The Politics of Opposition in South Asia

Paul Staniland and Milan Vaishnav, editors

Asim Ali | Rasheeda M. Didi | Asma Faiz | Bhavani Fonseka | Yasser Kureshi
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Contents

INTRODUCTION

The State of Opposition in South Asia

Paul Staniland and Milan Vaishnav

Over the course of the last year, the Carnegie South Asia Program published a series of essays on the politics of opposition in South Asia. The inspiration for this series was the commonly held assessment that democracy in many parts of South Asia appears to be struggling. This has not always been the case.

Less than a decade ago, voters across South Asia were imbued with a sense of democratic optimism. In 2014, India ushered in its first single-party majority government in three decades, a reprieve from decades of fractious coalition politics. Pakistan's 2013 elections represented the first civilian transfer of power following the successful completion of a five-year term by a democratically elected government. Voters in Nepal successfully elected a new constituent assembly, incorporating erstwhile Maoist rebels into mainstream politics. Sri Lanka, having emerged from decades of civil war, held important provincial elections, including in its contested Northern Province—the first time elections had taken place there in a quarter-century.

Today, optimism has given way to widespread pessimism. Across the region, democracy's fortunes have suffered significant setbacks. In 2021, both Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute downgraded the quality of India's democracy. While the Pakistani state has achieved success in reducing extremist violence, the military continues to dominate key aspects of domestic and foreign policy. Bangladesh is moving further toward consolidated autocracy, with the ruling party cracking down on dissent and political opposition. In Sri Lanka, the Rajapaksa family may have exited the scene (for now), but it remains unclear what political formation might fill the void. Across the region, regular elections co-exist with deepening challenges to liberal democracy. Far from being a beacon of democratic hope, South Asia now instead fits a larger global narrative of democratic malaise.

There has been no shortage of scholarship on South Asia's democratic backsliding, exploring topics such as declining representative institutions, civil-military relations, and the suppression of individual freedoms. However, what is missing in many of these accounts is a clear understanding of the state of opposition politics. For obvious reasons, most accounts of backsliding focus on the strategies and tactics of regimes, often treating the opposition as a passive actor. Yet, unpacking the nature of the opposition—and the dramatic variation in its forms—not only helps explain regime dynamics, but it also informs the possibilities of democratic renewal as well as the further consolidation of autocratic dynamics and the prospects for violence.

The ten essays in this series on the politics of opposition in South Asia cover a range of countries—Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—as well as a diversity of themes, from digital repression to violent militancy and citizen mobilization. This article reflects on the series, as well as other examples from the region, to identify a set of themes that sharpen the understanding of opposition dynamics in contemporary South Asia.

Which Opposition?

Perhaps the most obvious theme emerging out of this series is that the category of "opposition" is an incredibly heterogeneous phenomenon across the subcontinent. It includes intensive anti-state insurgency, so-called normal party politics, the intertwining of elite competition with mass mobilization, and efforts to carve out an autonomous citizens' space beyond political control. There are very different worlds of opposition, but all can be active forms of political contention.

In some cases, these forms of mobilization may have potential for overlap—for instance, between mainstream parties and citizens' movements. The morphing of the popular "India Against Corruption" movement, which arose in the early 2010s in response to a series of graft scandals, into a political vehicle that came to be known as the Aam Aadmi Party is a good example of this kind of overlap.

In other cases, these mobilizational forms may be diametrically opposed to each other, as in insurgents' assaults on both ruling and opposition political parties. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), for instance, targeted Tamil political parties in Sri Lanka with a ruthless intensity equal to their attacks on the state. This illustrates just how complex politics in the region are: opposition is multifaceted, frequently lacks unity, and is at times even intertwined with regime actors rather than cleanly standing apart from them.

Given this extraordinary complexity, what are the ways in which one can organize the dynamics of opposition in contemporary South Asia?

Systemic Orientation

One axis of differentiation is the systemic orientation of opposition forces. For instance, in some countries, there exist radically anti-system actors that explicitly seek to overturn the fundamental bases of the status quo; the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Pakistan and the Naxalites in India come to mind as revolutionary aspirants. The TTP, whose evolution Abdul Sayed documented in his essay, is the largest militant organization targeting the state in Pakistan. As Sayed notes, al-Qaeda's waning influence, the Afghan Taliban's rising power, and the TTP's efforts to remain relevant inside Pakistan have collectively fueled its transformation into a focused, anti-state militant movement.

However, there are also nonviolent, extra-systemic movements that are not reducible to conventional party protests. Mass protest movements from below in both Sri Lanka and Nepal have occupied this role, as have dissidents in Bangladesh. These mobilization efforts may blend into supposedly conventional opposition but seek to operate free from the dominance of politicians. However, some movements—like the Brihat Nagarik Andolan (BNA) in Nepal—have tried to shun traditional mainstream politics. As Amish Raj Mulmi explained in his essay on this citizen-led street movement, the BNA has adhered to a liberal, inclusive form of discontent, but its decision to remain outside of politics has tested the limits of its effectiveness.

The most standard use of "opposition" refers to political parties operating clearly within the system but in an adversarial role; at the national level, the Indian National Congress and Aam Aadmi Party occupy this role in India. In the Maldives, as Rasheeda Didi writes, the political opposition has championed a slogan of "India Out" to highlight its dismay over the government's close military and diplomatic links with India. In this role, however, it has channeled its disagreements primarily through the formal political system as opposed to engaging in street or other forms of activist politics.

Yet, the formal role played by opposition parties can be complicated by coalitional and/or federal politics, as Asma Faiz shows in the case of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) in Pakistan, at times blending ruling in some places while opposing in others. As in Karachi, a city whose armed politics are skillfully unpacked by Zoha Waseem, one can also see parties deploying violence or acting in collaboration with violent actors, bridging standard-issue party politics with gang-like warfare.

There are also actors that operate as part of the system but in shifting alignment with, or opposition to, other parts of the system: Yasser Kureshi's account of the Pakistani judiciary provides a clear example of an institution that can occupy multiple roles despite being firmly embedded within the state structure. This can also be true of politically active militaries, in addition to courts. In India, for instance, politicians with intimate local links to Maoist rebels have long held sway in eastern and central parts of the country.

Spatial Variation

Another axis of opposition is spatial/scalar. There is significant variation in the geographic space within which opposition forces, of whatever form, can mobilize. This spatial variation has hugely important implications for the kinds of coalitions that can plausibly be construct- ed. In some cases, there are relatively isolated pockets of mobilization, like among dissidents in Bangladesh protesting a draconian digital security law described by Ali Riaz. In other locales, opposition politics exists in distinct and somewhat self-contained political ecosys- tems, such as the Pakistani megalopolis of Karachi.

In both Nepal and India, a panoply of regionally defined opposition forces, which can be linked to both national and subnational arenas, battle for political space. Asim Ali's essay on India, for instance, disaggregates regional opposition parties, highlighting the superior per- formance that linguistically based regional parties have enjoyed vis-à-vis the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). These linguistically based parties, sometimes dubbed regionalist parties, have thrived in their local bastions even as they have proven unable to halt the BJP jugger- naut in New Delhi.

Finally, there are cases in which opposition functions on a national scale, as in the massive protests during Sri Lanka's 2022 political-economic crisis discussed by Bhavani Fonseka. In this case, tens of thousands of Sri Lankans across the country joined demonstrations in a largely peaceful display of political activism demanding the ouster of the powerful Rajapaksa family.

Dynamics of Protest

The dynamics of protest are obviously important to opposition but are also highly variable. Some opposition parties eschew mass protests in favor of more supposedly conventional forms of mobilization. Insurgents, for very different reasons, also tend to use other strategies as well. State actors, even though they may at times link themselves to protesters, tend not to directly engage in these activities.

In many other cases, however, opposition actors regularly generate mass protests. For in- stance, Nepal has experienced extensive street protests, both citizen- and party-led; Mulmi's essay argues that the former tends to only succeed when it aligns with the latter. Sri Lanka saw extraordinary levels of mass protest against a government seen as incapable of managing the country's economic collapse.

Many of Pakistan's major parties use mass marches as a signaling device, as do non/ quasi-parties like the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). For instance, in February, the PPP launched a "long march" from Karachi to Islamabad to force the ouster of the Imran Khan–led central government. The agitation culminated in Khan's April ouster after he lost a no confidence vote on the floor of Parliament. India's opposition politics regularly feature protests, but with substantial variation in both size and outcomes.

State-Party Fusion

Another theme that emerges from this collection of essays is the variation in the fusion of state and party institutions. In Bangladesh, for instance, an Awami League party-state, albeit one resting uneasily on potential instability, is clearly evident. As Riaz notes in his essay on digital authoritarianism, the country's Digital Security Act is a thinly veiled attempt by the government to silence critics and dissenters. The law is part and parcel of a larger project by the government to consolidate power and further marginalize the political opposition.

In India, party dominance over the bureaucracy and, to some extent, the judiciary is apparent at both the national and state levels. Here, there is no neat breakdown between BJP- and non-BJP-ruled areas; the hold Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress exerts on the state in West Bengal is comparable to both the sway Jagan Reddy and the YSR Congress hold in Andhra Pradesh and the iron grip the BJP's Yogi Adityanath wields in Uttar Pradesh.

In Sri Lanka (surprisingly, after a period of seemingly resurgent Rajapaksa hegemony) and Pakistan, one sees a murkier picture, in which fragmented and contested political power leaves interesting gaps and opportunities for jockeying actors (for example, the curious position of the PPP). In Nepal, no party has established lasting hegemony over the state apparatus. This is important both for dynamics of patronage and patterns of state repression.

Decline of the Left

There are also areas of consistency across contemporary South Asian cases. One of these is the weakness of the left, whether classical Marxist-Leninist or highly redistributionist demands from below. For instance, Tahmina Rahman documents the distinct decline of leftist parties in Bangladesh, a country that has moved rightward as well in a more authoritarian direction with seemingly little pushback from leftist forces. Rahman identifies challenges of both an ideological and organizational nature that have impeded leftist parties' electoral success. In fact, in many respects, the left has been its own worst enemy—struggling to engage civil society, manage intraparty disputes, or overcome perceptions of both elitism and atheism. Nepal is a partial exception to this trend, but in general leftist parties have ceded enormous territory to a wide variety of other political parties. Given high inequality and rapid economic change, which might be expected to trigger growing redistributive demands, this is an important finding. The ability of right-leaning regimes to mobilize around economic development—in reality and/or in rhetoric—is striking.

It also raises old questions about the usefulness of the left-right spectrum in the region. This is an interesting contrast to the recent leftward tilt in Latin America. What is the aspirational twenty-first century "developmental state" model in the region? One might suggest a comfortable bargain between the private sector and a statist party mobilizing a combination of development and identity/nationalism and in control of the state apparatus.

Yet this is not a guarantee: Sri Lanka and Pakistan stand as failed developmental projects, unable to maintain sufficient economic growth or political stability. For a period, the Rajapaksas fused statist political economy mixed with ethnonationalism but could not sustain meaningful growth.

Digital Politics

Riaz's essay highlights how contestation over digital technologies is an emerging political dynamic. His work grapples with state-led digital repression and surveillance, a phenomenon that has grown in scope and ambition as sophisticated technological tools became increasingly available to regimes. Pakistan has introduced an amendment to a digital security law that human rights organizations have criticized, and multiple civil society reports have explored Indian surveillance strategies.

In India, there are also public battles over the use of technology, such as with the Aadhaar biometric identification scheme and questions surrounding its linkage with voter lists, a priority of the present government. Previous programs supposedly meant to cleanse the electoral rolls have resulted in the disenfranchisement of large numbers of citizens, raising concerns that digitization could result in the further marginalization of certain classes of citizens, especially those belonging to religious minorities. Digital politics will clearly be a crucial area of competition between governments and opposition forces in the years to come.

Opposition Coordination

A final theme is the difficulty of opposition coordination in complex, federal systems where the opposition is fragmented and regionally oriented. Faiz's essay points to the difficulties the PPP faces, for instance, in stitching together an opposition coalition. The party has competing objectives in Sindh versus the center. The same is often true in India, as Ali points out in exploring the complex mix of opposition parties operating at the state and national levels. Aggregating state-level oppositions is much easier said than done, while building and maintaining (including financing) strong national parties is an immense challenge in the face of powerful incumbents. These challenges can make it difficult both to push out incumbents and to then deliver cohesive, stable governance afterward.

Conclusion

The dominance of powerful regime incumbents in South Asia, from the BJP in India to the Awami League in Bangladesh and the military in Pakistan, should not obscure the reality that the opposition space in the region is dynamic, fluid, and highly consequential. As the example of the Rajapaksa family in Sri Lanka illustrates, a coterie of political elites that is widely viewed as untouchable can quickly be made obsolete once domestic economic, political, or social currents begin to shift against them.

The opposition—parties, street protests, civil society collectives, armed groups, and even institutional veto players—all have agency in terms of exercising pushback. The essays in this series demonstrate that though opposition forces may be down in many parts of South Asia, they are not out. And, to complicate matters, the opposition that may be most worth heeding does not always come in the conventional categories that analysts have long identified: rather than a simple binary of state and opposition, there are complex and shifting constellations of political power. This series expands the collective imagination about the diverse array of forces that incumbents must reckon with.

The authors are grateful to Alie Brase, Haley Clasen, and Nitya Labh for editorial assistance.

How Bangladesh's Digital Security Act Is Creating a Culture of Fear

Ali Riaz

Author and social activist Mushtaq Ahmed died in a Bangladeshi jail on February 25, 2021, after being detained and allegedly tortured for social media posts critical of the government. On November 8, 2021, a tribunal framed charges against journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol for circulating "objectionable" information about ruling party leaders. And farmer Abu Zaman is on the run following accusations that he influenced the posting of false information on Facebook, even though he does not own a smartphone. Several minors in the country also have been arrested for social media activity and have been sent to juvenile corrections centers.

These cases have one thing in common: all were filed under Bangladesh's 2018 Digital Security Act (DSA). The law, which came into force on October 1, 2018, has become the government's and ruling party activists' preferred weapon to muzzle critics and stymie their freedom of expression, especially in cyberspace. Even before the law was passed by parliament, human rights activists and organizations criticized it as a threat to freedom of expression. The Editors' Council, the apex body comprising Bangladesh's leading newspaper editors, protested and demanded that the government scrap nine sections of the law. While cabinet ministers met the editors and assured them that it would not be abused, such promises proved to be empty gestures. The law became so repressive that, in May 2020, the Editors' Council remarked, "our fear is now a nightmare-reality for the mass media."

While previous governments have used laws on the books to squelch dissent, these efforts have now reached their zenith with the DSA. The government's use of the law has stepped up the fight against its critics to an unprecedented level. The resultant curbs on the freedom of expression in Bangladesh have done significant damage to the little semblance of democracy that is left in the country, especially after the democratic setbacks posed by two controversial elections in 2014 and 2018. The law and its consequences also reveal a lot about the country's political trajectory.

The Digital Security Act's Illiberal Origins

The DSA, while of recent vintage, is not the first law to curb online freedom of expression in Bangladesh. The DSA was preceded by the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act 2006 (later amended in 2013). Since 2014, the ICT Act has come under harsh criticism as it was widely used to arrest and persecute individuals for expressing their views online. According to Human Rights Watch, Bangladeshi police filed nearly 1,300 charges from 2013 to April 2018 under the ICT Act. Most of these cases were filed under Section 57 of the act, which authorizes the prosecution of anyone who "publishes or transmits . . . in electronic form any material" deemed "fake and obscene," defamatory, or otherwise likely to "deprave or corrupt" its audience. It also allows for prosecutions stemming from any online material that may cause "law and order" to "deteriorate"; "prejudice the image of the State or [a] person; or "hurt religious belief." In 2018, the government finally decided to repeal five controversial sections of the ICT Act, including the offending Section 57. But this repeal didn't result in a freer environment because the DSA essentially incorporated these sections with even harsher penalties.

The DSA came into force amid serious democratic decline in Bangladesh. Weak institutions, a trust deficit between political parties, and an acrimonious political culture have hindered democratic consolidation in the country since 1991. However, the process took a dramatic turn for the worse in late 2006 following the installation of a constitutionally mandated, nonpartisan caretaker government (CTG) to oversee the upcoming general election. The incumbent Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) amended the constitution to ensure that the CTG was headed by a former chief justice sympathetic to it, while the opposition Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) was adamant about stopping the appointment of former chief justice K. M. Hasan to this post at any cost. After Hasan declined the position, then president Iajuddin Ahmed, a BNP appointee, assumed the position of head of the CTG (in addition to his presidential responsibilities).

While the incumbent president's acceptance of the role followed the letter of the constitution, it was inconsistent with the spirit of a neutral caretaker government and therefore added to an already volatile situation. Two BNP loyalists were appointed new election commissioners, and the army was deployed even though the cabinet was not consulted. Some members of the cabinet resigned in protest. Although leading opposition figures initially agreed to join the January 2007 election (which was later canceled), they decided to withdraw due to the Bangladesh Election Commission's decision to nix the nomination of H. M. Ershad. All-out violence leading up to the election was on the horizon. This situation encouraged the military to intervene and stage a soft coup in early 2007. The military-backed civilian government instead arranged an election at the end of 2008, which was conducted fairly and delivered a spectacular victory for the BAL.

Armed with a two-thirds majority in parliament, the BAL government scrapped the CTG provision in 2011. The CTG system, which had ensured three free and fair elections since its incorporation into the constitution in 1996, was unceremoniously thrown away. The

opposition threatened to boycott the election unless it was reinstated. The incumbent BAL government did not heed this call and, amid widespread violence, held a one-sided election in January 2014. The BAL's victory was a foregone conclusion, and 153 candidates who ran unopposed (including many with the BAL) were elected well before a single vote was cast. On the first anniversary of this election, the opposition led by the BNP launched bouts of violent street agitation, which cost more than 100 lives. By early 2018, former prime minister Khaleda Zia, the leader of the BNP, was convicted on graft charges, and opposition leaders faced innumerable frivolous criminal cases. Extrajudicial killings by the Bangladeshi security agencies skyrocketed, and enforced disappearances became widespread.

From 2016 onward, the Bangladeshi government started to tighten its control over politics, introduced a new law to weaken civil society organizations, and ramped up cases against opposition activists. In July 2018, a spontaneous movement of students demanding road safety shook the country. Although mainstream media outlets were already facing indirect state control, cyberspace became a major avenue to raise critical voices. The government began introducing the DSA in early 2018 ahead of the election that was held later that year, seeing the law as a new tool to maintain power and silence its critics.

Overly broad and vague provisions in the DSA have granted the government enormous punitive power. The DSA gives the government absolute power to initiate investigations into anyone whose activities are considered a threat. Section 21 is a case in point. The section's first clause states, "If any person, by means of digital medium, makes or instigates to make any propaganda or campaign against the liberation war of Bangladesh, spirit of liberation war, father of the nation, national anthem or national flag, then such act of the person shall be an offence." However, the phrase "spirit of liberation war" is not clearly defined, and the government has leveraged such ambiguity to demean, vilify, and attack critics, alleging that they have undermined the spirit of Bangladesh's struggle for independence.

The act gives law enforcement agencies the power to arrest anyone, search any premises, and seize any equipment without a warrant, requiring only suspicion that a crime has been committed using social media. Also, the act allows the government to order the removal and blocking of any information or data on the internet that it deems necessary, thereby providing broad scope to silence those critical of its policies or those who share information on human rights violations in the country. Fourteen out of the twenty provisions in the law dealing with offenses and punishments render defendants ineligible for bail, a fact that allows the accused to be detained indefinitely. Within three months after the law was introduced, the BAL secured a landslide victory in the 2018 parliamentary elections, which the *New York Times* Editorial Board described as "farcical."

The Targets of Digital Repression

In the past three years, more than 1,500 cases have been filed under the DSA. These cases are under the purview of eight cyber crimes tribunals. The author has gathered information about 754 cases filed between January 1, 2020, and October 31, 2021, as part of a project funded by the National Endowment of Democracy for the Centre for Governance Studies in Bangladesh, a project for which the author is the principal investigator.[1] These data were collected from government-approved print and electronic media; the accused or their family and friends; the lawyers of the accused; and police stations and other concerned departments.

In these 754 cases filed under the DSA, 1,841 individuals were accused of committing crimes. The author was able to gather details on the professions of about 675 of these individuals. Records show that a total of 655 individuals were arrested. While some of the accused have secured bail, many are still languishing in jail and awaiting trial. A high proportion of politicians and journalists have been prosecuted under the DSA, as these groups represented 29.5 percent and 25.6 percent, respectively, of the accused parties whose professional backgrounds could be confirmed (see table 1). The accused have come from a variety of professions, including businesspeople, students, and educators.

Table 1. Professional Identities of Bangladeshis Accused Under the DSA

Profession	Number	Percentage
Journalists	173	25.6
Educators	35	5.2
NGO Workers/Activists	10	1.5
Politicians	199	29.5
Students	73	10.8
Government Employees	26	3.9
Private Employees	37	5.5
Businesspeople	76	11.3
Legal Practitioners	20	3.0
Religious Leaders	6	0.9
Other Professions	20	3.0

Source: Centre for Governance Studies, "DSA Tracker," 2020, https://freedominfo.net.

Note: These figures are drawn from the project's raw data set. The sum of percentages does not add up exactly to 100 percent due to rounding.

Of the subset of the accused who were actually arrested, the author was able to gather information on the professional identities of 245 individuals. Taken together, politicians and journalists account for more than 40 percent of the documented cases of those arrested (see table 2).

Table 2. Professional Identities of Bangladeshis Arrested Under the DSA

Profession	Number	Percentage
Journalists	50	20.4
Educators	21	8.6
NGO Workers/Activists	6	2.5
Politicians	56	22.9
Students	41	16.7
Government Employees	7	2.9
Private Employees	21	8.6
Businesspeople	26	10.6
Legal Practitioners	3	1.2
Religious Leaders	4	1.6
Other Professions	10	4.1

Source: Centre for Governance Studies, "DSA Tracker," 2020, https://freedominfo.net.

Note: These figures are drawn from the project's raw data set. The sum of percentages does not add up exactly to 100 percent due to rounding.

Most of those accused (83.6 percent) and arrested (84.1 percent) under the DSA are between eighteen and forty years of age (see tables 3 and 4). In the cases for which data were available, at least seventeen children under the age of eighteen have been accused of breaking the law, and twelve of them have been arrested.

Table 3. Ages of Bangladeshis Accused Under the DSA

Age	Number	Percentage
Under 18	17	2.4
years 25–18	264	37.4
years 40–26	326	46.2
years 55–41	92	13.0
Over 55 years	7	1.0

Source: Centre for Governance Studies, "DSA Tracker," 2020, https://freedominfo.net.

Note: These figures are drawn from the project's raw data set.

Table 4. Ages of Bangladeshis Arrested Under the DSA

Age	Number	Percentage
Under 18	12	2.8
years 25–18	170	39.6
years 40–26	191	44.5
years 55–41	55	12.8
Over 55 years	1	0.2

Source: Centre for Governance Studies, "DSA Tracker," 2020, https://freedominfo.net.

Note: These figures are drawn from the project's raw data set. The sum of percentages does not add up exactly to 100 percent due to rounding.

The Accusers in Digital Repression Cases

The DSA contains a provision that allows individuals, even those who are not aggrieved, to file cases. It is an unusual provision because defamation laws typically are meant to protect the individual who is subjected to the act of defamation and being harmed. But to file a case under the DSA, the individual does not need to be defamed personally but only to have felt that someone else has been defamed or insulted. Of the 418 accusers for whom data are available, eighty-seven (20.8 percent) are from law enforcement agencies such as the Rapid Action Battalion, an elite anticrime unit of the Bangladesh Police. Additionally, forty-one government officials (9.8 percent) have filed cases against individuals for allegedly violating the DSA. Taken together, cases filed by government-affiliated parties account for over 31 percent of the total. Of the remainder, 169 accusers (40.4 percent) are affiliated with political parties (see table 5).

Table 5. Professional Identities of the Accusers in DSA Cases

Accuser	Number	Percentage
Rapid Action Battalion	11	2.6
Police	72	17.2
Other Law Enforcement Agencies	4	1.0
Private Employees	23	5.5
NGO Workers/Activists	3	0.7
Individuals Affiliated With Political Parties	169	40.4

Accuser	Number	Percentage
Government Officials	41	9.8
Businesspeople	14	3.4
Educators	16	3.8
Journalists	22	5.3
Legal Practitioners	14	3.4
Others	18	4.3
Students	11	2.6

Source: Centre for Governance Studies, "DSA Tracker," 2020, https://freedominfo.net.

Note: These figures are drawn from the project's raw data set.

Among the 169 party-affiliated accusers, 135 belong to the ruling party (the BAL) and its various offshoots like the youth and student wings (see table 6). Altogether, almost 80 percent of accusers whose political identities are available belong to the ruling party.

Table 6. Political Identities of the Accusers in DSA Cases

Accusers' Political Affiliations	Number	Percentage
Bangladesh Awami League	52	30.8
Bangladesh Awami Jubo League ((youth front of the BAL	21	12.5
Bangladesh Awami Swechasebak (League (volunteer front of the BAL	11	6.5
Bangladesh Student League	51	30.2
Bangladesh Nationalist Party	1	0.6
Others	33	19.5

Source: Centre for Governance Studies, "DSA Tracker," 2020, https://freedominfo.net.

Note: These figures are drawn from the project's raw data set. "Others" refers to individuals affiliated with other parties besides the BAL and the BNP. The sum of percentages does not add up exactly to 100 percent due to rounding.

A further breakdown shows that thirty-three of these 169 BAL-affiliated activists hold elected positions at various levels, including five members of parliament and four mayors.[2]

Conclusion

These numbers show that Bangladeshi government officials and their supporters have extensively used the DSA to silence detractors. Their wanton use of the law has created a culture of fear, leading journalists to self-censor to avoid retribution. While the law itself is causing a precipitous decline in freedom of expression in Bangladesh, it is also indicative of the state of Bangladeshi politics and needs to be seen within that larger context. In the past decade, the space for opposition parties has shrunk remarkably, and they have faced persecution, often by way of frivolous legal cases. Citizens' right to assembly and free speech are now in serious jeopardy. The government is condoning and has engaged in extrajudicial measures.

The DSA is a telltale sign of Bangladesh's ongoing slide toward authoritarianism. Indications of digital authoritarianism such as increasing surveillance and repression of the country's citizens in cyberspace akin to the practices at work in other authoritarian countries have become the reality. State institutions are used to muzzle critics and strengthen the grip of the ruling party. Meanwhile, activists who support the ruling party are given free rein to use existing laws to effectively criminalize free speech.

The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan

Abdul Sayed

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is the largest militant organization fighting against the state in Pakistan. According to the UN, the TTP also boasts several thousand fighters in Afghanistan, with strongholds on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Although Pakistani military actions, U.S. drone warfare, and factional infighting led to the TTP's decline from 2014 to 2018, the militant group has been experiencing a strong resurgence since the Afghan Taliban and U.S. government signed a peace deal in February 2020. In fact, since July 2020, ten militant groups opposed to the Pakistani state have merged with the TTP, including, among others, three Pakistani affiliates of al-Qaeda and four major factions that had separated from the TTP in 2014. Following these mergers, TTP violence has become more frequent, and this violent streak continues to accelerate as a result of the Afghan Taliban's takeover in Kabul in August 2021.

The TTP serves as a crucial case study due to its deep historical roots with the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP). The group is a by-product of al-Qaeda's jihadi politics in Afghanistan and Pakistan after 9/11. The TTP still has covert links with al-Qaeda and has declared that it looks to Afghan Taliban leaders as its own while enjoying safe haven under Taliban rule in Afghanistan. And although the ISKP was born largely from disaffected TTP members, it has always avoided any physical confrontation with the group. Moreover, ISKP public messages continue to reveal a soft spot for TTP fighters. This connection will be particularly important to monitor, as any alliance between the two groups could have severe security implications beyond the region. According to a U.S. intelligence assessment, the ISKP could be capable of mounting an attack in the West, including in the United States, in the near future. Any alliance between the TTP and the ISKP could strengthen the ISKP and worsen the threat it poses beyond the region.

To understand how much of a threat the TTP could pose, it is useful to examine the rise and evolution of the group—its background, the policies and strategies that helped the group achieve legitimacy among jihadists since its establishment in 2007, and its changing efforts to eliminate past liabilities and make its anti-state militant campaign more mainstream in Pakistan. This information provides valuable context for assessing the significance of the TTP's intensified violence and organizational strength after the Afghan Taliban's return to power and, more importantly, for gauging its future threat to security and the likelihood of a peace deal with the Pakistani state.

The TTP's Origins

The TTP is a by-product of the intra-jihadi politics that followed the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. The TTP claims that its armed struggle aims to establish an Islamic political system in Pakistan based on the group's interpretation of sharia, a task it says was the main goal for establishing Pakistan in 1947. At the time of the U.S. invasion, many Pakistani jihadists who had fought on behalf of the Pakistani government in Afghanistan and in Indian Kashmir turned against the Pakistani state for its support of the United States' so-called global war on terror, among other grievances. TTP members thus began sheltering the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other militant allies who were fleeing the Afghanistan conflict. Yielding to U.S. pressure, the Pakistani government eventually cracked down on the safe havens, but its violent response ultimately prompted these Pakistani jihadists to band together and more formally ally with al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban. This eventually led to the establishment of the TTP in 2007.

At its inception, the TTP claimed to be an extension of the Afghan Taliban. It declared that the then leader of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammed Omar, was its spiritual leader and offered to support the Afghan Taliban's war against the United States and its allies. Though the TTP framed its militant campaign as a defensive war against Pakistan's military operations, the group hoped to follow in the Afghan Taliban's footsteps and establish a sharia system in Pakistan, freeing the country from the "American stooges" who supposedly governed it.

However, over time, the TTP's focus and strategy changed. For instance, in 2020 the TTP claimed that it no longer had any regional or global agenda beyond Pakistan. This pronouncement may have reflected an attempt to reduce international support for Pakistan's battle against the TTP; at times, Pakistan was able to secure sophisticated U.S. drone technology to fight the TTP due to the group's open collaboration with al-Qaeda. In 2018, the TTP formally excluded from its manifesto calls for a "greater jihad" in Afghanistan and for supporting the global jihadi agenda of al-Qaeda—calls that were prevalent in its early narratives.

The group also made another tactical change in its 2018 manifesto: it deprioritized indiscriminate attacks on Pakistani targets, including against civilians. For years, these attacks had aimed to pressure the Pakistani government to meet TTP demands. But the TTP's manifesto redirected its fighters away from attacking civilians and religious minorities, advocating instead targeted violence against Pakistani military personnel and intelligence operatives. Since this redirection, there has been a sharp decline in TTP attacks against civilians. While it is difficult to say what caused the change in tactics, one reason could be that the TTP's early spate of violence against civilians earned the ire of global and local jihadi allies, including Osama bin Laden. Another reason could be that the TTP wanted to focus its war on the Pakistani state and security forces.

Finally, to help establish its legitimacy, the TTP had to align some of its objectives with the political goals of certain Pakistani religio-political and ethnic parties, particularly a subset of Baluch and Pashtun nationalists. In recent decades, these ethnic minorities have protested allegedly discriminative and exploitative state policies. They are located in the Pakistan tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, which serves as the TTP's support base.

How It Has Evolved

The TTP has evolved over the years to maintain its influence among jihadi networks in Pakistan.

Establishing Legitimacy

The TTP faced two challenges from the outset. First, it had to lay the foundation of the anti-state jihadi war front in Pakistan. The Pakistani military establishment's strong ties with indigenous jihadi groups complicated this objective. These groups were actively involved in the jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan and enjoyed the state's support. Thus, the TTP had to turn this long-standing jihadi friendship with the state into an open jihadi war against the state. Second, it needed to gain prominence in Pakistan's highly competitive jihadi and religio-political ecosystem, in which many advocated nonmilitant means to achieve the same goals that the TTP was fighting for. These religio-political parties have been working for decades to accomplish the fundamental goal of creating a Pakistani state that upholds their interpretation of sharia.

To work around these challenges, TTP leaders pursued four political objectives. First, the group's leadership strengthened its alliances with the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda to increase its local and international legitimacy. Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen as well as Deobandi and Salafist seminaries, Islamist parties, and other jihadi groups all supported the Afghan Taliban's insurgency against the United States and its allies, seeing the campaign as a legitimate jihad to expel foreign infidels. Thus, as the TTP supported the Afghan jihad by offering material provisions, the group's legitimacy was enhanced. This strategy helped

the TTP recruit a large number of young recruits for its war against the Pakistani state. The TTP provided the Afghan Taliban with bases in the Pashtun tribal regions bordering Afghanistan, eventually earning an official endorsement from its Afghan ally. Its closeness to the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda—as well as Pakistani jihadists' frustrations with pro-state militant groups who were seen as compromising their narratives after 9/11—granted the TTP space in the competitive jihadi ecosystem, elevating it above other groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed.

Similarly, the TTP garnered al-Qaeda's support by providing it shelter in Pakistan. It also launched attacks either with, or on behalf of, al-Qaeda. For instance, a prominent TTP leader eventually claimed that the group assassinated former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto within weeks of the group's formal launch; she had been considered one of al-Qaeda's top enemies since the early 1990s. In addition, the TTP organized attacks to appeal to the global jihadi agenda of al-Qaeda. For example, the TTP attempted to bomb New York City in 2010, a plot that was ultimately foiled. A year earlier, it had played a lead role in the suicide attack on a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency compound in Afghanistan's southeastern Khost Province—another attack aimed at pleasing its ally. These acts further increased the TTP's local and international legitimacy and its competitiveness with more established jihadi groups in the region.

Second, the TTP killed hundreds of tribal elders who opposed its militancy in the tribal belt. The former Pakistani Pashtun tribal belt—comprised of the semiautonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)—was governed by a tribal system. However, the government had partial control of the FATA and needed the tribal elders' support to govern the territories and their people. Thus, in attacking the elders, the TTP essentially superseded and replaced the traditional tribal chieftains' system with its militancy, thereby increasing its hold in these areas.

Third, the TTP poached members from highly skilled cadres of anti-Shia sectarian militant groups in Pakistan, such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). Horrific attacks that the TTP carried out against the Shia sect in Pakistan encouraged LeJ members to defect, given the latter's exclusive targeting of the Shia sect. As the TTP leveraged the capabilities of anti-Shia groups, this eventually helped to intensify the TTP's war against the Pakistani state.

Fourth, the TTP established a sharia system in northwestern Pakistan in the same style that the Afghan Taliban imposed in Afghanistan before 9/11. This strategy attracted members of Pakistani Islamist groups from the districts of Malakand, Bajaur, and Orakzai, among others, thereby expanding the TTP's political base. The TTP was also able to attract educated Islamists from Pakistan's urban areas; many of these people were frustrated about the failed political approaches to sharia implementation in the country. The TTP's efforts helped it win over numerous Islamists who had long been aiming to achieve the Islamization of Pakistan through nonmilitant, religious-political means.

Transforming Into an Anti-State Militant Movement

Over time, the TTP evolved into a focused anti-state militant movement in Pakistan. Three factors contributed to this change: al-Qaeda's decreasing influence, the Afghan Taliban's rising influence, and the TTP's expanding efforts to remain relevant in contemporary Pakistani politics.

Initially, al-Qaeda had a profound influence on the TTP's politics. For example, it compelled TTP leaders to revisit their anti-Shia agenda and largely limit the war to Western interests and the Pakistani state; in 2010, bin Laden asked the TTP to stop attacks against the Shias and the Barelvi subsect of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam in Pakistan. But after U.S. drone strikes killed TTP leaders Baitullah Mehsud and Hakimullah Mehsud, the group was forced to reconsider its public support for al-Qaeda. Although al-Qaeda played an instrumental role in the TTP's birth, rise, and expansion, the group determined that a close public relationship with al-Qaeda had become a liability. According to recent reports, however, al-Qaeda still plays an important role in mentoring the TTP behind the scenes.

Meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban's influence has grown stronger. With some members co-located with the TTP in the tribal area of Waziristan in Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban became a natural political and organizational model for the TTP. As the Afghan Taliban refined its strategy, the TTP followed suit. In 2014, TTP leaders Omar Khalid Khorasani and Qari Shakeel Ahmad wanted to replace the quasi-tribal structure of TTP management with the Afghan Taliban's centralized bureaucratic system, arguing that such a structure was best suited for expansion. The TTP finally adopted this change in 2020, appointing shadow governors for different regions of Pakistan and announcing the group's first-ever centralized military training system. That same year, TTP chief Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud announced that the TTP can only be victorious in Pakistan if it follows in the footsteps of the Afghan Taliban.

The TTP has also engaged more with mainstream political issues to remain relevant in Pakistan's political discourse. For example, the TTP has called on Pakistan's opposition political parties to reconsider their nonviolent approach if they truly seek to end the powerful military establishment's political meddling. In this vein, the TTP has endorsed the politics of Pashtun and Baluch nationalists in Pakistan despite harboring deep ideological differences with both groups. (Baluch nationalists, for instance, are largely secular in disposition.) TTP leaders have even issued statements in support of the Pashtun rights movement, known as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, despite its anti-Taliban positions. The TTP has also recently endorsed the massive countrywide protests of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a far-right religio-political party fighting against so-called enemies of Islam. This is particularly significant because the TLP belongs to the Sunni Barelvi sect, while the TTP originates from the rival Deobandi sect. Each of these endorsements demonstrates the TTP's efforts to remain relevant in contemporary discourse.

The TTP After the Afghan Taliban's Takeover

Prior to the collapse of former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani's government, the Pakistani government repeatedly accused it of harboring anti-Pakistan militant groups in Afghanistan. As a result, some in Islamabad believed that if the Afghan Taliban (a so-called Pakistan-friendly organization) were to return to power in Kabul, the latter would limit these groups' freedom of action. Contrary to these expectations, however, the Afghan Taliban's return has so far strengthened the TTP.

Following its takeover, the Afghan Taliban released hundreds of TTP prisoners from prisons in Kabul, including TTP senior leaders like founding deputy emir Maulvi Faqir Mohammad. The TTP celebrated its members' releases with large motor rallies and caravans in eastern Afghanistan. Videos released since the Taliban's takeover also show the TTP enjoying complete operational freedom in Afghanistan. In addition to congratulating the Afghan Taliban on its return to power, the TTP publicly renewed its pledge of allegiance to its ally. Reinforcing its ongoing narratives, the TTP's leadership presented the Afghan Taliban as a role model to the group's fighters, arguing that perseverance in the war against the Pakistani state will guarantee a similar victory to what the Taliban achieved in Afghanistan. In addition, the TTP claimed responsibility for a large number of attacks in the months following the Afghan government's collapse—generating the highest monthly average attack rate in the last five to six years.

When the Afghan Taliban's spokesman was asked about the future of the TTP in Afghanistan, he was noncommittal and evasive. He argued that the TTP is a Pakistani issue and that his group has nothing to do with it. The spokesman even suggested that Pakistan should try to resolve its problems with the TTP through negotiations.

Conclusion

With the Afghan Taliban back in power in Kabul, Pakistan's prime minister, president, and foreign minister offered negotiations and general amnesty to the TTP. Initially, the TTP rejected these offers, arguing that it considers the Pakistani constitution "un-Islamic." Yet the group left the door to dialogue open, stating that the TTP is ready for "any serious negotiations which can ensure its sharia implementation goal in Pakistan." And in early November, spokespeople of the Pakistani government and the TTP announced that they were negotiating under a short-term ceasefire and would be extending it to enable further dialogue.

Hopes for the negotiations are higher this time around because two major factors that led to past failures no longer exist: first, the former Afghan government and U.S. forces no longer control Afghanistan, and second, hardliners within the TTP no longer oppose dialogue. A TTP peace deal with the Pakistani state represented a direct threat to the former Afghan government and U.S. forces, ultimately resulting in TTP contributions to the Taliban

attacks in Afghanistan. Thus, they always objected to such a deal in the past. With the removal of this first factor, TTP hardliners now support negotiations. For example, TTP co-founder and senior commander Khorasani completely supports negotiations this time, unlike in 2014 when he sabotaged both sides' dialogues.

Ultimately, a political settlement remains the only option for the Pakistani government. It will not be able to pressure the Afghan Taliban to combat the TTP beyond a certain point for two reasons. First, the TTP played an instrumental role in the post-9/11 resurgence of the Taliban. The TTP's leadership has strong bonds with various Afghan Taliban commanders and groups, who deeply admired the TTP's sacrifices in fighting against U.S. forces and U.S. allies in Afghanistan. This pro-TTP lobby within the Taliban is influential and crosses tribal and regional cleavages. As a result, using force against the TTP would result in serious intra-Taliban rifts. Second, the Afghan Taliban faces a major challenge in countering its rival, the ISKP, which (as noted earlier) includes former influential TTP commanders and hundreds of their fighters.

The TTP also now believes that a settlement is in its best interests, in part because of its ties with the Afghan Taliban once again in power in Kabul. The TTP claims that it agreed to negotiations with the Pakistani state to decrease the political problems of the Taliban. It is aware of the Afghan Taliban's problems with the international community and that the threat of foreign fighters in Afghanistan would exacerbate them. The Taliban has promised the United States and wider international community that it will not let any individual or group pose a threat to any state outside Afghanistan. The TTP comprises two-third of these fighters. Thus, if these fighters continue to mount attacks in Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban's promises will be considered nullified, further increasing the international community's political mistrust.

All this said, the TTP's main concern remains the implementation of sharia in Pakistan based on its strict interpretation of Islam. The group says that it will not lay down its arms until this goal is achieved. Thus, the likelihood of a quick peace deal between the state and the TTP remains low; Pakistan cannot afford any political settlement that comes at the cost of replacing a democratic system with strict sharia rules. Yet, because a settlement remains the only option for both sides due to geopolitical realities, there is hope that both parties will compromise to some extent to create a pathway forward.

Can Nepal's Latest Citizen-Led Street Protests Shake Things Up?

Amish Raj Mulmi

Roughly one year ago, Nepal's then prime minister, K.P. Sharma Oli, dissolved the lower house of parliament and announced early elections for December 2020. This decision followed a bitter imbroglio over power sharing with Oli's party rivals in the then-unified Nepal Communist Party, a merger between two long-standing rival communist parties that eventually splintered again. An intraparty divide meant Oli no longer had numbers on his side, and he chose to shutter the House of Representatives rather than face a vote of no confidence, even though Nepal's 2015 constitution does not grant prime ministers this power.

The backlash was swift but divisive. Party workers took to the streets, and cases were filed against Oli's move in the Supreme Court. As the country waited for a ruling, a unified response was missing, with parties choosing to protest individually rather than collectively. The primary opposition party, the Nepali Congress, and its leader Sher Bahadur Deuba were plagued by internal discord. Although its leaders protested Oli's decision, they also appeared (to some observers) to be opportunistically hedging their bets to capitalize on Oli's misstep and gain power themselves. Nepali politics reached a dead end.

Amid this crisis, a new citizen-led political movement was born. In January 2021, a group of Nepali citizens calling themselves the Brihat Nagarik Andolan (BNA), which translates as the Greater Citizens' Movement, arose to highlight the country's deteriorating political climate. Following in the footsteps of past popular movements in Nepal that brought democracy to the country in 1990 and 2006, the BNA sought not just to resolve the immediate crisis but also to demand greater accountability from the political class. It called for structural changes to address the historical inequities in Nepali society and establish more inclusive, transparent, and representative governing institutions.

The Supreme Court eventually reinstated the legislature in February 2021. But the drama was not over. In May 2021, both Deuba and Oli claimed to have enough support to form a new government. Although Oli did not have sufficient representatives on his side to stake a claim, President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved the House of Representatives once more on Oli's recommendation and announced fresh elections in November. The Supreme Court then stepped in again, reinstating the house in July 2021 and issuing orders that Deuba be appointed prime minister.

While Deuba's appointment, in a narrow sense, addressed Nepal's immediate governing crisis, many of the enduring problems that gave rise to the BNA in the first place—including unaccountable leaders, political brinksmanship, and the marginalization of some ethnic groups—remain largely unresolved. Examining the origins, demands, and limitations of the BNA is an important exercise for understanding the ongoing issues that Nepali politicians and citizens continue to grapple with.

Nepal's Legacy of Civic Opposition

Nepal has a long history of dissent against the state involving ordinary people. In various cases, citizens have organized themselves under the banner of professional organizations–such as the Nepal Bar Association–or as part of collective movements like the BNA. Citizen-led movements generally have supplemented a larger political campaign, but they emerged as a legitimate opposition force during the country's April 2006 movement, when groups of ordinary people coordinated their protests with those of political parties, as the late Nepali anthropologist Saubhagya Shah noted.

The April 2006 movement followed a decade-long civil war declared by the Maoists in February 1996 when they submitted a lengthy list of political demands. They called for "a new constitution" establishing a secular "people's democratic system" to rescind the royal family's special privileges. Additionally, they demanded that ethnic communities be allowed to "form their own autonomous governments" wherever they formed a majority of the population and that long-standing "regional discrimination" be eliminated between the upper castes that traditionally have lived in the hills and marginalized communities like the Madhesi and Tharu population groups in the Terai plains. The Nepali monarch at the time, Gyanendra, declared a state of emergency in February 2005 and dissolved the House of Representatives, outlawing political parties and suspending all civil rights.

As the war escalated, seven political parties negotiated a twelve-point agreement with the Maoist guerrillas in November 2005 "to establish full democracy by bringing the autocratic monarchy to an end" and forming a constituent assembly. Notably, the Maoists had "refused to recognize the legitimacy of the [1990] constitution" and demanded a constituent assembly even during the 1990 revolution. The parties then launched the April 2006 movement, forcing the king to reinstate the House of Representatives, which stripped the monarchy of most of its powers in May 2006 and turned the country into a secular state.

The Maoists entered the Nepali political mainstream and joined the interim government after the November 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which emphasized Maoist demands to create an "inclusive, democratic and progressive" restructuring of the state. The January 2007 interim constitution incorporated many of the Maoists' progressive demands, especially those related to federalism and representation of marginalized groups.

A key element of these reforms was abolishing the Hindu nature of the Nepali state under the monarchy. The kings of Nepal had been regarded as incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu, and the office of the monarchy was closely associated with several public rituals. The interim government under Nepali Congress leader Girija Prasad Koirala systematically disconnected these social practices from the monarchy, which had been founded on "explicitly religious (Hindu) ideologies."[3]

Elections for the Constituent Assembly were held twice in subsequent years, first in 2008 and again in 2013, the second time coming after the first assembly failed to promulgate a constitution in time. Madhesi population groups from the Terai plains held protests in 2007 and 2008 demanding greater political representation and a commitment to federalism. Nepal's post-2008 assemblies to design a constitution were thus a raucous mix of the old and the new, with the former represented by the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist), while the Maoists and Madhesi parties sought a firm commitment to a decentralized federal state.

The 2007 interim constitution, in several respects, created a blueprint for a more inclusive Nepal, which its 2015 replacement later rolled back. The 2007 document allowed for both proportional representation based on population counts, thus allowing for greater representation from the more populous Terai plains, and a simple first-past-the-post electoral system. In both of the Constituent Assembly elections, nearly 56 percent of the members were elected through proportional representation; this provision was subsequently reduced to 40 percent by the 2015 constitution. Similarly, the interim constitution was the first Nepali governing document to create provisions for reservations for marginalized groups such as Dalits, women, and Indigenous ethnic groups in the civil service and political parties based on the "principle of inclusiveness." This provision was watered down to the "principle of proportional inclusion" by a 2016 amendment to the 2015 constitution, which introduced reserved seats for the majority Khas-Arya ethnic group, which "is overwhelmingly represented in all state structures." The 2015 constitution also watered down secularism by defining it as "religious, cultural freedoms, including protection of religion, [and] culture handed down from the time immemorial." Put another way, this way of thinking could be described as upholding the dominance of Hinduism, or "sanatana dharma," in the public sphere.

Despite these significant political shifts, these changes did not honestly redress the issues that had led to the civil war, mass protests, and the abolition of the Hindu monarchy. The issue of representation has long dominated progressive politics in Nepal, but little has changed. For example, a 2016 study found that although members of Khas-Arya communities made up 28 percent of Nepal's population at the time, they made up 63 percent of

all civil servants. By contrast, while Dalits made up 13 percent of Nepal's population, only 2 percent of civil servants came from this community at the time. Similarly, although the representation of Madhesi caste groups among the ranks of civil servants was closer to their population share (roughly 20 percent of the population versus 15 percent of civil servants), Madhesi Dalits were virtually absent from the civil service. Khas-Arya communities continue to dominate in terms of the recruitment numbers for new civil servants. In 2019–2020, 57.8 percent of all new civil servants came from Khas-Arya communities; the corresponding figure was 54.5 percent in 2018–2019.

Such lack of representation carries over into elected bodies and political parties. Representatives from Khas-Arya communities form a majority in the lower house and occupy almost all leadership positions in the three major parties. Although women make up 33 percent of the lower house per the 2015 constitution, only 3.6 percent were directly elected, while the rest were nominated via proportional representation, which is regarded as less effective since nominations to such posts are dependent on the political party's leadership. Dalits make up 7.3 percent of the House of Representatives, while the representation of Madhesis has increased to 18.2 percent, primarily due to new federal boundaries.

The demand for greater representation by citizen-led opposition groups after the 2015 constitution took effect must be understood in light of this history. Civilian groups often made demands that pushed beyond the goals of their establishment political allies. Eventually, the media began criticizing groups like the Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace, one of the primary civil society groups in the 2006 movement, for supposedly restructuring the state in a partisan manner; these criticisms ended up discrediting these movements in the eyes of many Nepalis. Civilian-led protests were thus weakened in the years leading up to the country's 2015 constitution and thereafter.

Meanwhile, trust in political leaders has remained weak. Surveys demonstrate that most Nepali people largely do not trust political parties and state institutions. Public trust in politicians, according to a 2017–2018 World Economic Forum survey, ranked the country number 121 out of 137 countries, making it the lowest-ranked country in South Asia. Only 11 percent of respondents in a 2021 survey trusted the prime minister (Oli at the time of the survey), and only 6 percent trusted a political party. The same survey reported similar figures for other elected representatives and ministers.

This pervasive sense of distrust and discontent tends to prompt Nepali citizens to turn to street protests, hunger strikes, social media campaigns, and the written word to oppose controversial government decisions. Most of these protests are self-proclaimed apolitical movements, focusing instead on sociocultural issues and general government unresponsiveness. This history sheds light on the BNA's announcement of a people's movement as an alternative to the country's major political parties for demanding a trustworthy, responsive government and correcting the insular, unaccountable governing culture perpetuated by the 2015 constitution.

The Origins of BNA's Demands

The year 2015 has come to define contemporary Nepali politics. After a pair of severe earthquakes in April and May 2015, the country's major political parties finally moved to fast-track a constitution. This move was meant to fulfill an obligation to replace the country's 2007 interim constitution following the post-Maoist conflict and help make post-earthquake reconstruction efforts run more smoothly, especially after the failure of the first Constituent Assembly to promulgate a new constitution.

But the constitution that emerged was written by a handful of senior leaders behind closed doors. As an April 2016 report by the International Crisis Group observed, "[Constituent Assembly] members complained they were not given enough time to read the draft, which ran close to 150 pages." Even worse, discussions of the constitution were significantly curtailed, to the point that "there was barely any plenary discussion before the draft was voted on." Nepal's political class delivered a document that was fundamentally divisive even before it was promulgated.

The primary elements of discord involving the new document related to provincial boundaries (especially those related to the Terai plains), electoral representation, and citizenship rules that discriminated between men and women. In passing the 2015 constitution, Nepal's political class reversed the representational gains made in the post-conflict transition periods. As one newspaper editorial commented at the time: "The new draft marks a major step backwards in ensuring that Nepal becomes a more just society. . . . There is a systematic attempt to remove all provisions on inclusion that were established after 2006."

Subsequently, violent protests broke out in the Terai plains as demonstrators demanded increased political representation and federal autonomy. Nationalistic passions ran high, and the country was again divided between the people of the hills and those of the plains. What stood out was the unwillingness of the Nepali political establishment to negotiate with the protesters, cementing the exclusionary nature of the Nepali state under the 2015 constitution.

Although the Terai protests were emblematic of this struggle, a group of civilians from Kathmandu mobilized popular discontent with the constitution. While the Nepali government repressed (and at times co-opted) the original movement in the plains, some of these civilians later resurfaced in the BNA, which continues to demand improved political representation and inclusion today by way of constitutional amendments.

The BNA's Goals and Limitations

In February 2021, the BNA released a white paper to outline its goals. The document accused Nepali political parties of focusing only on capturing power and sowing discord. It then identified several demands on behalf of ordinary citizens: the creation of accountable

institutions, the promotion of more equitable political representation of the marginalized, the safeguarding of private rights, protections against discrimination, the preservation of freedoms of Indigenous peoples, and sustainable economic development policies. [4] The white paper further advocates a more participatory form of democracy, putting the onus on Nepali citizens "not just to support, advise, or pressure political parties" but to "ensure the autonomy of the people."

The BNA views itself as both a sociopolitical movement and a tool of political opposition. In addition to its broader political pronouncements, it has weighed in on a diverse range of contemporary issues. These include reservations provided to the dominant Khas-Arya community by the 2015 constitution, calls for the impeachment of the sitting chief justice for his controversial verdicts and allegations of nepotism, and international democratic crises such as the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar.

Many grievances against Nepal's political system are now becoming more evident, leading citizens to express dissent in a variety of ways. For example, one group seeking answers on the disappearance of two women and accusations that police may have mishandled the case have prompted protesters to launch an ongoing series of sit-ins. Such discontent crosses over into the sociocultural sphere, revealing the fault lines in contemporary Nepali society that the BNA identified in its white paper.

While emphasizing such a wide range of issues may seem to risk having one's fingers in too many pies, the existing discontent among Nepalis could work in the BNA's favor. The BNA's malleability allows it to align itself with a range of groups, as seen from its support for the women activists protesting the aforementioned disappearances. This flexibility also allowed the BNA to capitalize on discontent with the judiciary, enabling it to join forces with the Nepal Bar Association and five other organizations to demand the resignation of the chief justice. Further, the BNA leverages the experience of its members––some of whom are former editors, writers, and columnists––to highlight issues that have traditionally escaped the media's attention, such as protests by a group of Kathmandu residents who were displaced in the name of road expansion.

However, despite popular discontent over a range of issues, the BNA faces many challenges that it must tackle to have a societal impact. The first challenge is the apparent concentration of the movement in Kathmandu, which limits its reach outside of Nepal's capital city. Thus, the BNA's connection to historically marginalized populations outside Kathmandu is weaker, a shortcoming that the movement will need to correct if it wants to grow in the days to come. Furthermore, the BNA has not been immune to the charges of partisanship that many Nepalis have come to associate with citizen-led protests. Its protests against Oli's dissolution of the House of Representatives were labelled by one commentator as "inexplicably silly, feeble, and unnecessary." But the BNA has maintained that Oli is simply a symptom of broader and long-standing problems in Nepali politics today.

Civic movements like the BNA also can struggle to sustain momentum until their goals are achieved, unlike explicitly political movements with specific goals (like the push to overthrow the Nepali monarchy in 2006). The BNA's core leadership team will need a clear sense of purpose and concrete, achievable ways to accomplish its broadly defined goals.

The BNA also presents itself as an organization devoid of hierarchies that welcomes participation from the wider public. However, if such an impulse is taken too far, the movement could risk letting participants use the BNA selectively for self-serving goals. The challenge will be to manage this risk without making the movement seem rigid, overly formalized, and elitist.[5] And although women have been part of BNA protest movements, the public face of the leadership is dominated by men from the urban class. To maintain its upward trajectory, the BNA must present itself as an inclusive, more representative opposition force.

The BNA's Future

Citizen-led opposition movements in Nepal have historically succeeded when their goals are aligned with those of political parties, as happened in 2006. But what happens when the goals of the country's political leadership and a civilian movement do not converge?

The BNA has disavowed all political affiliations and has argued for an overhaul of Nepal's entire political system. In doing so, the movement appeals to Kathmandu's liberal intellectual class, but its ability to draw crowds to its protests is limited for now. While mass mobilization may not always yield favorable results, if the BNA could somehow garner more widespread support from across the country, that would likely help the movement become a more prominent voice of dissent in Nepal.

As with any protest movement, the question is whether the BNA has the wherewithal to force the state to meet its demands. While a few political parties engaged with the BNA while the parliament was dissolved, no political party or leader has shown an inclination to align themselves with the BNA thereafter, nor has the state responded to its pronouncements, except by detaining its leaders. The Nepali state has shown it can absorb, deflect, or violently suppress civilian dissent, especially in the Terai plains, where several civilian deaths have been reported since 2015. Thus far, the Nepali government has not responded to any of the BNA's white paper demands. Further, all political parties, including the Maoists, have largely shunned questions of representation and inclusion, shrinking the space for such discourse in Nepal.

The BNA will also have to contend with a popular turn to Hindu conservatism, a strain of political thought that argues that Nepal is not suited to be a secular republic and that its identity remains bound to the erstwhile Hindu monarchy. Calls for a return to a Hindu monarchy, antithetical to liberalism and democracy, mark the greatest danger not just to

movements such as the BNA but also to the republic itself. Nepali political leaders like Oli (who remains a member of the national legislature) are cultivating ties to conservative Hindus in Nepal as a vote bank for future elections, not unlike Prime Minister Narendra Modi has done in India.

Ultimately, although the BNA represents a liberal and inclusive strand of discontent against Nepal's political status quo, its decision to shun formal politics and the legislative process limits its leverage over the country's major political parties. Why would an establishment that has embraced the status quo yield any ground to a movement that does not threaten it from within? This, perhaps, will be the question that defines the BNA in the years to come.

The Peculiar Case of the Pakistan Peoples Party as an Opposition Party

Asma Faiz

In 2022, politics in Pakistan stands at a fascinating juncture with an intensification of opposition challenge to the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan. On February 27, the opposition Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) commenced a "long march" from Karachi to Islamabad with the stated aim to oust the to the central government run by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. Among Pakistani opposition parties, the PPP retains a critical position owing to its tenure in power in Sindh, Pakistan's second largest province. The PPP, founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, grew out of a five-month-long mass movement that led to the end of military dictator Ayub Khan's government in March 1969. The party has been a formidable actor in Pakistani politics ever since, enjoying multiple stints in power following its inception in 1967. Before their deaths, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his daughter Benazir Bhutto both served as the country's prime minister in the 1970s (1973–1977) and 1980s and 1990s (1988–1990, 1993–1996), respectively. And although the PPP today operates outside the corridors of power at the national level, the party remains an important oppositional force through its role in the national parliament and through grassroots mobilization.

In recent years, the party has moved away from its early populist moorings that defined its politics in the 1970s, but as the literature on political parties clearly highlights, the "founding context" of a party leaves a lasting impact, shaping its organizational and structural dynamics for decades. Notably, the current PPP does not exhibit the aggressive oppositional behavior that is the hallmark of populist parties in the contemporary world. The narratives of polarization, right-wing nationalism, and anti-system populism—as exhibited by the current ruling party, the PTI—are missing from the PPP's politics. The PPP, in contrast, largely operates as a conventional opposition party whose resistance to government does not include an anti-system narrative or politics of lockdowns.

Although the PPP has not been in power at the federal level since 2013, it has continued to rule Sindh Province, home to the country's largest metropolis, Karachi. In that capacity, the party has resisted the interventions of the PTI central government (locally perceived to be belligerent) and played a leading role in oppositional politics in Pakistan. To preserve its stronghold in Sindh and to stave off the challenge from both Sindhi and Mohajir nationalists, the PPP has been compelled to tinker with ethnic nationalism. (Mohajir Pakistanis are Urdu-speaking migrants from India who settled in large numbers in urban Sindh after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.) As the party in power at the provincial level, the PPP has maintained an assertive posture toward Islamabad in order to uphold its autonomy in Karachi. The party has never enjoyed the comprehensive support of the state apparatus, popularly known as the establishment, even when it formed the government at both the national and provincial levels in 1972, 1988, 1993, and 2008. The PPP's various stints in power in Islamabad were marred by strained relations with the establishment; the two governments of Benazir Bhutto were dismissed by presidents Ghulam Ishaq Khan in 1990 and Farooq Leghari in 1996.

In 2022, the PPP remains an important factor in the politics of Pakistan despite its electoral weight being confined to Sindh in the last two general elections (2013 and 2018). Since 2018, the party has walked a delicate tightrope to balance the imperatives of holding on to power in Sindh and joining national opposition parties in a collaborative anti-government coalition known as the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM). The PPP left the PDM in 2021 following the election of Yousaf Raza Gillani as the opposition leader in the upper chamber. However, by the end of 2021, the PPP's ties with other opposition parties had smoothed as the latter recognized the PPP's position as a formidable force of opposition in Pakistan. The following observations examine the various facets of the PPP's oppositional politics, which will critically impact Pakistan's political landscape ahead of general elections in 2023.

The PPP's Fine Balancing Act

The PPP positions itself as the champion of provincial autonomy in Pakistan's relatively centralist federation. In the case of Sindh, PPP thinking goes, the central government has long engaged in overreach, for example by transforming Karachi into the federal capital in 1948 and merging Sindh into the mega province of One Unit in 1955.[6] The PPP has traditionally acted to protect Sindhi interests against a perceived domineering center as well as against the ethnic "other" represented by the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), the premier party of Mohajirs. Currently, the PPP plays the role of opposition in two ways: in the national Parliament, where it contests Khan's PTI government in Islamabad, and in the federation's second-largest province, where as the ruling party it champions provincial agency.

The cause of provincial autonomy is not new for the PPP. Indeed, while in power from 2008 to 2013, the party's government passed the landmark Eighteenth Amendment. This 2010 amendment provided an unprecedented expansion in the administrative and fiscal powers

of provinces in Pakistan by changing 102 articles of the constitution. After the PTI came to power in Islamabad in 2018, the PPP formed a government in Sindh, the only province that was not controlled by the PTI or its allies. For its part, the PTI government has consistently sought to reduce the autonomy of the PPP-led Sindh government. Relations between Karachi and Islamabad have been hampered by several contentious issues, including over water usage, the results of the 2017 Census, and the governance of two islands along the Karachi coastline.

An Interventionist Center

In 2021, provincial water sharing became a hot button issue in the context of Sindh's ties with Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province, and Islamabad. Over the years, there have been numerous calls to revise the 1991 Water Accord, which includes fixed quotas for water storage and usage for each province. Many in Sindh argue that the then Nawaz Sharif government coerced smaller provinces into signing the accord against their will. In addition, Sindh has accused the upper riparian province—Punjab—of stealing its water by building dams and canals that have deprived it of its fair share.

The PPP government called for the resignation of the head of the Indus River System Authority for allegedly helping Punjab steal water designated for Sindh and for attacking Sindh's representative in a meeting in May 2021. But the PTI, supported by its affiliates in Punjab who claim Sindh is misrepresenting the water figures, has resisted the PPP's demand for renegotiation and accused the PPP of exploiting the water issue for partisan political gains.

Water is not the only issue that put the PPP on a collision course with Islamabad. On August 31, 2020, President Arif Alvi promulgated the Pakistan Islands Development Authority (PIDA) Ordinance as part of Islamabad's bid to take over the islands of Bundal and Buddo located off the Karachi coast. This action united the PPP government and Sindh's civil society as they protested against the federal government's purported land grabbing. The PPP leadership likened this takeover to the Indian government's nullification of Jammu and Kashmir's unique constitutional status in August 2019.

Yet again, the PPP was obliged to resist the PTI's aggressive intervention. To achieve its aims, the PPP government in Karachi adopted a multipronged strategy: the passage of a resolution in the Sindh Assembly against the ordinance, protest in the National Assembly, and the fostering of a common cause between Sindhi nationalists and civil society organizations. The PPP's efforts bore fruit, as the federal government ultimately failed to get the PIDA Ordinance approved by the Parliament. (Executive ordinances must be approved within 120 days for them to become permanent.)

Implementation of the PTI government's policy on national curriculum also put Sindh and Islamabad on a collision course. Sindh refuses to adopt the newly introduced Single National Curriculum, as the Eighteenth Amendment stipulates that education be the exclusive domain of provinces. Education remains a deeply contested issue in Sindh in light of competing interpretations of history by various ethnic communities. Both Mohajir and Sindhi nationalist movements clash over the historical legacy of Muhammad bin Qasim (the eighth-century Arab invader) and Raja Dahir (the local Hindu ruler). With such contrasting interpretations of history, the PPP and Sindh government remain deeply critical of Islamabad's control over school curriculum. The Eighteenth Amendment recognized education as a provincial subject, thereby conferring the power to draft curriculum to the provinces. In this deeply polarized context, the PPP's forceful defense of provincial rights in the domain of education won it widespread support in Sindh.

Opposition (Dis)unity

The PPP has been an important player in the ongoing opposition to the PTI government. Since the 2018 general elections, the party has resisted the populist rule of Imran Khan. And it has done so alongside other opposition parties, including its longtime rival, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). In the larger national theater of politics, the PPP has operated both within and outside the umbrella opposition alliance, the PDM. Formed in 2020, the PDM currently comprises the PPP, PML-N, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam under its leader Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F), and ethnic parties like the Balochistan National Party and Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party.

However, since its inception, the PDM has been handicapped by rocky relations and internal disagreements. For instance, alliance partners—particularly the PPP and the PML-N—accuse each other of trying to secretly engage with the military establishment, which has been criticized for its repeated interference in Pakistan's politics since independence. The PPP generally seeks to avoid an all-out confrontation with the military establishment, while the PML-N takes a more hawkish posture.

Alliance partners also disagree on the extent to which opposition forces should pursue direct action via street protests and indirect action via resignations from national and provincial assemblies (to put pressure on the Khan government). Thus far, the PPP has resisted the strategy of other PDM parties to quit provincial legislatures. Instead, the party has considered this move a last resort—a final, so-called nuclear option to be adopted only in extreme circumstances. As the PPP's support base has been largely confined to Sindh since 2013, it cannot afford to lose power in Karachi.

The question of collective resignations from the assemblies has fractured the PDM. In April 2021, the PPP withdrew from the alliance after the PDM presented it with a "show cause" notice for rejecting mass resignation proposals. The PDM leadership also took the PPP to task for allegedly joining hands with the PTI government in order to secure the Senate

opposition leader's slot. Once the PPP's Gillani was elected as the Senate opposition leader with the support of the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP)—a party widely believed to have been created by the military establishment—the PDM leadership's stern reaction was inevitable. The PML-N was already aggrieved toward the PPP for its alleged role in the collapse of the former's government in Balochistan Province. (The PPP had surprisingly thrown its weight behind the BAP ahead of the 2018 general elections.) These developments exposed the failure of the PPP and PML-N to overcome their decades-old rivalry in the pursuit of opposition unity. Even the common goal of removing the Khan government from power has not been sufficient to align these parties, thereby hindering the opposition alliance's possible success.

As of January 2022, the PPP has not formally rejoined the PDM even though testy relations have thawed between the two leading opposition parties. PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's call for a "long march" against the Khan government received support from other opposition parties, even though a formal union between the PPP and PDM was not yet on the table. In sum, the PPP walks a fine line in its quest to safeguard its government in Karachi while also projecting itself as a major opposition actor on the national scene. These contradictory pressures have forced the PPP to employ a variety of political strategies, ranging from challenging the PTI government outright to adopting a softer posture when required.

Sources of Pragmatism

When analyzing the PPP's unique oppositional stance, one needs to acknowledge how its control of Sindh compels it to adopt a pragmatic posture at the national level. Unlike the PML-N and JUI-F, the PPP must perform a balancing act—placing one foot in the government of Karachi and the other in the federal opposition movement against the PTI. In this context, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has repeatedly cautioned allies against "impos[ing] their will and dictation" on the party.

While the PPP negotiates this tricky balance, the party is also passing through a generational transition. In January 2021, Bilawal—the son of assassinated prime minister Benazir Bhutto and her husband, former president Asif Ali Zardari—was elected as party president unopposed. Following in the footsteps of his deceased mother and grandfather, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Bilawal is attempting to bring charisma back to the party's leadership. Since its inception, the party has been dominated by the Bhutto family, and intraparty elections are a rare occurrence. The PPP, like other parties in Pakistan, suffers from weak internal democracy. In de jure terms, the chief decisionmaking body is the Central Executive Committee (CEC), which acts as the "nerve center of the party" and monitors party members' activities. In de facto terms, however, the CEC plays second fiddle to the party's top leadership.

Despite its incrementalist approach to opposition against the PTI government, the PPP continues to serve as the grand symbol of opposition—not only against the PTI but also against the broader dominance of the establishment in national politics. Historically, the party has been at the heart of major opposition movements in Pakistan, such as the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy against president Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship in the 1980s. However, at times, it has also adopted a softer stance toward the establishment. For instance, in 2007, Benazir Bhutto returned to Pakistan from a self-imposed exile after coming to an understanding with president Pervez Musharraf through the issuance of the National Reconciliation Ordinance.

Yet, generally, even when it was in power in Islamabad, the PPP functioned as an outsider. It never received the kind of support from the military establishment that was provided to the PML-N and later the PTI. Hence, despite its multiple stints in office at the federal level and its willingness to occasionally compromise with the powers-that-be, the party does not enjoy the same degree of proximity to the establishment—which distinguishes the PPP from its peers.

The PPP currently remains in control of the Sindhi vote. But despite its command over the Sindhi electorate, it had to fight pitched battles within the province—facing strong opposition from various factions of the MQM, the anti-PPP Sindhi land-owning elite, Sindhi nationalists, and the PTI. The anti-PPP parties have joined hands to provide a serious challenge to the Sindh government. Despite its relative decline, the MQM has continued to back the establishment in Sindh. On issues such as the center's take-over of Karachi through imposition of Article 149, the MQM has sided with the federal government. Hence, an unstable equilibrium prevails over politics in the province, pushing the PPP to tinker with soft ethnic nationalism and position itself as a spokesperson for Sindh. Consequently, the PPP's political agenda and policy profile fit the description of an ethnic party. It has adopted positions on various issues that are similar to the narrative of the conventional ethnic nationalists. Whether it is the question of the alleged undercounting of Sindhis in the national census, the settlement of Afghan refugees in Karachi, the resolution of water disputes, or the central government's attempt to impose a national curriculum on Sindh, the PPP unfailingly adopts textbook ethnic party positions. Meanwhile, it operates as a party of the federation in the national arena. Thus, particularly given no apparent contradictions between the two positions, the PPP continues to be a fascinating political actor in the context of Pakistan's ethnic federalism.

Conclusion

The PPP stands at an interesting juncture in 2022. The two previous general elections in Pakistan (2013 and 2018) saw the PPP confined to Sindh due to its dismal electoral performance in other provinces. In 2022, the PPP sought to recapture its position as a party of the federation in the rest of the country. In its first three decades, the party was a viable political contender in Punjab, Pakistan's largest and most developed province. During the last two

elections, however, it failed to garner a significant number of votes in Punjab. Since then, the PPP has been attempting to reorganize itself in Punjab. Indeed, if it can build on its roots in south Punjab, it could make a comeback. The party has a stronghold in the region, where it supports demands for a new province in the Siraiki-speaking districts of southern Punjab and, as a result of party patronage networks, enjoys the support of electoral heavyweights.

In Sindh, the PPP, with its blend of ethnic nationalism, looks poised to continue its dominance within the province in the face of fragmented Sindhi nationalists as well as a divided MQM. Even if the PPP fails to capture power in Islamabad, it looks set to retain its credentials as a party that stands up to a hegemonic central government. With the next general elections scheduled for 2023, the PPP is stepping up its visibility in national-level opposition politics, even leading a "long march" that began on February 27, 2022.

Beyond street agitations, the party has intensified its contact with other opposition parties, with an eye on the 2023 general elections. The visit by Asif Ali Zardari and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari to PML-N leader Shahbaz Sharif's residence in Lahore in February 2022 reflects a renewed vigor for cooperation in the opposition ranks. Will Bilawal be a Bonaparte and thrive on the inherited charisma of his grandfather? Will the PPP be able to accelerate its opposition to the PTI in 2022–2023? The stage is set for an interesting display of oppositional politics by the PPP.

A House Divided: Karachi's Politics Remain in Flux

Zoha Waseem

Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and financial capital, has long suffered the aftershocks of civil-military conflict and violent politics. In 2013, criminal, religious, and political violence prompted the "Karachi Operation," a campaign against crime and terrorism authorized by the civilian government and led by the Pakistan Army and intelligence agencies. The operation was primarily carried out by the Sindh Rangers, a paramilitary force granted special policing powers to arrest and investigate criminals, particularly those involved in targeted killings, kidnappings, extortion, and terrorism. Following the terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar a year later, this security operation escalated, becoming part of countrywide counterterrorism efforts. These events also put Karachi's security at the center of Pakistan's first counterterrorism policy, the National Action Plan. One of the key tenets of the plan was to take the Karachi Operation to vaguely defined "logical conclusions."

This article explores politics in Karachi since the 2013 operation and what these developments might mean for key stakeholders going forward. It suggests that economic competition and political claims over a multiethnic and divided polity are likely to generate further contestation between various civilian political stakeholders and Pakistan's military establishment. This competition will keep the city in a state of insecurity, making it attractive to criminal and militant enterprises.

A Pluralized Landscape of Stakeholders

The Karachi Operation has left behind a fragmented local political party (the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, or MQM), a cautious provincial party with important political and financial stakes in Karachi (the Pakistan Peoples Party, or PPP), and a populist national party with limited roots in the city (the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or PTI). These effects were

produced partly by state-directed crackdowns on the MQM and PPP's interests in Karachi and the military's patronage of the PTI. These parties are accompanied by religious political parties and groups, such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). A secular party representing the Pashtun, the Awami National Party (ANP), also operates in the city, but has been severely weakened in the aftermath of armed violence with the MQM and the assault of the terrorist group Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the lead-up to the operation.

Furthermore, Karachi's political economy has been shaped by the political role of Pakistan's military establishment (comprising intelligence and military law enforcement agencies). The Sindh Rangers, specifically, have partnered with the local business community to provide them with private security, collaborated with property developers to host sporting events, and managed the city's water supply. Their stake in the city's political economy has increased steadily since their deployment in the late 1980s.

Several other sectarian organizations and splinter groups of political and militant organizations dot the landscape. Such pluralization has created a fractured and loosely assembled political structure in Karachi, reflecting polarized constituencies and competing interests. This complicated arrangement of power seekers upholds the popular description of the city as a microcosm of Pakistan.

The Moving Goalposts of the Karachi Operation

Prior to the operation, Karachi experienced decades of ethnic grievances and criminal and ethno-political violence born of unfulfilled political and economic promises, creating a unique "ordered disorder." These complaints accompanied active student and campus politics, sparking the rise of political parties like the MQM, a secular party representing the Urdu-speaking Muhajir ethnic group, and the JI, a religious Islamist party. Both the MQM and the JI would compete with Sindh's largest party, the PPP, which represents ethnic Sindhis. Decades of violence and resentment between Sindhis, Muhajirs, and Pashtuns over political representation, property rights, employment, and broken accords have prompted direct military oversight in Karachi since the late 1980s.

Under the military regime of Pervez Musharraf in the 2000s, the security establishment supported the MQM, empowering its position against that of the PPP and other ethno-political groups. The MQM's armed militants subsequently battled with the ANP and PPP's criminal gangs (the gangs of Lyari), plunging the city into violence. Deteriorating law and order brought the city into the purview of an activist judiciary that exerted pressure on political parties, the paramilitary, and the police to eliminate crime and "no-go" areas and curb political influence on law enforcement agencies, through the proceedings and hearings of the 2011 *suo moto* case on Karachi's "law and order situation."

In this context, the military liaised with army, intelligence, and police leadership to orchestrate the 2013 Karachi Operation against criminal and militant actors participating in armed violence. Facing pressure from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) government and the military establishment, the MQM and PPP consented to the operation. They believed it would primarily target religious militancy, including the threat from the TTP.

The aims of this operation were, at least initially, to uproot terrorist groups, criminal gangs, and militant wings of political parties. This effort endeavored to stabilize the city's economy and increase foreign investment. Pakistan's civil-military leadership, including the provincial apex committees and the apex court, oversaw the operation. Within a couple of years, the operation had crippled local gangs, weakened militant networks, and, perhaps most importantly, fragmented the MQM.

In 2015, the operation's architects shifted gears dramatically toward political actors, leading to a violent crackdown on the MQM. The Sindh Rangers raided and sealed party offices and arrested several hundred workers; an unknown number of these were illegally detained and killed. The "security operation" became glaringly political, with the Rangers prioritizing the army's interests, which were increasingly opposed to those of MQM founder and chief Altaf Hussain.

In 2016, Hussain's call for violence in a fiery speech against state institutions forced the MQM further out of favor and emboldened the army's efforts to dismantle the party. Pakistan initiated cases against Hussain on grounds of hate speech and inciting terrorism. Simultaneously, the state alleged that Hussain was sponsored by India's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing. The allegation legitimized state violence against party workers and undermined the MQM, but no evidence supporting the claim could be produced.

With the state's growing intolerance for Hussain and political pressure to "minus Altaf" or face political uncertainty, many MQM party workers and senior members parted ways with Hussain. The exodus fractionalized the MQM and created the MQM-Pakistan (MQM-P). The MQM-P emerged as the dominant group seeking to represent Muhajirs but was unable to win back the relative autonomy the MQM had once possessed.

By 2018, the vacuum created by the MQM's retreat and fragmentation allowed the PTI the space it needed to win big. Of twenty-one National Assembly (NA) seats for Karachi in 2018, the PTI secured fourteen, taking observers by surprise and leaving the MQM-P and the PPP to split the remaining seats (four and three respectively). The achievement is particularly notable given that in the 2013 general elections, the PTI managed to secure only one NA seat from Karachi. Relations between the PPP, MQM, and PTI in Sindh and Karachi, however, have remained frosty at best.

Aftermath and Impact

The military establishment's assault on the party left the MQM and its various factions demoralized; senior leaders became distrustful of each other. Attempts were made to merge the factions, but to no avail. The Karachi Operation fizzled in 2018 after reductions in criminal violence and the dismantling of terrorist networks such as the TTP, but it rendered insecure the political standing of parties like the MQM. At the same time, the operation created room for new stakeholders then friendly to the military (such as the PTI) and solidified the influence of the military establishment.

Though the MQM-P and PTI had formed an alliance in 2018, by 2022 the parties severed their partnership. The coalition had strained under the PTI's lack of focus on urban Sindh and its inability to deliver on development and reform promises. This tension was exploited by the PPP after the formation of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a coalition of opposition parties, chiefly the PPP, PMLN, and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) (JUI-F), that sought to oust Imran Khan's government.

For its part, the PPP too had been politically targeted by the military during the operation, with key figures accused of "financing terrorism," money laundering, and corruption, leading the PPP—and thereafter the provincial government in Sindh—to periodically threaten the withdrawal of the policing powers granted to the Rangers. The PPP's political stake in select constituencies, such as Lyari, was further damaged following crackdowns against the PPP's patronized gangs in the area; though it had previously been a stronghold of the PPP, Lyari voted in favor of the PTI in 2018.

The operation also impacted the strength of key institutions and their working relationships, including the paramilitary, the police, and intelligence agencies. First, the paramilitary's operations allowed the Sindh Rangers to gain legitimacy by nurturing intimate working relations with Karachi's business, industrial, and financial elite. This elite has often relied on the military's presence and partnership. Over time, the relationship furthered the Rangers' participation and power in Karachi's political economy, a trend unlikely to be reversed in the foreseeable future.

Additionally, the operation forced the police to coordinate with the paramilitary, resulting in blurred lines between the organizations. The army and intelligence agencies began to have greater influence on the police, including on recruitment and postings. The interference intended to curb political influence on police leadership and governance, thereby reducing the level of control that the PPP and MQM held over the police.

However, such actions served specific political interests, such as favoring the PTI and hurting the opposition. The interference culminated in a theatrical late-night kidnapping of the provincial police chief by paramilitary and intelligence officers in October 2020. The police had not obeyed the wishes of the military establishment and the PTI: that they should arrest selected leaders of the PDM coalition in a bid to derail the countrywide protests. The

kidnapping prompted police officers to submit leave applications en masse, while the PPP called upon the army for an explanation. While the army admitted to the incident and expressed regret, the links between army and police organizations were exposed.

By early 2022, the military's romance with Khan was evidently fading, affecting the PTI's alliances in Karachi. In late March, the MQM-P—desperate after its fragmentation, frustrated by the PTI's lack of interest in Karachi, and observing the potential shifts in the power centers—joined ranks with the PDM to support the no-confidence motion against Khan, resulting in his eventual ouster. Nevertheless, the PTI continues to hold some sway in the city, with large portions of the middle class rallying behind Khan immediately after the successful vote of no confidence in his leadership.

The Future of Karachi's Opposition Politics

Over the past three decades, the military and paramilitary forces have become key national political players and investors in Karachi. These organizations, granted power by the Karachi Operation, disrupted the hegemony of MQM politicians and the influence of the PPP. The military's interjections in local politics are likely to continue in the future. Its influence may even be welcomed by Karachi's corporate elite and key investors, as the city remains vulnerable to threats from terrorist organizations (such as the surge in the TTP's activity in Pakistan), insurgent and separatist groups, and rising street crime.

While the PTI government has benefited from anti-American, conservative rhetoric and widespread social media marketing, Imran Khan's ousting from government displays the complex, factionalized nature of politics that endures in Karachi. The PTI is limited by a weak organizational structure and capacity and by internal dissatisfaction, which could compromise its long-term political sustainability. In comparison, the MQM and PPP, while still unlikely to overpower the PTI in the next elections, will enjoy a sustainable presence in Karachi because of their organizational capacity, political training, and experience; the extent of this will depend upon their ability to avoid upsetting the army's interests.

The PMLN has paid scant attention to Karachi's economic and political issues, but it has, along with the JUI-F, become a guarantor for the PPP and MQM-P accord and an oversight body for their relations in Karachi going forward. Shahbaz Sharif's first visit to Karachi, just days after taking oath as the country's new prime minister, was perhaps an important signal that the PMLN might pay more attention to the city's infrastructure, transportation, water, and public sector development than it previously has. The PMLN may also pull votes from Karachi's Punjabi-dominated areas. It will therefore work with both the PPP and the MQM-P, developing relations with both parties depending upon their collective and individual political trajectories.

Provincially, the PPP will benefit from a slowly urbanizing Sindhi population that can boost its vote bank, and the delimitation of local government constituencies it has sought to implement to improve its political standing in cities such as Karachi, a move that is being challenged by the MQM-P and PTI in the courts. Following its new agreement with the MQM-P and the Supreme Court's direction to form a new local government law in consultation with local political stakeholders, the PPP may need to reconsider some aspects of its demarcations if it is to maintain a partnership with MQM-P, although this relationship has historically been turbulent.

Ethnic politics and financial considerations will thus continue to drive the primary interests of both the MQM-P and the PPP, leading analysts to question how long the "marriage of convenience" between the PPP and the MQM-P will last. For now, there is cautious optimism surrounding the accord, given that the MQM-P does not have a strong bargaining position and the PPP seems to have an improved attitude toward its opposition in Karachi (barring the PTI) and thus may be willing to negotiate with and consult the MQM-P on policy, local governance, and jobs.

Locally, the MQM-P will prioritize securing political gains through the local government elections and provincial assembly seats. On this front, it will be challenged not just by the PTI but also by the TLP, which will continue pulling predominantly Barelvi (a subsect of Sunni Islam) middle-class voters from both the MQM and the PTI. In order for the MQM-P to make substantial gains, however, it will need to continue bargaining with the PPP for the support of both provincial and federal stakeholders to help it compete with the PTI and the TLP's attraction for middle-class voters (including in some Muhajir pockets). It may also consider merging with other MQM factions, although previous attempts have failed and distrust between faction leaders persists.

Political parties for Muhajir and Sindhi representation will be sought after by Karachi voters, but the extent of their domination will depend largely upon party leaders' ability to work with one another, as well as their military counterparts, their penetration of the state machinery and bureaucratic institutions, the continuation of patron-client relations, and the ability of opposition forces (especially the TLP and PTI) to capitalize on the future fissures in these civil-military relations and operationalize their forces beyond social media campaigns. Meanwhile, the JI, once a formidable right-wing force, will continue to see its supporters drawn toward the PTI and the TLP, as it did in 2018.

For its part, the MQM-London (the Altaf Hussain faction) is struggling to find space and fit back in. Although Hussain's cases in London have been dismissed, the group has struggled to regenerate a coordinated presence in Karachi. Previous efforts to consolidate and organize led to the arrests of two key party workers on grounds of "maintaining public order." Furthermore, the ban on Hussain's speeches remains in place, a form of censorship that will continue blocking Hussain's attempts to mobilize and entice voters. For now, the minus-Altaf terms appear non-negotiable, but as experts caution, in Karachi's pluralized political environment, nobody can be ruled out.

Conclusion

In the coming years, Karachi's politics and the political security of the stakeholders discussed here will depend upon several developments. First, the city has long planned for local government elections, which will serve as a litmus test for the MQM-P, PPP, and PTI. The elections are scheduled for the summer of 2022, and the agreement between the PPP and MQM-P incorporates the latter's demands regarding the local government system in Karachi. Whether these demands will be met remains to be seen. Relatedly, the PTI's ability to sustain itself in Karachi will also be indicated by its performance in these local elections, which were previously (in 2015) dominated by the MQM.

Second, Pakistan is planning for general elections in 2023, and it is unclear how interparty relations will look at that time, and whether these accords will remain intact. In the lead-up to these elections, the MQM-P and PPP may well be at odds again. The PPP is also likely to seek back the control over some bureaucratic institutions and the city's administration, especially the police, that it lost in the Karachi Operation. If the accord falls through, chances are the MQM-P will look to a federal ally, the PMLN, for political protection. It also remains to be seen whether otherwise relatively secular parties will seek to make electoral alliances with religious parties (such as the JI and TLP) for greater gains, and to offset voters' attraction to the PTI.

There are two other significant indicators worth following: demographic changes and violent crime. In August 2022, Pakistan intends to carry out its seventh national census. In the 2017 census, the MQM complained that Karachi's population was underrepresented; it was also angered that the size of the Urdu-speaking (Muhajir) community was less than previously estimated because of how the city has diversified over the years. If the census results again show demographic changes that are unfavorable to the MQM, the party may threaten to renege on its agreements with the PMLN and PPP and return to street-level agitation. The city will also remain prone to violence from Sindhi and Baloch insurgent groups, as recent attacks have demonstrated. And if the TTP, in the context of failed negotiations with the Pakistani state and the support it gets from the Afghan Taliban, continues to escalate its violent attacks, the group is likely to look toward Karachi again to further its operational, networking, and financial capacities.

It is safe to say that in the future, Karachi is likely to remain a fragmented, continually contested political power center, in which the military, political parties, and religious militants are likely to have substantial presence, keeping economic and political stability in a state of flux.

Politics at the Bench: The Pakistani Judiciary's Ambitions and Interventions

Yasser Kureshi

One of the most consequential features of Pakistan's contemporary political system has been the emergence of the superior judiciary—made up of its provincial high courts, the federal court of Islamic law, and the Supreme Court—as an assertive and active center of power. Historically, Pakistan's military was the country's dominant power center, but with elected institutions and political parties pursuing more governing space, inter-institutional conflict has been the norm. In this competitive space, Pakistan's superior judiciary has played a central role in Pakistan's political system, arbitrating contestation between political elites and state elites.

In the past fifteen years, however, the superior judiciary has moved beyond just arbitrating political disputes to playing a tutelary role of its own within the political system: constraining the authority and vetoing the policies and actions of elected institutions in order to shape politics and policies in line with its own preferences. This newfound initiative has meant the judiciary frequently opposed, constrained, and undermined elected and unelected institutions. Opposition parties and state officials hoping to challenge civilian and military governments have turned to the increasingly assertive courts.

The superior judiciary's central place and tutelary ambitions in Pakistan, and the challenges the body faces in its relationships with state institutions and society, were most evident in the events surrounding the end of former prime minister Imran Khan's government this year. The Supreme Court compelled Khan to face a parliamentary no-confidence vote from a coalition of opposition parties by ruling that his efforts to block the vote and call early

elections were unconstitutional. The decision polarized public opinion between those who thought the court protected the constitutional order and those who viewed the move as "a judicial coup."

Understanding this decision and its political impact requires examining how the superior judiciary evolved into and operates as a more independent and assertive actor. Through changes in the judiciary's structure and culture, the superior judiciary has joined the military as a key, nonelected powerholder. It alternates between confronting, constraining, and collaborating with elected and nonelected centers of power as it seeks to leave its imprint on politics and policymaking, while political and military elites work to co-opt or control judges in order to align the judiciary's burgeoning authority and ambition with their own interests and ambitions. This interplay shapes the contours of Pakistan's politics. However, the judiciary's interventions also raise expectations and generate political discontents, creating a complex blend of power and vulnerability from growing judicial assertion.

Inside the Judiciary

Why did the judiciary emerge as an assertive and active center of power in Pakistan's politics after a history of collaboration with, and deference to, the powerful civil-military bureaucracy?

First, a combination of constitutional articles and judicial innovation empowered the judiciary to intervene in the actions of other branches of government. The 1973 Constitution enhanced the judiciary's powers of review. The Constitution granted the high courts the jurisdiction to enforce the observance of fundamental rights by state institutions. The Supreme Court could now also make orders on questions it deemed of "public importance" with reference to enforcement of fundamental rights. Public interest litigation began in the late 1980s and advanced significantly after 2006, becoming a tool the court has used to intervene in the domains of the executive and legislature in the name of public interest. The chief justice began taking on cases *suo moto* (in the absence of a petitioner), often based on newspaper and television reports. The discretion about when to use *suo moto* powers lay with the chief justice, enabling them to respond to popular sentiments and maximize the court's visibility and impact.

Second, the judiciary separated itself from the executive, taking control of judicial appointments from the executive. The formal role of executive institutions was first reduced through judicial action in the 1990s and then again through a constitutional amendment in 2010. The Judicial Commission for handling judicial appointments and promotions is composed of multiple stakeholders, but it is dominated by the chief justices of the Supreme Court and high courts.

Third, high court judges are primarily recruited from a legal profession where the legal culture has increasingly eschewed procedural restraint and favored confrontation with executive leadership, whether elected or military. In the democratic decade of the 1990s, where political parties were weakly institutionalized and inter-institutional conflict was the norm, the fragmented political landscape and growing prominence of courts as sites for managing political disputes generated a perception among judges and lawyers regarding the limited legitimacy of the state's political leadership and the potential for the judiciary to shape national politics and policies.

This combination—new jurisdictional discretion, executive separation from the judiciary, judicialization of politics, and a shifting legal culture—helped move the judiciary in a more ambitious, confrontational direction.

With the judiciary impacting and intervening in political processes and outcomes, the role and authority of chief justices has become especially significant. Beyond public interest litigation and judicial appointments, the chief justices of the high courts and Supreme Court also came to decide when cases would be accepted for hearings and how many and which judges heard those cases. Thus, chief justices can set their court's agenda and indirectly impact case outcomes through bench selection. Given the judiciary's centralized structure, a pliable chief justice co-opted by the military or a political party can now significantly impact the jurisprudence of a particular court.

However, the judiciary's close relationship with bar associations complicates the efforts of military and political elites to co-opt and control the judiciary. As judges train and socialize as professional lawyers, the lawyers of the bar are the primary audiences with which judges seek to build their reputations. The bar has become politically engaged and effectively mobilized around political and professional issues. The bar's propensity for collective action and disruption was most apparent in the Lawyers' Movement in 2007, and it can act as a counterweight against efforts by political and military leaders to tame the judiciary. Recognizing this, political parties and the military increasingly expend their efforts to pressure and persuade bar leaders to indirectly influence judges. The close, though often antagonistic, ties between the bar and the bench as well as the overlapping legal culture have each played some role in shaping the judiciary's increasingly confrontational direction.

The Judiciary and the Two Executives

How did shifts within the judiciary impact its relationship with executive institutions? Historically, the superior judiciary was seen by democrats as the junior partner of the military, providing the military's political actions with legal cover. During the 1990s, Pakistan's national politics were shaped by relationships among three offices that came to be known as the "troika": the prime minister, the president, and the chief of army staff. The clashes

between the elected executive office led by the prime minister and the unelected executive leadership in the presidency and the military regularly resulted in constitutional disputes until the 1999 coup through which General Pervez Musharraf took over the presidency.

From the 1990s onward, for the reasons outlined earlier, the courts gradually began to chart a more independent and interventionist direction, culminating in a confrontation between the superior judiciary and Musharraf's regime in 2007. An interventionist Supreme Court challenged the regime's core interests, including Musharraf's power to remain president while being chief of army staff, prompting the regime to suspend Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and attempt to purge the judiciary. Judges resisted, and lawyers mobilized in support of the superior judiciary, galvanizing a national movement for democracy that led to Musharraf's downfall. The court's resistance and impact on Musharraf's regime solidified the superior judiciary as a power center in its own right.

After Musharraf's exit and with the return of elected civilian rule, judges began to play a tutelary role of their own in the political system, challenging what they saw as the excesses and corruption of Pakistan's other power centers. A "new troika" emerged in Pakistan's democratic politics: the prime minister, the chief of army staff, and the chief justice of Pakistan. Shifting alignments and conflicts between these three officeholders shaped national politics during this decade.

The superior judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, adopted the mission of improving governance and combating corruption by intervening in, and frequently overruling, bureaucratic transfers and postings in order to limit the interference of elected politicians in unelected bureaucracies. The courts also formulated policy on socioeconomic issues and went after the political leadership of the ruling parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), in corruption cases. The Supreme Court's focus on political corruption and expansive interpretation of its authority led to the removal of two elected prime ministers, Yousuf Gilani and Nawaz Sharif. While political and administrative corruption were serious issues that needed to be dealt with, repeated judicial interventions in the domain of executive and legislative institutions undermined elected civilian supremacy.

In contrast, there were relatively fewer confrontations between the military and judiciary after 2010. The Supreme Court not only enabled the military's role in internal security as part of the war on terror, but it also gave itself a role in overseeing aspects of these operations. Courts attempted to establish certain redlines against political interference by the military, even charging the now-deposed Musharraf with treason for his past actions, but the courts did not push for the implementation of military-related judgments the way they did in civilian government–related judgments.

The judiciary's stance against the military's political interventions and its interference in the civilian executive and legislature were the essential pieces of its jurisprudential strategy to carve out a role as the country's legitimate intervening authority. It adopted the military's self-serving, anti-corruption rhetoric and used constitutional and popular support to

legitimize itself in this role. The courts' tactics, combined with their softer approach toward the military, left democracy unconsolidated and after 2017 weakened the system of elected government and facilitated the military's return to political primacy—to the detriment of both democracy and judicial independence.

The Judiciary and the Same-Page Regime

In 2017, the military leadership, several senior judges of the Supreme Court, and the political party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)—developed a consensus that different players in the political system needed to be brought onto the same page with institutional stakeholders aligned around a common platform. These stakeholders agreed that the root of Pakistan's problems was a corrupt political class personified by the leaders of the mainstream political parties (the PML-N and the PPP). The solution was to rescue state institutions from their control and influence, by any means necessary.

From 2017 to 2018, the Supreme Court's anti-corruption jurisprudence focused on the PPP and PML-N, often hearing petitions brought against them by PTI members. This concentration led to the disqualification of these party's leaders from political office, including Sharif. Led by Khan, the populist PTI benefited from these disqualifications. The party hitched its wagon to the court's interventions, using the court's judgments to validate PTI claims that mainstream political parties were corrupt. Khan's popular appeal, the Supreme Court's anti-corruption jurisprudence, and the military's efforts to engineer the election in the PTI's favor helped ensure the party's victory in 2018. With the elected, military, and judicial leadership aligned around key political questions, the new political arrangement was popularly known as the same-page regime. Under the PTI, military authority and influence across state institutions grew substantially, and democratic backsliding took hold with increasing suppression of opposition and dissent. It seemed the new troika in Pakistani politics was the prime minister, the chief of army staff, and the director-general of the Inter-Services Intelligence.

The military was happy to allow the assertion of court powers as long as judges exercised those powers against the elected executive and legislature. While some judges willingly aligned with the military in regulating political branches, judges also came under the growing influence of an increasingly authoritarian executive and its surveillance apparatus. As the public profile of judges grew, they became more vulnerable to threats from executive agencies holding information that could tarnish their reputations and careers. Through a combination of an alignment of interests between judicial and executive elites and executive pressure on judges, a sizeable faction of judges became unwilling to confront military power.

Members of opposition parties, including the PPP and PML-N, spent time in and out of court hearings and prison cells on corruption charges. With many judges under executive influence, the likelihood that a high court would uphold a detention order or reject a bail petition for an opposition member could almost be predicted by the state of relations between

the ruling leadership and that opposition party. While the Supreme Court remained relatively restrained toward federal executive institutions during the PTI's rule, it routinely clashed with the PPP's provincial government in Sindh Province. The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution enhanced provincial authority and autonomy, but federal political and bureaucratic elites that opposed the PPP found the superior judiciary a useful tool to constrain Sindh's government. During the pandemic especially, the Supreme Court chastised the PPP's government and made observations regarding the limits of provincial autonomy. Such communication from the court chipped away at provincial discretion in critical policy areas.

However, some judges were less willing to acquiesce to autocratization. The Islamabad and Peshawar High Courts, led by more independently minded chief justices, became important sites for opposition parties and dissenters to push back against the worst excesses of executive institutions. In the Supreme Court there was growing polarization between judges who were willing to align with the political and military leadership and those who were not. These fissures became most apparent in the case of Justice Qazi Faez Isa. Isa's willingness to confront military interference in politics made him a target, and a reference was filed with the Supreme Court to have him removed for alleged financial misconduct. During the proceedings, some judges who sided with the executive called for judicial accountability, while others who sided with Isa called this reference an attack on judicial independence. Ultimately, Isa's supporters on the bench quashed the case against him, but polarization within the judiciary was now evident, as were the judiciary's and the bar's growing fatigue with increasing autocratization and the court's legitimacy crisis caused by its enabling this autocratization.

By 2021, the military leadership's relationship with Khan frayed, providing an opportunity for opposition parties to push back against the PTI and leading to the parliament's April 2022 vote of no confidence in Khan. When Khan attempted to block that vote, it was apparent that the military was not siding with the PTI, but there was concern that several judges on the bench who were involved in judgments that helped bring the PTI to power might still rule in the PTI's favor. Khan's defense for blocking Parliament's vote rested on flimsy legal grounds, including foreign conspiracy allegations, restrictions on judicial power to intervene in parliamentary matters, and the necessity of allowing elections in the so-called national interest. But the tutelary court was disinclined to accept limitations on its prerogative to intervene in parliamentary matters. And given that the foreign conspiracy allegation remained unsubstantiated, and that there was a widespread legal consensus that Khan's actions amounted to an attack on the constitutional order, ruling in Khan's favor would have further damaged the court's legitimacy with the legal community. Bar leaders and several judges pushed the chief justice to take notice of Khan's actions. The court's reopening at midnight on the night of the vote, on the Supreme Court Bar Association's advice, was intended as a show of strength by the court to enforce compliance by a recalcitrant PTI. But it convinced PTI supporters of judicial bias.

The judiciary's tutelary role and associated political interventions helped to both establish and dismantle the same-page hybrid—but they also exposed the judiciary to threats to its authority and legitimacy.

Toward Elections and Beyond

Moving forward, the courts may continue to play a critical role in shaping the rocky road to Pakistan's next elections and beyond. When courts wade into the resolution of major political questions, some stakeholders are likely to be disappointed by their decisions; judges risk damaging their credibility and legitimacy with those constituencies. As Khan's supporters mobilized around the country after his ouster, Khan questioned the court's motives, leading PTI supporters to enact a smear campaign against judges. Large segments of the bar saw the court's actions as an affirmation of constitutionalism in the face of a populist assault on constitutional norms. However, outside the legal community, Pakistan's broader urban middle classes have long supported Khan's anti-corruption populism. Thus, judges will have to balance the conflicting expectations of their core constituencies: their professional networks in the legal community and their social networks of urban, middle-class households.

Judicial reputations and legitimacy are being tested by a range of political litigation coming to the courts during this complicated and contested transition. Already, we have seen legal proceedings over the chief ministership and governorship in Punjab, the fate of elected representatives who turn on their party's leadership, the delimitation process for electoral constituencies, and the treatment of PTI staff, to name a few. As the PTI amplifies its claims of a foreign-instigated conspiracy and demands immediate elections, the PTI is inviting courts to review the judgment on the no-confidence vote, proceed on corruption charges against PML-N leaders, challenge the electoral commission, facilitate prompt new elections, investigate Khan's allegations of a foreign conspiracy, and ensure Khan can hold protests and sit-ins in the capital city unencumbered. Meanwhile, as the new PML-N-led government seeks to consolidate power, it is looking to pursue charges of corruption and treason against PTI leaders in the courts and wants courts to handle PTI petitions in ways that allow for stability in the political transition.

The PTI has honed a strategy of pressuring judges through social media. As the party files court petitions, its social media activists cast aspersions against judges for not taking up their petitions promptly or not giving them a fair hearing. Pakistan's unelected judges and generals are less vulnerable to electoral pressures than they are to pressures from their social, professional, and institutional networks. Targeting judicial reputations within pro-PTI social networks has yielded dividends; many of the PTI's recent petitions were heard promptly. This strategy is similar to one bar associations use: naming and shaming judges when they act against the interests of bar leaders. The current leadership of most high courts' bar associations is opposed to the PTI (although, as time passes, more bar associations are willing to

give Khan's narrative a hearing). The growing public visibility of judges in electronic and social media has rendered them more vulnerable to reputational pressures from these constituencies.

The pressures from Khan's effective mobilization since his removal combined with the judiciary's continuing distrust of mainstream political parties, especially the PPP and PML-N, and an abiding judicial interest in constraining political discretion and holding politicians accountable mean that the new PML-N government cannot expect much relief from the courts. The Supreme Court, addressing Khan's demands, ordered that there should be no withdrawal of, or government interference in, corruption proceedings against members of the new government. The Supreme Court also ruled that votes from members of a party that contradict their party leader—known as party defection—shall not be counted in a vote of no-confidence, effectively meaning that a prime minister with a party majority can never be voted out. The judges who made this ruling argued that it would deter elected politicians from supposedly trading votes for private benefits, illustrating judges' continued distrust of politicians' motives. Parliament has been weakened as the court has circumscribed parliamentary accountability of the political executive and weakened the model of constituency-based parliamentary representation. Military and judicial leadership appear keen on directing the state toward a political dispensation with a reformed institutional structure, perhaps with a new troika that better matches their preferences. Should the current government be replaced by a caretaker government before fresh elections, courts will likely receive petitions regarding the caretaker government's actions from across the political spectrum, providing judges a further opportunity to maneuver political dynamics in their preferred direction—but at the risk of angering political elites aggrieved by their decisions.

The court may also hear important cases pertaining to the military, particularly regarding Musharraf's treason conviction and the military's internment centers and real estate empire. The relationship and divisions between the civilian and military leadership will continue to inform the judiciary's approach to these cases.

How the judiciary deals with these challenges will also depend upon judges themselves. It is apparent many judges disapprove of traditional political parties and sympathize with Khan's anti-corruption rhetoric, even as they opposed Khan's blatantly unconstitutional actions in April. But there are also judges who are focused on ensuring judicial independence rather than participating in further autocratization. To predict which direction courts will take, observers can look to which judges, and their associated normative positions, are elevated to positions of authority. With the current Supreme Court leadership, the trend of constraining PML-N and PPP-led political institutions is likely to continue. But the differently minded Justice Isa is designated to be the next chief justice of Pakistan in 2023. Whoever is chief justice during Pakistan's next elections will play a critical role in defining the judiciary's role during the elections. Beyond this transition, some judges are concerned about how enmeshed courts are in politics and policymaking, but for now, the judiciary is unlikely to walk back from this role.

Today, the government and opposition parties court the support of both the military and the superior judiciary. Political elites criticize these institutions for overreach when the institutions intervene against their interests and celebrate the role of these institutions when the institutions act in their interests. Pakistan now has two tutelary institutions: the military and the superior judiciary. Even as the military remains the more powerful one, the interests of these two institutions, their disdain for political elites, and their relationship with each other will shape Pakistan's political future.

Sri Lanka's Crisis and the Power of Citizen Mobilization

Bhavani Fonseka

Sri Lanka is facing an exceptional political and economic crisis that has sparked months-long protests across the country. Its citizens have demanded that the president resign using the tagline #GoHomeGota, that the powerful Rajapaksa family relinquish power (after having been active in politics for several decades), and that the government address systematic corruption and usher in political accountability. Despite the government's attempts to disrupt these protests, tens of thousands have joined demonstrations across Sri Lanka in a reawakening of peaceful political activism. The massive mobilization and sustained pressure jolted the presidency of the previously all-powerful Gotabaya Rajapaksa, prompted mass resignations from the government at the time, and solidified existing spaces and created new spaces for dissent and discussions on much-needed reforms.

Despite troubling trends of authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and ethnomajoritarianism sweeping across Sri Lanka, key moments in recent history have united diverse groups in a show of peaceful pushback. These events have enabled the most recent wave of citizen mobilization, which has the potential to significantly transform Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka's History of Political Activism

This recent upswell of mobilization builds on Sri Lanka's rich history of political activism attributed to multiple actors, including victims' groups and civil society organizations from across Sri Lanka, trade unions, and political parties. Activism has focused on a range of issues, including civil and political rights as well as socioeconomic issues on which street protests, legal challenges to public statements, and political debates have been used to press for progressive reforms.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, opposition groups, civil society, trade unions, and victims of political violence worked to oppose state-sponsored violence and enforced disappearances. These efforts include the powerful work of the Mothers' Front, whose members mobilized in raising awareness of enforced disappearances and pushing for accountability. This mobilization came at huge personal cost to the participants, with many protesters facing sustained harassment and violence. For instance, after the country's civil war, which ended in 2009, the families of disappeared victims have held continuous protests for more than 1,900 days. Other issues have also received attention including farming and fishing communities whose members' livelihoods were affected by disastrous government policies, communities opposing government-initiated land grabs, and teachers and trade union members who opposed attempts to militarize higher education, among many other causes. These and many other protests have contributed to a rich history of opposition mobilization in Sri Lanka.

Authoritarian practices and impunity under former president Mahinda Rajapaksa (who was in office from 2005 to 2015 and is the older brother of current President Gotabaya Rajapaksa) sparked new levels of activism by victims of political repression, civil society, and opposition groups. These critics of the government called out the atrocities committed during the civil war and creeping authoritarianism such as threats to freedom of the press and the wrongful impeachment of the country's chief justice who dared to rule against the Rajapaksa government. Democratic backsliding during this period prompted groups to coalesce under a common cause, leading to movements such as the National Movement for a Just Society, which demanded regime change.

Notably, the first movement to unify both Tamil and Muslim citizens during Gotabaya Rajapaksa's presidential tenure was a February 2021 march from Pottuvil in eastern Sri Lanka to Polikandy in the north. Thousands united to march and demand equality and justice for minority communities. The protesters faced surveillance and intimidation and defied court orders to cease and desist.

As protests in Sri Lanka have evolved, so have government efforts to quell dissent with violence, intimidation, and other tactics including arbitrary restrictions. For example, during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, public health challenges were used to suppress protests. Scenes of protesters violently attacked and dragged to military-run quarantines were widely broadcast, sending a chilling message to potential protesters. The government also used broad regulations under the guise of pandemic control measures to stop opposition rallies. Yet these attempts failed to deter activists as protesters stayed resolute in their opposition to the government.

The Latest Crisis

Much of the recent crisis can be blamed on Gotabaya Rajapaksa's presidency and his family, with several family members holding multiple government portfolios. The Rajapaksa family has dominated Sri Lankan politics for several decades, carving out a massive constituency

among the majority Sinhalese community by espousing populist ethnomajoritarianism and touting the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a separatist group that was involved in Sri Lanka's nearly three-decade-long civil war. Even after losing the January 2015 presidential election while facing allegations of corruption and nepotism, Mahinda Rajapaksa returned to politics later that year as a member of parliament. Since winning a seat in the August 2015 parliamentary elections, he has, with the help of family members, built a new political party (the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna or the Sri Lankan People's Front) and entrenched the Rajapaksa family as the most powerful political family in Sri Lanka.

In the wake of the devastating Easter Sunday terrorist attacks that rocked Sri Lanka in 2019, Gotabaya Rajapaksa emerged as a presidential candidate, projecting himself as a strong leader capable of restoring security, stability, and economic growth. Within months, he was elected president by a margin of more than 1 million votes, despite having held no prior elected office and facing allegations of serious human rights violations linked to the civil war.

Many of his policies have had catastrophic effects on Sri Lanka's democracy and economy. For example, the 2019 tax cuts he enacted significantly reduced government revenues, hindering Sri Lanka's ability to purchase essential items such as food, medicine, gas, and fuel. Further, a ban on chemical fertilizer in 2021 harmed the agricultural sector and food security, leaving many Sri Lankans to struggle with securing meals and their livelihoods. The ban also impacted the country's tea trade and other industries. The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns also shriveled the economy, which is heavily dependent on the tourism sector. Government mismanagement on a range of other areas has contributed to high inflation and has compounded the crisis, leading to uncertainty, instability, and new triggers for violence.

Sri Lanka has experienced decades of unrest, violence, and uncertainty punctuated by a lengthy civil war, several humanitarian disasters, and a constitutional coup in 2018. However, the country was still ill-prepared for the current crisis; thousands of citizens have been affected, and many are struggling to find essential items and manage long power cuts brought on by fuel shortages, problems that have disrupted essential services, education, and people's livelihoods. In a sad indictment of the dire conditions, multiple people died after collapsing following long waits under the hot sun for basic goods and services. There are also increasing concerns about the impact of malnutrition and medication shortages on Sri Lankans.

Amid this unprecedented crisis, Sri Lankans' political activism has reawakened, prompting months-long peaceful protests. Rallies have protested shortages of essential items and long queues to obtain such items, the skyrocketing cost of living, and the disruptive power cuts. After several weeks of peaceful protests, however, violence erupted on March 31, 2022. On this day, a peaceful protest outside the private residence of Gotabaya Rajapaksa turned violent, resulting in mass arrests and prompting an ongoing police investigation. The government responded by declaring a state of emergency and imposing a curfew. Despite these measures, the energy of the protests did not dissipate; thousands continued to peacefully

protest, resulting in the largest outpouring of civil disobedience in recent times. The protesters continued with their demands of a systemwide change in Sri Lanka including political accountability, transparency in governance, the resignations of the Rajapaksa family from government posts, and an end to corruption. In response, the cabinet resigned en masse on April 3. For a time, however, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who still holds the presidency, and then prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksa remained in office, resulting in renewed calls for them to leave their posts.

The Rajapaksas' refusal to heed these calls for their resignations and the country's deteriorating economic situation further energized protesters. On April 9, protesters launched the largest protest site at Galle Face Green in the heart of Colombo. The occupied area was renamed "GotaGoGama," reinforcing the demonstrators' demand for the president's resignation. After now being occupied for more than seventy-five days and counting, the GotaGoGama campaign has become the epicenter of the protest.

In Sri Lanka's larger history of protests, this mobilization is remarkable for its diversity, perseverance, and relatively peaceful methods (except for some instances of violence largely sparked by government supporters, including deadly attacks on protesters on May 9). Much of the energy and creativity of the protests can be attributed to youthful participants, yet the protests have attracted demonstrators from a wide range of ages, including some in their eighties and nineties. The movement also has united members regardless of ethnicity, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, and profession, all demanding that the Rajapaksas resign. The protests also have displayed an unprecedented level of organization, with food, water, and healthcare being provided by well-wishers and space being made for creative forms of resistance like public discussions, a library, legal aid, street dramas, and memorials for past violence.

With pressure mounting and government officials fearing that a continuous *hartal* (strike) would bring the country to a standstill, a state of emergency was declared yet again on May 6, soon after the previous state of emergency had been revoked. As was already evident from the demonstrations in April, the state of emergency did not deter the many who continued to peacefully protest. On May 9, supporters of Mahinda Rajapaksa attacked the peaceful protesters, unleashing new waves of violence. The violence targeting the protesters subsequently spread to other areas, causing several deaths alongside looting and the torching of properties belonging to members of parliament from the ruling party. The violence did not abate, despite Mahinda Rajapaksa's abrupt resignation from his post as prime minister, one of the protesters' key demands. A national curfew was soon imposed, but it took several days for the tensions to subside.

The peaceful protests' descent into violence was worrying for multiple reasons. Mobs took over streets and neighborhoods, raising concerns about the inability of the police and military to guarantee order amid the state of emergency and curfew. Investigations have since led to the arrests of several perpetrators including those who attacked peaceful protesters

and those involved in the subsequent deadly violence across Sri Lanka. These arrests have also prompted questions about the potential culpability of key government officials, former officeholders, and those responsible for maintaining law and order.

Following Mahinda Rajapaksa's resignation, Sri Lanka had neither a prime minister nor a cabinet for three days. The president was isolated, and the opposition remained divided. The country's deepening political, economic, and security crisis was alarming. On May 12, seasoned politician Ranil Wickremesinghe was appointed prime minister, and some individuals allegedly linked to the crisis were subsequently appointed to the new cabinet, sparking questions about the new government's legitimacy.

Diverse Forms of Pushback

Sri Lankan politics has evolved in recent years beyond traditional street protests. Nowadays, protests include diverse initiatives such as litigation, public statements, debates, art, theater, and social media campaigns. For example, social media have injected new levels of energy and creativity into protests and helped increase engagement among participants from all age groups and geographic areas.

Citizens' use of public interest litigation has also grown in recent years, with many activists filing cases to challenge proposed amendments to Sri Lanka's constitution and legislative proposals as well as unjust and arbitrary government practices. Public interest litigation has also informed broader debates among policymakers and ordinary people, raising awareness on important contemporary issues through, among other things, social media updates on developments in relevant courtrooms and the implications of related rulings.

Some instances where public interest litigation and other forms of pushback have shaped debates and have propelled change are worth noting. In 2012, the Supreme Court, which had been considered pro-regime, struck down the Divineguma Bill, which attempted to consolidate executive power and remove checks and balances on governance. In a move now widely seen as government retaliation, the then chief justice was unceremoniously and swiftly impeached. Yet the move united a diverse range of activists and ultimately helped form a broad-based opposition that defeated then president Mahinda Rajapaksa in the country's 2015 presidential election.

This is not the first time these figures have been at the forefront of political transitions in Sri Lanka. The country's 2018 constitutional crisis, which involved an undemocratic power grab by Mahinda Rajapaksa and the arbitrary ouster of the sitting prime minister, also united political parties, civil society, trade unions, and academics, sowing political chaos in Sri Lanka. In a rare moment of unity, many took to the streets to challenge this development and litigated their cause in the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal. Weeks of activism and litigation resulted in a historic judgment: the Supreme Court ruled that the actions of

the sitting president were unconstitutional and brought an end to the crisis in December 2018 with the resignation of Mahinda Rajapaksa as prime minister and the reinstatement of Wickremasinghe to the post.

More recent examples also capture moments when different forms of protest forced powerful Sri Lankan government officials to change course. In 2020, a diverse range of actors united against the Twentieth Amendment proposal to amend the country's constitution, a move that was designed to further consolidate the powers of the presidency and weaken independent institutions. These critics filed legal challenges in the Supreme Court. Activists also used protests, social media campaigns, and political debates to express their dissent, forcing the government to introduce several changes. Despite having a majority in the parliament, the ruling party was forced to incorporate several revisions to the amendment.

Protesters also responded in 2021 to the proposed Colombo Port City Economic Commission Act with vociferous opposition, as many critics saw the proposed legislation as another government attempt to cede control of Sri Lankan assets to external actors without accountability or transparency. Activists again took to the streets to show their dissent and challenged the proposed legislation in the Supreme Court. Opposition to the legislation was fueled by China's increasing footprint in Sri Lanka, which protesters perceived as a threat to Sri Lanka's sovereignty and economic wellbeing. The legal challenges and debates around the bill generated awareness among Sri Lankans of the problems inherent in the proposed measure and prompted the government to amend its terms and enact the law with changes.

These are a few examples when different forms of pushback chipped away at authoritarian practices. As these examples show, such political activism must also be considered in the context of Sri Lanka's fragmented political parties and weak trade unions. The shortcomings of these groups coincided with the emergence of new entities and groups for protesting government actions, such as citizen-led initiatives and youth mobilization.

Potential for Transformation in Sri Lanka

These months-long peaceful protests reflect the resilience and creativity of Sri Lankan citizens. In a matter of weeks, a powerful government collapsed, and a previously untouchable political family was forced into hiding. Amid the bleakness engulfing Sri Lanka, the power of citizen mobilization and resistance has captured global attention and injected much-needed energy, ideas, and perspectives into the Sri Lankan opposition. These protests have also redefined the role of citizens and their relationship to the state.

But many challenges remain for protest groups, including intergroup suspicions, deeply entrenched and polarized political viewpoints, and societal fissures. While these protests have highlighted the need to address minority rights and a reckoning for past wrongdoing

linked to the war, these questions are perceived by some people as secondary to today's crisis. Thus, while the present crisis offers a promising opening for future social movements, there is also much to aspire to.

Additionally, the change of government in May 2022 coupled with protest fatigue has contributed to a decline in the number of protesters. While some people have adopted an accommodating stance toward the new prime minister, many others including younger protesters still argue that change can only occur if Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigns as president and systemwide change happens. They see the new government as a continuation of the old guard and a lifeline for the Rajapaksas and their supporters. These dynamics will continue to affect the direction of the protests, help determine whether they can be sustained, and have a bearing on their effectiveness.

Regardless of the setbacks and uncertainties, Sri Lankan citizens have an opportunity to build on this moment and create a new vision for their country. They can address structural inequalities and violence while demanding social and economic justice, political accountability, and a new culture of governance. This task will not be easy, nor will the results be immediate. However, the changes brought about in the last few weeks give hope that sustained, innovative, and inclusive citizen mobilization has a chance to transform Sri Lanka.

The Opposition Space in Contemporary Indian Politics

Asim Ali

Over the last eight years, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has established itself as the dominant player in Indian politics.[7] The party's unchallenged reign is due not just to its own efforts but also to the moribund state of the political opposition in large parts of the country.

One only needs to glance at the round of five state elections held in March 2022 to understand the extent of the BJP's dominance. The BJP was the incumbent in four of the five states, but opinion polls suggested high rates of anti-incumbency in at least three contests. Inflation, unemployment, and a devastating COVID-19 wave presented formidable headwinds for the BJP's success. Yet the party breezed to victory in all but one election, including in the politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh, highlighting the inability of opposition parties to channel popular dissatisfaction into votes.

At the aggregate level, the Indian opposition does not seem to be in a crisis. If one considers all non-BJP coalition parties together, the opposition still controls twelve out of thirty state assemblies and comprises more than 55 percent of the national election vote share. Indeed, in almost one-third of parliamentary seats in the 2019 general election, the BJP was not even competitive (meaning it won less than 25 percent vote share or finished outside of the top two spots).[8] These seats represent large parts of southern and eastern India, where the BJP—unlike the earlier dominant Congress—has struggled to break through.

All too often, analysts explain the opposition's weakness as a natural consequence of the Hindu nationalist wave that has transformed the Indian polity and propelled the BJP to power. There is some truth to that perspective, but it is also worth exploring this question from the other side. If the post-2014 era of BJP dominance is considered in Darwinian terms, certain political parties have adapted and even thrived. This success is self-evidently true in the case of the linguistic-based regional parties in the East and the South, where the

BJP has never beaten them in a state election. The West Bengal assembly election of last year, where the regional heavyweight All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) comfortably trounced the BJP, is a case in point.

On the other hand, the BJP has easily gobbled up the space of those political formations that were already in a state of decay prior to its rise.

Thus, we can divide the Indian opposition space into two camps: a crisis-ridden group and a healthier, more resilient group. The first two sections of this essay describe the challenges and possible future trajectories of both of these camps. The third section examines the dynamics of the aggregate opposition space, including possibilities of reconfiguration, fragmentation, and coordination. The concluding section uses these arguments in service of a central question: Does the Indian opposition have the capacity to dislodge the BJP in the near future?

The Crisis-Ridden Opposition

Three opposition formations, each representing a distinct ideological space, have found themselves in a state of deep crisis during the present era of BJP dominance: the Congress, the so-called "Mandal" parties, and the Left. While ideological and organizational atrophy in these parties preceded President Narendra Modi's administration, the BJP exploited their glaring weaknesses, diminishing the legacy effects they once enjoyed.

The Congress Party

First, let's consider the Congress. The party has historically represented centrism and mainstream nationalism. However, the centrist space has been shrinking since the early 1980s, coinciding with the increased politicization of caste and emerging religious cleavages. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar—two of the biggest states in the country, located in the Hindi heartland—the Congress fell between the two stools of the Mandal movement (backward caste) and Mandir (Ram temple) movement, losing the upper castes to the BJP and the lower castes to the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), two caste-based regional parties. In the aftermath of these movements, the Congress was rendered a largely spent force in this vast Gangetic plain.[9]

Meanwhile, the Congress has conceded mainstream nationalism to the BJP over the last three decades. Postindependence, Indian nationalism had two politically operative components: developmental nationalism and unitary nationalism. The Congress defined these two faces of nationalism and used them for popular legitimacy and electoral mobilization.

Developmental nationalism was exemplified by former president Jawaharlal Nehru: projecting the party as a vanguard leading the nation-state through a project of "collective development." Dams and steel plants, in Nehru's words, were the temples of modern India. National

pride was summoned through this imagery of a newborn nation galloping from poverty and backwardness toward a developed future. Nehru's successors, especially Indira Gandhi, leaned more heavily on the Congress's ownership of unitary nationalism—the claim that the Congress was the only party that could rise above sectional interests and articulate the national interest. Indeed, Indira Gandhi routinely played up the threat of secessionist elements in Punjab and Kashmir to bolster the nationalist appeal of the Congress. That era has long since passed.

Since the 1990s, a liberalized economy meant that the Congress could no longer rely on grand, state-led projects to conjure up feelings of nationalistic pride. At the same time, the imperatives of coalition politics forced the Congress to negotiate and bargain with an array of regional parties. It could no longer project itself as the sole, uncompromising guardian of the "national interest." Meanwhile, the BJP has bridged the gap between mainstream unitarian nationalism and ethnic nationalism, aided by the securitization of anti-Muslim discourse. The idea that Pakistan and Indian Muslim extremists (categories that often intersect) pose the biggest security threat to the country has gained ground, especially among the middle classes.

In a 2014 Lokniti survey, 31 percent of people named the BJP as the most trusted party on national security, a key indicator of the party's nationalist leadership, while just 19 percent selected the Congress. The BJP's lead only widened in similar 2019 surveys.

Can the Congress regain its former dominance? The last eight years do not paint a promising picture. The party has struggled to create its own brand of nationalism and has not succeeded in correcting perceptions of its leftward drift on national security matters. In its 2019 manifesto, the Congress promised to scrap a draconian military law (the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, or AFSPA) and a colonial-era sedition law (Indian Penal Code Section 124A) to compete with the BJP's nationalistic campaign. More recently, the de facto Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has taken to framing the Congress vision of India as a "union of states" in contrast to the BJP's top-down, unitarian vision. However, these efforts have proven unsuccessful. This dispassionate depiction of India as a nation created by compacts and sustained through negotiation might be intellectually valid, but woefully lacks nationalistic content. It represents a pale comparison not only with the BJP's national vision, but also with the Congress of an earlier era.

Even the Congress's articulation of secular nationalism remains circumspect. It is, of course, true that public opinion in India has taken a sharp majoritarian turn. However, one might also argue that the Congress has failed to design a new grammar of secular nationalism to coherently demonstrate how the BJP's divisive politics can hurt the national interest. In December, bands of extremist Hindu seers assembled in the holy city of Haridwar and gave incendiary speeches targeted at the Muslim community. The Congress condemned this hatefest (termed *dharam sansads* in the media) much like it flayed recent disparaging comments by a BJP spokesperson about the Prophet Muhammad. But the Congress's articulation of secularism is often limited to reactive and episodic rebuffing of Hindu nationalism, rather

than representing a clear and consistent narrative. Further, as Yamini Aiyar has pointed out, such secular posturing lacks power of conviction as it remains confined to social media posts and press conferences rather than concrete mobilization.

However, this ideological dilemma is not the key obstacle to the Congress's revival. Even more important is the dwindling trust voters have in its party brand. The Congress's owner-ship of the centrist space rested primarily on its image as India's natural party of governance. As the comparative political science literature shows, centrist parties can survive periods of ideological polarization if their valence remains on solid ground.[10] But that image took a severe beating during the last fateful years of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government (2009–2014), which were marked by a succession of corruption scandals, economic missteps, large-scale protests, intra-party battles, and policy paralysis.

Has the Congress's valence improved over the last few years? The answer here is a resounding "no." In the Uttarakhand and Goa assembly elections earlier this year, which were largely bipolar contests between the BJP and the Congress, voters didn't trust the Congress to govern despite the lackluster performance of the ruling BJP. In Punjab, the Congress was swept out of office amid widespread claims of corruption and misgovernance. In the future, the Congress can take two steps to improve its reputation. First, it must settle its protracted leadership question, which makes the party appear to be a confused mess. Congress has been without a full-time, elected president since its defeat in the 2019 general election. The leadership of the Gandhi triumvirate (Sonia Gandhi and her children, Rahul and Priyanka) has muddled chains of command and diminished the principle of accountability in the party. Second, the party should develop and promote a distinctive model of governance in the states where it still holds power on its own: Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan.

In the 2019 election, the Congress lost 171 out of the 186 seats where it battled the BJP in a head-to-head contest. Therefore, any hope of opposition success in the near term depends on an electoral revival of the Congress.

Mandal Parties

The states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are considered the political heartland of India, contributing 120 out of the 543 seats of Parliament. The BJP has sealed its place as the dominant party of Uttar Pradesh, underscored by its spectacular re-election earlier this year, where it overtook the SP, the largest Mandal (backward caste) party of the state. In neigh-boring Bihar, the success of the BJP has been comparatively modest. Even so, it has emerged from the last election as the most powerful party in Bihar, eclipsing its Mandal rival, Rashtriya Janata Dal, or RJD, as well as its Mandal ally, Janata Dal (United), or JD(U).

As mentioned earlier, the BJP is a staggeringly effective political machine that grinds down and feasts on decaying political spaces. Rot in Mandal politics, much like in the Congress, had been brewing for decades. A series of factional splits in the 1980s and early 1990s had

left the Yadav community in charge of the largest Mandal parties in the Hindi heartland, the SP and the RJD. Over the ensuing decades, this single dominant caste deepened its stranglehold on the Mandal space further. Thus, the BJP was easily able to penetrate party defenses with its own backward caste strategy, making non-Yadav backward castes the centerpiece of their larger Hindutva movement.

In the Uttar Pradesh campaign, the SP tried to counter this strategy by rebranding. Proclaiming itself the "new SP," the party tamped down its Yadav centrism, making broad appeals to backward castes and re-emphasizing its socialist roots. In the end, the critical non-Yadav backward caste voters—representing more than a third of the electorate—judged this strategy to be a cosmetic exercise and remained loyal to the BJP.

It was the fourth consecutive electoral drubbing for the SP at the hands of the BJP in the Modi era. In fact, in the aftermath of the election results, many commentators declared Mandal politics to be a spent force. The veteran journalist Vandita Mishra wrote, "Mandal politics is now seen, in large sections of even its home ground, UP [Uttar Pradesh], as casteist and divisive." The political scientist, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, argued the SP relied excessively on "social arithmetic" rather than a "generative conception of politics." He expanded, "The project of now opposing any national party on the basis of a coalition of fragmented identities is dead."

However, a reinvigorated Mandal space could still be a potent political force, but it is patently clear that the Mandal stock has never been lower and these parties do not possess the capacity to realistically challenge the BJP. If Mandal parties are to climb back from political irrelevance, they need to revamp their ideological content by articulating relevant goals. They should not limit their horizons to settled battles of the past, such as caste reservation. Moreover, for ideological renewal to be perceived as a genuine programmatic shift rather than an electoral gimmick, it must take place outside of electoral cycles and the domain of campaign speeches.

The Left

The third political space that has been steamrolled by the BJP is that of the Communist or Left parties. In West Bengal (as well as in neighboring Tripura), the BJP's spectacular rise was facilitated by the wholesale shift of voters fleeing from the imploding Left Front bloc. The Left finds itself in the political wilderness in both these states, the legacy of its decades-long reign receding from public consciousness, as it shrivels under the weight of its own structural weaknesses. The Communist parties have been unable to define their role in a polity where economic or class cleavages have progressively become depoliticized following the liberalization of the economy.

While these parties once occupied a comfortable niche as a left-wing pressure group in larger coalition governments, the return of the single-party-dominant phase in the form of the Modi era has proved to be a disconcerting jolt. Except in Kerala, where the state unit is run efficiently by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, the party is weighed down by its slow, frozen, bureaucratic style of functioning. Decisionmaking in the party is subject to deliberations within a large Politburo and a bloated Central Committee. In an era where identity and culture are the predominant site of politics, the silver-haired grandees of the Politburo cut an anachronistic figure.

The Healthy Opposition Space

Which political formations have been prospering in the Modi era? Subnational, linguistic-based parties have proven to be the only reliable identity-based counter to the politics of Hindu nationalism. Even in eastern states where the BJP has made massive inroads, it has largely done so by replacing the Congress or the Left, not by encroaching on the space claimed by regional parties. When facing an incumbent espousing regional pride, such as the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha or the TMC in Bengal, the BJP has been soundly defeated. Similarly, in the southern state of Telangana, which is the next high-growth frontier for the BJP, the party's strategy is to become the second pole of politics by replacing the Congress rather than challenging the stronger regional Telangana Rashtra Samithi. In terms of generating visceral emotional resonance, language has turned out to be the only competitive tool against religion. In fact, in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, the BJP has been largely marginalized, partly because it is seen to be the party of Hindi-speaking outsiders.

While language is one barrier to Hindutva's failure against healthy opposition forces, there are other variables at play. The first is organizational capacity. Unlike the Congress or the Mandal parties of the North with their frozen patronage structures and dormant local units, the linguistic parties of the East and the South are more professionally organized. The TMC spent two years before the West Bengal elections overhauling its grassroots structures with the aid of efficient feedback networks designed to gauge the performance of its local leaders. Similarly, both the ruling Yuvajana Shramika Rythu Congress Party in Andhra Pradesh and the BJD in Odisha effected a wholesale resignation of the cabinet, dispatching their senior leaders to guide organizational revamping. The parties of the deep South—Kerala and Tamil Nadu—have a historical legacy of firmly rooted, cadre-based party structures. In these states, the BJP loses the comparative organizational advantage of its large Sangh Parivar network that it enjoys in northern and western India. Hence, the superior organizational capacity of these regional linguistic parties has made them resistant to BJP encroachment.

Second, the inclusive nature of linguistic parties represents a stark counterweight to Hindu nationalism. The Dravidian politics of Tamil Nadu and the Congress-Left bipolarity in Kerala are both steeped in an egalitarian ethos. In West Bengal, the quintessential Bengali identity has been portrayed as pluralistic. While the BJD's Odisha model emphasizes

social harmony more than progressivism, Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has reiterated the vitality of an inclusive Odia identity. In Maharashtra, too, the regionally rooted Shiv Sena has engaged in an intriguing recalibration of its Hindutva identity, moving away from its traditional anti-Muslim rhetoric to emphasize its contrast with the BJP.

Further, the BJP-dominant party system has also given opportunities to these regional parties, who have an ambiguous relationship at best with democratic norms, to present their crusade against the BJP in pious terms of anti-authoritarianism and the defense of constitutional federalism. In the midst of the West Bengal campaign, TMC leader Mamata Banerjee wrote a letter to fifteen top opposition leaders urging them to unite against "a series of assaults by the BJP and its government at the Centre on democracy and constitutional federalism in India."

Configuration of Opposition Space

Beyond the dichotomy between healthy opposition groups and those in crisis, the aggregate present opposition space possesses two overarching features.

First, there is no alternative national pole to the BJP. After the reversal in Punjab, the Congress party directly controls just two states. Thus, the BJP is the only national party in India's current party system, mainly competing with a string of regional or supra-regional parties. The closest historical parallel to this system is the second phase of Congress dominance (1967–1989), which ended with the strengthening of the BJP as an alternative pole. Over the last year, opposition parties have competed to find similar footing, with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the TMC challenging the Congress. Of the two, the more serious contender is the AAP, a party that, following its landslide victory in Punjab, controls two states (Delhi being the second).

The AAP is a formidable challenger in the centrist space that has been largely vacated by the Congress. Unlike the TMC, the AAP is not tethered to a fragmented identity of either caste or region. Further, it has two distinct advantages over the Congress. One, it has built a positive valence based on assiduously marketing the Delhi model of development, which features free and "high quality" public services. Secondly, it is free from the baggage of missteps accumulated by the Congress, particularly on matters of national security, enabling it to craft a contemporary model of nationalism from scratch.

Paradoxically, the strengths of the AAP also seed its vulnerabilities. Its lack of a defined social base reduces its competitiveness in larger states. Its ideologically diffuse populist character can also shade into a lack of credibility, prone as it is to varying its positioning from state to state and at different points in time (such as the courting of migrants in Delhi and promises of job reservation to locals in Uttarakhand and Goa). Since the party chooses to largely play within the Hindu nationalist parameters set by the BJP, it also does not presently pose any substantive ideological challenge to the ruling party.

The second overarching feature of the opposition is its extraordinary placidity. There are no new ideas, animating political movements, or daring political experiments emerging from its ranks. This temperance makes the current opposition space quite distinct from the opposition space during the Congress-dominant era. The two big popular mobilizations since 2014 (the anti-Citizenship Act Amendment movement and the farmers' movement) were civil society movements that consciously emphasized their distance from opposition political parties.

This hesitation to collaborate reflects misgivings over both the political will and the popular credibility commanded by the opposition parties. The anti-CAA demonstrators, a coalition of ordinary Muslims, student groups, and middle-class activists, developed their own leadership structures to mount sustained nationwide protests against the government's new citizenship law, which they held to be discriminatory to Muslims. The fact that more professionally organized political parties have not been able to put together any street mobilization remotely comparable to the scale and spread of the CAA protests illustrates the paucity of political will. When protesters are better organized, such as the farmer protests led by the powerful farmer unions of Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh, they have even less reason to let opposition parties piggyback on their demands in an effort to burnish their credibility.

Thus, the opposition has been unable to absorb energy and strength from popular movements. The only dynamic element in the opposition ranks is perhaps the AAP, and yet there are few parties as allergic to articulating their politics in terms of grounding ideas. "We are neither Left, nor Right, but practical," is the governing credo of the party, in the words of its supremo Arvind Kejriwal.

In the absence of any ideological churning, several opposition parties (especially the crisis-ridden parties) have become closed political channels, unable to produce new leaders or to locate new bases of support.

Looking to 2024

As political parties turn to the 2024 general election, much of the opposition has found itself in a crisis that began long before the present era of BJP dominance. If these parties remain trapped in their rut, the only serious opposition to the BJP will continue to come from regional-linguistic parties, allowing the BJP to comfortably occupy the national space while ceding important territory in the southern and eastern parts of the country.

Since general elections are no more than an aggregate of state results, it will be hard to dislodge the BJP. Opposition unity is sometimes presented as a panacea for this challenge, but one must remember that the BJP faced a much more consolidated opposition in 2019 than in 2014, and still emerged with an even larger majority. Grand opposition alliances in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, for instance, did not make a huge difference to the outcome.

Therefore, what is required is not a more united opposition, but a renewed opposition. Much like a giant disruptor in business, the BJP has revealed and capitalized on the myriad weaknesses of crisis-ridden parties. However, opposition parties can use this opportunity to reinvent themselves, incorporating the lessons learned from healthy opposition parties, such as the need to build durable, agile organizational structures.

Given that in almost half the country the principal challenger to the BJP is either the Congress or one of the principal Mandal parties, an opposition challenge in 2024 is only possible if crisis-ridden parties revive themselves. The results of the assembly elections earlier this year do not suggest any reason for optimism in that regard.

From Revolutionaries to Visionless Parties: Leftist Politics in Bangladesh

Tahmina Rahman

Several indices on democracy have identified the current Bangladeshi political system as "semi-authoritarian," "hybrid," or only "partly free." Despite showing promise of re-democratization from the early 1990s to the late 2000s, the country appears to have returned to its path of "democratic backsliding."

The controversy in 2013 over the International Crimes Tribunal—which was instituted to prosecute the people involved in crimes against humanity, war crimes, genocide, and other crimes under international law that occurred during the 1971 liberation war—accelerated democratic backsliding in the country, accentuated the rift between secular and Islamist parties (reflecting the left/right divide) in Bangladeshi politics, and led to two opposing mass movements. On the surface, pro-tribunal, leftist forces won this battle with the successful conclusion of the tribunal. Some experts claim that since the Awami League (AL) came to power in 2014, it has enacted policies that undermine freedom of expression, minority rights, and women's empowerment, contributing to democratic backsliding and an overall rightward shift in the country. On top of this, others argue that the party's policies have contributed to further marginalization of the opposition.

Today, Bangladeshi opposition parties are struggling. The center-right Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) never quite recovered from its boycott of the 2014 election, and its party chair, Begum Khaleda Zia, was imprisoned in 2018 on corruption charges. Zia was granted bail on certain conditions through a government executive order in 2020. Although the government extended the bail for the fifth time in March 2022, BNP leadership still complains about repression. The other center-right party, Jatiya Party (JP), struggles to maintain its role as the main opposition party, holding only 26 out of 350 parliamentary seats. The far-right Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) lost its registration status due to the leadership's war crimes in the 1971 liberation war. Another far-right party, Islami Andolan

Bangladesh (IAB), captured third place in the 2018 parliamentary election, but it failed to secure a single seat in parliament. Absent any electoral threat from right-leaning parties, the current conservative shift in Bangladeshi politics is perplexing, especially considering the AL's electoral and executive alliance with some leftist parties.

This paradox leaves observers wondering why leftist parties have failed to exert their influence and reverse the country's rightward shift and creeping authoritarianism. In today's Bangladesh, these parties have been relegated to what one expert called a "microscopic condition."[11] Although not monolithic in terms of nature and ideology, leftist parties in Bangladesh share institutional and ideological constraints that curtail their abilities to emerge as dominant political actors.

This article analyzes thirty-nine expert interviews, four focus group discussions with students at the University of Dhaka, and qualitative content analysis of the party platforms, manifestos, and publications of four leftist parties to explain those parties' failure to aid democratic consolidation in post-1990 Bangladesh.[12] It begins by tracing the history of leftist parties to the colonial era, examining the role of the country's authoritarian past and how the parties' habits of acting within larger parties limits leftist politics. Then, the article identifies ideological and organizational challenges that impede party success and grassroots mobilization, including leftists' reputation of being "elitist" and "atheist," their inability to engage civil society networks, and intraparty feuds. Finally, the piece closes with a discussion on the future of leftist parties in Bangladesh.

History of Leftist Parties in Bangladesh

Leftist parties in the Indian subcontinent have a well-documented history of participating in anti-colonial movements against the British. In the post-partition era, Bangladeshi leftists played an influential role in anti-authoritarian mobilization against Pakistani dictatorship. Though these parties were not allowed to operate openly, some worked through the AL. After the party spearheaded the liberation war in 1971, however, leftist parties suffered from internal feuds and confrontation with the ruling AL. Even when leftist parties became the only viable option for opposition politics when religion-based politics was banned in 1972,[13] these parties still could not agree on how to initiate a socialist revolution. The military coup in 1975 removed the AL from office, but opposition politics were still restricted. After fifteen years of military dictatorship, the two centrist parties along with smaller leftist parties mobilized the nation and reinstituted parliamentary democracy in 1991.

Still, leftist parties struggle in national elections. Well-known parties like Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JASAD) and the Workers Party of Bangladesh (WPB) have some parliamentary representation, but their constituencies and subsequent vote shares are very small. Focus group discussions (FGD) conducted among students at the University of Dhaka indicated that these parties have become so irrelevant that most young voters cannot even name more than two leftist parties or their leaders. Participants also admitted that they have very little

or no clue about the political ideology of these parties, save the ones that occasionally end up as part of the governing coalition. Although in no way representative of the total voting population, remarks by student participants in FGDs indicate that leftist parties in Bangladesh suffer from a legitimacy crisis. Ultimately, this crisis has been a result of authoritarian rule and the left's failure to popularize their agenda.

Politicking Through Bigger Parties: Erosion of Party Power

Most experts interviewed by the author argued that Bangladeshi leftist parties lack a distinguishable voice compared to their moderate counterparts. Historically, leftist parties avoided the wrath of authoritarian rulers by politicking through more mainstream parties. Dictatorial rule and legal barriers necessitated their collaboration with mainstream parties to achieve common goals—such as independence from Pakistan and the end of military dictatorship—but this strategy also meant leftist parties existed under the shadow of their mainstream counterparts. Following the end of military rule in 1991, coalition politics exacerbated this dependency, further compromising leftists' ability to push their agenda. A veteran leftist politician explained:

> There are some benefits and profits of coalition politics. In fear of losing those benefits and profits, [leftists] sometime take a softer approach in speaking against oppression and unfairness and in favor of changing laws. I will call this an opportunist tendency. Because of this opportunism, sometimes they do not come off as active in the field, inside and outside the parliament, on the street as one expects them to. This is one shortcoming of forming an alliance with bigger parties.[14]

These explanations demonstrate that leftist parties in coalition often become less able to hold centrist parties accountable and push for alternative policy proposals. The leading parties, too, take advantage of this dependency by not taking leftist policy proposals into consideration.[15] In its "political program" (রাজনৈতিক প্রস্তাব), JASAD recognizes that despite being a coalition partner of the AL, it is not treated well. Its official program reads,

> Leaders-activists-supporters of JASAD are not happy with the number of seats it received for being part of the 14-party alliance and the grand alliance in the past. All levels of party leaders-activists-supporters believe that the number of seats offered to JASAD as a result of electoral coalition is not respectable for the party. We definitely want this situation to change. However, reality is brutal. Whatever injustice has been done to the party in terms of seat distribution has happened because of party's own weakness. Our own weakness has forced us to accept this compromise over seat distribution.[16]

Reputational Damage: The "Elitist" and "Atheist" Image

Both FGD respondents and experts emphasized that leftist politicians in the Indian sub-continent have a reputation for being elitist. Marxism became popular in nineteenth-century Bengal among a small but powerful section of educated, young Hindus known as *Bhadraloks*. This enlightened group was responsible for the Bengali renaissance in the nineteenth century but was also perceived as snobbish and clueless about the real world. This perception deepened after the 1947 partition when a minuscule number of Hindu communists chose to stay in East Pakistan instead of migrating to West Bengal, India, due to fears of communal violence. Those who stayed behind were mostly teachers, limiting leftists' promotion of communist ideas within the "petty-bourgeoisie or lower-middle classes, and to students" and solidifying their elitist reputation. Legal restrictions further prevented these parties from operating freely in united Pakistan's military dictatorship, eroding any chance to expand their platform beyond these classes.

Leftist politicians and intellectuals are still viewed this way by students at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh. When asked about leftist politicians and activists, FGD respondents described them as "snobbish" and "elitist." A professor of economics at the University of Dhaka found the tendency to talk about revolution from the comfortable urban setting as one of the biggest reasons behind the leftists' failure to emerge as an alternative political force. In his words:

> They cannot sacrifice on a day-in day-out basis like Sheikh Mujib[ur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh] did. . . . Their tendency is to do good without challenging the status quo as much as possible. The mindset is like this: 'I will not compromise [with my beliefs], but I will not sacrifice [for my cause] either. I will not take risks.' Here by compromise I mean tactical compromise. But there is no such commitment as leaving the suit [that is, upper-class elite status] behind and explore Bangladesh from one end to the other for six months.[17]

FGD responses indicate that this allegedly elitist attitude of the parties might have spilled over into student fronts of leftist organizations as well. This perception of young leftist activists perhaps comes from a deeply ingrained belief that not all people are equally capable of comprehending their political message, and hence their efforts should focus on the truly interested ones. Therefore, even within their historic area of operation—public universities—leftists have not been able to garner much support.

One leftist politician, however, contradicted this stereotype, claiming that the young generation of his party's activists are still active in the countryside where they mobilize peasants and downtrodden people.[18] While grassroots mobilization might not be at the level it reached during the 1980s, the tradition has not totally died. The politician did admit to a leftist proclivity to *ahamika,* the Bengali word for arrogance, which causes reputational damage and alienates leftist politicians from the people.

Leftists in Bangladesh also have a reputation for being atheists. This label makes building strong grassroots networks and a stable constituency difficult, given existing anti-atheist stigma in the country. In Bangladesh, "if you go to the countryside and tell people that you are an atheist, they will look at you like they have seen a snake. Bengali Muslims are petrified by the term atheism."[19] Authoritarian rulers both before and after Bangladesh's independence conducted propaganda campaigns against leftists, branding them as impious nonbelievers. One veteran leftist politician remarked that "this label [atheists] cannot be removed. It has always been there, still is, and will always be."[20] The FGD participants confirmed his frustration; most of them used words such as "hedonist," "immoral," and "atheist" to describe leftist political parties.

Such defamation grew stronger when the Shahbagh movement, which demanded capital punishment of 1971 war criminals and a ban on religious politics, emerged in 2013. Leftist students at the University of Dhaka received criticism from right-wing political parties for promoting a secularism tantamount to anti-Islamism. The term "atheists" came to be used to identify anyone sympathetic to the secular movement, although only a handful of activists involved were self-proclaimed atheists. This type of attack on leftist politicians has continued today; famous religious preachers label politicians as "atheist" for their sympathy toward minority sects. These leaders are called "*murtads*" (apostates), "atheists," and "enemies of Islam" because their version of secularism calls for respect for all groups.

Leftist political parties realize they must find a balance between staying true to their ideology and avoiding offending prevailing religious sensitivities. Instead of providing conceptual clarity of secularism and making it Bangladesh-oriented, most leftist politicians have opted for the strategy that the AL has been using since mid-1990s, showcasing the piety of their leaders to offset anti-religious allegations.

The FGD responses reveal that public displays of piety, like embarking on the holy pilgrimage to Mecca or referring to Islamic documents in political speeches, do not help the leftists much in removing the perception that they are anti-religious. Rather, these strategies give the impression that leftists are only trying to score political points. For example, one respondent commented, "We have seen these leftist parties, such as JASAD and BASAD, relying on a leftist vocabulary in protest demonstrations and rallies. However, when they participate in real politics, meaning election, they try to play the religion card as well. We have seen that leftist politicians, from Hasanul Haq Inu to Rashed Khan Menon presenting religious issues in their election manifestos, even using religious phrases like 'Allah is the most powerful' in their posters."[21] Another respondent further explained that "their core ideology might be Marxism. But they also have the opportunist tendency like all other [political] parties. Since Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country, they try to use religion to serve their interests."[22]

Mobilizational Limitations: Lack of Issue and Organizational Linkages

As the successes of leftist parties in Greece, Portugal, and Spain over the last decade suggest, linkages with like-minded groups and civil society organizations help smaller parties garner support.[23] Linkages provide these parties with legitimacy to establish themselves as integral to the party system and reinforce party messages. Parties have the choice to create, penetrate, and collaborate with civil society organizations to make themselves more "credible in the eyes of the electorate" and foster grassroots mobilization.

Historically, trade unions are the strongest ally of leftist parties in the civil society arena. However, leftist parties' linkages with this vital civil society organization have gradually diminished over time due to the authoritarian-era legacy that restricted access to trade unions. After partition, East Pakistani jute and textile industries had been home to left-dominated labor unions until General Ayub Khan rose to power in the 1960s. To exert control over the working class and carry out an anti-communist campaign, Khan introduced factory-level unionism that benefited corrupt union leaders close to the regime. In independent Bangladesh, the politicization of trade unions continued: the AL administration (1972–1975) nationalized key industries and incorporated all labor unions within one single organization.

Military rule further exacerbated this trend in two ways. First, Ziaur Rahman's regime made it mandatory for all registered political parties to declare their own labor fronts.[24] This measure introduced fractionalization within unions, and leftist parties lost their hegemonic access to the working class, their core constituency and base for mobilization. Second, the successor Hussain Muhammad Ershad regime intensified the denationalization of the economy, and the rising private sector was against union activities. This further shrank the room for maneuver for leftist parties through unionism.

In the post-authoritarian era, trade unions started mirroring polarization in Bangladeshi politics. The two bigger, centrist parties, the BNP and AL, took turns running the country. While in power, each party promoted their own labor fronts and union leaders instead of letting the working class organize their own interests. By this time, leftist parties were organizationally so weak that their presence in these unions could not match BNP and AL power. BNP and AL fronts outranked leftist ones, and leftist parties lost the ability to lead on important issues related to labor rights and welfare. This weakness has become painfully visible in recent years on issues of minimum wage and decent working conditions for readymade garment workers in Bangladesh.

It would be unfair to suggest, though, that leftist parties do not pay enough attention to their core constituency. Official documents from four leftist parties show a clear commitment to the betterment of the condition of the working class, with a particular focus on minimum wage and workplace conditions. However, the restriction of trade union activities makes it difficult for these parties to realize these goals. One leftist politician said that even though

trade unionism has been greatly hampered by stricter laws of entry and the introduction of "*dalals*" (middlemen) and the "trade union mafia," leftist parties are still trying to work through unions. From his point of view, leftists are also not solely focused on mobilizing factory workers. Since the *khet-mojurs* (farm laborers) constitute a vast majority of working-class people in the countryside, leftist parties now cast their net more broadly. However, he also acknowledged that grassroots mobilization remains less than ideal in present day Bangladesh. No leftist leader has been able to impress and inspire younger activists through a demonstration effect.[25]

Leftist parties also share several goals with other members of Bangladeshi secular civil society, goals ranging from poverty alleviation to the betterment of human rights. However, the parties and civil society organizations disagree over how to achieve those goals, so there is hardly any formal or informal cooperation between them. Their relationship is also strained by political parties' animosity toward civil society organizations for their interference in political processes. A seasoned leftist politician remarked that these civil society organizations have tried to "depoliticize" politics by bypassing political parties. Such sentiments do not bode well for collaboration between the two types of actors.[26]

In leftist circles, suspicion of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which form the bulk of secular civil society in Bangladesh, is strengthened by those NGOs' dependence on foreign funding. Leftist parties in Bangladesh generally view these groups as puppets of imperial forces. The following excerpt from the political proposal adopted at the eleventh party congress of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, for example, explains why NGOs are not viewed as credible partners in social reform:

> Today, NGOs are running a big campaign in the country. Broadly speaking, NGOs are working as the "security net" for imperialism to offset the social unrest created by poverty, inequality, and unemployment borne by the anti-people policies of the very same imperialism. . . . In the name of poverty alleviation, they are offering micro-credit in the countryside. The high interest rate of these credit programs is forcing the debtors to take a loan from one NGO to pay back the loan from another NGO. Instead of getting rid of poverty, rural people are getting caught in a vicious cycle of debt. Therefore, the number of poor, stressed, loan-defaulting people has increased in the country. However, the NGOs that are involved in this business of micro-credit are making huge profits. NGO-led reform activities might bring some benefits in the short term. Although there is no reason to oppose these "reforms," it is our obligation to fight against this reform-ism. We have to remember this about the NGOs. So it is safe to say that considering everything, NGOs are a negative and dangerous actor.

This sentiment has been echoed by the WPB in its 2018 election manifesto. The party pledged to "save the peasants and agriculture from the hands of loans of rural money lenders and NGOs, by taking practical and effective steps." Documents from the leftist party Gana

Samhati, too, portray NGOs as loan sharks preying on poor rural people. In its blueprint for action, the party declares its obligation to "save the peasants from the multinational corporations selling fertilizers, seeds, pesticides and also from the debt-traps of rural NGOs and *mahajans* [money lenders]."[27] Some experts mention certain cultural organizations, such as Udichi or Chhayanot, as the true civil society of Bangladesh. They see prospects for collaboration with these groups, especially in reversing the rightward shift in politics and society. However, these experts also recognize that deliberate state policy during the dictatorial period promoted a conservative version of cultural Islam, limiting secular civil society's ability to continuously and consistently mobilize supporters.[28]

Fractionalization

Experts identify intraparty feuds and a lack of internal democracy as two of the biggest weaknesses of leftist parties. In the 1971 struggle for an independent Bangladesh, there was a split in leftist support for the AL. Today's leftist politicians regret the lefts' inability to unite at this defining moment of national politics. In post-independence Bangladesh, debates over the appropriate form of social revolution and personality clashes among party leadership only entrenched divisions. The lack of a coherent vision about the future course of politics became even more evident with the military's 1975 intervention into politics. One leftist politician who was active at the time explained how this era further eroded the collective policy-shaping power of the leftists:

> With the military intervention in Bangladesh, the leftists practically became more marginalized. They fell into the trap of disagreement over whether to engage in a strong anti-dictatorship movement or a somewhat tepid one. . . . Pretty much all leftists in Bangladesh suffered from this hesitation/indecision from post '75 era through the entire decade of 1980s to 1990. Some of them supported Ershad while others supported Zia. Some even defected from the party to join Ershad's party. At the end of the day, the leftists came out as the most damaged ones.[29]

Leftist parties carried the legacy of factional politics into post-authoritarian Bangladesh as well. Some experts opined that party disagreements are still largely personal clashes masked as ideological rivalries. They also identified a lack of internal democracy, an inability to accommodate alternative views within the party, and an absence of strictly enforced party discipline as reasons why personal disputes become intractable, reinforcing fractures among leftist parties. However, one expert dissented and claimed that the capitalist media amplifies the division within the leftists and presents them as feeble to the voters.[30] The majority of experts claimed fractionalization has affected leftist politics in three ways: it fragmented their voter base, reduced their organizational strength in terms of both manpower and money, and diminished leftist parties' individual and collective bargaining power vis-à-vis the centrist parties in power.

What Lies Ahead?

Leftists are not oblivious to the challenges they must overcome to reassert their politics. See more from the Communist Party:

> In spite of so many attempts and successive efforts it was not yet possible to institute a structure of left unity. The influence and mass mobilization power of the majority of the left parties is weak. Besides, many of them have many defects, deviations and confusions. One part of the left is a partner of the "Mohajote"[31] and therefore they still remain a part of the government. On the other hand, some left parties are suffering from the various kinds of weaknesses like, left sectarianism, revolutionary phrase mongering, confining oneself to ivory tower theorization completely estranged from mass people. . . . Till now there is also no visible influential, progressive, large, honest and patriotic political force outside the left who could unite with the left and form a left-democratic alliance.

Yet not many experts interviewed for this project were hopeful about a leftist resurgence in the near future. Many of them observed a puritan, ritualistic version of Islam gaining prominence in the country, making a secular, leftist ideology unpopular and a reversal of support for right-wing parties unlikely.[32] One leftist leader expressed frustration over the younger generations' unwillingness to take up the mantle of leftist ideology. From his perspective, an infusion of consumerist culture in Bangladeshi society and the normalization of conservative Islamic practices have led to a situation that makes leftist ideology unappealing to this generation.[33] A few experts predicted the rise of a third force and the collapse of the two extremes on the political spectrum.[34] However, when asked if they see any leftist political party in present-day Bangladesh that might transform into that third force, they could not offer a positive answer.

Some leftist politicians and civil society members were hopeful about the creation of a new political agenda based on the changing socioeconomic needs of the people. They thought that climate change and environmental degradation in the natural disaster-prone country might be one issue on which the leftists could mobilize constituents. The protection and promotion of valuable natural resources like gas and coal could be another issue where leftists could rally support. However, even the most optimistic observers made cautious predictions about the left's ability to lead. One leftist leader's advice to fellow leftists was, "Organization! Organization! Organization!"[35] He identified being active and visible in politics and participating in elections as the most pressing obligations for leftists. Leftist publications analyzed for this project also reveal this realization among the parties, where they emphasize ideological solidarity and organizational strength to stay relevant in Bangladesh.[36]

However, almost all experts recognized that for leftists to do their job, procedural democracy through free and fair elections must be established in Bangladesh—the opposition should be allowed to operate freely. To quote one left-leaning expert, "We have failed to create a viable alternative force, something that we want. We do not have the kind of force that you need for the minimum level of democracy, secularism, and egalitarianism. You need social democracy, which is absent here."[37]

The Maldives' Tug of War Over India and National Security

Rasheeda M. Didi

Like many island nations in Asia, the Maldives is busy grappling with the best way to advance its economic and national security interests in a region where geopolitical tensions between larger Asia-Pacific nations like China, India, and the United States continue to rise.

Unsurprisingly, views among the country's political leaders on the best course of action differ. The political debate playing out in the capital of Malé offers a vantage point on the tradeoffs and constraints that policymakers in the Maldives and other similar countries must account for as they strive to protect their national sovereignty.

The Maldives' current government led by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has unapologetically oriented the country's foreign policy toward India as a provider of economic benefits and security. Meanwhile, the country's political opposition under former president Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom has urged the president to reconsider the closeness of the relationship ostensibly to protect the Maldives' sovereignty.

The main issue dominating this debate is India's controversial military presence in the Maldives, though other ad hoc issues have arisen too. While the current government has actively sought to strengthen such ties with India, Yameen and the main opposition force have pressed the government to weaken such ties or even end India's military presence altogether, as embodied by the slogan "India Out."

To amplify the India Out campaign's reach, the opposition has expanded its appeals beyond the capital to outer islands. The expansion of the campaign and the opposition's heated rhetoric could create a serious rupture in the Maldives-India partnership with potentially significant consequences for both sides.

The Maldives-India Relationship

The strength of the Maldives-India diplomatic relationship has ebbed and flowed based on the ruling party or coalition in power in Malé. For years now, India has been the dominant regional power by virtue of its being the most powerful in the subregion and, more recently, by its Neighborhood First policy. A high priority of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, this core component of India's foreign policy, which focuses on peaceful relations and collaborative, synergetic co-development with its neighbors, encompasses a diverse range of topics, such as economics, connectivity, technology, research, and education, among others. In response, the Maldives adopted an India First policy, prioritizing its relationship with its larger, more powerful neighbor. As recently as August 2022, Solih reaffirmed the Maldives' India First policy, with both countries reassuring each other that they continue to remain mindful of the other's security concerns. He reasserted that India has always been a "reliable ally to the Maldives, through thick and thin."

This reality persists despite the foothold that China managed to gain in the Maldives' political scene from 2013 to 2018, when Beijing and Malé struck deals for large infrastructure projects on the islands and inked a free trade agreement. During this period, the Progressive Party of Maldives and its ruling coalition under Yameen (now the country's opposition force) was in power. The Yameen-led main opposition force consists of a coalition of parties including the Progressive Party of Maldives and the People's National Congress.

Furthermore, the Maldives relies heavily on trilateral maritime security cooperation with India and Sri Lanka. The purpose of such collaboration is to counter common maritime security threats and challenges such as illicit trafficking; piracy; and illegal, unregulated (or unreported) fishing.[38]

The three countries cooperate to keep other countries from encroaching on their respective territory. This cooperation is a vital objective given the Maldives' dependence on the ocean's bounty for domestic food security and exports (particularly fish and related products). Hence, protecting the Maldives' exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is crucial.

In addition to these security ties, the Maldives has been connected to India in cultural, ethnic, and economic terms for centuries. According to anthropologists and other writers, some Maldivians hail from southern India. The origins of Dhivehi (the Maldivian language) harken back to Sanskrit and Pali, which are also the roots of many southern Indian languages. Moreover, Maldivians have long traded with India, listened to Hindi music, and studied in India.

More recently, residents of the Maldives have begun to depend heavily on India for healthcare including a much-appreciated initial supply of 100,000 Covishield vaccines shipped from India in January 2021, near the peak of the pandemic. Furthermore, India has become the main destination for other kinds of medical treatment as well, and the main government-affiliated hospital in the Maldives, the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital in the

capital, was built with aid from the Indian government. The bilateral relationship has also expanded to the tourism sector. In 2020, India surpassed China and Europe as the leading source of tourists to the Maldives, a crucial development since tourism is the largest sector of the Maldives' economy and accounts for more than one-quarter of its gross domestic product.

India and the Maldives have also signed a flurry of bilateral agreements in recent years, including $500 million in grants and financing to support maritime connectivity, an $800-million line of credit from the Export-Import Bank of India, and an agreement on exchanging information on the movement of commercial maritime vessels. The relationship especially reached new heights after Solih completed his third visit to India in August 2022.

The Opposition's Fears and Suspicions

The opposition has addressed India's relationship with the Maldives with a range of emotions. Sometimes, its rhetoric is infused with a reflexive nationalistic fervor against the Indian military's presence in the country. On other occasions, its messaging betrays a highly inflated and adrenaline-filled pessimism that reaches almost paranoid proportions. For instance, critics have referred to the Indian military's presence as "crimes of this government" that might reduce the Maldives to being "a slave of India" and "losing its independence and sovereignty."

Regardless of the opposition's rhetorical approach, its preoccupation with India is driven by suspicion in several domains. For instance, the opposition believes that there has been too little transparency on the terms of the agreements that the Maldives has signed with India. To address this lacuna, it has asked the Parliamentary Committee on National Security Services to disclose the terms of these pacts.

Another target of the opposition's skepticism is the Maldives' recently completed new police academy. The project was developed with the Indian government's assistance and houses the National College of Policing and Law Enforcement. The opposition's mistrust stems from the sheer size of the building and surrounding complex. One rumor making the rounds implies that the only reason the academy is so large is to house Indians associated with the academy and their families, supposedly rendering it an opportune place to bring more Indians into the country. This conjecture, however, is unfounded.

A third point of contention is Uthuru Thila Falhu, an island that was selected for the development of a dockyard facility and a harbor for the coast guard of the Maldives National Defence Force according to the defense action plan between India and the Maldives. Again, the country's political opposition is concerned that the presence of Indian technicians and advisers on the island will erode the island nation's sovereignty.

The opposition has not been content to merely criticize the government; it has also lobbied India directly. In February 2021, a high-level opposition delegation met with the visiting Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar to request his government's support in maintaining political stability in the Maldives. This manner of outreach by the opposition has sometimes backfired with the Maldivian public. For instance, its meeting with Jaishankar sent confusing signals to ordinary citizens as it appeared to contradict the opposition's hardline stance on India's role in the country. As a result, one analyst described this session as a "game of politics" in which the opposition lodged anti-India "accusations in public" while cordially "mingling" with Indian officials "behind closed doors."

On the one hand, the opposition's focus on India seems sensible if it wishes to draw the government's attention to the long-term damage it believes India's increasing military presence could bring about for the country. Democracy in the Maldives is only fourteen years old as it began with the Constitution of 2008 and the establishment of the multiparty system of government which ended the thirty-year old dictatorship of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Hence, the experience of democracy can be considered as a blink of the eye when compared to the seventy-five years of democratic experience neighboring India has enjoyed. In large measure, the opposition's fixation on India is premised on the belief that, due either to naivete or inexperience, Maldivian politicians might unknowingly be drawn into a trap.

On the other hand, if the India Out campaign rankles the Indian government, the ones who will suffer are the ordinary Maldivian citizens who rely on India for medical treatment, visas, and economic support. This concern is not idle speculation; the souring of bilateral relations in earlier periods (from 2013 to 2018) during the previous administration had an impact on ordinary citizens. More importantly, if bilateral relations take a dip, who will replace India as the Maldives' main backer?

On balance, the opposition appears to have concluded that the benefits of the India Out campaign outweigh the costs; it continues to campaign for the removal of India's military from the country. India's military presence includes reconnaissance aircraft, military helicopters, and personnel, and it is also believed to include officers of the Research and Analysis Wing, India's external intelligence agency. The opposition argues that this buildup poses a long-term risk to Maldivian sovereignty.

The Maldivian Government's Response

The incumbent government's response to these critiques has, at times, fueled the anti-India campaign rather than tamed it. For instance, the parliamentary group of the governing coalition, led by the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), submitted a bill to the parliament to ban the "India Out" campaign in February 2022, sparking outrage among the opposition. Government critics called it an "unconstitutional" move tantamount to "suspending" citizens' ability to convey their discontent, though these critics painted the policy with highly exaggerated expressions like "the illegal stationing of Indian military forces." It emphasized

the gravity of the government's actions by stating that the attempted ban "marks a dark day in the history of the Maldives as for the first time a sitting president has actively elected to abandon his own people and protect the interests of a foreign military." It is worth noting that these expressions by the opposition are more for drama and popular appeal. As for the government, although the anti-India campaign created anxiety, state policy or tactics have not changed because the country's incumbent leaders continue to work closely with India. The India First policy remains intact.

In general, the Maldivian government's modus operandi in responding to the India Out campaign has been to emphasize the vital importance of its relationship with India and the assistance New Delhi has consistently offered the country. Particularly fresh in the Maldives' popular memory is India's aid during the worst of the coronavirus pandemic, when it donated doses of the Covishield vaccine to the islands soon after its rollout in India. The Maldivian government has also reiterated its gratitude to India for allowing Maldivians to travel to India for medical purposes during the pandemic when others were denied entry.

The government of the Maldives has underscored other forms of aid too. It has reminded the public of the assistance India provided in response to earlier crises, like fending off a coup attempt by mercenaries in November 1988, helping with recovery efforts after the major tsunami that struck the Maldives (and many other countries of South and Southeast Asia) in December 2004, and helping address more recent shortages of drinking water. The government maintains that these examples are proof of considerable Indian generosity and good-will. In addition, the Maldivian government has also highlighted India's role in promoting broader Indian Ocean security especially on the thorny issues of illicit drug trafficking, illegal fishing, transnational organized crime, and terrorism. Each of these issues is important to the Maldives and its security.

Beyond rhetoric, the Maldivian government has also doubled down on its pro-India policies. Despite the opposition's campaigning, Solih has stuck to his government's India First policy and has been unapologetic about close ties between the two countries. When India's Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Radhakrishnan Hari Kumar visited the Maldives in April 2022, Solih noted that "defense cooperation is an integral aspect of the Maldives-India relationship," and that "military cooperation between the two countries had increased over the past three years." Reminding Solih of the countries' numerous joint exercises, maritime safety drills, and patrols in the Maldives' EEZ, Kumar reportedly reaffirmed India's continued commitment to the relationship.

The Maldivian government also asserts that the roughly seventy-five Indian military personnel stationed in the Maldives, despite adamant criticism from the opposition, are needed to operate two helicopters and a Dornier fixed-wing aircraft furnished by India. These helicopters are used for humanitarian purposes such as carrying patients from remote islands to regional healthcare centers or the capital's hospital and conducting search and rescue operations. Furthermore, the government has emphasized that the India-provided

military hardware is never used for combat or security purposes. In the absence of Maldivian technical staff to operate the aircraft, the incumbent government has explained, the Indian military needs to have boots on the ground.

Finally, on the contentious issue of Uthuru Thila Falhu, the Maldivian government has clarified that it is simply implementing elements of the defense action plan signed by the previous government in 2016. The minister of defense has also reminded the opposition that it has modified certain clauses to make the Maldivian government the sole administrator of the island with India's support.

India's Concerns

No doubt, the India Out campaign has generated substantial concerns for India, the gravest of which is the possibility of violence and harassment against Indian nationals in the Maldives. The opposition in Malé has categorically denied accusations of harassment targeting Indian nationals (such as teachers and doctors) in the country's outer islands, accusing the incumbent Maldivian government of simply "finding excuses" to bring in more Indians.

Officially, India has expressed concerns about disrespectful public displays of its national flag with "India Out" scribbled on it. However, New Delhi has thus far exercised considerable restrain in its reactions, not wanting to jeopardize its broader strategic aims.

Conclusion

The Maldivian government's principal concern with the opposition's India Out mantra is the possible disruption of the country's wide-ranging relationship with New Delhi. On a practical level, the government worries that just one stray incident of violence against an Indian could halt all medical assistance, food aid, and other bilateral support. It stands to reason that the government is doing whatever it can to counter the campaign.

Thus, the opposition and the government are locked in a battle over India's involvement in the Maldives, with both sides justifying their position on national security grounds. On the one hand, the opposition strongly feels that the Indian military presence in the Maldives is a threat to the country's national security and sovereignty. On the other hand, the government repeatedly has asserted that the India Out campaign itself is a threat to the country's national security as it serves to antagonize the partner country that provides regional security benefits to the island nation.

Both sides have used the legislative process to further their aims. The incumbent government's proposed bill to stifle the India Out campaign is a case in point. The opposition noted that this move was unveiled without the least bit of irony: the MDP prides itself on advocating free expression, but its bill would do precisely the opposite. In critiquing the government,

the opposition submitted a letter to the parliament in April 2022,[39] which accused the government and other public entities like the police of narrowing the terms of Article 27 of the 2008 Constitution of the Maldives, which guarantees the right to free expression. The government tried to justify its legislative gambit by saying that its goal was to address the incitement of violence and xenophobia. Eventually, under heavy fire, it shelved the bill.

Contrary to the worst fears about anti-Indian violence, only a handful of minor incidents of harassment against Indians have been reported in the Maldivian press. The opposition has downplayed these reports by calling them "total rubbish" and has emphasized that the goal of the India Out campaign is to compel the Indian military, not Indian civilians, to leave the Maldives.

But the average member of the public may not necessarily understand the nuances of the opposition's position. In other words, once fierce anti-Indian rhetoric is out there, it can be difficult to predict how disgruntled citizens will act.

Regardless of which party is in power, the Maldives' official India First policy is unlikely to change. After all, Yameen—despite being the face of the opposition's India Out campaign—made clear at the signing of the defense action plan with India in April 2016 that New Delhi factors prominently in his estimations of the Maldives' diplomatic posture as well. To mark the occasion, Gayoom reiterated that the Maldives' security is linked to India.

At present, the opposition's singular fixation on India's security presence has not attracted significant blowback. But if things escalate to an unmanageable level, punctuated by an outbreak of violence against Indians, the opposition—not to mention the government and the ordinary citizens of the Maldives could pay a high price.

About the Authors

Asim Ali is a political researcher and columnist based in Delhi.

Rasheeda M. Didi is an independent researcher and lecturer in political science and international relations as well as twentieth century Maldivian history. She has worked for the United Nations Peacekeeping mission in Liberia and the Commonwealth Joint Office for Permanent Missions to the UN, in New York.

Asma Faiz is Assistant Professor of Political Science in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), Pakistan. Her book *In Search of Lost Glory: Sindhi Nationalism in Pakistan* (2021) was published by Hurst Publishers and Oxford University Press, New York.

Bhavani Fonseka is a senior researcher and lawyer with the Centre for Policy Alternatives based in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Yasser Kureshi is a departmental lecturer in South Asian Studies with the Contemporary South Asian Studies Programme in the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies at the University of Oxford. He is the author of *Seeking Supremacy: The Pursuit of Judicial Power in Pakistan* (2022), published by Cambridge University Press.

Amish Raj Mulmi is the author of *All Roads Lead North: China, Nepal, and the Contest for the Himalayas* (Oxford University Press, 2022). He is also a contributor to *Where the Gods Dwell: Thirteen Temples and Their (Hi)stories* (Westland India, 2021), *The Himalayan Arc: Journeys East of South-East* (HarperCollins India, 2018), and *Best Asian Speculative Fiction* (Kitaab, 2018).

Ali Riaz is a distinguished professor in the Department of Politics and Government at Illinois State University and a nonresident senior fellow of the Atlantic Council. His research interests are democratization, violent extremism, political Islam, South Asian politics, and Bangladeshi politics.

Tahmina Rahman is a visiting assistant professor of political science at Rollins College in Florida.

Abdul Sayed is a researcher on jihadism and a specialist on the politics and security of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Sayed has a master's degree in political science from Lund University in Sweden. He is currently working on projects related to violent extremist organizations and transnational jihadism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. His Twitter handle is @abdsayedd.

Zoha Waseem researches policing, security, and violence in urban Pakistan. She is an assistant professor at the University of Warwick. She is the author of *Insecure Guardians: Enforcement, Encounters, and Everyday Policing in Postcolonial Karachi* (2022), published by Hurst & Co. Her Twitter handle is @ZohaWaseem.

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The genesis of this project dates to a conversation the two of us had in July 2021 about the state of the opposition in South Asia. During that conversation, it struck us that we knew far more about powerful regime incumbents across the region than the varied dynamics of opposition actors, most of whom were treated as afterthoughts by the scholarly literature and most media analyses.

Apart from the introductory essay, the chapters in this compilation were first published as essays on the website of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace between November 2021 and December 2022. Reflecting on this yearlong initiative, we thought it would be a good idea to publish all the pieces in one place, along with an introductory essay highlighting the key themes connecting these contributions.

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Our hope is that this compilation will not only expand our knowledge on political dynamics in South Asia but that it will also contribute to the richness of the discourse by highlighting diverse, important voices from the region.

Paul Staniland and Milan Vaishnav
January 2023

Notes

1   Unless otherwise stated, the numbers in this piece come from the raw data set of the author's Centre for Governance Studies research project. See Centre for Governance Studies, "DSA Tracker," 2020, https://freedominfo.net.

2   This information is based on the author's research in connection with the research project for the Centre for Governance Studies. See Centre for Governance Studies, "DSA Tracker."

3   For more information on secularism in Nepal, also see Chiara Letizia, "Secularism and Statebuilding in Nepal," in *Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: The Nepal Peace Process*, ed. Deepak Thapa and Alexander Ramsbotham, *Accord*, no. 26 (2017): 109–112, https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/SecularismAndStatebuildingInNepal.pdf.

4   The BNA white paper was published in Nepali. All the translations were provided by the author of this article.

5   Author interview with BNA representatives, Patan, Nepal, November 9, 2021.

6   Asma Faiz, *In Search of Lost Glory: Nationalism in Pakistan* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2021), 40–62.

7   Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma, «The Rise of the Second Dominant Party System in India: BJP's New Social Coalition in 2019,» *Studies in Indian Politics* 7, no. 2 (2019): 131–148.

8   A. Ziegfeld, "A New Dominant Party in India? Putting the 2019 BJP Victory Into Comparative and Historical Perspective," *India Review* 19, no. 2 (2020): 136–152.

9   A. Farooqui and E. Sridharan, "Can Umbrella Parties Survive? The Decline of the Indian National Congress," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 54, no. 3 (2016): 331–361.

10   R. Johns and A. K. Kölln, "Moderation and Competence: How a Party›s Ideological Position Shapes Its Valence Reputation," *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 3 (2020): 649–663.

11   Interview conducted at the expert's office in Dhaka on February 20, 2020.

12   The publications of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), the Worker's Party of Bangladesh (WPB), Jatiya Samajtantrik Dol (JASAD), and Gana Samhati were used for this purpose. These four parties were chosen based on their electoral strength, popular recognition, and alliance history. The analysis was completed between February 2020 and May 2022.

13   Interview conducted at the expert's residence in Dhaka on February 22, 2020. Article 38, paragraph 2 of the first Bangladeshi Constitution, enacted in 1972, stated that "no person shall have the right to form or be a member or otherwise take part in the activities of, any communal or other association or union, which in the name or on the basis of any religion has for its object, or pursues a political purpose."

14   Interview conducted at the expert's office in Dhaka on February 21, 2020.

15   Ibid.

16 JASAD's political proposal, adopted in 2018, p. 6.

17 Interview conducted at the professor's residence on February 19, 2020.

18 Interview conducted over phone on May 18, 2022.

19 Interview with a professor of political science at University of Dhaka on February 20, 2020.

20 Interview conducted at the expert's residence in Dhaka on February 21, 2020.

21 Focus group discussion conducted at the University of Dhaka on February 19, 2020. The author did not come across any posters with that phrase published by any leftist political party during her research.

22 Ibid.

23 Myrto Tsakatika and Costas Eleftheriou, "The Radical Left's Turn Towards Civil Society in Greece: One Strategy, Two Paths," *South European Society and Politics* 18, no. 1 (2013): 81–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2012.757455.

24 Md. Abu Taher, "Politicization of Trade Unions: Issues and Challenges in Bangladesh Perspective," *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* 34, no. 4 (1999): 403–420.

25 Interview conducted over phone on May 18, 2022.

26 Ibid.

27 Outline for Gana Samhati Andolan, p. 6.

28 See Kazi Shahdat Kabir, "Islam as a Symbol of Ligitimization: The Islamization Project of President General Ershad in Bangladesh," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (April 16, 1982); and Muhammad A. Hakim, "The Use of Islam as a Political Legitimization Tool: The Bangladesh Experience, 1972–1990," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 6, no. 2 (December 1998): 98–117.

29 Interview conducted at the expert's office in Dhaka on February 21, 2020.

30 Interview conducted with the expert over phone on May 18, 2022.

31 Mohajote, or "grand alliance," is the name of the AL-led coalition that won the parliamentary election in 2008 and formed a government in 2009.

32 Interview conducted at the expert's residence in Dhaka, Bangladesh on February 22, 2020.

33 Interview conducted at the expert's office in Dhaka, Bangladesh on February 21, 2020.

34 Interviews conducted in different locations in Dhaka, Bangladesh in February 2020.

35 Interview conducted at the expert's office in Dhaka, Bangladesh on February 21, 2020.

36 Including JASAD's election manifesto from 2018 and CPB's political proposal adopted at the eleventh party congress in 2016.

37 Interview conducted at the expert's residence in Dhaka, Bangladesh on February 19, 2020.

38 Minutes of the National Security Committee of the People's Majlis (17 February 2022) , published in Dhivehi (Maldivian language) and translated to English by the author.

39 Emergency Submission by Maduvvari Consitituency member Adam Shareef. No. 1631. 25 April 2022. Translated from Dhivehi (Maldivian Language) to English by the author.

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