

## Democratic Bricolage

### *Resilience and Innovation in Autocratic Bangladesh*

#### ABSTRACT

Despite their dominance and control over police, courts, state institutions, media, and civil society, authoritarian governments face multifaceted internal and external contestation over their right to rule and the boundaries of autocratic control. Analysis of this opposition is wanting in the literature on democratic backsliding. Societal groups, institutions, and individuals regularly contest governments' claim to legitimate rule, and they seek opportunities to raise their voices and be heard. These efforts, which we call democratic bricolage, are mostly uncoordinated, accidental, disconnected, and dependent on opportunities as these arise. But they undermine the government's claims to authority and legitimacy. They maintain instead the moral claim to democracy, the right to be heard and consulted. We argue that democratic bricolage is the story of democratic resilience in an authoritarian context and an understudied and little-noticed part of the story of autocratization.

**KEYWORDS:** Bangladesh, authoritarianism, bricolage, democracy, protest

IT IS WELL ESTABLISHED that there is democratic backsliding in countries in both the global North and South (Bermeo 2016; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). But there are major gaps in our understanding of how these processes

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are contested and challenged, and the study of resistance is “a neglected area of inquiry” (Tomini, Gibril, and Bochev 2023; see also Wiebrecht et al. 2023). While the literature has investigated how autocratic regimes seek ever new and creative ways of furthering their agenda while hiding their undemocratic nature through what Morgenbesser (2020) calls “autocratic innovation,” it has largely ignored the resilient and creative ways in which the notion of popular accountability and participation are being upheld and autocratization is being contested.<sup>1</sup> This article is about such contestation and how to identify it.

This contestation we call democratic bricolage. It is an assemblage of processes whereby individuals or groups engage in a multitude of modes of protest that disrupt, ridicule, challenge, and resist deepening autocratization. While autocratizing governments adopt a myriad of innovations to control and muffle opposition voices, democratic bricolage constitutes processes by which institutions, groups, and individuals push back. These processes of contention constitute a game of wits between autocratic and democratic impulses and render democratic bricolage an integral part of the story of autocratization. Democratic bricolage is fundamentally the story of democratic resilience in an authoritarian context and thereby the story of how the idea of democracy—people’s participation in governance—is being maintained.

We draw our material from Bangladesh and identify six modes of protest. Each of these could be considered separately, yet there is scope to connect them into a mesh that forms against the backdrop of deepening authoritarian control. In order from the explicit and public to the implicit and private, we have called them defiance, insistence, poaching, subterfuge, networking, and deflection. This is not an exhaustive list or a typology in the stricter sense (Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012). It may be possible to identify other modes or variants furthering democratic aspirations, possibly from other countries. This list, however, illustrates the breadth of democratic bricolage that emerges from our investigation into how the relentless narrowing-down of democratic space in Bangladesh is being contested.

## INNOVATION IN AUTOCRATIC AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

In contrast to earlier forms of dictatorships, contemporary autocratic regimes are run by “spin dictators” (Guriev and Treisman 2022) who pretend to be

1. We use the terms “autocratic” and “authoritarian” interchangeably.

democratic while effectively limiting access to information or meaningful public participation. Such regimes draw creatively on “the menu of autocratic innovation” (Morgenbesser 2020; see also Curato and Fossati 2020), bring strategic litigation against public participation (SLAPP suits), control the media (perhaps indirectly), adapt constitutions, restrict access to information, deploy social media trolling against critics, and silence individual rebels using subtle or not-so-subtle intimidation. In the process they damage both horizontal constraints on government power (via attacks on the legislature and the courts in particular) and accountability to the voting public (via interference with media integrity and civil liberties). Moreover, efforts to constrain public participation and voice through breaches of established norms—a defining aspect of democratic decay (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018)—often also take place locally and in relation to informal institutions and norms. Although their effect at this level is often incremental and may not gain international or even national attention, they can have great (negative) impact on democratic practice (Pepinsky 2020), and this is ultimately “how institutions change” (Lowndes 2005).

Following Glasius’s (2018) definition of autocratization as “disabling . . . access to information and/or disabling their [the citizens’] voice,” we understand efforts to restrict public participation as an expression of autocratic intent. Conversely, we understand efforts to increase the number of spaces for voice as an expression of democratic intent. Democratic intent we then define as opening and respecting spaces for political participation—spaces that are free from the interference of unequal power relations (Dryzek 2009). Following Tomini et al. (2023), we understand resistance against autocratization as any activity or combination of activities that “regardless of motivations, attempt at slowing down, stopping, or reverting” the process of autocratization. Enabling spaces for voice can then work in both formal and informal settings, at different levels, and at different scales. If autocratization is a process of exclusion and silencing, studying democratic contestation in an authoritarian context requires an approach that examines actors and strategies for opening spaces sensitive to their institutional, political, economic, and social context. The resistance to boundary breaches constitutes contestation “over meaning and value” (Pepinsky 2020). New authoritarian moves, practices, and innovations are met with various degrees of foot-dragging, resilience, and resistance (Maerz et al. 2020), which illustrates that voices are unwilling to be silenced, and that concerns and

interests continue to seek opportunities to be heard. This resistance expresses societies' resilience to creeping autocratization.

In a sense, the question behind our investigation is why spin dictatorships are not more successful. They retain a sheen of democracy, civil rights, and rule of law; spin stories about development, sovereignty, national pride, and the popularity of the leader or ruling ideology; and let the citizenry pretend to be free. But they also face continuous opposition and forms of resistance—recalcitrant intellectuals, the occasional outburst of protest, lack of enthusiasm, and ever-new demands for attention and being heard. If spin is successful, why are governments still struggling to maintain order, discipline, and legitimacy? Our analysis has a close affinity with Lisa Wedeen's (1999) study of how Syrians accommodated to the patriarchal claims of the authoritarian Assad regime and James Scott's (1985) notion of "weapons of the weak"—how foot-dragging and related practices reveal a reluctance to accept the hegemonic ideology's claims of benevolence. But we also expand on these "hidden transcripts," to borrow another phrase from Scott (1990), to underline how they form a continuum against the backdrop of deepening authoritarian control.

#### WHAT IS BRICOLAGE?

We use the term "democratic bricolage" to indicate the creative energy and processes of adaptation and contestation over legitimacy and space that are mobilized to broaden, for whatever reason, public participation in political matters. These innovations may range from local or everyday improvisation to more formal or organized demands for due process and democratic institutions. Originally used by Lévi-Strauss (1966) as a metaphor for the creative process ("the science of the concrete," see esp. 16ff), *bricolage* denotes the construction of something useful from a diverse range of material or resources. The *bricoleur* cannot easily plan, because material or tools are finite, and he makes do with what is at hand. Such projects develop as material and tools become available, rely on personal ingenuity and idiosyncrasy, and produce an outcome that is unique and unpredictable (Kini-Singh 2022, 49). Scholars of social dynamics have borrowed the term to mean "the re-ordering and re-contextualization of objects to communicate fresh meanings" (Clarke 1976 149). The concept has been used extensively to describe, for instance, how existing symbols are given new meanings (Mahoney and

Thelen 2010), norms and values are adapted to suit new purposes (Clever 2012), or technical innovation allows new forms of political contestation, such as hacking (Hunsinger and Schrock 2019).

Democratic bricolage, then, embraces inchoate social mobilization and organization, explicit or implicit political alliance-building, and cross-cutting civil society mobilization—actions and practices that aim to counter autocratizing efforts. With its lack of formal and ordering constraints, the term *bricolage* also permits an understanding of political activism as infused by the irreverent and order-upsetting “play” (Huizinga 1949; Verkaaik 2004; von Lünen 2019). Moreover, the practices included in (democratic) bricolage defy traditional constraints, and they accommodate the investment of personal risk and identification with the protest. These points are useful for our focus on bricolage as process and not as end product. While we conceptualize the protesters largely as “rule takers” (Streck and Thelen 2005) who do not set the rules of the game, they may still engender institutional change in the longer run by forcing the “rule makers” to adapt.

#### AUTOCRATIC INNOVATION AND PROTEST IN BANGLADESH

Once categorized as a “flawed democracy” (Economist Intelligence Unit 2007), over the past decade (2013–2023) Bangladesh has slid backwards spectacularly and is now described variously as a “hybrid regime” (Economist Intelligence Unit 2023), a “moderate autocracy” (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022), or an “electoral autocracy” (V-Dem 2023). International IDEA’s 2022 “Global State of Democracy” placed Bangladesh in the same category as Myanmar, Afghanistan, China, and Cambodia, and Reporters without Borders’ 2022 World Press Freedom Index ranked it below Russia, Sudan, and Venezuela. Because of opposition boycott and massive rigging and manipulation, Bangladesh has not had a free and fair election since 2008. The country’s democratic decline crossed both a symbolic and a real threshold when in December 2021 the United States imposed sanctions against the elite Rapid Action Battalion for hundreds of “disappearances” and extrajudicial killings, and for torture (J. Rahman 2022).

Though Bangladesh does not appear in Guriev and Treisman’s study as a spin dictatorship, it has the same features they identify, including crafty political manoeuvres (Ruud 2021), autocratic innovations by the government (Maitrot and Jackman 2023), election manipulation (Fair 2019; Riaz 2019),

and the creation of a culture of submission (Ruud and Hasan 2021). Most media outlets are owned by government-supporting businessmen (Riaz and Rahman 2021).<sup>2</sup> Two constitutional changes (the 15th and 16th amendments) have given the government control over the electoral process and the power to remove judges. The Digital Security Act permits imprisonment without bail and sentences of up to 14 years for offending religious sentiments, criticizing the history of the war of independence, or finding fault with Sheikh Hasina's father and has been much used against inquisitive journalists, news outlets, and citizens with grievances (*Business Standard* 2021a). In connection with any unrest, the police file so-called phantom cases against hundreds of often unnamed activists, to be used later, such as in anticipation of anti-government rallies (*Daily Star* 2018). For instance, Human Rights Watch (2022) notes that "at least 20,000 cases have been filed against Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) supporters." After release from custody, opposition activists are often re-arrested on another case. Courts also often deny bail (*ibid.*). The government also uses the Anti-Corruption Commission, tax authorities, and other arms of the state against the opposition. To gain the loyalty of state employees, the salaries and benefits of bureaucrats, police officers, armed forces personnel, and judges have been increased several-fold (BDNews24.com 2023; *Economist* 2021). The state also funds postgraduate studies abroad for government officials as a reward for loyal service.

Despite these measures, it is clear that all is not well and that misgivings about the increasingly autocratic government and its authoritarian ways are widespread. The slow but persistent consolidation of autocratic power in Bangladesh has been running in tandem with a proliferation of forms of protest and contestation. These have varied in scale from very large mass mobilizations to the very small and personal, and their immediate aims have varied from seeking changes in specific policies to implicit avoidance of any claim the government may make. Some of these forms are very visible, while others are almost imperceptible changes in behaviour. Below we analyze several instances of protest in some detail and seek to order them from overt to covert. These instances of rejection of the government's authority do not amount to a rejection of government per se, as in the incompleteness and

2. In this text, we do not distinguish between the government and the ruling party, the Awami League.

tentativeness of the postcolonial state as identified by Hansen and Stepputat (2006; see also Gilmartin, Price, and Ruud 2020); we seek to show that they constitute modes of protest against this particular government.

#### NOTE ON DATA AND ETHICS

The observations that form the backbone of this article are a result of our close observation of events in Bangladesh from 2013 to 2023, as well as interviews. Both authors have worked extensively on political developments in the country, mostly using a mixed-methods approach including archival research, interviews, and textual analysis. We build on this background here. For this article, we conducted interviews in February and March 2023 with journalists, human rights advocates, opposition leaders and activists, academics, NGO workers, bureaucrats, and ruling-party men.<sup>3</sup> For safety and security reasons, interviews were not recorded. We closely followed the recommendations in the American Political Science Association's report, "Research in Authoritarian and Repressive Contexts" (Bellin et al. 2019). Ethics, methods, storage technology, and purpose have been extensively discussed with the relevant authorities at our home university and ultimately cleared by the Norwegian research ethics bureau, Sikt. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, engaging with critical voices in a repressive authoritarian context, our project is deemed public interest research. We should also mention that the interviews have strengthened our findings and argument but were not the core source of the argument, as we use other public sources of information to supplement our findings.

In the following sections, we deal with six different modes of protest, identified here under rubrics that elucidate their main characteristics. We are conscious that there is significant overlap between the various modes and that some of our examples have aspects that could have put them under another rubric. In any case, the modes have been ordered from the overt to the covert, from the most defiant examples of freedom of expression—the right to insult—to the most covert and private mode, the active deflection by the individual of demands made by the state. We argue all along that all

3. Our techniques including purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al. 2015) and unstructured interviews (Zhang and Widlemuth 2009). The interviews lasted between 30 and 65 minutes. They were conducted online on Zoom but also via various encrypted phone software because of increasing risk of surveillance.

these modes constitute a rejection of the state's demands for loyalty and submission.

## DEFIANCE

The most open and public form of protest in Bangladesh is in political memes on social media. Memes “disrupt and reimagine politics in a humorous way” (Mortensen and Neumayer 2021), and ridicule and insult are acts at the most overt end of the right to expression. In these memes the leading politicians are ridiculed. Particularly popular apps are Facebook and TikTok, and we will discuss a few examples from these platforms. This form of open protest is interesting in view of the judicial innovations the government of Bangladesh has implemented between 2013 and 2023 to restrict social media criticism. The Digital Security Act, adopted in 2018 but building on the Information and Communications Technology act of 2013, has been called “draconian” by human rights organizations (e.g., Human Rights Watch 2018).<sup>4</sup> Apart from carrying sentences up to 14 years in jail, the act also allows immediate arrest. Because a court hearing may happen weeks or even months later, the act in reality permits the police to keep individuals in jail even if the case is weak and later dismissed. Around four cases are lodged each week under this act (Voice of America 2023).

The defiance expressed in memes is interesting because they target very sensitive topics that ordinarily are taboo in the public sphere, such as the prime minister and her father, the official story about the war of independence, religion, and the armed forces. Journalists, newspaper editors, and filmmakers engage in self-censorship to avoid these topics (Haq 2021; Riaz and Zaman 2021). Allegations of corruption or unethical behaviour by elite members of society are also generally avoided, for fear of being charged with defamation under the Digital Security Act.

However, social media accounts are not so reverent. Comments, posts, and in particular memes may ridicule the prime minister as well as her government, its corruption, the partisan roles of police and military intelligence (including the dreaded Directorate General of Forces Intelligence), senior ministers, assaults on free speech, political ineptitude, and the country's

4. In August 2023, the Digital Security Act was replaced by the Cyber Security Act, but observers considered the latter “largely a replication” of the former (e.g., Amnesty International 2023).



foreign allies. “Earki” (Joke), a blog and Facebook page, had more than 900,000 followers, while one called “Rajnoitik [political] Shitposting” had 40,000 (both as of March 2023). These pages and others like them each feature many memes, and new ones are regularly posted.<sup>5</sup>

An illustrative image shows a hand about to press a button that will release funds for the celebrations of the Father of the Nation’s centenary, rather than for hospitals or COVID-19 measures. The meme thus makes fun of the prime minister’s inclination to prioritize her father’s celebrations over health measures. And the Bengali word for “honourable,” *manoniyo*, appears on the hand about to push the button. Thus the meme also makes fun of the sycophantic attitude of many in Awami League, who increasingly refer to the prime minister as “the *Honourable* Prime Minister Jananetri [people’s leader] Sheikh Hasina.”

Other memes also directly criticize the prime minister, such as one in which she appears as the real face of the actions that brought Islami Bank to its knees. In another, a photo of a Rapid Action Battalion vehicle is captioned “Uber for BNP leaders and supporters”—making fun of the paramilitary force’s partisan policing. A third meme shows a visiting British minister of state, who, according to Bangladesh’s foreign minister, had said the UK might ask Bangladesh for advice on how to conduct its democracy. The caption suggests ironically that he could also provide advice on how to fight corruption.

These memes and videos demonstrate that even under this repressive regime there is much criticism of the government and its leaders. These videos demonstrate a thriving subculture that challenges the official narrative rather than respecting it.

The subculture is also represented by the “YouTube dissenters”—critics living abroad and posting on YouTube and other formats. They regularly produce video commentaries, news reports, and online talk shows on government corruption, human rights violations, and individual malfeasance (*Netra News* 2023). They sometimes air personal insults toward the prime minister, reviving old allegations against her father, insinuating that there is foreign (Indian) influence on her government, and so forth.

5. We refrain from giving individuals’ Facebook IDs to protect their security; we only refer to established meme pages which are well known publicly.

The government is largely helpless in the face of the popularity of these reports, although harassment of the individual bloggers and critics does take place. One possible explanation is the sheer number of followers on social media; they cannot all be arrested or even threatened. The government has at times tried to clamp down on social media companies, but they are not within its jurisdiction, so such pressure has proven ineffective.

In consequence, and in a case that perfectly illustrates the “game of wits” point, representatives of the government have instead tried to learn to use social media to their advantage. When Facebook flagged a post by the prime minister’s son and IT advisor, Sajeeb Wajed Joy, as “misleading,” the state reacted. First, the Bangladesh-based fact checker was put through several stressful and intimidating interactions with state representatives, including high-ranking officials, was subject to several coordinated online smear campaigns, and was harassed by the police and officers of the Special Branch of the police. Eventually Facebook’s global team stepped in and contacted Bangladeshi authorities, including a minister. After this, the government’s attitude shifted from intimidation to engagement. The fact checker was asked to train Bangladeshi ruling-partymen in the distinction between information and disinformation. This allowed them, according to another source, to continue operating more than 150 Facebook pages and more than 20 websites that produce and distribute pro-government disinformation in a coordinated manner and on a regular basis.

## INSISTENCE

A second mode of protest is to insist that criticism of the government is legitimate in a democracy, even if ridicule of the government is not. This is a mode somewhat less provocative than the open defiance we find in social media, and it is enabled by the government’s efforts to appear democratic: the media have some freedom, elections are held, opposition parties are officially welcomed, and rule of law and of the constitution are allegedly upheld. All of this is of course less and less true. Since 2013, opposition parties and their activities have been under persistent and multifarious pressure from the government. Beyond tactics such as mass imprisonment, extrajudicial killings, “disappearances,” and various forms of intimidation (Human Rights Watch 2022; S. A. Rahman 2022), the government has charged the opposition with sponsoring violence, and it has used the full power of law, including

police and courts, to curb opposition activism. This strategy has been successful, in the sense that street activism largely stopped between 2014 and 2022 (Jackman 2019).

Yet BNP, the opposition party, continues to be a relevant and living organization. Its general secretary, Fakhru Islam, holds regular press conferences and criticizes the government for its shortcomings and policy errors. His statements are faithfully reported in the media. BNP's acting chairman, Tarique Rahman, though he has been in exile in London since 2007, has spent years building the organization through online contact with activists, even those in remote villages. This was one reason for the ability BNP showed in November and December 2022 when it organized rallies, with tens of thousands participating (*Euronews* 2022). Despite the ruling party's efforts to dampen the mobilization through arrests, checkpoints, bus strikes, and an internet shutdown, photos in social and newspaper reports show BNP activists traveling miles on foot, by bicycle, or by boat to the rally points, actively inventing modes of transport to circumvent the suspension of bus services (*Daily Star* 2022b; Karim and Shishir 2022).

BNP leaders and activists use a variety of decentralized strategies, including a focus on local challenges. Jackman (2021a) offers fascinating insights into the everyday life of a local BNP leader who campaigned during morning prayers in the local mosque and maintained an informal and secret campaign group, including women, to win a local election. Similar narratives emerge in a study of the banned Jamaat-e Islami (Hossain and Haque 2021).

Newspapers and human rights organizations also insist on democratic ideals and the right to speak up and be heard, even while being restricted in many ways. On occasion, newspapers publish critical opinion columns and reports as well as editorials. Again, these never criticize the prime minister or her immediate family, nor the armed forces, nor the official narrative about the war of independence. However, they do criticize a range of government policies and failures, including human rights abuses, scams, and the lack of media freedom.

Although this window of democratic voice is apparently accepted by the government, we emphasize that it is not without risk and constitutes another example of a game of wits. The largest national daily, *Prothom Alo*, has long been considered critical of the government, and its editor is considered a courageous critic. In March 2023, on the country's independence day, *Prothom Alo* published a report in which a day labourer was quoted as saying,

“What is the use of this freedom if we can’t afford rice?” The report and the statement were read against a backdrop of rapidly rising prices for food and other essentials. In promoting the report on Facebook, the paper made a trivial error, using that statement as the caption for a photo of a young boy and thus seemingly attributing it to him. The editor was then served with several charges by the police, and the reporter was arrested outside his home and his computer seized. The reason given was that false statements had been used to smear the government (Ethirajan 2023). In the end, the editor was not arrested, and the journalist was set free after three days.

This game of wits, of pushing and redrawing the boundaries of the permissible, of challenges to the authorities and their efforts at repression, is a public underlining of the ideals of democracy, if somewhat less irreverent and more measured than the open defiance shown in social media memes. This game of wits is even more central in the case of the large-scale mass protests, which were not against the government as such, at least not publicly, but against its policies. It was a form of indirect protest that was effective because it captured—poached—some of the government’s core support groups.

### POACHING

To poach is to be critical, but critical of individual government policies rather than the government per se. This form of criticism is indirect, but real nonetheless, as it challenges the government’s claims to be an effective and unquestionable benefactor of the country and undermines the government’s core support, while also forcing it to revise its *modus operandi*.

This mode is exemplified by the four large youth-led protests the country saw between 2013 and 2018. The size of the protests, their demands, and the way they evolved varied, but they all successfully put pressure on the government (and upset it). In some ways, these movements were similar to contemporary movements elsewhere, including the Milk Tea Alliance of Southeast Asia, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy movements in the United States. They were uncoordinated and spontaneous, and driven by social media mobilization (Sinpeng 2021; Stone 2021). In an interesting way, the Bangladeshi movements were different in that the target was not explicit. All four of the major youth movements in Bangladesh demonstrated three major patterns relevant to the theme of democratic bricolage: they employed

a narrative that aroused sympathy deep into circles the ruling party relied on, thus ensuring that the government could object to their demands only with great difficulty; they forced open a space for voice in which to criticize the government and debate its merits on a particular point; and they used these spaces to criticize the government, as such, indirectly. We delve into one of these movements, the road safety movement, to illustrate these points.

In 2018, street protests erupted after two teenage students were killed by a speeding bus. In general, roads in Bangladesh are dangerous, and bus drivers are considered unruly. In this protest, thousands of students took over the streets in their school and college uniforms (Fair 2019). A key grievance in Bangladesh regarding road safety is that many drivers have no license, some drivers are underage, and many vehicles lack roadworthiness certificates. In an interesting innovation, the protesters took the role of the police and started checking licenses and registrations at makeshift checkpoints. This highlighted how the government had failed to implement simple rules and regulations. One government minister is reported to have abandoned his car “after the students detained it for incorrect paperwork” (Qayum 2018). The students even checked vehicles belonging to the police, military personnel, and bureaucrats.

The protests targeted bus drivers in particular, a point that further upset the government because of the strong nexus between the ruling party and transport workers (Bari 2018). Shahjahan Khan, at that time a senior Awami League leader and minister for shipping, was also executive president of the Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Association. Control of road transport and of public buses are key political tools that enable the government to move its supporters or to limit the mobility of opposition activists, as when transport workers in city after city suddenly went on strike in the days before the opposition rallies of November and December 2022.

The extraordinary images of schoolchildren blocking traffic and checking driver’s licenses gained global attention. Among those asked to comment was an internationally famous photographer, Shahidul Alam, whose televised criticism rattled the government enough to have him arrested and jailed for several months. Alam and other commentators pointed out that the protests were about more than road safety; they were about government ineffectiveness and corruption (Fair 2019). Banners painted by the students and slogans popular among them underlined the point: “Road closed: repair of the state in progress” and “Missing: justice,” for example. Their specific demands all

pointed a finger, directly or indirectly, at the government (*Business Standard* 2021b).

The government vacillated between dismissing the demands and giving in to them. It said it was meeting the demands of the students and passed relevant legislation. It also promised action to improve the situation. On the other hand, it also engaged in strategic disinformation, claiming that the protests were run by infiltrators from the opposition, and asked parents to make sure their children went to school. Internet services were throttled, and the police quelled the protests with the help of batons, tear gas, and ruling-party activists. Many students were arrested, and more than a hundred were injured. After about two weeks, the movement was over. Four years on, little has changed. The complaint continues to fester; it is brought up regularly in the media and irregularly in (smaller) street demonstrations (Adhikary 2022; *Daily Star* 2021).

But the road safety movement undermined the ruling party's legitimacy among important groups of supporters (Jackman 2021b). The parents of these schoolchildren and college students were middle-class Bangladeshis living in Dhaka and engaged in government service or business. The Awami League's image as a pro-people party made it difficult to dismiss protests over the safety of public streets, and the protests made it difficult to sustain this image. The government's claim that it is leading the country on a path of constant development and improvement sat uncomfortably with the movement's harsh focus on evident shortcomings—in particular its inability to protect schoolchildren.

The three other movements—the secular Shahbag movement (named for the intersection where it started) against concessions to the Islamists (2013), and the protests against a VAT on education (2015) and against quotas for government positions (2018)—all had similar features. They erupted relatively spontaneously and without any apparent organization, and they criticized specific government policies. Crucially, all of them mobilized support that cut deep into the ruling party's support and undermined its authority.

Such movements are evidently very public events, even if their target—the government and its lack of efficacy—was less clearly so. We call forms of protest that are less public while still targeting the government's efficacy or its claims to legitimacy “subterfuge”: simply skirting the government's writ.

## SUBTERFUGE

Poaching is obviously a dangerous mode of protest, because of the government ire it attracts. An alternative is to find ways of continuing critical work while avoiding the government's attention. Civil society and human rights organizations have often chosen this strategy to remain operational. Over the years such organizations have faced increasing government scrutiny and repression. For example, in 2013 Adilur Rahman Khan, secretary of Odhikar, a leading human rights organization openly critical of the government, was arrested and jailed for "fabricating information." In 2022, after years of harassment, the organization was finally closed down by the government (S. A. Rahman 2022). Other human rights organizations have had to lay off employees after the NGO Affairs Bureau refused to release funds for "sensitive" projects. The bureau is a government agency under the prime minister's office charged with releasing funds from foreign donors to NGOs.

A common theme that emerged from our interviews, however, is that many human rights advocates and organizations have adopted the arts of compromise, collaboration, and deception to bypass authoritarian scrutiny. One human rights advocate pointed to how organizations compromise, in the sense that they do not challenge cancellation of funds in court or complain to the media about it; instead they negotiate with government officials to find other ways of continuing their operation. Some organizations have succeeded in these negotiations, although others, like Odhikar, have not.

A second key tactic is to create projects that are not perceived as targeting or criticizing the government directly. Many NGOs in the human rights field are running projects on the rights of domestic workers, climate change rights, sustainable development goals, women's leadership, education, or digital literacy rather than political rights as such.

A third strategy is mislabeling. This is often crucial to subvert the threat of government repression and to minimize risks. As mentioned, if a project is deemed problematic, the NGO Affairs Bureau will not release the funds. To avoid this, one of our interlocutors said, they tweak the project description. "It is a war-like situation in Bangladesh for us—human rights advocates—and all is fair in war. Under a highly unethical system, it is ethical to mislabel a human rights project to continue our work." Their funder knew about this deception but gave the go-ahead in view of the problematic context.

A fourth tactic is cornering, which works on a smaller scale. A group of left-leaning cultural activists who use popular theatre as a method of protest were protesting cuts and demanding pay raises for factory workers in Khulna, a provincial city. However, two days before their performance at a government-run factory, officers from the local police station demanded a copy of the script. It was very critical of the ruling party's economic system, but they quickly rewrote it. The police read the new script made some suggestions, which the activists said they would accept. However, in the actual performance they reverted to the original script. "The detectives on the spot were visibly upset, but they did not have the courage to spoil the drama in front of hundreds of workers," said one of those involved in the production.

A fifth example of deception as a strategy, but also one that was largely uncoordinated, is when BNP activists put photographs of Sheikh Hasina on their mobile phones. This happened in connection with the rallies BNP organized in November and December 2022 (Mostofa 2022). To prevent activists from reaching the venues, police officers at city entry-points checked people's mobile phones for signs of BNP sympathy (BDNews24.com 2022; *Daily Star* 2022a, 2022b). But the activists had deleted such signs and repopulated their phones with images and symbols suggesting pro-government activism.

Lastly, we will mention that human rights organizations often prefer to rely on media reports rather than sending their own officials to investigate a case of human rights violation by the state. They might even hire journalists, especially those who are generally considered to be in the good books of the government, as consultants. Such journalists are not deemed threats by the government. In the field, they can record cases of human rights violations and report back to the organizations that hired them.

Subterfuge is a risky mode of protest, because the end result is critical and could draw the unwanted attention and force of the government to small and vulnerable groups and organizations. Here the general consensus is that size does matter, so a fifth mode that still permits real criticism of the government is to reach out to like-minded groups, organizations, and other entities to build broader alliances.

## NETWORKING

An assertive strategy used by rights organizations to allow them to continue their criticism is collaboration with like-minded national and international



organizations. Since the government has become more critical of human rights NGOs, the national organizations sometimes do not issue statements on what they deem sensitive cases. Instead, they contact colleagues in international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, or Front Line Defenders and suggest that they launch a campaign. For example, statements on the sacking of BNP's secretary of information and communications technology from his position as professor at National University, and the demand for access to education for Rohingya children in the refugee camps, came not from local human rights organizations but from international ones—here Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, respectively.

Journalists use similar strategies. As mentioned, most media outlets are connected to the ruling party through their ownership structures, and journalism is characterized by self-censorship and the threat of the Digital Security Act. To counter such limitations, critical journalists have tried several innovative strategies that can be summed up in three categories: building strategic personal relationships with the power structure; embeddedness; and international networking.

Maintaining personal relationships within the varying circles of power holders may be a key strategy to sustain critical journalism. Rivalry within the ruling party's senior levels opens opportunities for access. A reporter working for a Bengali daily known to be critical of government corruption told us that it is a conscious strategy of their editor to maintain good relationships with members of the core group around the prime minister. "That circle is constantly changing. If someone falls out of favour, someone new is stepping in. Our editor uses an updated knowledge of that circle and maintains strategic relationships. He regularly meets the chairmen of influential companies and promotes news of their companies."

Another strategy newspapers and editors use to maintain some room for maneuver is to sympathize with the regime's core ideological tenets. This is a widely used strategy. Glorification of the prime minister's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as Father of the Nation, is central to how the ruling party seeks to legitimize itself (Ruud 2022). Most newspapers go along with this glorification in long op-eds or even supplements on important occasions. In one case, the editor of a daily mostly critical of the government pursued this strategy further by setting up a publishing company through which he published several books outlining or glorifying the role of Mujibur Rahman.

Newspapers also faithfully (and daily) print statements from the prime minister, often on the front page. These forms of embeddedness within the elite and the ideological constructs of the ruling party allow a certain degree of criticism of the government.

Another powerful way to build alliances, attractive for some, is to connect with forces outside the country. As mentioned, there are forbidden themes and powerful figures that will never be criticized in newspapers. Consequently, contributing information and content to international media has become a major outlet for critical journalism. While journalistic collaboration is not a new practice, these collaborations have circumvented the taboos.

For instance, in 2021 Al Jazeera aired a documentary called *All the Prime Minister's Men*, which alleged that the then chief of army staff protected his criminal brothers by using the state and law, and that he profited from corruption schemes partly protected by the country's security forces. Similarly, Sweden-based Netra News (2022a, 2022b) has reported on a series of highly critical issues, such as one minister's very expensive Rolex watch collection, state-backed hacking of the accounts of critics, the name of a high-ranking security official behind the enforced disappearance of a major opposition leader, and the location of the military intelligence agency's secret prison. Netra News also published a story about the prime minister's sister's expensive housing in London, paid for by a major Bangladeshi businessman. And in early 2023, Deutsche Welle published a documentary on enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by the Rapid Action Battalion, one of the most prominent of the country's many law-enforcement agencies. The editor of Netra News has publicly said on many occasions that their news operation depends on the journalists working in Bangladesh, and this is also true of the Deutsche Welle and Al Jazeera reports.

In addition to being available online and a continuous embarrassment for the government, these reports have permitted domestic newspapers to broach these critical themes—with reference to the international outlets. Before the Al Jazeera report, for instance, to place a serving military general under journalistic inquiry would have been unheard-of. And for the first few days after the documentary aired (and available online), no Bangladeshi news outlet dared touch it. However, once the army HQ and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had issued statements rejecting the story's allegations, it was Bangladeshi news, and Bangladeshi news outlets could report on it. Which they did.

## DEFLECTION

We have considered five modes of protest aimed at directly criticizing the government and seeking to open (or keep open) spaces for voice. We conclude with a sixth mode, which also indirectly expresses misgivings with the government but constitutes the least public form of protest—yet it still is a form of protest. We include it because it has consequences for the government’s legitimacy and ability to rule. In this mode the government’s writ is undermined in a way that both demonstrates its lack of moral authority and weakens its ability to claim that authority. This mode, deflection, is about avoiding the government and disobeying its orders. There are many forms of deflection, including everyday forms of cheating, bribing, or ignoring laws and government orders. Here we consider only two.

Withholding taxes undermines the government’s ability to function. Scholz and Ludell (1998) suggest that the greater the trust in government, the lower the likelihood of noncompliance and the higher the tax morale. Similarly, Feld and Tyran (2002) note that “direct voter participation in the political decision making process” increases tax compliance. Bangladesh has the lowest tax–GDP ratio in South Asia despite having the second-largest number of registered taxpayers (Mavis 2022). According to the Centre for Policy Dialogue, an independent think tank, 68% of the population do not pay income tax, and 85% do not believe they receive good public service from the state (*Daily Star* 2018). Hence, they avoid the state. As one of our interviewees put it, paying tax means contributing to the strength of a murderous regime.

Another kind of deflection is the informal transaction practice known as *hundi*. This is a significant issue for Bangladesh because remittances from the approximately 7.4 million migrant workers in Malaysia, the Middle East, Europe, and elsewhere are one of the largest sources of foreign currency for the country (*Business Standard* 2021c). The challenge is that half the money is transferred through *hundi*. This system is illegal because it happens outside formal channels and avoids taxation (Raihan 2023). It is estimated to deprive the country of USD 7.8 billion in remittances per year (*Financial Express* 2022). In a financial crisis over the past several years, the war in Ukraine, the pandemic, and other setbacks have made imports costly, including oil and gas. A particularly sensitive consequence is in electricity generation: Bangladesh has seen the reintroduction of power cuts known as “load shedding”—an old curse this government was proud to have ended.

To increase the use of formal banking, an existing cash incentive was increased, and the finance minister made a public appeal. Despite this and the near tripling of migrants after the pandemic, remittances sent through official channels fell by 6.7% (Chowdhury 2023). Appeals to citizens to help the state out of a crisis went unheeded or perhaps had the opposite effect. Even if it costs them, migrants prefer a private arrangement to a government-endorsed one. Trust in the government is very low, and its ability to command has been severely hampered.

Hundi and tax evasion ignore the government's authority and undermine its ability to function, limiting investments and prolonging dependency on foreign aid. These private forms of protest against a government not considered representative of the people are an indirect expression of democratic intent, deriving from the notion that participation by the ruled in governance enhances the legitimate ground for tax demands. We include this form of protest here because it underlines that participation or voice is fundamental for legitimacy.

## CONCLUSION

We have suggested the term “democratic bricolage” as a corollary to the concept of “autocratic innovation” introduced by earlier scholars. The usefulness of our concept lies in its ability to help us identify diverse practices such as mass movements, covert forms of deception by human rights organizations, and the reluctance and recalcitrance of citizens as they go about their everyday lives, as practices that belong to the same order. They undermine, challenge, ridicule, or oppose the autocrats' power and authority. This expands on previous research that characterizes reluctance and foot-dragging as hiding more expansive notions of legitimate and just government to include in the same categorization as large-scale protests and overt criticism. Our concept is meant as a heuristic device and does not exist as an identifiable practice with a defined core—except in the effect these practices have. It is a concept that allows us to identify a range of activities from their consequence: they slowly coalesce into forms of oppositional counterforce in autocratizing states.

It is important to underline that autocratic innovation and democratic bricolage constitute intertwined processes, where one germinates reactions in the other in a never-ending process between the autocratic impulses and

democratic ones. When studying autocratization as an ongoing process, it is crucial to factor in the contestations that it ferments and that help explain its dynamics. Democratic bricolage helps us understand autocratization, as rulers are invariably opposed—directly or indirectly, openly or covertly—and their efforts to control power, to stifle critical voices, and to legitimize their own rule will invariably engender new forms of opposition. These ever-changing cycles of innovation and bricolage constitute a constant if implicit dialogue or, as we have termed it, a game of wits. The logic of this process is such that it tends to be ever-intensifying. Repressive measures prompt reactions that lead to further repressive measures, with the outcome both open and unpredictable.

We do not wish to be unrealistically optimistic about democratizing endeavors. Backsliding democracy is a real and still ongoing process in many countries. And the strategies we have identified here all appear in efforts that are uncoordinated and in the long run little match for the autocrats. At the same time, we caution against excessive pessimism. The memes, the avoidance that undermines authority, the indirect protest movements, and the other phenomena of protest all show that democracy as an idea and an ideal, and the demand that voices be given space and be heard, is still very much alive, even in Bangladesh after decades of autocratization.

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