THE SIGNIFICANCE OF UNRULY POLITICS IN BANGLADESH

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Introduction: why political rule-breaking matters

Calls for good governance in Bangladesh invariably remind me of my young cousin’s views on rules: in general, he feels they are important – crucial, even; yet he does not see why they should apply to him. His views on rules were articulated in the context of some trouble with campus authorities, yet they nicely expressed salient features of Bangladeshi popular political culture: faith in the value of laws and formal rules is coupled, apparently without irony, with a strong sense of exceptionalism and routinised rule-breaking by political actors. Thus the desire for order in a fractious setting competes with - and is often over-ridden by - powerful political interests that cannot be articulated or contained within existing rules.

That rule-breaking is characteristic of elite politics is well-known and has been convincingly interpreted within a political economy framework, most notably by Mushtaq Khan; it has also been the recent subject of institutional analyses by the Centre for Policy Dialogue and the Institute of Governance Studies’ State of Governance series, and been explored in donor-commissioned country governance assessments and similar analytical exercises. With Khan’s idea of competitive clientelism to guide our thinking, we now have a strong understanding of the sources of the fragility of the Bangladeshi elite settlement.¹

With the gaze of political economy and institutional analyses fixed firmly on the politics of the patron, far less attention has been paid to the politics of those whose position is mainly that of client. In fact, we know less about the contemporary ‘politics of the governed’ than of the immediate post-Independence period, because the village study tradition of class and

¹ In particular, (Khan 2010a; Khan 2010b) On the State of Governance Series, see (Institute of Governance Studies 2006; Institute of Governance Studies 2008).
power analysis that enriched 1970s and 1980s political sociology appears to have now more or less disappeared; the few and limited analyses of popular politics available suggest, however, that clients are not total prisoners.  

This paper looks at both elite and mass modes of politics. Unruliness – framed variously as informality, fragility etc – is the substantive governance issue in Bangladesh, and political unruliness is at its nucleus. That rule-breaking powers political action in Bangladesh has been recently reaffirmed by the unprecedentedly large cross-class Shahbag movement protesting the war trials verdicts in 2013, and the violent response it provoked by the Jamaat-e-Islami. Both the movement and the response are examples of rule-breaking to protest rule-breaking and in order to establish the legitimacy or authority of a different rule. This chapter attempts to explain why Bangladeshi political culture is so dependent on rule-breaking for its power, and implicitly, to reflect on what that means for the ‘good governance’ agenda associated with rule-bound transparent administration.

The chapter does not address all the possible angles. It approaches these issues mainly out of an interest in popular political culture, and is partly an exercise in conceptual ground-clearing in preparation for comparative empirical research on unruly politics in Bangladesh. ‘Unruly politics’ are a distinctive form of popular contemporary political action, which with colleagues at the Institute of Development Studies, I have been thinking about since the global wave of protests and mass movements started in 2008. The core proposition is that recent instances of unruly political action derive their power precisely from their collective

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2 The ‘politics of the governed’ is the Partha Chatterjee’s expression (Chatterjee 2004) There have been a few recent efforts to revive or revisit village studies in Bangladesh: (Lewis and Hossain 2008; Siddiqui 2000; Westergaard and Hossain 2005) Other recent efforts to explore the politics of the masses include (Ali and Hossain 2005; Kabeer and Kabir 2009; Ruud 2011). The ‘prisoner’ metaphor refers to (Geof Wood 2000) The idea that Bangladeshis, and in particular poor and powerless people, are ‘prisoners’ within a system with deep structural roots in patron-client organisational forms has probably been the most influential overall framing of the governance challenge in the 2000s.

3 This is an ongoing situation at the time of writing, and any summary of Shahbag and its aftermath would be instantly out of date. It is such a heatedly political debate that it is hard to find any detached or objective analysis, in the absence of which, see the Economist’s view: http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21571941-huge-protest-capital-against-islamist-party-and-its-leaders-mass-dissatisfaction; and my own blog: http://participationpower.wordpress.com/2013/02/18/bangladesh-is-revolting-again/ (both accessed March 12th 2013). For the debates from among progressive young intellectuals, see blogspot http://alalodulal.org/. For news coverage, see http://bdnews24.com/.

4 See (Centre for the Future State 2010).
rule-breaking and what it means for the workings of power. This is because under particular ‘states of exception’, often threats to the moral economy, otherwise unorganised and relatively powerless people (political society) can find the power within themselves to draw attention to and legitimate their claims by collectively breaking the rules of politics that generally favour the powerful. Many such acts are ignored or repressed. But acts of defiance can momentarily fracture the surface of power relations, creating possibilities of change that were otherwise absent. Many such acts also elicit responses: some course correction for a policy deemed to have gone off the rails; a temporary or partial victory in line with the unruly demands; or transformed rules of engagement with path-changing effects. The paper tests these ideas in the fertile Bangladesh context, taking first a look at the issue of hartal, and second at the garments workers’ revolt, 2006-11.

The chapter is organized as follows. The next section sets out some of the motivations for the paper, sketching the main debates about governance in Bangladesh with which the paper seeks to engage. The third section sets out in more detail what is meant by ‘unruly politics’. Section 4 applies these to the issue of hartal, taking a preliminary look at how it has changed over time and at its position within political culture. Section 5 applies the analysis to the ready garments (RMG) workers’ protests, which started in 2006 and continue episodically to the present. The concluding section draws together some thoughts about the contribution of an ‘unruly politics’ frame, and what it means for the analysis of politics and governance in Bangladesh.

**Motivations**

Any analysis of politics and governance in Bangladesh necessarily speaks to the dominant ‘good governance’ debates. This chapter was written in the ‘upside down’ spirit of looking not at the distance between actual conditions and ideal governance norms of transparency, Weberian bureaucracy and predictable, rule-bound behaviour, but instead with a relatively open gaze at how actual conditions govern. Here we briefly review the dominant debates

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5 See (Centre for the Future State 2010)
about politics and governance in Bangladesh to show the gaps a stronger understanding of political rule-breaking might fill.

**The unruly political settlement in Bangladesh**

A motivation for analyzing political rule-breaking is that it may shed light on the conditions of governance more generally, a determining feature of which, it is agreed, is the unruliness or tendency to rupture of the main elite political settlement. The political elites cannot agree to the rules by which political power is shared and distributed, chiefly because the stakes are so high in a winner-takes-all system.

From this core instability stem various manifestations of weak political governance which have marked the period since 1991: the uncertainty of political transitions, the inability of incumbent parties to stage credible electoral processes, comparatively high levels of political violence, the routine use of hartal (strike) as a key component of political competition, the abuse of official powers to punish political opponents - all arise out of a failure by political parties to develop self-enforcing arrangements to police their own behaviour in relation to electoral competition. This failure to make useable rules for elections and political transitions is institutionalised in the caretaker government system, an institution designed precisely to obviate the need for political parties to agree on the rules of democratic transition. It thus ensures that the parties do not develop habits of playing fair, and so never develop the necessary internal institutions. And as the military-backed takeover in 2006 showed, there was no guarantee that the rules of the caretaker administration would be adhered to, either. This failure to self-regulate is an institutional failure of the party system; the pressures for victory within a ‘winner-take-all’ system further fracture the watchdog and administrative institutions (the election commission, the upper courts, the civil service) along clientelist-partisan lines.

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6 For a selection of governance assessments that cover this territory, see (Duncan 2010)(which is a meta-assessment, as it synthesises a range of recent governance assessments); also (Institute of Governance Studies 2006; Institute of Governance Studies 2008; H. Z. Rahman 2009).

7 The point that the caretaker government institution has meant a failure by parties to develop self-enforcing rules of the game is from Mirza Hassan.
These and other defining characteristics of the Bangladesh political economy arise, we know, from the deeper structures of patron-clientelism. Wood’s earlier characterisation of Bangladeshi political economy as a ‘total institution’ illustrated the vital interests of ‘prisoners’ in retaining their client status in the short term, which he elaborated further as a ‘Faustian bargain’ (Geof Wood 2003). This is linked in turn to the permeability between formal and informal institutions, and that in turn again to the limited legitimacy and authority of formal institutions (Geof Wood 2000).

For Khan, the political economy of Bangladesh as a whole can be seen as driven by the interaction of broad-based clientelist political factions amidst changing economic opportunities and contexts. Bangladesh’s particular brand of ‘competitive clientelism’ features short time horizons and an enduring intensity of political antagonism that mitigate against more developmental trade-offs between growth and stability and smooth political transitions:

Compared to the other variants of a clientelist political settlement, the competitive clientelism variant has ... the most adverse growth-stability trade-off. This is both because the permanent presence of significant excluded factions that are always building up their oppositional strength serves to reduce the time horizons of incumbents and focuses their minds on making quick money to fight the next election. In addition, the competitive context increases the power of lower-level factions within the ruling coalition and makes policy implementation difficult and the enforcement of formal institutions relatively poor. And yet, given a large number of powerful primary factions, this may be the only viable type of political settlement in countries like Bangladesh (Khan 2010a: 79).

Khan shows how and why the settlement fell apart to bring about the extended interim caretaker regime of 2007-2009, and why attempts to make political parties operate in more rule-bound ‘good governance’ mode fail (Khan 2010b; Khan 2010a). Competitive clientelism is resilient and protean in this context; many powerful interests are not aligned behind good governance-type reforms. In Wood’s application of North et al’s idea of limited access orders
to Bangladesh, the games played by political elites successively widen the circle of interested groups to include state and other powerful groups, but not other non-elite groups. The ‘doorstep conditions’ needed to move Bangladesh to a more open access society and polity are not yet in evidence (Wood, this volume).

Less powerful groups may remain prisoners of the system, but there are signs that clientelist forms no longer exhaust the possibilities of mass political culture and/or mobilization. An example of this is the more clearly class-based mobilisation by garments workers since 2006 which we will look at below. But while we have a good understanding of the logics of elites within this system, our focus on the base of the patron-client pyramid is more fuzzy. What, politically speaking, does it mean to be a client in this system? How does competitive clientelism shape capacities to organise around interests that go against those of their patrons? From Khan, we know that the political settlement does not only generate resources and power for the elites, but has pay-offs and interactions throughout the lower tiers of the system. The base of the pyramid remains strong mainly to the extent that a critical mass of poorer and less powerful groups are individually incorporated and rewarded within this capillary model of resource distribution.

My own earlier work gave evidence of an elite settlement on the basic economic rules in the late 1990s: a minimum consensus on the need for broad-based export-oriented growth to reduce poverty, alongside investment in basic education and health, space for non-governmental organization or NGO action and improvements in women’s status, and support, strongest among local elites, for social safety nets for the poorest (Naomi Hossain 2005). The substance of the elite agreement will have changed with the change in the composition of the Bangladeshi elite over the past two or three decades: it is now a strikingly more private than public sector elite, compared in the 1980s. And even in the 1990s this was no redistributive or developmentalist agenda but the minimum necessary to sustain the social peace and a modest pace of growth. Yet economic change shifts interests and organisational power, as the Khan framework set out. The elite settlement on the minimal social contract may or may not have changed, but the aspirations and expectations of the people are likely to have done. The period since 2006 has seen fast economic change, growth but also more volatility, with some
signs of new forms of political organisation among less powerful groups that do not fit the clientelist logic. The signs of this are emerging, but as yet we do not know how to read them.

**Understanding ‘the power within’**

A second motivation for investigating unruly politics is that one reason we mis-read or miss the politics of ‘the escapee’ is the limited nature of research into political culture in Bangladesh. This means a profound deafness to the alternative logics and interests that are emerging and being articulated in what could be termed emergent ideological perspectives of proto-escapees. This gap is being filled. Recent comparative research by Simeen Mahmud, Lopita Huq, Naila Kabeer and others have made important contributions to understandings of popular political agency, and the role of NGOs and social mobilization within that. Maheen Sultan and Sohela Nazneen have been working on the women’s movement and women’s political engagement more broadly. Work on wellbeing in Bangladesh as part of the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) programme also contributes a sense of what is important in political culture. Together these give a far stronger sense of the agency of less powerful groups, and help us to think more clearly about how ‘the power within’ may grow.8

To make the connections between elite and mass politics more meaningful we need concepts that will connect this growing knowledge of the politics of the governed with the more clearly defined elite political settlement. Fortunately, political sociology provides us with an entire battery of concepts that have to date been underused in Bangladesh. Political analysis for Bangladesh needs to shift its focus from agency and structure to state-society interaction, to ask questions like how do less powerful groups see the state (Corbridge et al. 2005)? Does the growth of governmentality create new spaces for marginal groups to engage (Chatterjee 2004)? When do interests align behind broad-based developmental goals, and what might coalitions of interest look like (Houtzager 2003)? Who contends in the spaces that exist, with what repertoires and to what effect (C. Tilly 2008a; Tarrow 2011)?

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8 For publications on Bangladesh from the Development Research Centre (DRC) on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability, see [http://www.drc-citizenship.org/search?country_ids=841464564](http://www.drc-citizenship.org/search?country_ids=841464564) (accessed March 12 2013). Relevant research from the Bangladesh section of the Pathways of Women’s Empowerment Research Programme Consortium includes (Nazneen 2009; Nazneen and Sultan 2010; Nazneen and Sultan 2009). On the WeD research, see in particular the Shammo case study in (Devine, Camfield, and Gough 2008), and (GD Wood 2007).
**Mundane and magical power**

Political rule-breaking may also play a role in course correction, enabling less powerful groups to hold more powerful to a rough kind of account. Overall, we know there needs to be a reasonably functional alignment of interests to power for the kind of equilibrium and minimal order implied by a notion of ‘settlement’:

The achievement of a social order or political settlement requires in turn formal and informal institutions (such as property rights or informal rules of redistribution) that create benefits in line with the relative power of powerful groups.

... [A] political settlement implies an institutional structure that creates benefits for different classes and groups in line with their relative power. The commonsensical understanding of a political settlement as a stable agreement between elites (or a social order) is therefore only likely to be viable if it is underpinned at a deeper level by a viable combination of institutions and a distribution of power between organizationally powerful groups in that society (Khan 2010a, 20).

This is, as Khan points out, a broader point about the bases of political authority: if not at the point of a gun or jackboot, societies need to consent to rule; for that to happen the political and economic structures need to be able to reproduce themselves (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Moore 1978). A distinctive feature of Bangladeshi political culture is that political authority is not only in the modern democratic period but also historically mundane and material, lacking the symbolic cultural power of traditional or religious authority (Price 1989). This is a distinctive feature of the clientelist settlement in Bangladesh (Khan 2010b; Ali and Hossain 2005; Ruud 2011; Hossain 2005). As the anthropologist B.K. Jahangir bluntly explains ‘[i]n the rural areas of Bangladesh the perception of a good government depends on: whether a government is able/unable to feed its people in times of crisis’ (Jahangir 1995, pp. 93). Popular understanding of paternalist responsibilities of political leaders is the basis for all hierarchical relationships, based on high cultural value assigned to virtues of indulgence and benevolence (Greenough 1982; Greenough 1983). The
legitimacy and authority of those in positions of power derives from how they behave more than who they are, and because power and legitimacy are based not on inherited status or massive wealth but on demonstrating this intention and ability, this needs frequent confirmation.

At the base level of delivery of minimal basic necessities, the state acts as the patron across factional divisions (Davis and McGregor 2000; McGregor 1989). This is an imperative – an agreement to provide a base standard of protection to the poor - that has broadly united national and local elites in Bangladesh (Hossain 2005). To some extent, then, a basic level of material security has been the part of the political settlement in Bangladesh that connects the powerful to the poor and powerless.

**The Bangladesh paradox**

Khan reminds us of the central importance of changing economic structures and opportunities in political analysis (Khan 2010b; Khan 2010a). We know that in Bangladesh the past half decade has been a period of both strong growth and surprisingly strong progress on income poverty reduction (BBS 2011). It is not clear that the pace of social and human development progress of the previous decade has been sustained, but there have been promising gains in equity and the more stubborn social problems like maternal health. For all the concerns about its governance failings, the pathways of development in Bangladesh are clearly yielding impressive, measurable gains for poor people and women.

This is all the more remarkable because this has also been a period of considerable global economic volatility: this was moderate or possibly lagged compared to many countries in the region and elsewhere (CPD 2012; CPD; M. Rahman et al. 2009; M. Rahman et al. 2010; M. Rahman, Moazzem, and Hossain 2009; Rashid, Hasan, and Hossain 2012). However, standard economic indicators rarely pick up lagged effects (e.g., of nutrition on cognitive development) or those on ‘non-economic’ sectors, e.g., women’s care work (Espey, Harper,
and Jones 2010; Heltberg et al. 2012). There are good reasons to believe the period of food and fuel price volatility (2007-11 so far), the global downturn (2008-10), and cyclones in 2009 and 2010 have all had an effect on broader dimensions of wellbeing in Bangladesh (Naomi Hossain and McGregor 2011). The political and policy significance of these are generally lost, particularly to aid donors, who increasingly fixate on big numbers to tell them about people’s realities. To understand and analyse the broader social impacts of global economic volatility, wellbeing-based approaches appear to be the most promising methodologically and conceptually (White 2009; McGregor, Camfield, and Woodcock 2009; Camfield, Crivello, and Woodhead 2009).

It is in this context of important but unmeasured social costs of economic change that what my colleague Alex Shankland terms ‘unruly politics’ appears to become more important in shifting power towards the poor. As this chapter will try to show, the garments workers’ revolt is an example of why unruly politics shifts power to the powerless in a context of global economic turbulence. It shows that it is not only powerful groups who can use rule-breaking to their advantage. But to what extent and under what conditions are unruly forms of politics empowering for poor and powerless people – particularly for women – in contemporary Bangladesh? And given the importance of formal civil society in Bangladesh’s development to date, what role does it play in taking on and standing alongside such struggles? In 2006 the State of Governance report noted that:

[T]he recent explosion of ‘unruly civil society’, particularly militant Islamist organisations and spontaneous single-issue protest groups (power sector, RMG workers), strongly suggests a gap between what NGOs and CSOs have to offer, and what people appear to respond to and need (CGS 2006: 99).

The Shahbag movement is yet another instance of ‘unruly civil society’. The motivation for focusing on these issues here is that closer examination of phenomena such as popular protests and industrial riots may provide conceptual handles for some of the mysteries of Bangladesh’s development, including why Bangladesh succeeds in income poverty reduction
when its disorderly and unpredictable governance institutions appear to create barriers to this?

In examining these issues, this chapter extends some of my earlier work on the importance of ‘rude accountability’, or the idea that poor and powerless people, particularly women, rely on informal strategies to hold public officials to account, including manipulation of status and reputation and the vague threat of the angry crowd. These informal pressures work are comparatively effective in a context in which formal mechanisms of public accountability systematically fail poor powerless people (particularly women) and wholesale public sector reform is painfully slow (Hossain 2010). Just as poor and powerless people use shame and fear relatively effectively to ensure public service delivery where there is little scope for more formal accountability mechanisms, a culture of political unruliness may create more space for marginalised political groups to mobilise in a context in which formal political channels preclude this. As with the ‘rude’ mechanisms of accountability on which the poor and powerless rely, unruly politics are risky politics. But they may afford an alternative channel of effective political expression for groups whose concerns otherwise lack a sufficiently loud voice.

Some ideas about unruly politics

‘Unruly politics’ is a set of ideas about what is so distinctive and potent about the wave of protests and revolts since 2009. These have been taking place in the global public sphere of the internet and against a backdrop of seismic volatility in financial and commodity markets and associated political crises. A group of colleagues at the Institute of Development Studies came together over a shared interest in these issues, as researchers, activists or both in what Partha Chatterjee calls ‘the politics of the governed’ – the struggles of marginalised groups to secure rights and resist oppression, beyond the institutionalised public spaces of governance

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9 This section draws from discussions with my ‘unrulista’ colleagues akshay khanna, Patta Scott-Villiers, Alex Shankland, Mariz Tadros, and Joanna Wheeler. See (Shankland et al. 2011). Other related writings that use the notion include short blog pieces on the Occupy movement: http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/alex-shankland/occupylsx-unruly-politics-and-subversive-ruliness; the Arab Spring: http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BE6B5/(httpNews)/6CACEA99340950AAC125795D00581C33?OpenDocument; and other blogs http://participationpower.wordpress.com/category/unruly-politics-2/ (accessed March 13 2013). For a more detailed account of the theoretical underpinnings of the idea of unruly politics, see (Khanna 2012).
and civil society. Individually, we have had access to parts of those localised political struggles in Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Mozambique and Yemen. Our entrypoints varied from public services, recognition of cultural or sexual identity, food price spikes, freedom from violence, and the basic democratic right to choose leaders. We shared an epistemological bent towards exploring these issues from the perspectives of the relatively powerless – poor people, minority groups, women, slum-dwellers, sexual dissidents, workers and their own political ideologies and organisational strategies. For the purposes of this chapter, our discussions about these 21st century protest phenomena identified four dimensions of this wave of protests and revolts that made them distinctive: 1) timing, or historic specificity; 2) form; 3) content or ideology, and 4) agency or the actors involved. 10

**Timing/historical specificity**

The concentration of unruly political episodes and events gave rise to a question about timing: was there something distinctive about the present moment, i.e. the early 21st century, that was making this happen? The conclusion most observers seemed to have reached was that the political moment grew out of the deep structural crisis in global capitalism, specifically its fast-growing inequalities over the recent past, sharp economic shocks with uneven impacts and new waves of connection and communication between groups and across contexts, enabled by ICTs and social networks. 11

Our joint thinking was initially triggered by the wave of popular unrest during the 2008 commodity price spike. These ‘food riots’ (more properly also fuel riots) drew our immediate attention. Our initial literature review has touched on some of the main texts on contentious politics, social movements, rebellion and revolutions, authority, non-violent action, political space, citizenship and civil society, and the politics of the governed, or ‘the crowd’. These will be referred to in the following section. Not all of the group will agree with this categorization or the terminology used here; see (Khanna 2012) for a less empiricist perspective.

10 Our initial literature review covered texts on social movements, rebellion and revolutions, authority, non-violent action, political space, citizenship and civil society, and the politics of the governed, or ‘the crowd’. Not all of the group will agree with this categorization or the terminology used here; see (Khanna 2012) for a less empiricist perspective.

11 Several articles in New Left Review connect the unruly politics of the period to the particularities of the economic-political-technological-social nexus, often pointing also the reluctance of more mainstream and centre-right commentators to draw such obvious connections. See e.g., (Žižek 2010; Anderson 2011; M. Davis 2011).
attention because they were so widespread, gave the appearance of spontaneity and often seemed to succeed in sending a message that was both loud and clear, which resulted in some action by government (Berazneva and Lee 2011; Bush 2010; Arora, Swinnen, and Verpoorten 2011; Arezki and Bruckner 2011; Schneider 2008; Brinkman and Hendrix 2011). At the same time, food riots were generally framed (e.g., in the media) as the natural defensive spasms of hungry people, and not as properly political acts (Hossain 2009). The 2008 wave of food riots was followed by other public protests around the time of the 2009 global financial crash, and then by ‘austerity protests’ against the public sector cuts that followed in 2010 and 2011, particularly in Europe. The 2011 Global Peace Index, which measures ‘domestic and international conflict, safety and security in society and militarisation in 153 countries’ registered ‘overall score increases for several indicators, the largest of which were in the potential for terrorist acts and the likelihood of violent demonstrations’ (IEP 2011: 3). After a protest-filled winter of 2010-2011, UK observers started talk of a ‘new protest politics’. Time Magazine famously declared The Protestor as the Person of the Year (Figure 1).

![Figure 1 Time Magazine's Person of the Year 2011](image)

Many of the protests looked and felt qualitatively different from those in the immediate past, drawing in a new generation of protesters as well as new techniques of protest (e.g. using SMS and social networks like Twitter and Facebook), and reflecting a conscious sense of originality thanks to the power of the modern forces that have propelled its birth. These give credibility to its double wager of defiance: that what the state, the government, and the corporate media offer to the country and especially
its young as our fate is unacceptable, and that the claim which accompanies it, that there is no viable alternative, is a lie (Barnett 2011: 14-15).

It is possible that as Barnett suggests, aspects of these protests mark a new repertoire of contentious performances (C. Tilly 2008a), but it is primarily their apparent contagiousness that makes them stand out. In its synchronicity, the early 21st century wave of protests looks very like the contemporary version of the ‘structural adjustment riots’ of the 1970s and 1980s:

One effect of greater integration and synchronicity within the world economy is a greater degree of simultaneity and similarity in what might broadly be referred to as ‘class struggles’ around the processes of capital accumulation and around government measures to resolves crises in that process and to promote renewed accumulation. It becomes less surprising then that a ‘wave’ of popular protest accompanies the process of structural adjustment and government austerity measures as it takes places across the developing world (and even the developed world) during the last two decades ...

It is the crisis and process of reconstruction of global capitalism that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s that has generated the economic policies of liberalization and austerity that have themselves given rise to the upsurge of popular unrest across the developing world (Walton and Seddon 2008): 21-2.

At first, the Arab uprising seemed to be part of the family of protests relating to economic crisis and fiscal adjustment, with the price of bread explicitly raised in Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Yemen, among other countries. Later in 2011 it became clear that what the structural adjustment protests of the 1970s and 1980s were to the food, crisis and austerity protests of 2008-11, the collapse of Communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union was to the Arab Spring. These went beyond a complaint against economic policy into fundamental political upheavals, fought on the grounds of basic liberties. That there were such grounds on which to stage a revolution was clear in the Arab context. One member of our unruly politics group, Mariz Tadros, noted that two things needed to happen to enable the Arab uprising: 1) the fear barrier had to be broken, including fear of the brutal security forces, and 2) citizens had to reach a breaking point, in which the cumulative impact of injustice would make people
feel that there was nothing to lose. Another way of putting this is that people had to become conscious of ‘the power within’.

Perry Anderson took the view that ‘volcanic social pressures’ built up, to be freed by the political fissure created by the defiant self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi:

The odious cast of the regimes in place has persisted unaltered for decades, without triggering mass revolts against them. The timing of the uprisings is not to be explained by their aims. Nor can it plausibly be attributed just to novel channels of communication: the reach of Al-Jazeera, the arrival of Facebook or Twitter have facilitated but could not have founded a new spirit of insurgency. The single spark that started the prairie fire suggests the answer. Everything began with the death in despair of a pauperized vegetable vendor, in a small provincial town in the hinterland of Tunisia. Beneath the commotion now shaking the Arab world have been volcanic social pressures: polarization of incomes, rising food prices, lack of dwellings, massive unemployment of educated—and uneducated—youth, amid a demographic pyramid without parallel in the world. In few other regions is the underlying crisis of society so acute, nor the lack of any credible model of development, capable of integrating new generations, so plain ((Anderson 2011, 10)

The baguette waving and bread-helmets of protestors were unforgettable, triggering a barrage of debate about the connections between food prices and protests. *Scientific American* asked: ‘Are high food prices triggering revolution in Egypt?’ Barings economists updated a historical analysis of bread prices and revolutions to find a neat correlation between food prices and the Arab Spring. The BBC’s Paul Mason explained:

There were, undoubtedly, deeper seated causes to the Jasmine Wave than the price of a loaf of bread. But to paraphrase Berger and Spoerer's [the historians from the initial

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12 See also (Tadros 2012).

13 See (Lagi, Bertrand, and Bar-Yam 2011; Johnstone and Mazo 2011)
This view is of food riots as ‘natural’ responses to threats to basics needs, or what Thompson called a ‘spasmodic’ view of riot (Thompson 1971). Within the unruly politics group, our view was that while the economic crisis provided the conditions of the moment, political acts such as these are inadequately explained as physiological reactions to deprivation. More properly political explanations included that food and austerity riots are part of a repertoire of contentious politics with a distinct moral justification, functionally separate from more profound revolutionary protests. Food riots are familiar to the governing classes, who know their texts and frequently respond accordingly (with export bans, subsidies, price controls). For the protestors in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere, perhaps registering their defiance in this more rehearsed form meant breaking Tadros’ ‘fear factor’, even while the sense of growing hardship contributed to the sense that there was ‘nothing more to lose’. In other words, the question of timing and historical specificity was resolved, but required us to look more closely at the form and the content of the protests, as well as at who was protesting.

**When are politics ‘unruly’? Forms and frames**

There are several ways in which the forms taken by unruly politics shift our thinking about the politics of the governed. First, there are implications for thinking about civil society and citizenship, and the work of NGOs, coalitions and social movements, and other aid programming related to governance and politics. The normative preference for civil, ruly power-sharing typical of good governance programming is at odds with rude, rule-breaking protests. Might powerless people have to break the rules if they are to gain power? Given that formal invited participatory spaces often fail to empower (Cornwall and Coelho 2007), how ‘civil’ can shifts in power ever really be? In a ‘results’-focused aid industry, we need also to grapple with why unruly forms of politics so often seem to deliver ‘results’ for poor people.

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We can safely say that unruly politics evade or are at most on the periphery of what is known as ‘civil society’ in developing countries, away from formal seats at the policy table and at a more frictional outer edge. Focusing on unruly politics is part of the shift in focus from civil back to political society (Houtzager 2003; Chatterjee 2004).

A second aspect of the form of unruly politics that matters conceptually and methodologically is their interactive nature. What we have termed unruly politics are a contemporary sub-species of contentious politics, which is itself defined as the interactive making of claims that call for actions that would affect one party’s interests (for better or worse), and including the concepts of events, performance and repertoire (C. Tilly 2008a; Tarrow 2011). From the analyses of food riots in European history (J. Bohstedt 2010; Thompson 1971; L. A. Tilly 1971), it was clear that riots were potent to the extent that they claimed action by public authorities, and in doing so drew on shared or at least legitimate understandings about entitlements and responsibilities (or the ‘moral economy’). The significance of this point is that unruly politics must be situated within relationships – people do not merely erupt when denied affordable bread.

The third and most visible aspect of the forms of these politics is their disruptive quality. This is in many ways their most defining quality: that they break, dismiss or challenge laws, rules or norms of political behaviour and practice. At their most extreme they include violence and vandalism and the ever-present threat of ‘the crowd’ (Rudé 1981), elsewhere the public shaming and criticism as a classic ‘weapon of the weak’ (J. C. Scott 1992; J. C. Scott 1977; J. C. Scott 1987).

Humour appears to have made a welcome return to the political activist scene during this unruly period. Possibly the new means through which images and ‘memes’ (such as the bread-head man of Cairo) can be instantly flashed around the world or groups convened flash mob-style lend themselves to creativity in protest styles. The desire for online audiences, particularly in the western country protests, means that comedic defiance is not only increasingly theatrical but also a potent means of defying power. Khanna retells an encounter between the police and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, a group whose aim is
to ‘make clowning dangerous again’ during a UK anti-austerity protest. During an episode of ‘kettling’ (a police encircling containment technique), a senior officer approached the lead clown for ‘a serious word’. The clown reportedly responded: ‘Encyclopaedia: is that a serious word?’ Khanna interprets this as disruptive of established grammars of politics and political behaviour. In southern Europe the indignados and in the various Occupy movements, theatre, art, and spectacle were all good humouredly used to break the older molds of politics (Khanna 2012). This defiance is the kernel of a possibility of a shift in power, a potential turning point. In Domination and the Arts of Resistance, Scott writes of a moment of ‘charged political impact’ when ‘the frontier between the hidden and the public transcripts’ is breached (1992, 202).

What such defiance actually achieves is a question for empirical investigation. It is clear that in the contemporary period, unruly political acts tilt the power balance – possibly temporarily – but to introduce something new into the relationship between ruler and ruled. The classic response to defiant acts is hostility and repression, but

If the withdrawal of acceptance, cooperation, and obedience can be maintained in the face of the rulers' punishments, then the end of the regime is in sight. Thus, all rulers are dependent for their positions and political power upon the cooperation of their subjects. The theory that power derives from violence, and that victory necessarily goes to the side with the greater capacity for violence, is false. Instead, the will to defy and the capacity to resist become central (Sharp 1994, 6).

It was through the withdrawal of cooperation opened by the initial demonstrations, and the recognition that first the Tunisian and then the Egyptian state were unable to face down widespread defiance that revolutions there became possible. It is possible too that the unruly political act is defined by its denial of the legitimacy of public authority, a temporary disruption of power. For akshay khanna, form is content: disagreement with established modes of doing politics expresses rejection of the institutions and practices of politics in general (Khanna 2012).
Fourth, and despite their disruptive qualities, unruly political acts come within a range of repertoires, which change relatively slowly. These include how claims or protests are voiced, with which objects, and with which language, The use of social media, first properly noted in the Iranian Green Movement in 2009, seems to mark a paradigm shift in repertoire through new means of organizing and tools for communicating about the protests through Twitter, Facebook etc, which may have drawn in new actors and debates. However, while it is the slightly shocking nature of the individual unruly political act that gives it its power, it only really takes on recognizably political characteristics within well-worn repertoires of action, which innovate slowly and iteratively over similar actions (C. Tilly 2008a).

*Content: moral economies and laws of necessity*

These fragmented responsive events often look as though they share a loose underlying bare-bones political logic – a common ideological thread about the responsibilities of a reasonable state (Apter 1964). If so, what might that common thread include?

One possibility is that popular protest in an era of economic crisis and adjustment shares a political logic with the claims of a ‘moral economy’ – a consensus about the right to adequate provision of basic needs, in contrast to the claims of the market economy, which was claimed at particular historical moments when these were most threatened (Thompson 1971; J. Bohstedt 2010; John Bohstedt 1992). The idea of a moral economy may be an invented tradition, in that such ideas were rarely explicitly articulated until people’s entitlements to affordable food were threatened by policies that prioritized rights to profit over rights to consume. It would be interesting to explore whether an implicit or ‘natural right’ is invoked in contemporary protests. Women were often prominent protestors, reflecting both their roles in provisioning and their lack of political voice (J. Bohstedt 1988; Taylor 1996; J. W. Scott and Tilly 1975; L. A. Tilly 1987). During periods of economic adjustment, how governments responded to such mobilisation could be constitutive of public authority, legitimacy and order.
The political logic for political unruliness was in the past and may now be based to some degree on a ‘law of necessity’ (J. Bohstedt 2010), or the idea that threats to basic human needs are prior to all other laws. This idea of a law of necessity, rooted in (interpretations of) people’s basic needs, does not entail accepting a hardship or ‘spasmodic’ view of the material bases of protest as the natural, physiological revolt of the hungry angry masses. As Bohstedt notes of English food riots in the 16th to 19th centuries,

Certainly hunger, combined with moral outrage over profiteering from deaths, powered popular protests. But there is a nearly-universal core to the ‘moral economy’ of acute hunger; it did not depend simply on the English precedents and paternalist regulations marshalled in Thompson’s essay on the ‘moral economy’. Found in many different polities and periods, that core is the ‘law of necessity’; in emergencies, when survival hangs in the balance, human subsistence must take precedence over property rights (2010: 9).

Unruly politics seem to derive their distinctive quality and power from the contradictions between bodies – people’s basic material being - and the law. In Bohstedt’s law of necessity, the claims of human subsistence trump legal property title, the very foundation of the capitalist order. He calls it a ‘law’ but it is really its opposite: a situation in which the law is suspended and a natural right is substituted for a manmade technology of rule.

The relationship between bodies and the law parallels Agamben’s ‘state of exception’, which is a time or space in which the law is suspended, through the power of the sovereign to declare it such (2005). For Agamben, the state of exception creates an increasingly indistinct zone between the properly political realm and that of ‘bare life’, or life beyond the scope of the law; the growth of modern state power means the convergence of the techniques of government or policies and state practices on the one hand, and the ‘technologies of the self’ through which people are disciplined, forming their identities and sense of selves. In a
separate discussion of exceptionalism, Chatterjee explains that modern or Western political theory’s powerful ‘norm-exception construct’ enabled it to reconcile, for example, liberal democratic principles with practices of imperial rule. The grounds for declaring the exception here derives from ‘the empirical deviation of prevailing institutions and practices’ from a universally desirable norm. The scope for ‘improving’ the population, the White Man’s Burden, marked an empirical deviation worthy of the exception (Chatterjee 2011, 9).

It is beyond the present scope to explore the implications of bio-politics and exceptionalism for political unruliness in detail, but there are several ways in which bodies and exceptions to the law meet in unruly politics (but see Khanna 2012). Instead of thinking about politics as laws and institutions, it helps to see it as the concrete practices through which bodies are disciplined (Agamben 1998). To do so sheds light on the content of unruly politics in several ways. First, because its modes are directly confrontational: bodies in the wrong places and times, acting in ways that break the disciplines of the classroom or factory. The rejection of specific disciplines makes the acts so potent – as noted above, the medium is the message. But unruly political acts are also a claim to sovereign power, to the extent that they lay claim to declare their own ‘state of exception’. This is very much the case with the hartal, as we will see below. And unruly politics do so by reference to the politics of bare life, a space beyond, but perhaps therefore also above, the law.

Unruly actors

If the basic unit is the event, this distinguishes what we are looking at from a focus on the activist groups more characteristic of social movement analysis. Unruly politics in which we are interested are more diverse than social movements, less continuous and more patchily connected. Who are these unruly politicians? Are they part of Guy Standing’s ‘precariat’, chronically insecure low income workers comprising ‘the new dangerous class’ (2011)? Methodologically, we need to ask: what kinds of occupations, communities and networks they belong to, what brings them together, who constitute the ‘faces in the crowd’ (Rudé
Chatterjee’s concept of political society helps to distinguish from the activism of a civil society that presumes equitable standing and full citizenship:

The rural poor who mobilize to claim the benefits of various governmental programs do not do so as members of civil society. To effectively direct those benefits toward them, they must succeed in applying the right pressure at the right places in the governmental machinery. This would frequently mean the bending or stretching of rules, because existing procedures have historically worked to exclude or marginalise them. They must, therefore, succeed in mobilizing population groups to produce a local political consensus that can effectively work against the distribution of power in society as a whole. This possibility is opened up by the working of political society. When school teachers gain the trust of the rural community ... they do not embody the trust generated among equal members of a civic community. On the contrary, they mediate between domains that are differentiated by deep and historically entrenched inequalities of power. They mediate between those who govern and those who are governed (2004: 66).

The defiance of unruly politicians distance them from the rule-bound civil society engagement promoted by aid donors, although there may be some overlaps in individual actors. When political society succeeds, Chatterjee suggests it is more transformative of poor people’s lives than civil society organisation. Might unruly acts emerge from the failures of civil society to represent the classes of ‘the governed’?
Unruly politics in Bangladesh

With this necessarily long conceptual preamble out of the way, we now look at some patterns of political rule-breaking in Bangladesh, to test these ideas empirically.

The slow evolution of the hartal repertoire

The contemporary Bangladeshi hartal lacks many of the qualities of unruly politics as set out above: these days, hartal is not the defiant political act of the governed, but the routine modes of competition by big powerful parties. Yet it has not always been that way: hartal has a long and honourable tradition of earning powerless groups power, famously in the Gandhi model through non-violent means. Although nowhere else is it as ubiquitous as in Bangladesh, it is still an institution within South Asian politics. In its original repertoire, hartal worked because it threatened public authority on moral grounds, not because of the economic threat or the violence it mobilised to ensure fear and the semblance of popular support. There has been little sustained public discourse about the phenomenon since the UNDP’s 2005 Beyond Hartal study. An internet search for literature on hartal in Bangladesh found few scholarly analyses of the phenomenon, yet it is widely and expertly discussed in the blogosphere and in social media. Moniruzzaman (2009) found that the use of the hartal has increased over time (see Figure 2).

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15 Moniruzzaman (2009) provides a valuable recent macro analysis of the phenomenon on which I draw here. Suykens and Islam (2013) give one of the first close-grained account of the micro politics of the ‘complex political phenomenon’ of hartal.
Hartal has thus clearly been a potent form of a specifically anti-colonial mode of unruly politics, most notably since the Civil Disobedience movement against the Raj in 1930s’ India. In more recent times, the long hartal campaigns of the democratic movement in the late 1980s and the mid-1990s campaign to institutionalize the caretaker government system both had credible claims to a higher purpose in their attempts to restore democratic order.

Yet in its contemporary adoption by political parties within competition-as-usual, its moral claims to be asserting the law of necessity have been lost, as are its claims to be subverting or defying public authority. Without a credible claim to be in defence of the public interest, the hartal is now widely recognised as the routine performance of the political opposition, and indeed the repertoire of politics for all major parties.

The gap between the hartal’s moral origins and its venal political uses in the present is filled by a lingering attachment by both parties to hartal as a mode of political action. It has been a successful tactic in the past. Their party structures and cultures are aligned to deliver an
effective hartal, particularly their youth and students wings, creating strong internal institutional imperatives to stick with it. But there is wide ambivalence about how it is used. In the article about a July 2011 hartal below, the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina vacillates over the issue of hartal *per se*: she wants to protect it as a means of protest in the public interest, but also to decry its use as a crude political tactic.

**Hartal not called for people**

Says PM Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday alleged that BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia enforced hartal to save her family members from the charges of murder, August 21 grenade attack, corruption, money laundering and other criminal activities.

“Although she [Khaleda Zia] claimed that she had called the hartal in people's interest, the truth is she enforced the illogical shutdown only to save her family members and war criminals,” said Hasina while answering to lawmakers' queries in parliament.

A court recently sentenced Khaleda's younger son Arafat Rahman Koko to six years' rigorous imprisonment in a money laundering case while her elder son Tarique Rahman was accused in a case filed for the August 21 grenade attack on an AL rally.

“They are now trying to create an abnormal situation in the country by enforcing hartal, and running propaganda against the government by appointing lobbyists,” said Hasina, chief of ruling Awami League.

The prime minister urged people to remain alert and united to face them.

She said BNP enforced hartal for more than 300 days during the previous AL-led government's tenure between 1996 and 2001.

“At that time, they could not stop our government's development activities,” said Hasina, also the leader of the House.

She said the opposition is practising “negative politics” which is unacceptable to people.

“If the people do not respond, a movement cannot be waged only by damaging or torching a few vehicles.”

She called on the main opposition to return to parliament and speak about their demands.

Hasina said her government has been implementing the ruling party's electoral pledges one by one.

The country has now become a role model in the world in ensuring food security and reducing child mortality rate, she said.

Hasina said her government's efforts have brightened the country's image in the last two and a half years.

She also referred to her government's measures to ensure health service for people, stop illegal use of electricity, and increase facilities for freedom fighters.  

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The article shed valuable light on the political mind of the most important politician in the country. The Prime Minister argues that the hartal called for the next day lacks moral purpose in that it is not ‘in the people’s interests’, but in the particular and close family interests of the leader of the opposition. She goes on to make two additional points of interest: first that the people need to respond if the movement is to work – else the violence of ‘damaging or torching a few vehicles’ will be pointless. Second, she rounds off her statement by listing her government’s achievements in food security and similar policy areas, presumably to signal her expectation that the people will not respond to the hartal because they are well cared for. Thus a failure to protect the moral economy is anticipated – and rejected as groundless - as a justification for unruly politics.

In the absence of robust quantitative analysis of the repertoire over time we cannot measure the change, but by any qualitative assessment, the objectives and role of hartal in articulating political opposition have changed over time.17 The form has been notably more common during ‘political’ or multiparty elected regimes, than under military or un-elected rule in the years since independence, according to analysis by Moniruzzaman (2009)(see Figure 1). This is a pattern likely to have been continued in the years since the early 2000s, because the caretaker government of 2006-08 banned most protests, whereas the ‘democratic’ periods before and since have been marked by a growing ferocity in routine politics.18

As they tend to close down businesses and much of the urban economy, hartals tend to be costly for the Bangladesh economy. Estimates suggest 3-5% of GDP was lost to hartal annually in the 1990s (Khundker 2005). Less attention tends to be paid to the human experience of hartal: unpredictability and disruption to work, school and travel; acute hardship for some; boredom and frustration for all. It is not surprising that hartals are unpopular; what is of interest is the extent to which Bangladeshis nevertheless think it is important to protect the right to call hartals. The UNDP perceptions survey in 2003 found that while 95% of respondents thought hartals were very or somewhat damaging for the economy, 73% nevertheless thought they were a legitimate means of protest. More recent discussions in

17 For an account of how to analyse and measure political events like hartal see (C. Tilly 2008b).
18 See Ahmed 2010 for a blow-by-blow account of the ‘Fakhruddin interregnum’.
the blogosphere suggest a similar ambivalence, but also a waning patience with political party antics. Below is a selection of responses to a 2010 article by Sazid Khan on ‘Does Hartal Deliver in Democracy?’ on the London-based e-Bangladesh portal. I found these to be of particular interest because they were posted around the time of the hartal itself and so give a sense of the frustrations in real-time:

Shahriar on November 29, 2010 at 7:33 pm [the night before the hartal]
Its shameful that senior BNP politicians are pushing the country into anarchy to protect the petty interest of Khaleda Zia’s illegal occupation of government property worth 1600 crore taka. The highly politicized BNP lawyers should be charged for gross misconduct in the premises and contempt of court.

Hartaal is a shameful act that should be shunned. If BNP activists resort to terrorist activities and burn public and private property including buses, cars and shops the culprits should be severely punished by law enforcing agencies and fined to cover the costs of the destruction of public and private properties.

I am also annoyed to see why the DMP could not arrest the criminals last night who indulged in setting on fire cars and cabs at very sensitive areas in Dhaka. The criminals were very few in number. They could have easily been nabbed by the police.

Fuad on November 30, 2010 at 4:10 pm
One day hartal costs 300 crore taka. But when the first priority is party interest, then you can kiss prosperity of the country goodbye! It is a democratic right for an organization to observe Hartal. But it is also a democratic right for anyone who rejects hartal, to freely travel and stay open their businesses. Can anyone practice this democratic right in Bangladesh? Hartal is being forced upon the people. No body wants hartal except any political party who happens to be on the opposition. Today political parties don’t practice democracy, they abuse and manipulate it heir own interest.

Farhad on December 1, 2010 at 8:10 pm [the day after the hartal]
The so called Hartaal has been a total failure. From now onwards it has to be the political leaders who have to lead processions, stone cars and buses, set them on fire and inflict irreparable damage on public and private property.

This was for the first time few of the aging leaders showed up on strategic points to force hartaal on peace-loving people of Bangladesh. The police used wit to round up paid goons and criminals who resort to terrorist activities for money doled out to them the day before by the opposition party. There was hardly any procession this time drawing maximum 10-15 people in number ...


In some respects the hartal has been institutionalised so as to be a set piece in the theatre of political competition. Suykens and Islam (2013) see the political performance of hartal as enabling local leaders to showcase their power: the idea of audience is critical to this performance, and in their analysis of its micro effects, the hartal is a success, which is also why it is such a resilient aspect of the political repertoire.

In its form it now uses fear and violence more than the suspension of authority – the creation of a ‘state of exception’ - to achieve its ends. The apparently successful use of hartal by
Islamic groups protesting the National Women’s Act earlier in 2011 suggests that new actors are adopting the model to contest issues around which they are able to mobilise sufficiently large support, where the hartal had traditionally been the domain of the big parties. In 2013, the Jamaat-e-Islami again called a series of hartals against life sentences received by their leaders for 1971 war crimes. These make the interesting political argument that the State was wrong to interfere with judicial process – in effect, that the law must be adhered to. Yet the Jamaat hartals were themselves the response to the Shahbag movement which also demanded the law be properly adhered to and that convicted criminals receive the full punishment of the law. The Shahbag protestors were also certain that the judicial process had been interfered with to assure a lenient verdict, and that should convicted war criminals not be hanged, the verdicts would be overturned with the next government. It should be a matter of great interest to Bangladeshi political sociology that it is through this mélange of demand for rules and rule-breaking that our politics are performed.

There is a sense that people are less willing to comply than in the past, and certainly some - such as a 2011 BNP-sponsored strike about the rising price of fuel and food - have failed. Success in this context is judged by the extent of disruption to everyday and particularly economic life – failure would imply little disruption. That people failed to strike against high food prices is surprising given that food riots have been frequent in this context; yet it also reflects the fact that in times of rising prices, people must work, and harder than before: there can be little sympathy with a political strategy that hurts the poorest first and foremost.

Until the Jamaat started to use it more routinely, the hartal had appeared to be in its dying days as part of a contentious political repertoire. A repeat of the 2003 UNDP survey on perceptions of hartal may well now reveal a degree of unpopularity that could persuade the parties to settle the matter and restrict its use. But the hartal has had effects in the past, and is part of the political culture of oppositional all-out hostility between the parties. The tactics are widely known and may inform those of other actors and popular mobilisation. So it remains interesting to think about why such a repertoire persists within more routine politics, and how the underlying logic of hartal might change.
Garments workers’ protests

A campaign for higher wages (and other improvements in labour rights) erupted in the garments industry in 2006, and has persisted even after the agreement of an almost doubling of the minimum wage in 2010. On this issue, there is relatively little empirical data on which to draw to conduct a meaningful analysis. To date, there has been no notable effort to study the issue as an instance of political mobilisation. For this section, I will draw on existing literature and background material gathered for a paper on garments employment as women’s empowerment (N. Hossain 2012). This is another instance of contentious politics that has received little serious attention.

The RMG sector has seen an increase in the size, seriousness and frequency of protests, typically violent, in Dhaka and the Ashulia-Savar belt since 2006. These became particularly long-running and violent campaigns in 2006 and then again in 2010. Even the agreement to almost double the minimum wage rate, which took place in early 2011, failed to fully defuse the tension, as many workers’ groups continue to demand higher wages still.

A catalogue of the protests that covers the full period does not yet exist, and the struggle does not yet appear to have been fully resolved, and what follows depends on the results of a simple keyword search of the Daily Star news archive and secondary sources (cited in Hossain 2012). At the time of writing, we lack basic facts about the mobilization in its entirety, which prevents us from gaining a sense of its scale and dynamics. This summary of an event catalogue below (see Figure 3) from IGS researchers writing in the Daily Star gives a sense of the 7 month period in July 2010: 340 people were injured; plant and vehicles were damaged and production and transport were disrupted.

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19 The Daily Star is the leading English language daily newspaper in Bangladesh [http://www.thedailystar.net/](http://www.thedailystar.net/).
Contemplating sustainable solutions to garments sector unrest

Table I: garments sector unrest in Bangladesh in 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date &amp; place of incidence</th>
<th>Cause of incidence</th>
<th>Loss of life &amp; property</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 11, 2010</td>
<td>For conveyance, lunch bills and encashment of casual leaves</td>
<td>40 workers injured, production in around 30 garment factories halted, roads blocked for over one hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashulia, Tongi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 28, 2010</td>
<td>For increased minimum monthly wage from Tk. 1,662 to Tk. 5,000/</td>
<td>30 people hurt, 22 RMG units hit, production affected in 22 more readymade garment factories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirpur and Rupganj areas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 25, 2010</td>
<td>For low house rent &amp; better supply of water &amp; gas</td>
<td>30 people wounded, police box burnt, roads blocked for one and half hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karschpur, Narayanganj</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 21, 2010</td>
<td>For minimum pay at Tk. 5,000/</td>
<td>200 people hurt, 50 vehicles damaged, 30 factories ransacked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashulia, Tongi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 30, 2010</td>
<td>Against closure of 3 factories</td>
<td>40 people hurt, 3 vehicles vandalized, road blocked for 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirpur, Dhaka</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: A catalogue of garment sector unrest in 2010

Source: dailystarnews.com; the authors were with the Institute of Governance Studies at BRAC University

For the remainder of the year, between August 2010 and January 2011, and using a different metric, Rahaman et al. (2011) record a further 30 disputes or incidents of labour unrest in the garments industry. From these and other newspaper accounts, the issues at stake revolved around unfair labour practices and the wider issue of low wages, but were in many instances sparked off by particular factory-level events – the closure of a unit without notice or payment of back-wages; abuses on the factory floor; late wages; unfair dismissals, etc. A rapid review of Bangladesh news articles of other RMG protests since 2006 suggests this is a fair sample of the points of contention.
Place the garments workers protests within their global and historical context, however, and things look different. A new study of food riots and right to food movements in 2007-12 in four countries (including Bangladesh) has provided an opportunity to start explore the garments revolt in more detail and in comparative perspective. The international press has a different take: what were industrial disputes in the Bangladesh media were often – and somewhat lazily – labeled ‘food riots’ by the international press, as these were taking place at a time when similar cost of living-related unruly political events were erupting around the world. It may be telling that references made in the Bangladesh media to ‘food riots’ at this time were mainly to events in other countries, including India and Nepal; our Indian research partners tell us that similarly while the Indian press reported no food riots at home, it dwelt at length on the Bangladesh ‘food riots’. Two points are worth noting: first, that a food riot seems to be something that happens elsewhere. But this is probably because, second, looked at closely, the contexts, the motives and the actors involved in unruly acts are more complex than the term ‘food riot’ appears to allow for.

In the case of the garments revolt, the protests often clearly articulated food price rises as a vital concern; this reflects an accurate reading of the protestors’ object: to raise their wages, not to argue (no doubt pointlessly) for lower food prices, as the article below from 2012 illustrates.

Monday, June 18, 2012
Front Page

**RMG industry in a tight spot**

Export orders already fall amid global recession; now comes demo for wage hike

Refayet Ullah Mirdha

The apparel industry is in a double bind: continuous high inflation has led to a wage pressure and a gloomy global economy has left the garment owners in a tight financial situation.

The garment workers had a pay hike less than two years ago, but they are already finding it hard to meet their expenses.

Financially, the garment owners are in a bad shape too as work orders have dipped alarmingly.

Take Rahima (her real name withheld), for instance. She earns Tk 4,500 a month, and pays Tk 1,000 per month for her one-room shanty. Her landlord now wants Tk 1,400.

Over the past several months, she had to skip eggs, the almost one and only source of protein for low-income group people.

"Four eggs cost Tk 40 now. When my wages were increased [in late 2010] they cost Tk 24," she says as she explains why she cannot afford eggs any more.

With such a price spiral, the inflation graph has swung wildly and remains at a high level. On a 12-month average basis, the inflation rate accelerated to 10.76 percent in May, up from 8.67 percent in the same month a year ago, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

Rahima and her fellow workers were shattered by the skyrocketed journey of inflation.

"The workers did not get any benefit of the pay raise as the house owners increased rents four times a year," said a worker at Ha-Meem Garment at Ashulia on the outskirts of the capital.
Rahima’s employer, Arif (again, not his real name), sandwiched between inflation and global financial crisis, also feels helpless.

He found prices of his product -- basic T-shirts -- falling to $2 now from $4 a piece two years ago, while his interest rate remained high at 15 percent. In a time of high inflation, one cannot expect banks to charge low. “Inflation is cutting into workers’ purchasing power,” says Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, adding that food and housing are the two major expenditure items for the garment workers.

A garment worker spends 60 percent of his income on food, which is the same as the national average; and nearly 25 percent on accommodation, which is 7 percentage points higher than the national average of 18 percent in urban areas, he adds.

Prices of firewood also shot up due to higher demand among the workers in Ashulia in the absence of gas burners.

On November 1, 2010, the wage board for garment industries nearly doubled the minimum wages to about Tk 3,000 a month at the entry level. In dollar terms, the minimum wage was $43, the lowest in the world, at the exchange rate in 2010, which is now $36.4, as the taka has lost its value against the dollar.

Facing severe protests by workers over the last six days, the owners of more than 300 garment factories in the industrial hub of Ashulia closed down their units from yesterday for an indefinite period.

The latest spell of labour unrest started with the rumour of the death of Salman, a storekeeper at a unit of Ha-Meem Group, on May 11. Later, Salman was found alive with minor injuries he had suffered in clashes with factory officials.

But street violence returned to Ashulia on June 11. This time, the workers made a demand for a pay hike.

The Salman issue over, factories in Ashulia resumed production on May 14.

Source: Daily Star news; downloaded February 15th 2013.

The events catalogue on which this preliminary analysis of the garments revolt draws is a work in progress, yet it is already clear that the article is unusual in the amount of space it gives to protestors’ views, and in how it certifies their concerns with ‘expert’ evidence. The elite view of the garments revolt, it should be noted, is of a conspiracy by India to destroy Bangladesh’s RMG sector in order to boost its own market share. The idea that external forces are stirring up the masses is common enough among elites who are reluctant to accept that their modes of rule may be unpopular (see (Rudé 1981) on this during the French Revolution). There is rather more middle class sympathy with garments workers, by contrast. The garments workers were initially contending with the industry owners to secure the basics: better working conditions and higher wages, at a time of rapidly increasing food and other prices. As the conflict spread in the flagship economic sector, it became a national law and order priority. The minimum wage agreement reached in 2011 marks a certification of the problem (C. Tilly 2008a): the state recognised that there was a problem here, which only it was capable of addressing. This has also meant a move towards more formal recognition of the need for worker representation.

Several questions arise about the garments revolt as an instance of unruly politics. One is that of form: why did the struggle become so violent? Contentious politics offer many opportunities for conflict, but the level of violence used on both sides and the security responses have been both polarising and painful. Indisputably, one of the key problems the garments workers face is outright hostility to labour organisation. This is one of the lessons of the post-Independence state, and public sector service delivery continues to feel the pain of
over-powerful union interests among doctors, teachers and civil servants. The absence of any means of incorporating the interests of factory workers virtually ensures an unruly response from this group.

The intensity of the struggle also reflects the historical moment and the nature of the actors: RMG workers have been fully exposed to the perfect storm of global economic volatility that struck in 2007, bearing the brunt of food price inflation, economic downturn, and ‘flexibilisation’. They are also members of Guy Standing’s precariat.

The high level of violence also expresses defiance. In the absence of any rights to representation, workers lacked legitimate and effective means of articulating a powerful sense of grievance. Blocking traffic and closing factories suggest the logic of the moral economy at work here: basic material security must be guaranteed as a precondition for political authority. These acts may not be intended as destructive but to correct public authority when it fails to ensure a fair share for all. Possibly it is the shared moral sense of when it is right to protest – which appears to have been present during the revolt – which stimulates ‘the power within’ and provides a shared target for its action.

As noted above, public discourse suggests that middle class people were comparatively sympathetic with the garments revolt, even though they widely decried the violence and vandalism. This may be because the middle class have also felt the pain of recent inflation, and can also see the fast-growing gap between factory owners and the rest of Bangladesh. It is possible that middle class sympathies reflected the moral power of organizing around rights to food in this context, and a recognition of ‘the law of necessity’.

This long period of political contention will have shifted power relations, but labour remains poorly organised, repressed and excluded from policy spaces and relationships of power. Yet there is agreement that the workers won key concessions through their struggle, and so have more power than before. One area in which the workers have made progress is in shifting the perception of them as docile. Men workers are thought to have played an increasingly important role in protests as the knitwear and sweater sub-sectors grew and more men were
hired; however, women workers were very prominent, and the images of women workers fighting with the police were seen all around the world.  

To conclude the discussion of the garments workers’ revolt, we refer back to the Khan framework of competitive clientelism. The object of the workers’ contention – wages set by factory owners and regulated by the state – meant their political target was spread across the political factions, and so was largely separate from party competition. Yet garment factory owners are numerous on both sides of parliament, and better represented than any other profession. There have been factional and party connections to the workers’ groups, and suspicion that external agents stir up worker discontent. But the garments workers’ revolt is the most significant class-based mobilisation seen in Bangladesh for some time, and likely to impact on the way politics is popularly conceived and staged.

20 Anyone who believes that Bangladeshi women garment workers were docile victims should see the photographic series by Reuters’ Andrew Biraj of the garments revolts in 2010, called ‘The Fashion Victims. See also images on http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/gallery/2010/jun/30/bangladesh-protest#/?picture=364397796&index=6).
The political settlement framework also sheds light on the global sources of the garments workers’ revolt. Workers riot partly because world food prices and export volumes fluctuate. The Government of Bangladesh is generally responsive on acute food insecurity and responds generally better than in many places. But its sphere of action is limited when global food and fuel prices soar or global markets for Bangladeshi garments shrink (or grow). So the global economy intrudes into the moral economy of the nation. This suggests that the ultimate object of the worker protests is or should be at least partly at the global level (the UN, the G20?). The political settlement is destabilised here by the limited strength of national rule over global economic forces.

**Conclusions: What unruliness means for the governance agenda**

This paper asked: why is politics so indisciplined – violent, lawless, irregular, defiant - in Bangladesh? What, if anything, does it matter? The why is answered partly with the help of recent political economy analysis which has clarified the roots of the fragile political settlement in Bangladesh: understanding the unruly political culture should shed light on the core problems of elite politics. These issues have been amply documented and are widely understood. We know less of what political unruliness means to struggles by the non-elite. But there are good historical reasons to believe that defiance can be a powerful weapon in the political armoury of the governed.

This contribution set out some ideas about what is interesting and distinctive about the unruly politics that have featured across the world since 2007. All of this matters because political rule-breaking ultimately defines the governance problem in Bangladesh. Over-reliance on the destructive unpopular hartal in routine party politics raises the political temperature; violence elicits repression and ratchets the game up. The repertoire of the hartal – the objects and tools of contention - has changed from a strategy of public interest and civil disobedience, to a tactic of holding the nation hostage to poorly concealed sectional interests. Yet popular political culture is ambivalent: hartal is deeply and widely unpopular in fact. But in theory, there is a desire to protect the right to defy authority, learned, no doubt, from the protracted
and repeated bouts of unelected rule. There is a shared suspicion of a form of politics in which defiance is not permitted.

Popular unruliness may also correct public policy in minimally pro-poor directions. We say this partly on the back of a small but persuasive literature that indicates a growth of ‘the power within’ —a sense of courage, solidarity and strategy within popular political praxis in Bangladesh. Much of this evidence comes from the rising political awareness of women. Yet as Mushtaq Khan’s work predicts, and close-grained accounts of political action confirm, political struggle remains substantially organised around factional rather than class interests, which remain fragmented and indistinct.

But do the factional interests of the client still exhaust the possibilities of organisation by poor, powerless groups? Although to date unregistered as such, the garments revolt has redrawn the lines of class conflict. Unlike industrial unrest in the public sector, classically factional, the garments revolt has been transparently a class conflict. For the industrial working class of Bangladesh, substantially female, it is as workers in a globalised capitalism that they have experienced recent economic volatility. The garments workers of Bangladesh are ‘flexibilised’, non-unionised, predominantly young and female, precariously exposed to volatile global commodity markets as consumers, and equally uncertain global export markets as producers. Their political significance has almost certainly been under-played because of their youth and sex. The Bangladeshi public is generally well-informed about the conditions in which garments workers live, yet the perception lingers that women garments workers cannot have a serious grievance, as these nimble fingers work merely for pin money.

What if anything does our loosely formulated ‘unruly politics’ framing add? One contribution is that we are reminded of the importance of consent to public authority, and therefore of the combustible quality of defiance in that context. This is particularly relevant in Bangladesh because of the mundane quality of public authority, the absolute levels of poverty and deprivation, the political history of protest, the absence of class-based mobilisation and the expectations of a patron class. How these factors combine in the Bangladesh context explains the portion of the political settlement that incorporates the poor and marginal. With its focus
on the moral power of defiance within unruly acts, an unruly political framing sets out a more realistically capillary and relational model of power than a resource model of power (you have it or you do not). Unruly politics helps understand power in ways that not only appear to fit the realities better, but also makes it more possible to imagine a more inclusive polity. The emphasis on time, form, content and agency also remind us that these protests are not random or unconnected: the contentions of the garments workers of Bangladesh is only partly in the control of their immediate bosses and state; their wages and cost of living complaints are at least partly a complaint about their positioning within the global economy. Finally, the focus on unruly actors and events shifts the gaze on to political society and away from the aid-funded managerialism of development NGOs and civil society groups. This is a far less mediated form of action but with far greater potential for political empowerment and pro-poor change.