilities—as organizer of active students and as leader of a gang of toughs. His gang of toughs were partly *mastans* and partly activists and expanded their extortion business while taking part in street protests against the government. They also allegedly filled in in demonstrations in support of the government. 'Shamim Osman was the leading figure in the movement against Ershad'. His charisma and organizational skills made him very successful.

And so we have a glimpse of a more complex operation. The brutality and violence obscure the view of a compelling and useful side to this nexus of legitimate politics, business, and crime, one that benefitted not just the top dog but many. With one brother MP, one in business, and one harnessing street power and street credibility, the three Osman brothers together constituted a formidable trio. Each had distinct networks and sources of power, and although aligned differently they were known to support one another and draw on one another's assistance when needed. All three continued to live in Narayanganj, and they continued to live in Chashara where they for many years also shared house as a joint family.

In-built Challenges

From the 1980s onwards, the Osmans consolidated their power and influence. This was not without setbacks as their fortunes continued to be tied to the national context. When Awami League to its own surprise lost the national election in 1991, it also lost in Narayanganj. When Awami League won the 1996 election, it won in Narayanganj as well. Nasim Osman lost his membership in parliament in 1990 but remained with Jatiyo Party and became an influential figure in Narayanganj when Jatiyo allied with Awami League to form government after 1996. At the same election, his younger brother Shamim was elected to parliament, on an Awami League ticket. Nasim was re-elected in 2008 and again in 2014, and Shamim in 2014. It is the younger Shamim who was to become the more famous or infamous of the two and who is at the limelight of the challenges the dynasty has come to face. It is to him we turn text.

Albeit the younger Osman's position rested to some vital extent on the national circumstance, he was also his own man—a boss figure, a street-smart activist with a knack for organizing, popular and reviled, and someone who soon earned himself the epitaph 'godfather of Narayanganj'. In this epitaph lies respect and even admiration, but also serious challenges.

Even if Shamim is preeminent among the many 'godfathers' in Bangladeshi politics, he is not the only one (see Michelutti et al., 2018). The English term is used and the reference is to the mafia bosses of American popular culture, but the Bangladeshi godfather is more than a superior criminal lord: he is a politician who represents a combination of the licit and illicit. Many so-called godfathers built their careers in the same restless decades as Shamim Osman. Individually, the godfathers of Bangladeshi politics are as CEOs of enterprises: they often have special personal qualities, they are convincing, nimble and flexible in strategic choices, and at times intimidating and at other times charismatic. They maintain wide network of contacts in very different social groups.

Shamim Osman is a good example of the type, one who combines—or so it is held—the licit of activist politics and the office of MP with the illicit of the underground. But before he became MP he was just a political leader; it is after assuming the position of MP that he became a 'godfather'. As a Narayanganj journalist put it, 'The source of Shamim Osman's power is the government'.

For example, we had a government owned factory, Laxminarayan Cotton Mill, which was worth over 450 crores. Shamim Osman and Nasim Osman helped a businessman get it for 30 crores. This is how politicians reward businessmen for their help.

Moreover, deal-making with the rich, the business owners, money for services, is common. 'His business model is very simple: extortion.' Money is received from a select number of businesses in exchange for protection and assistance. The MP does not exact money from small businesses, it is held, only from larger businesses. In general, the control over the government machinery ensures control over much of the economic activity in the city. 'No one can start the construction of a building without their nod.'

Because it is all hush-hush, very little is actually known and rumours abound. Among the more widespread rumours is that he was involved in the private companies that run the bus service on the vital Narayanganj to Dhaka route and was instrumental in closing down the public service. The Dhaka–Narayanganj services were always a little more expensive than comparable services on other routes, it is alleged, and there have been protests.

On the other hand, the money is redistributed. ‘It requires money to run a party.’ The family did not ostentatiously display its wealth (but very few Bangladeshi politicians did¹⁰). Most of the money was used to maintain extensive yet necessary networks. Businessmen paid because refusing to do so involved high risk—of losing licences or having equipment ruined; but they also paid because it was practical and efficient to be on the inside of Shamim Osman’s operation, and they often paid directly—sending someone with an envelope—to the bureaucrat, police officer, activist or *mastan*—rather than indirectly, via the MP. It was the operation that mattered, not the personal gain.

Two examples will suffice to illustrate of how politics, business and muscular politics went hand-in-hand to create a nexus that most informants and many newspaper reports over the last few years have come blame the Osmans more openly for. Both examples suggest the kind of entrenched, routinized system that constitutes a prominent feature of the Bangladeshi state (Kim & Monem, 2014).

In every *thana* [police station] there is a cashier. Unofficial; not on a government payroll. This cashier keeps a record of money paid. Local businesses pay to the *thanadar* [the OC]. Each local factory pays up to one *lakh*. With perhaps a hundred factories under a *thana*’s jurisdiction. The police is counted upon to keep order, including crushing any disorder.

Factory owners pay the local Officer in Charge to suppress movements. Because some police stations have more factories under their jurisdiction, there is competition among OCs for these more lucrative postings and the MP has a decisive voice in the selection. Next time around the MP may ask the OC to stop (or not to stop, depending) a particular protest. The ingenuity of the nexus is that one may be at both sides at the same time. Shamim Osman in particular was alleged to be particularly adept at supporting police efforts to suppress labour unrest and at the same time engaged in the role of patron and protector of workers. Other politicians allegedly did the same, and so did local trade union leaders. Workers were mobilized to demonstrate for higher wages or bonuses, and at the same time their leaders negotiated underhand with party leaders, factory owners and the police. In Narayanganj as elsewhere salaries remained low in spite of frequent demonstrations and protests, but workers tended still, leftist unionists held, to be loyal to Shamim Osman because he was ultimately seen as the only really effective benefactor. In a famous incident he mobilized a huge number of workers to block the highway and prevent (then) opposition leader Khaleda.

The other example that helps illustrate the workings of the politics–business–crime nexus centred on Tanbazar. This was a centrally located area of Narayanganj that in addition to smaller businesses and workshops also housed a large brothel—known as the largest in Asia. The owner was one Doulat Khan, a powerful boss connected to the BNP. Whereas Doulat himself was an active politician, his son Zakir was known as a notorious ‘terror’ (which in Bangladesh denotes hard-core criminal) and the one who commanded the muscle to protect Tanbazar and its businesses. When Shamim as MP started the eviction

¹⁰ Most Bangladeshi politicians seem to hide their wealth well. Suspicion abounds, and the number of very expensive cars left by the wayside during the first weeks of the military backed clamp-down on corruption in 2007 was interpreted as an indication of the extent of political corruption. It is widely held that wealthy politicians invest in apartment buildings in swanky neighbourhoods in the capital.

process, to rid the city of this embarrassment, opposition from both Doulat Khan with associates and organizations working for the prostitutes was formidable. To succeed, the MP mobilized all his forces: the bureaucracy, the police, his rhetorical skills, his newspaper allies, and at one point even the Prime Minister. In the end he won, evicting not only the brothel but a host of other legitimate businesses and secured a very significant blow to the local BNP. For this proof of energy and intelligence he gained wide respect in Narayanganj. It was said of him that Shamim Osman 'is more a politician, knows how to balance things,' whereas his opponents were regarded as 'thugs'.

Tanbazar today is a thriving business area in which the MP and his associated have several rich investments. This is one of the allegations used against him, that he and his associates have personally benefitted from what was otherwise understood to be a morally desired political act. However much a politician first, the secondary tools of muscle, extortion and networking were increasingly visible and objected to. In 2011 it was held by the main national newspaper Prothom Alo that there were 17 criminal cases against him, mostly for alleged involvement in corruption, arms dealing and cases of violence (*Prothom Alo*, 2011).

Danger of Decline

It was generally held in 2017 that the Osman family has lost much of its position and influence in recent years. 'They have become paper tigers,' one Narayanganj activist said, albeit with exaggeration. A significant indication of the decline in the family's position was when in 2017 the middle brother Selim Osman attended a meeting organized by the city corporation mayor and publicly extended his support to her. The mayor immediately asked him to have a particular truck stand removed, and a few days later it was (*The Daily Star*, 2011). The significance of the incident is that the mayor Salina Hayat Ivy was a long-standing rival of the Osmans and Shamim in particular. Ivy had on several occasions publicly accused Shamim of crimes and called him 'godfather', and there were televised spats between them (*bdnews24.com*, 2014a). She was the daughter of an associate-turned-rival of the brothers' father in the 1970s and had run and won against Shamim in two elections for the mayorship of the town (2011 and 2016). They both belong to Awami League and both fought for the prime minister's support. Shamim and Ivy were one another's main rivals and serious claimants to the loyalty and support of the city's party activists, and Ivy had become the rallying-point the anti-Osman wing of the party had lacked. The truck stand incident was symbolic because the stand functioned as an unofficial toll booth and source of income for Shamim, or so it was alleged. Emboldened, cultural activists whose natural inclination was towards Awami League organized regular rallies in front of the Shahid Minar in protest against the kind of rule the Osmans represented.

The reasons for the decline in the family's influence were multiple, but their position suffered in particular from two sensational cases of murder in the city. The first was the murder of Toki, the son of a prominent cultural activist, in which the prime accused is Azmeri Osman, the son of Nasim Osman. The second case of murder was the murder of seven individuals by a close associate of Shamim's. Both cases caused uproar and national limelight, and both revealed—it was alleged—aspects of the modus operandi of the Osman dynasty. The unfolding of the murders and investigation chipped on Shamim's influence while emboldening his opposite camp under the leadership of Ivy. The two cases of murder were special and came to have particular impact, first because they hit directly at the educated middle class, which was unprecedented, and second because the climate in the country had slowly been changing—with less acceptance for muscle politics and a higher expectation of clean politics.

Toki was a 17 years old boy who was abducted, tortured and killed. His body was found in a ditch the day after his disappearance. His father was a nationally known political and cultural activist and Toki's murder immediately made national headlines. The father had only weeks earlier organized the Narayanganj chapter of Ganajagoron Moncho, the organization set up after the massive immense progressive left mobilization known as the Shahbag movement. He also had a conflictual history with Shamim Osman.

Witnesses accused Azmeri Osman and held that he had ordered the abduction and taken part in the murder (*The Daily Star*, 2013). Toki's bloodied trousers were found in a 'torture cell' in a building owned by Azmeri. Azmeri has a bit of a history and it is alleged—'it is well-known' was the phrase—that he had been involved in several murders and disappearances. In one previous case, he had had to go abroad for a while. With his gang of five to six men he had operated with impunity even if his father, Nasim Osman, MP, had disapproved. Again, Azmeri made himself scarce, allegedly hiding in India. Higher authorities deemed the Osmans' local influence such that the local Narayanganj police was side-lined from the inquiry. But even the more professional Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) hesitated in accusing the son of a sitting and ruling party MP of murder and in the end the charge sheet did not mention Azmeri. At the time of writing (February 2018) no one has been convicted of the Toki murder and Azmeri is not known to have returned even though his two uncles are both MPs (Selim was elected after Azmeri's father died).

A year after Toki's murder, 'the seven murder' incident took place in Narayanganj and again Shamim Osman was implicated, if again indirectly. The bodies of a city councillor, his driver and three other associates, plus a lawyer not associated with the councillor and this lawyer's driver were found in the river Shitalakshya. Fingers were pointed first at Nur Hossain, a city councillor known to be close to Shamim Osman, and at members of RAB.¹¹ Within a few days no less than 83 policemen from Narayanganj were transferred, a new Investigating Officer was brought from another district, and the entire force of one particular police station was transferred. In the trial the following year, 35 members of the police forces were charged and convicted, out of whom 26 were given the death penalty (*bdnews24.com*, 2014b). Among them were Nur Hossain. He had originally fled to India but was arrested there and repatriated a year later to face immediate arrest in Bangladesh.

The massive protests that followed immediately after the discovery of the seven bodies were fuelled by years of abductions and killings in the city, including some high-profile ones just previously. Reports suggested that the number of bodies found along a particular stretch of the Shitalokkha river had increased year by year, and one estimated that over 30 bodies had been found in 'the river of the floating dead' within a few months (*The Daily Star*, 2014a). Most bodies had hands and legs tied and some were tied to bags filled with bricks or stones.

Nur Hossain's arrest implicated Shamim Osman through association. Both Nur Hossain and the murdered councillor were known as his men; he had introduced Nur Hossain into Awami League (*Dhaka Tribune*, 2014); and Nur Hossain had turned into a significant figure in the shadowlands of politics and crime. He was vice-president of a local chapter of Awami League, and yet he was engaged in illegal sand trading, extortion in the transport sector, drug peddling, tender manipulation, and river encroachment (*The Daily Star*, 2014d). He dominated drug smuggling, the local speciality of siphoning off oil from ships in the harbour, and the very lucrative waste business from the garments industry.¹² He had 22 criminal cases to his name, including six for murder.

¹¹ Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) has a shaky reputation (refer to Ahmad, 2013, p. 78; Human Rights Watch, 2012).

¹² The massive amounts of cut-off (*jhut*) from the garments industry is worth very large sums of money and has in recent years been regulated by the government and taxed. The business is still very lucrative because the industry is leaned upon by local politicians

It was this ‘culture of impunity’, as a national journalist called it, that protesters objected to with increasing vitality and vehemence. The implication of the elite force RAB and the massive bribes uncovered in the news reports and RAB investigations (by a different wing) led to massive national coverage and agitation (*The Daily Star*, 2014c). That the criminal Nur Hossain had gained positions and influence in Awami League suggested to many that the party and the city under the Osmans did not fare well.

Even people in favour of Shamim Osman acknowledged that popular perception pinned the murders on him. Few believe him to be directly involved, though. It was people around him who had murdered. The MP himself, and now the epithet ‘godfather’ had become very common, had no reason to kill or have killed Toki or the councillor. On the contrary, Shamim Osman was considered too astute a politician not to anticipate the fall-out of such murders. But for personal reasons people around him had stepped too far, believing the MP would save them in the end. They misjudged, and the murders and implications cast the MP in such a bad light that new opportunities have opened for his rivals. It is a significant sign of diminished influence that the MP has not been able to save his associates. At the height of his power, Shamim Osman’s position and influence were such that he would not permit one of his associates to stand trial.

Conclusion

The case of the Osmans of Narayanganj, an industrial ‘middle’ city in Bangladesh adds nuance to theoretical efforts to understand the political dynasty phenomenon. Culturalist or social explanations that suggest dynasties form because the population is politically unconscious fail to convince against the evidence. This particular dynasty and many others with it formed from within a politically highly conscious and charged segment of the population. The dynasty formed initially during years of active political mobilization and struggle, only to solidify and expand with the third generation in what was in effect a political mobilization against an autocratic regime.

The explanation that dynasties form in poorly institutionalized political parties is more convincing. One challenge with this explanation is that it is difficult to avoid a circular analysis—dynastic succession indicates a weak organization and weak organization leads to dynastic succession. Although this observation does not immediately invalidate the connection as spurious, the narrative of the Osmans as a local dynasty rather than a national, party-building one adds useful understanding to this picture. The importance of an enabling national context at a specific historical juncture is crucial to the formation of regional dynasties. The brittle nature of the national sovereignty in a traumatized postcolonial and post-war society constituted an environment in which local sovereigns could establish themselves through a combination of legitimate political activism blended with muscle and readily available weapons, however, innocent by later standards. This situation helped create and sustain local strongmen. The ability of the three brothers initially endowed with a name but little more, to mutually reinforce each other’s positions was the unique local factor that made succession and hence the dynasty possible. There were rivals and challenges at the time and succession was not assured. The fact that the dynasty now does not seem to be able to pass the torch to a fourth generation due to lack of suitable material or possibly because of the presence of unsuitable material, only underscores that personal and basically un-inheritable qualities are essential to the formation of political dynasties.

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and power holders to sell it cheap to their men: ‘If the market rate of the waste is 500 taka for 40 kg, the politicians will force the owner to sell it to the party activists for 50 taka.’

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