The *mohol*: The hidden power structure of Bangladesh local politics

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It is a common view that power in Bangladesh is exercised through patron–client forms of exchange. These patron–client relationships are held together by moral proximity and intimacy and are diffused and multidimensional. Most recently, Basu et al. (2018, Politics and Governance in Bangladesh: Uncertain Landscapes, 1–16. London: Routledge) argue for the persuasive presence of patron–client relationships and its role as the informal, ‘real’ structure as opposed to the formal state structure. The portrait, however, leaves us with the image of a vast undifferentiated web where the only node is the one at the centre. This article seeks to temper this portrait by arguing that at a certain point the web is no longer undifferentiated. It has locally real, tangible nodes of substantial power—often referred to as *mohol* (quarter) in Bangla. These nodes of power are often albeit not invariably centred on the local MP. The existence of these nodes indicates a decentralised power structure, wherein power is located in numerable nodes across the country rather than centralised in Dhaka.

**Keywords:** Political culture, patron–client relationships, *mohol*, syndicate, Barisal, Dhamrai, Mohammadpur

1 Introduction

In their dissection of patterns that account for poor governance in Bangladesh, Basu et al. (2018) argue that there is a gap between rhetoric
and reality. The rhetoric is about the formal institutions, while reality includes the subversion of formal organisational institutions, rules and expectations by a conduct that seeks delivery of resources in favour of allies or clients, or of oneself. The existence of this reality after decades of formal institution building is indicative of a social and political ‘prison’, a pattern of behaviour socially or culturally so deeply embedded that successive regimes in Bangladesh cannot be distinguished from one another with respect to this underlying behaviour. Irrespective of the nature of the various regimes—democratic, nationalist, autocratic—they are all understood as ‘large factional agglomerations of patron-client favours and loyalties which extend from top to bottom of their organisations’ (ibid.: 10). Political parties, in their view, may look formal but their ‘institutional profile resembles a traditional dal [faction, group] comprising leaders and followers bound together by highly personalised, multiplex ties of obligation, favour and dependence as well as interdependence’ (ibid.: 6).

These ‘large factional agglomerations of patron-client favours and loyalties’ carry the weight of the country’s poor governance record and the inability of state development funds to reach where they should.

This view is not dissimilar to the so-called Net that was identified in the late 1970s: an informal network that included village patrons and government officials, and that controlled access to (or rather diverted) government development funds (BRAC 1983). Jansen’s (1986) ethnography from the late 1970s supports convincingly this dim picture of rural exploitation by better-connected patrons (also Jahangir 1982).

The conceptualisation of systems of exploitation summed up in ‘the Net’ was later challenged by Khan (1989; also Lewis and Hossain 2008) who pointed to important developments in rural society that afforded individuals new sources of access. There were similar developments in India, which gave rise to the new patron or middleman appropriately captured in Anirudh Krishna’s term naya neta, new leader (Krishna 2011). As opposed to the old-type patron who belonged to a dominant caste and hailed from large land-owning families, the naya neta was often self-made and depended on the relationships he himself built with more powerful patrons (also Alm 2010). The recently published Mafia Raj (Michelutti et al. 2018) contains a series of portraits of a subset of new leaders—the criminally inclined, few of whom could be characterised as being from privileged backgrounds. Jansen’s (2019) restudy confirms that Bangladeshi village society has gone through similar extensive changes, and that many new opportunities had become available (also Lewis and Hossain 2017).
Much of the increasingly large number of studies on political leadership in South Asia adds credence to Basu et al.’s (2018) interpretation, that the state is not so much an actual formalised institutional set-up as it is a social and cultural ‘prison’ of expectations and practices. But the large number of studies has also given us very varied portraits of political middlemen and political leaders (and, given that anyone’s patron is potentially also someone else’s client in this interpretation, the two cannot easily be distinguished from one another) and should prompt us to question further the practical nature of this large web of relations. The assertion in this article is that the conceptualisation of a large web of patron–client relationships effectively hides the identification of real executive power.

II

Patrons and middlemen

In contemporary South Asia, the new breed of middlemen utilises a greater-than-before variety of possible sources of influence, and the terms used to characterise them are equally large. They are in the literature known as brokers, fixers, patrons or middlemen. They are the mediators of contemporary South Asia’s ‘mediated state’ (Berenschot 2010) and are expected to act as brokers (Haque this issue; Kuttig this issue; Ruud 2011). They are the men—and I use the term ‘men’ throughout as a shorthand while acknowledging that women often perform similar roles—who people the grey zone between the formal institutions of the state and the messy everyday of socially embedded negotiations and practices. Collectively (if that is at all a thinkable categorisation) they vary a lot. They can be charismatic (Hansen and Verkaaik 2009), violent (Berenschot 2011; Jackman 2019; Michelutti and Martin 2017) or just help organise and put people in touch with one another (e.g., Manor 2000). Some just happen to be in the right place at the right time, such as non-governmental organisations (NGO)-workers in disaster zones (Aase 2019). Some excel because of a personal network and personal powers of persuasion (Alm 2010; Krishna 2011), and others try out pretence, trickery and the performance of might (Michelutti et al. 2018).

These many forms of middlemen represent a confusing array of levers and tactics that confound our understanding of local political configurations. In this narrative, the central figure of the political leader is not sufficiently highlighted because he is lumped together with the rest.
as another middleman. The term *neta*, meaning leader, adds confusion by being applied to both powerful leaders and local aspirants.

One fundamental proposition for this article is that the local networks consist of people of different orders. Some are officials; others are businessmen, lawyers, enforcers, activists etc. These are the true middlemen, ‘the men in the middle’ in Sud’s (2014) terminology, the men who exchange favours and services between the weaker and the stronger. They perform middleman roles as part of a larger network, a network that consists of different kinds of middlemen—lawyers, enforcers and business associates. These networks have a central figure, often a political leader. The central figure is not a middleman, at least not in a meaningful sense: he is the one around whom the middlemen orbit. The many middlemen are each part of separate and different set-ups which all have different purposes and characteristics. The political leader holds the networks together. Without the man at the centre, the system does not work. The political leader is the chief executive officer (CEO) of a heterogeneous operation that includes both legal and quasi-legal and sometimes illegal subplots, both overt and covert, that thrive in the broad opaque borderlands that is South Asian democracy (Ruud and Islam 2011). Due to the nature of the deals, much of this coordination work is hidden even from the view of many of the participants. The lawyer does not know the enforcer; only the political leader knows them both.

These operations are akin to ‘networks of trust’ that Charles Tilly (2010) identified as commitment-maintaining connections often for high-risk enterprises, such as marriage, political conspiracy or clandestine religious practice. Tilly’s concept is useful for it points to the importance of interpersonal trust for such networks to function. These are not permanent; on the contrary, they exist at the risk of members’ malfeasance, mistakes and failures, but they can also be highly influential and powerful.

This article will investigate the operation of these networks of trust through three vignettes and three different terms.

### III

**Cases from middle Bangladesh**

We shall use material from three different cases: the southern city of Barisal, the small periurban town of Dhamrai just outside the capital and Mohammadpur, a sprawling urban neighbourhood in Dhaka itself.
A common denominator for these three places is that they all belong to what we might call ‘Middle Bangladesh’, the country’s equivalent of ‘Middle India’ (Harriss-White 2015). They are not ‘the centre’ but also not ‘the periphery’. They are part of the country’s growing and increasingly globalised economy, integrated into it and yet in its outer reaches. In Harriss-White’s words, Middle India is the place of the informal economy, and the informality of this economy means ‘those kinds of labour relations, and those contractual forms, where regulative law is unenforced, and so flouted or ignored’ (ibid.: 5). It is where labourers are right-less and unprotected and relations are socially regulated rather than state-regulated, although not all is criminal and some are highly profitable. This economy is dynamically and extractively linked to global value chains.

In Bangladesh, the ‘Middle’ is manifested in its 16–18 provincial cities each with a population of 400,000–1,000,000 but also in urban localities with their mixture of small, noisy and polluting industries or businesses and the densely populated housing blocks. In reality, these urban neighbourhoods are no closer to the national centre of power than the half-rural towns in the central plains. This is a landscape that suffers an intense rivalry over scarce resources and in which officials and officialdom exercise power through permits and licences, certificates, ID-cards and schemes small and large. Public institutions such as Union, City Corporation or Municipality play a major role in economic and political life. In the city of Barisal, a significant source of profit derives from contracting for local government works, mainly construction works, and involves tenders and bids, contracts, permits and licences. In the quasi-rural town of Dhamrai, a significant source of opportunity for profit-making lies in land, for building or for cultivation, for which deeds and records become crucial. In the dense urban neighbourhood of Mohammadpur, it is housing and the construction business, and again land records and also fire regulations and shop licences that are sources of money and obstruction. In all three cases, the necessary paperwork constitutes a major source of power.

In all three cases, we see the presence of middlemen of various kinds, from the dodgy lawyer and the bendable official to the contractor, the activist, the enforcer and the union leader and the criminal boss. Increasingly, the system has also come to include the local media, which is more a political tool than a political watchdog.

More crucially, the three vignettes draw our attention to how financial or political decisions are taken, to how there are hidden mechanisms at
work and how decision-making power is located in particular individuals and positions. They are the centre of clandestine networks with real allocative power. These networks are referred to as ‘syndicate’ or mohol (quarter or inner quarter). They centre on individuals and individualised trust, they work largely autonomously from other centres of power, they create their own operations and they depend on control over state powers.

The vignettes are based on interviews in the localities and on news reports.¹

IV

Contracting in Barisal

There are several dozen small and large tenders for public works every year in Barisal City Corporation. They range in size from a 200,000 taka to several million. Because of so-called tender politics, in which physical intimidation and threats are used to prevent rivals from submitting bids (Ruud 2010), the submission and selection of bids for tenders is tightly regulated. At the national-level e-tender is increasingly common, but in the provinces the physical submission of papers is still (2018) the norm. This is why a number of measures have been implemented to ensure that the process is transparent and avoids undue influence during both submission and selection. First, the physical boxes where the paper bids are deposited are placed in more than one office and, if need be, police officers are posted to guard against activists. Second, there must be at least three bids for jobs over a certain sum, and the contract should be given to the lowest bidder. Third, the selection committee will have representatives from technical, administrative and political wings of the local government.

A senior officer in the district administration said that ‘the system is fool-proof but does not work’. The contractors simply agree among themselves beforehand. A senior contractor explained how: When a job is advertised, he said, contractors will sit down and negotiate.

¹ Material for the Barisal section is based on interviews conducted in Barisal between 2011 and 2018. Some material is reproduced from Ruud (2019). Material for the Mohammadpur and Dhamrai sections was collected during fieldwork in 2018–2019.
The contractor supposed to get the job submits the lower bid and two others will submit bids that are higher. The lower bid will be sufficiently high to allow a cut for the accomplices. The bidding will conform to the formal requirements. ‘If there had to be a hundred bids, there would have been a hundred bids’.

There are some potential pitfalls, though. The municipal technical staff may decide that the quality of the bid or the contractor is not sufficiently high. This is why officials are often brought into the negotiations beforehand. A more serious danger is the political leader. For the other committee members, it will be difficult to go against his recommendation because as individual officials they are vulnerable, often lack local networks and can be transferred.

The political leader is at the centre of this game and dominates it. Members of Parliament (MPs) and mayors in the ruling party are powerful in terms of both political clout and statutory powers, and their men are powerful by extension. Contracts and the work afterwards are secured through their agreement. As one of the contractors said, ‘If you do not have political power you cannot drop the bid’. Or at least not successfully. So, for any major contract, the political leader will be invited into the negotiations or will himself encourage the negotiations. ‘I will send my man to help you’ was how a contractor said the political leader muscled in. In the private negotiations, the leader or his agent will lay out the conditions.

The political leader’s contribution is to manage the negotiations in the selection committee where municipality officials as well as the relevant engineers are represented. His job continues after the contract has been awarded. It is on his authority that the work goes ahead and that crucial people remain in on the game—including rival contractors, officials and bureaucrats, the engineers, union leaders, party workers, activists, allies and journalists. They need to be managed. An angry and dissatisfied local councillor may see his right-hand man beaten up in a dark alley. A newspaper editor may be happy to see a large order by the city authorities for adverts in his paper. Losing contractors look forward to the next round of bids. Questions such as ‘who is close enough to the political leader to get positive attention’ and ‘whose fortunes are taking a dip’ are continuously being asked by anyone. Hearsay, gossip and rumours—any kind of information—become necessary for survival (Michelutti et al. 2018; Piliavsky 2013).
Syndicate or mafia

Terms often used to denote clandestine collaboration include ‘mafia’ and ‘syndicate’. Both terms in colloquial speech refer to collaboration between people involved in an illegal business and who share common privileges. Typically, a ‘yaba business’ will be run by a syndicate. The term mafia is often used to explain a situation in which prices of certain commodities are unexpectedly high (sand, eggs, onion, milk) or monopolised. Traders, police, officials and drivers are often suspected of collaborating on prices or on supply, for instance. A slight difference between the two terms is that mafia tends to be used for less concrete cases, for allegations of a criminal band with a useful police protection, while syndicate refers to more elaborate forms of criminal activity. Typically, the term syndicate indicates that several people with political connections are involved, including political leaders themselves. In the Indian context ‘syndicate’ refers essentially to ‘low-level cartels’ that offer ‘services’ to builders and property developers while also enjoying political patronage (Das 2019). In the Bangladesh context, the term encompasses the political masters.

A last and crucial difference is that while mafia denotes a whole group directly engaged in an ongoing illegal business enterprise and benefitting as a group, syndicate denotes a larger collaboration of people who facilitate each other and while doing so also profit from it, albeit individually. They are not necessarily known to one another or at least not closely. The Barisal collaboration is a variety of this and involved not only contractors and political leaders but also entrepreneurs, union leaders, enforcers, officials and activists. The people in a syndicate will mostly be there as individuals and run their part of the business on their own. They are not shareholders and do not share capital or profit. They profit from shared interest and from jointly securing an arrangement. It is also commonly assumed that syndicates are rigged in such a way as to ensure profit for members belonging to the ruling party, while also depending on their protection.

While some find profit in car theft and reselling, or in operating housing estates, bus lines, the share market, etc., contracting for government jobs is profitable enough to attract syndicate-like initiatives around all major government departments. A syndicate of contractors will get the winning bid in several ways, including using manipulation, coercion or even violence. Whichever way this happens, the syndicate has the backing and
protection of the political leader. Otherwise, it will not be able to function. The political leader may be the MP or in the case of Barisal the mayor. Even if the MP or mayor does not back members of the syndicate directly, he will draw some benefit from it or his party will (see also Hoque this issue; Kuttig this issue).

While the term syndicate is used to denote a practical and pragmatic form of collaboration, there are other terms to indicate more intimately personal and private forms of collaboration. Of particular interest are the term mohol and its two popular varieties, provabshali mohol (influential quarter) and ghonishtho mohol (close quarter). The first was used extensively to explain an unexpected situation in the Dhaka neighbourhood of Mohammadpur.

VI

Mohammadpur behind the scene

Some 6 weeks before the 2018 national election, two teenagers were killed during a clash between supporters of two rival MP candidates.2 Sadek Khan’s supporters were attacked by some 40 people with iron rods, hockey sticks, knives and daggers. The supporters had formed a procession in advance of buying his nomination papers, a move that challenged sitting MP J.K. Nanok. Both belonged to the ruling Awami League (AL). A local party leader and known supporter of Nanok was a few days later arrested for the attack.

Both Nanok and Sadek Khan held high positions in the party organisation, which made their rivalling a struggle between powerful constellations. In the end, Sadek Khan won the tussle and became the MP, and the way this was later explained locally helps us understand the nature of the mohol.

Mohammadpur is a large lower-middle-class neighbourhood that forms part of the great urban sprawl that is Dhaka. Most of the neighbourhood was built after the 1970s, on lands that were either low-lying or have been reclaimed from the river, the Buriganga. In that early period, the area had supported the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party. But in the 1980s, an energetic local leader named Maqbul successfully mobilised influential

2 The Daily Star (2018) and Dhaka Tribune (2018); interviews with party activists and leaders in Mohammadpur 2019.
local families in favour of the AL. Some of these families were local landowners, and although their land had earlier been of little value, it was becoming very profitable as the city expanded. In 1996, Maqbul became the local MP, and many of his allies became ward commissioners or held other positions of influence. Together, they formed a powerful alliance. Some names figure prominently in popular narratives: Maqbul himself, Sadek Khan and his brothers, and the brothers Hasu and Kashem. With both money and political power, their hold over Mohammadpur was strong.

Maqbul’s time as MP was tumultuous though, as was the case of many AL strongmen throughout the country in that period. His sons developed a reputation for muscle power and abuse. When AL lost the national election in 2001, their abuses were counted among reasons for its loss, and Maqbul was not made the AL candidate again. (But in reverence of his position, his less tainted son was allowed an MP’s ticket from another constituency.)

For the 2008 election, the party selected its Mohammadpur candidate from outside the established local circles. Nanok was chosen because being from the south of the country himself, he appealed to Mohammadpur’s many southern migrants. The local party dutifully supported him, and he sat as MP until 2018. But relations were increasingly strained between him and the other influential local leaders.

One local party worker said, ‘Hasu’s family is native here; he is very popular…. Nanok was not renominated because Hasu was not happy with him’. Another local party worker said ‘Hasu and his brother Kashem were not happy with Nanok’, also holding that this was why Nanok was not renominated. Hasu had wealth, a strong local network and popularity. He also had street presence, was ‘capable of violence’ and many activists lived cheaply in one of the family’s many buildings. His close associate Sadek Khan also had wealth, activists and useful family members. The third local strongman was former MP Maqbul. The three were unhappy with Nanok because of a skewed distribution of proceeds from the state and a feeling that their traditional hold over the constituency was being challenged. Nanok ‘had a circle around himself’, a circle of close associates who won the contracts and did not share the proceeds. In the end, the attack in which the two teenagers were killed was the excuse the local party organisation used to denounce Nanok.

The mohol around Maqbul was sufficiently influential to dethrone a sitting MP and install another in his place. Such dethroning is not unheard of from other constituencies, but mostly such dethroned MPs would not
be powerful in their own right. Nanok was an AL joint general secretary and had built his own network of associates in the constituency using his powers as MP. Contracts, opportunities and positions had been awarded to his associates—some known as his ghonishthos, a term we will return to. But in the view held by many lower party activists and workers observing the unfolding of his rivalry with Sadek Khan and his eventual fall, Nanok had over the years become insufficiently attuned to the needs of the old established political families of Mohammadpur. And when these families finally decided to move the levers of power, it overwhelmed even that of a powerful MP.

Interestingly, the incident with the two teenagers killed in the violent attack on Sadek Khan’s procession was not clear-cut. They were killed not by the attackers, they were run over by a lorry trying to flee. The driver was among Sadek Khan’s supporters. The story could have been spun differently by the press, but it was spun in a manner that implicated and accused Nanok. And the police acted against his right-hand man rather than the Sadek Khan-supporting driver. This was a clear indication of the power of Mohammadpur’s influential quarter.

VII

Provabshali mohol, or influential quarter

The word mohol (or mahal in transcribed Hindi) originates from the era of South Asia’s sultans and Muslim emperors and denotes the inner quarters—often of a palace. It is the hidden part of the palace, where other kinds of liaisons are important than those that appear in public. The term provabshali (powerful, influential) mohol is often used in print and more formal settings to describe vaguely formed notions of collaboration between powerful families or establishment figures whose mutual links are not clear. The term is used as a Bangla equivalent of the English term ‘influential quarter’ and points to what is often a vaguely understood but powerful connivance able to engineer an unexpected outcome.

Provabshali mohol is a term used to describe collaboration between people who are already powerful, who through common bonds choose to collaborate in order to protect their businesses, their interests or their families. The difference between the ‘syndicate’ in Barisal and the Mohammadpur provabshali mohol lies in the more business-like feature of the syndicate. The provabshali mohol has an element of emotional

attachment or at least mutual sympathy—the kind of sympathy that may derive from a common class identity, distant family relations or childhood, school or college friendships. Individuals typically said to be members of a provabshali mohol would often belong to large, educated and well-established families, in a position to draw a wide range of favours from other rich and powerful locals.

The influence of a provabshali mohol is also distinct from political power, which may stem from organisational strength, access to state or financial resources, muscle power, alliances, etc. While political power is mostly public, the relationships of influence in a provabshali mohol are secret and hidden. Again, the provabshali mohol comprises members of the local elite, but not necessarily the entire elite. There may be moneyed individuals or families, for instance, who do not have the links necessary to call upon the services of powerful individuals. Money in itself does not buy you access to these circles. Lastly, it is interesting to note that the administrative elite in a provincial place such as Barisal and Dhamrai (below) is not normally considered to be part of a provabshali mohol. While most senior bureaucrats do have solid school or family links to influential quarters, these ties do not always exist where they are stationed. The civil service tradition of transfers means that officials are dependent on keeping a good relationship with the locally existing mohol rather than the other way around.

Officials and the ambitious from other classes may rise to similar or near-similar positions as the provabshali mohol, however, but they form a different kind of mohol, as exemplified in the Dhamrai case.

VIII

Land grabbing in Dhamrai

In February 2017, the MP of Dhamrai held a press conference in which he made a series of allegations. The MP was M.A. Maleque, and he accused his predecessor, Benajir Ahmed, and a senior local party leader, S.H. Saku, an associate of Benajir, of fraud, violence and land grabbing. (They were all from the same party, the ruling AL.) Maleque claimed that Saku with

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3 Sources for this section include: Prothom Alo (Bangla daily) (2017); Dhamrai News 24 (not dated); Uttaradhikar 71 News (2017); and interviews in Dhamrai, January and August 2019. I am indebted to Mozahidul Islam and AbuBakar Siddique for additional information.
Benajir’s support had become the virtual ‘home minister’ of Dhamrai, that he had had people arrested arbitrarily and that his gang of henchmen had engaged in land grabbing. Maleque also held that the former MP had protected his own brother, a man with a violent past who had engaged in looting, land grabbing, corruption and extortion, and who had attacked and almost killed an assistant secretary of the AL’s central committee.

In response, both the former MP and his associate accused Maleque of similar crimes. They held that he had built an eight-storeyed building in his home village, that he had extensively harrassed rivals in the party and made irregular use of the law against them (including Section 144 and false cases), and that he had had illegal weapons in his house. The associate, Saku, was particularly detailed and alleged that Maleque protected a ring of criminals that included his wife and son, his son-in-law and his nephews. These people, Saku alleged, formed ‘a syndicate’ that thrived on false licences and land grabbing. He singled out Maleque’s wife Meena as the kingpin and accused her of innovative land grabbing. In detailed accusations, he alleged that lands from a cooperative society, from the local girls’ school and from an old people’s home had all been usurped using forged documents. He pointed out that Meena Maleque’s name was mentioned on signboards that had been put up at two sites of grabbed lands.

These mutual recriminations were made in 2017. Before that, the activities they referred to were not widely known although effects such as the alienation of land, the signboards and the cases of arbitrary arrest had been visible. What had remained obscured from view were the individuals involved and the possible motives.

It had been known that the MP’s wife was an influential person in her own right. She was a leading member of the national women’s wing of the party. Locally, her association with a man called Ashraf had slowly become apparent. Ashraf was said to have been unusually knowledgable about local land ownership, and he was well connected. His brother was the Upazila chairman although belonging to the opposition party—the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party). Ashraf had not been without influence before Maleque became an MP, but the support and protection of Meena Maleque made him powerful. It was a working alliance. They were seen talking together at functions or on social occasions, and she offered him support at crucial points. An issue at the local girls’ school was resolved in Ashraf’s favour against that of other AL leaders. The working alliance was surmised by connecting the dots.
In the relatively quiet backwaters of Dhamrai, land was a highly priced commodity. Meena Maleque’s successful endeavours pitted her against the other substantial factions in the ruling party’s local unit, to which belonged the mayor of Dhamrai town. Their rivalry peaked in a struggle, involving the local Hindu chariot festival and a large field belonging to it *(debottor bhumi)*. This valuable piece of land had been denoted ‘enemy property’ in 1971 and had remained vested with the government ever since. Local Hindus disputed the status, but the case, like similar cases, dragged on for decades and most *debottor* land in the area had been lost. This particular field was close to the town centre, and both Meena and the mayor had their eyes on it.

The annual chariot festival took place a few months after the press conference. The festival drew large crowds and local businesses invested in stalls. This was also the main source of income for the festival committee. But a little ahead of the festival, some Hindu shops were vandalised, and just as the festival and its chariot procession had gotten underway, the local police decided to cancel it. The reason given was fear of a terrorist attack. Maleque the MP accused the mayor of being behind the vandalism allegedly because he had not been invited to preside over the festival or because his cut was too small. Hindu leaders chimed in saying the mayor could not be invited because of traditional reasons. A little later, they changed their story, saying they had been under pressure from the MP not to invite the mayor. They filed a case against the mayor but later dropped his name from the case. Senior police officials from Dhaka said there had been no terrorist threat.

Land grabbing is public knowledge, but it is public in the same way that corruption is in Bihar (Parry 2000): certain aspects are visible, but the mechanisms are not. The cases of land grabbing in Dhamrai are interesting because the very public and increasing acrimony revealed the mechanisms. Before the rivalry became public, land grabbing had been ongoing for a while, and in most cases, this is how the mechanisms remain—hidden and oblique. When the chariot festival was stopped mid-way, local Hindus scrambled to understand what was going on, who had pushed the police, who was their enemy and who could help. The general murkiness of (political) alliances—who is in and who is out—is a constant challenge for groups or individuals dependent on dealings with the state.

More characteristic of this case, however, was the quite precise public revelation of collusion and working relationship across party lines and
between people unrelated to one another—the wife of the MP and the brother of an upazila chairman, belonging to rival parties. By being seen together on occasion, they deliberately signalled that they were close, ghonishtho.

IX

Ghonishtho mohol—Close associates

Like anybody else, politicians in Bangladesh have people who are regarded as close to them. These are known by a variety of terms. Ghonishtho or ghonishtho lokjon suggest someone close. They are also known by terms such as kacher lok, shongobongo or ashepasher lokjon—all of which mean people close, near-by. The terms not only indicate closeness to someone powerful, but close with a sense of temporariness, affectionate but less permanent than family bonds. Other related terms used include bishasto (trusted), onugoto (loyal) and onushari (follower). These indicate slightly different relationships but are used interchangeably.

The ghonishthos of an MP are often activists and upcoming leaders from affiliated organisations such as the student wing or the youth wing. They often come from the lower rungs but have shown promise and are ambitious. The origin of their relationship with the leader can vary, from ideological and political closeness to individual closeness. Someone known as member of a ghonishtho mohol is valuable to know because he has the ear and trust of the leader. If you want to meet the leader, it makes sense to contact someone known as his ghonishtho.

It is in the character of the mohol that it is not immediately clear who is in that inner circle and who is just an associate of the leader. But if there is a surprise promotion or a surprise allocation of a license or a contract, it would certainly indicate that the recipient belongs somehow to the ghonishtho mohol.

For the leader, the ghonishthos are trusted lieutenants who can be counted on to remain loyal, proactive and help to carry out the leader’s vision as well as protect his interests. Since the average Bangladeshi constituency has a population of half a million, ghonishthos can certify, for instance, that a person seeking support or benefits is trustworthy and does not belong to a rival’s camp. Ghonishthos may also have influence over tender distributions, or they may be trusted to represent the leader in negotiations with contractors.
In an elected official’s office, there are permanent staff as well. These are not ghonishthos. The ghonishthos are the people who are given the informal job, who support the leader in a struggle with a rival, who can lead a fight against the rival’s activists and who can organise the posting of posters or tear down those of the rival. Once the leader has secured a position, the ghonishthos will continue being close to him and will be rewarded for their allegiance. But if he loses, they may shift to the new man.

Because of the informality of the ghonishtho’s position and the rewards it may give in terms of money, status and power, there is often intense rivalry among young aspirants. The competition is graphically seen in the posters hanging on lamp posts and plastered on street walls: apart from the fixtures of the Mujibur family, there will be the MP or senior leader, then local leaders such as the president or secretary of the local party unit, and finally the aspirant party worker or activist (often known locally as a borovai—elder or big brother) who through the poster seeks to portray himself as close to the leader (Kuttig forthcoming). Unlike the situation for a provabshali mohol, the ghonishtho mohol is often not secret. On the contrary, in the case of the ambitious, it is publicly proclaimed.

X

Conclusion

In any locality in Bangladesh, there will be elements of all these forms of collaboration—syndicate, provabshali mohol or ghonishtho mohol. These are terms that characterise aspects of a basic system of collaboration that exists in all political constellations, in a political culture that is murky and oblique. There are strong similarities between these forms of collaboration and the ‘sistema’ that Ledeneva (2012, 2013) describes from contemporary Russia. Sistema refers to a personalised power network that ensures the distribution of government largesse, privileges and kickbacks within the network. At the same time, being ‘linked to patrimonial rule and traditional forms of governance’ (Ledeneva 2013: 1136), it represents a system of informal governance.

Whereas Ledeneva’s Russian sistema is a national system that centres on a crucial figure in the middle, the system in Middle Bangladesh is decentralised and heterogeneous. The party leadership may be powerful at the national level, but in Middle Bangladesh, the power radiating from Dhaka is felt acutely only on certain occasions and mostly in a supporting
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role. The local political landscape consists of political leaders, contractors, newspaper editors and bureaucrats who together form criss-crossing networks of mutual benefit and antagonism—balancing interest against interest. Similar to the Middle Bangladeshi mohol, however, the Russian ‘sistema’ is ‘an open secret’ (Ledeneva 2012: 149) that represents shared, yet not articulated, perceptions of power and the system of government.

Both in Russia and Bangladesh, as in many other countries, there is an inverse relationship between institutions and levels of trust. When the state is letting citizens down, they are forced to rely on each other to ‘get things done’ (Letki 2018). And yet the mohol is both the unreliable state, and it is the consequence of the unreliable state. The trust network, that is, the mohol, consists of interpersonal connections among some members against others.

In this sense, the mohol represents something real; in another sense, it is ephemeral. It does not exist in any formal sense. Mohol and syndicate are terms used to indicate informal and often hidden agreements or understandings among people of power, whether these are old and established individuals or aspirants. These terms suggest collusion that engenders unexpected outcomes and that manipulates the formal procedures of the state apparatus. But mohol and syndicate, like the term mafia, also connote an allegation that is used to explain an outcome one is dissatisfied with or to cast an aspersion on a rival. The explanation of a mohol is a popular one, based on what one might surmise from hearsay, gossip and rumours. The less influential and less educated will often be guessing more than the influential and the educated. The allegation of a mohol can be a form of slander to dismiss a decision or an attempt to denounce leaders not of one’s liking. But in some cases, such as the ones encountered here, public revelations also confirm pre-existing suspicions.

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