Democracy in Scare Quotes: The Granularity of Control in the Hybrid State of Bangladesh

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Hybrid cars. Hybrid workplaces. Hybrid war. Hybrid states. We are witnessing today the mixing of elements to create new forms of life, business, work, war and politics. In times of technological, geopolitical, social and political change, the ability to creatively devise new assemblages is viewed as a vital process of innovation and survival. The hybrid state attempts to combine the techniques, technologies and tactics employed by authoritarian states while at the same time holding on to the image of being democratic – the type of processes and tensions we see in various examinations of the 2018 Bangladeshi elections (Riaz 2019). These are states that are attracted to the possibilities of digital economies and societies for improving and accelerating all aspects of life and economy. At the same time, these are states that are anxious about the seemingly incontrollable 'viral' effects of these technologies and the often unpredictable ways individuals and groups can use these constantly evolving tools.

Governance and power is becoming increasingly *granular* (targeted) in this new age of politics and technology. New technologies of what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) describes as 'surveillance capitalism' monitor the habits (and possibly desires and fears) of consumers and citizens through the transformation of data into big data and the real time monitoring of online activity in increasingly molecular detail. The surveillance of activities and attitudes not only produce the possibility of new insights into the everyday consumer habits of people and communities but also reveal details of the *habitats* that leaders – business or political – manage and try to govern. The granularity of surveillance can reveal details of sections of cities, of neighbourhoods and streets in order to provide for data for both policing and marketing.

The citizen has access to more information than ever, confronting what Paul Virilio described as the 'information bomb' (Virilio 2006). Writing about the information bomb in the 1990s, Virilio began to see a world where disinformation and the sheer overwhelming of the citizen with information was a likely outcome of the network society or new digital age. The states now confront a world where the promise of easy access to news and information results in a landscape of fake news, disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories. Now, control works not through shutting down access but by allowing the avalanche of information to flood and overwhelm the consumer.

But inside the chaos and confusion of the information bomb are more targeted forms of an information war where online campaigns are waged —using the targeted insights collected online—on those who are viewed as necessary for support (or open to persuasion) and those who can be made to fear the outcomes of not supporting a party or leader. In this sense, the openness promised by the information age of network society confronts a reality of online manipulations, internet shutdowns and new laws and digital security acts to police online activity creating what we have termed 'digital vigilantes' (Lacy and Mookherjee 2020)[1]. The individual/citizen/consumer can become an important element in the granularity of control in the hybrid state – it has never been easier to transform citizens into agents of surveillance who can report on the online and offline activity of people in their apartment blocks, streets, workplaces, universities and online forums.

[1] There are numerous parallels of the Indian state which also exercises such targeted and spectacular practices of control and hegemony (see Lacy and Mookherjee 2020 for elaboration).

To be sure, it is not simply Bangladesh – or other hybrid states – where this molecularity of control and surveillance is being explored and experimented with. These new technique and technologies of granular control – and possible threat to democracy – are a worldwide phenomenon, albeit with different combinations of tactics and severity of policing. While the specific issues and concerns may differ from state to state and leader to leader, the broader anxiety that drives the new tactics of control emerges from a concern with threats that are presented as being both internal/domestic and foreign/international. On the one hand, there is an unease about politics and economy in times of disruptive change where these technologies enable citizens to organize in new ways. A time when an image taken on a phone on a street can quickly circulate around the world. Where global attention can be drawn to an event in a neighbourhood or apartment block in any city in the world. This anxiety about what a citizen can do on a street or in online forums – and the new type of surveillance this creates (or sousveillance, surveillance from below) – is felt as acutely by political leaders in Paris, Washington and London as in Dhaka, Lagos or Hong Kong. Strong leadership is required to deal with states that are seeing the proliferation of 'super empowered individuals' and collectives, armed with smart phones, websites and blog posts.

At the same time, there is an anxiety about the disruptive influence of foreign actors. Action at a distance that can be both 'global' in origin and granular in its impact, the anxiety about the micro-targeting of citizens by foreign actors, the manipulation of social media by rival states. The anxiety is around citizens using technology to cause political and social instability, a threat compounded by the foreign actors who may have an interest in causing disorder in the micro-targeted state. In Europe and the United States, the concern is that new tactics of election 'hacking' or the digital disruption of 'critical infrastructure' are strategies of hybrid war or what some refer to as the 'grey zone' (the ambiguous zone between war and peace) of security and international politics. But for some states, the anxiety about hybrid war orchestrated by foreign actors and the internal disruption emerging from citizens and domestic groups results in the creation of the hybrid state.

We live in a time where technology contributes to the creation of new economies and economic possibilities – with winners and losers – and where it reveals the extent of the inequality that is viewed by some leaders as an inevitable and inescapable condition of contemporary and future life. A time when the behaviours and activities of politicians and business leaders can be revealed in the form of photographs, text messages or emails, which might expose corruption that would have previously been easier to hide. A world where 'global' problems result in complex problems closer to home, on streets and neighbourhoods. and where the social media we consume becomes a means for generating fear (and possibly hate) toward those strangers who might end up as refugees in foreign cities or are viewed as the global sources of our local and personal problems and struggles.

As the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000) wrote on many occasions, the world is experienced by many people in terms of never-ending anxiety and insecurity, compounded by the new technologies and policies of what he describes as *liquid modernity.* French philosopher of war and politics Paul Virilio (2012) suggested that people come to experience fear as an *environment*: we live with a constant sense of fear not only about our jobs, our health (say our proximity to other people during Covid-19) or crime but also about the future of the world, the consequences of climate change, the impact of artificial intelligence and the new technological possibilities that we sense will transform the planet (and ourselves) in radical and unpredictable ways. When the world and our lives are experienced as never-ending fear, uncertainty and insecurity, the strong leaders can offer security and solidity in a world of liquidity; at the same time, their images of power and authority often serve to mask their own paranoia and sense of vulnerability. The chapters in *The Masks of*

Authoritarianism: Hegemony, power and public life in Bangladesh examines the different experiences of this molecularity of control in hybrid states, from the experience of government workers, doctors during the Covid-19 pandemic, film makers, bloggers, refugees and teachers. And the chapters explore—in very powerful and troubling ways—how different people experience fear as an environment in Bangladesh.

Producing Fear as an Environment

The chapters in this collection all speak to the granularity of control in contemporary Bangladesh where the anxieties and desires of states and political leaders can be operationalised in increasingly personal and intimate ways; where new technologies are both the source of unease for political elites but also the source of new forms of surveillance and control, adding to the more conventional forms of what Michel Foucault (1991) described as governmentality. For Foucault, modern organizations often functioned through the way they could create individuals that would act as 'good' employees or citizens, through the way they would internalise the values or objectives of the institution or society; individuals would be placed under surveillance in the workplace or on the street but they would also be placing their own behaviour under surveillance, policing the self. There would be spaces of resistance and freedom but, as Gilles Deleuze (1997) argued in the 1980s, all territory and aspects of life were becoming societies or terrains of control. What we are seeing now is the deepening of control in a time of constant surveillance, a molecularity of control where political parties or police can obtain increasingly detailed insight into the activities of citizens.

What becomes clear in the chapters is the unsettling 'hybridity' of the situations that people find themselves in where, as we see in the chapter by Lisa I. Knight and Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury, the act of writing and circulating a blog post results in the threat of the machete or knife attack, the possibilities of the digital age and network society confronting the reality of the blade: a threat that seeks to deter those who might want to promote the creation of new digital public spheres and ways of communicating. However, as the authors powerfully show: 'danger is generated, artificially made' as the state manages violence by 'executing an Islamist war criminal and gradually relinquishing responsibility for Rajib's murder' thereby ensuring bloggers and publishers to live in fear. The chapters also show how the public sphere is threatened by the 'DIY news portals' that Julian Kuttig & Sarker Shams Bin Sharif examine, the granularity of the political media landscape that serves to reinforce the more centralized objectives and desires of the ruling party.

But the granulairty of control in these hybrid regimes is not always reliant on new technology as the chapter by David Jackman details, exploring the everyday experience of the opposition party member confronting the more traditional – but possibly increasingly pervasive – forms of political threat that proliferate in the hybrid state. Similarly, in the chapter by Akram Hossain and Mahmudul Haque, there is a sense that not all actors are part of this new age of innovation that is shaping the future of hybrid states – and creating a genuine opposition will be a struggle. Internal conflicts among activists in the absence of an eternal rival is examined in the essay by Muhammed Rashedul Hasan and Nazmul Ahasan: the attempt to remove political enemies results in other modes of enmity that might be equally destructive to political culture and processes. As they show where fear is the environment, 'loyalty is the most sought-after trait' from obedient student politicians. Kajalie Shehreen Islam shows that the pervasive sense of unease results in self-censorship in education, the types of policing of the self that is possibly integral to all organizations and institutions. As she powerfully argues:

> It was easier for university students and teachers to fight against external forces such as the Pakistani rulers who were physically and culturally distant, or even

> Bangladesh's military rulers, as they were not part of the people, but when the enemy is among us [those oppressing us are our own people], they cannot be challenged. Dissent has always been muzzled, now it is just more institutionalized. This is a reflection of the overall political culture of the country which is autocratic and intolerant, and change can only come from political change. But this will be difficult as oppositional voices are silenced and dissenting voices have become fewer and fewer as a result.

Further, the anxiety created by the Digital Security Act provides the backdrop to the fear that is felt by students and teachers. The practices of self-censorship and self-policing is developed further in an essay on government officials by Camelia Dewan that begins to open up questions about the limits of governmentality through the lens of *durbolata* [weakness] among government officials engendered by the vicious nexus of favours and counter favours. The limits to control and governmentality are highlighted further in Mubashar Hasan and Priyanka Kundu's essay on rap artists in Bangladesh, showing not only the targets of threat and control that can shape the lyrical content of a song but also how resistance can emerge across generations of musicians in the complex spaces where music circulates. Asheque Haque shows how the granularity of control, which the Digital Security Act aims for, generates the constant sense of insecurity that continues to harm the lives of queer individuals and communities in Bangladesh captured poignantly in the expression: 'what is it to be a citizen whose civil rights are as arbitrary as the monsoon weather?' Indeed, the book highlights the molecularity and differences experienced by those inside the environment of fear created by the state.

The book also examines the minutiae of responses to the insecurity produced in these environments of fear, by exploring the survival strategies of the Rohingya refugees in the chapter by Marte Nilsen or by describing attempts by journalists to negotiate the limits to freedom of expression—the enforced self-censorship—found in the essay by Ali Riaz and Fahmida Zaman. Fahmidul Haq explores how filmmakers negotiate the increasingly authoritarian cinematic codes that seek to govern what can be filmed and viewed, the granularity of control that seeks to shape how citizens can see the world in the cinema hall or on their television sets and other devices. In the essay by Maha Mirza we get an insight into the development of mega projects that showcases the state as being simultaneously anxious to present an image of power and progress through these projects and equally concerned about their image of legitimacy and responsibility when confronted with the economic, environmental and social harm that these desires/projects produce. As a poor research interlocuter recently told us in the context of discussions about Covid-19, lockdowns and the choice of inviting the right wing, anti-Muslim Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Liberation War of 1971:

> Can you just rule, even if by force, by building shiny bridges with your names on plaques while overturning rickshaws of poor people? No. To be a state is also to look out for the people/*jonogon*. Without the *jonogon*, you are nothing.

Similarly, in the chapter by Joarder Taufique we get an insight into the management styles of hybrid states at their most acute moments of crisis in a revealing portrait of those tasked with protecting the health of people during the Covid-19 pandemic: a politics when the production of a spectacle of authority and power can be more important than the experience of safety and vulnerability of people trying to survive in environments of fear and insecurity.

The Future of the Hybrid State

While some of the chapters in this volume point to the possibilities of resistance, the overwhelming feeling is that of a degraded, claustrophobic public sphere where the chances of resistance and transformation are limited by the various tactics of granular control and the hybrid space. As Rashed and Nazmul show, 'the crisis here is the serious erosion of democracy and democratic institutions throughout the three consecutive terms of the ruling party.' The book also prompts us to think about the future of the hybrid state, to think about the limits of control, the nature, application and effects of the masks – and the possibility for change – as also of the possibility of consolidation and intensification of the hybrid state. The April 2021 arrests and disbanding of the central committee of Hefajat-e-Islam is evidence of this consolidation.[2] As our earlier research interlocuter told us: 'Only if kings (AL and BNP) take turns with the throne, then they stay in control and serve the people well' - a clear indictment of the need for checks and balances for the sovereign itself.

The silence and the role of the pro-institutional *buddhijibis*/intellectuals as the 'Arendtian' mobs (Ruud and Hasan, Introduction**)** has come under particular attention as the enablers of this hegemony of power. Though the state has attempted to produce and manage acquiescence through the *buddhijibis*, the younger generation have become increasingly critical of the self-censorship of the intellectuals with regard to the hybrid statecraft of Bangladesh. The legitimacy provided by and collaboration of some of the *buddhijibis* has a long trajectory in Bangladesh (Mookherjee 2015) and is linked to the foundational moment of the birth of Bangladesh linked to the war of 1971. As a result, today pro-establishment individuals, museums, institutions and organizations are not only dependent for state funding, they are also reliant on the state for upholding the values of 71. In recent invitations to speak at Bangladesh@50 commemorative events, we were struck by how those linked to the establishment were also questioning the presence of egalitarianism in Bangladesh by referring to 'democracy' in scare quotes as soon as the zoom recording had stopped. They would also highlight the vulnerabilities, the *durbolota/*weakness (highlighted by Dewan's chapter) behind their complicities with the regime.

In August 2018 soon after the detention of Shahidul Alam, Nayanika was invited to give a lecture to students at Bangladesh Liberation War Museum (BLWM). This was significant as the museum is also a part of the International Coalition of the Sites of Conscience, which is the only global network of historic sites, museums, and memory initiatives that connect past struggles to today's movements for human rights (https://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/home/). She had written in an article (Mookherjee 2011) that the BLWM also sees itself as a museum 'dedicated to all freedom-loving people and victims of mindless atrocities and destructions committed in the name of religion, ethnicity, and sovereignty.' Nonetheless, there was no discussion with the trustees at this 'site of conscience' about the detention of Alam and others, and neither about the acts 'committed in the name of sovereignty.' In the tea break that followed, however, the students, apart from sharing the resonance of the lecture with their contemporary ongoing experiences, also thanked me for reminding them about Shahidul's work in 1971 at a time when he was being slandered on social media as being 'against the spirit of 1971.' At that moment we felt that we could maybe turn to the younger generation to be the sites of conscience (Mookherjee 2018) of the nation.

[2] https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/hefajat-disbands-central-committee-2083953

Thinking about the future of Bangladesh and the hybrid state takes us to questions about the broader transformation of international politics in the coming years and decades. There were undoubtedly moments where to adopt 'Western' ideas of development, democracy and progress was viewed as the only vision of advancement in the global economy. But now there are alternative models of 'success' and development. The economic achievements of China raise the possibility that democracy might not be an essential ingredient for the cultivation of economic vitality. Indeed, authoritarian tactics might be an essential element for states dealing with disruptive and radical economic transformation in an age where digital tools - tools that more and more of the population use for work and play—might lead to new types of organization and resistance. The argument proposed in books such as *The End of History of the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama (2020), and countless other manifestos on development was that democracy was an essential ingredient in the path to progress and modernity. China reveals another possibility for growth and development and the hybrid state is often entangled between these two worlds of possibilities. The hybrid state might be playing power politics as it deals and negotiates with these contrasting worlds. But there might also be a genuine attraction to the authoritarian practices that China will no doubt continue to refine and extend. But there is no certainty that China will continue to 'work' as a model – just as there is no certainty that the liberal democracies will continue to work. It might be the case that the many problems that Bangladesh confronts—problems explored in the chapters in this book—might require a revitalization or re-imagining of political space for its very security and survival in a time of economic, environmental and social change, not just its limiting or control; possibilities beyond both authoritarianism and liberal democracy, beyond the ambiguities of a hybrid state.

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