

The Political Origin of HUNGER IN BANGLADESH

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Historical evidence suggests that almost every year before independence in 1971, present-day Bangladesh consistently grappled with a widespread shortage of food grains. It's worth noting that a low food grain intake was a common characteristic of Bengal. Alongside the scarcity of food grains, Bangladesh has perennially faced the adverse impact of natural disasters, rampant poverty, and income inequality. These factors have consistently played a significant role in driving hunger and starvation within Bangladeshi society.

Much like the situation in pre-independence Bangladesh, hunger remains a pressing issue in today's Bangladesh. For political reasons, successive governments have sought to conceal the extent of hunger, but available data paints a different picture. For example, a recent study revealed that between 2018 and 2020, approximately 52 million people in Bangladesh experienced varying degrees of food insecurity (FAO 2021: 148).

On three recent occasions—in 1973/74, 2007/08, and 2022/23 (largely due to the Ukraine war)—there were sharp surges in food prices, especially staple foods like rice and wheat. These price hikes had catastrophic socio-political ramifications globally. Consequently, the number of people experiencing hunger saw a significant rise. It's worth noting



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A woman, her face filled with despair and frustration, cradles her sleeping baby as they wait their turn to buy subsidized rice and flour from a TCB truck, part of the government's OMS program, at Khulna city's No. 5 terminal. As the cost of essential items continues to rise, the desperation for affordable food among low-income individuals grows daily. The photo was published in The Daily Star on November 30, 2022. PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

The root cause of food insecurity is deeply entrenched within the Bangladesh state itself and the political institutions that bind the state and society.

that Bangladesh, being a net food importer, bore the brunt of the global food crisis.

However, it's crucial to recognize that hunger and food insecurity in Bangladesh are neither new nor solely tied to global food price hikes. Strikingly, it often takes the occurrence of a devastating famine for hunger and starvation to capture widespread attention.

Why nations fail to feed the poor
In my recent book, "Why Nations Fail to Feed the Poor: The Politics of Food Security in Bangladesh" (Routledge, London, 2023), I attempt to explore how the Bangladeshi state responds when its people go hungry. This book provides a detailed portrayal of the missing dimensions of stateness, including the strength of institutions, the scope of state functions, and other essential attributes. In doing so, it employs the concept of neopatrimonialism to examine the political system of Bangladesh. The analysis utilizes five key concepts—rent-seeking, public corruption, the partial reform syndrome, weak state capacity, and poor governance—as an analytical framework. A primary concern of this book is to elucidate the various obstacles to food security in Bangladesh, spanning from the process of policy formulation to the mechanisms of implementation.

It is true that the food security of a nation-state has multi-dimensional aspects involving national and international politics. However, the role of the state remains central in shaping and reshaping national food policies and promoting food security. This is because national governments adopt policies that ultimately affect and potentially eliminate hunger. In this era of globalization, the emerging global

food network remains excessively reliant on policies driven by external actors. This issue is compounded by regimes that neglect the need for proactive food security governance, posing significant challenges for many nation states in providing resources to address the numerous hunger-related problems they face.

I argue that millions of people go hungry in Bangladesh not because it is a resource-poor country, but rather due to the nature of the state.

The neo-patrimonial Bangladeshi state lacks administrative capacity, effective institutions, and a coherent ideology, rendering it incapable of achieving developmental and economic goals. In other words, as a result of the erosion of state capacity, the state's ability to define and pursue essential services has dwindled over the years, making it rarely capable of providing these services to its citizens. Most importantly, the neo-patrimonial regimes in Bangladesh persist through patronage politics, where personalized exchanges are the mechanisms of governance. Consequently, the neo-patrimonial regime is diametrically opposed to good governance and development.

The problems of food availability in Bangladesh

The book delves into the difficulties faced by the neo-patrimonial Bangladeshi state in ensuring food availability, a crucial aspect of food security. The state's limitations are evident in its inability to bolster domestic agriculture for increased production, its overreliance on food imports instead of encouraging domestic production, its failure in timely food imports, its dependence on uncertain food aid, and its flawed efforts to promote food availability.

By examining the political economy of budgetary allocation and the budget-making process in Bangladesh, I have demonstrated that the state is progressively diminishing its role in fostering agricultural growth. Alongside the dwindling budget allocation for the agriculture sector, the state has either not taken adequate steps or is unable to promote agricultural growth in a manner that would ensure food availability.

A critical analysis of the changes within Bangladesh's agriculture sector over recent decades indicates that the state's inability to promote the sector is primarily due to weak state capacity and poor governance, resulting in a shrinking role for the state. In essence, poor state performance in economic management, particularly in the agriculture sector, is evident.

The state's initiatives in developing and implementing agricultural

development policies are seriously hampered by patronage politics, which is an inevitable outcome of a neo-patrimonial regime. Rent-seeking, public corruption, poor governance, and weak state capacity further undermine these initiatives.

Moreover, due to the neo-patrimonial nature of the state, reform efforts often succumb to interest-based politics, a phenomenon I refer to as the 'partial reform syndrome.' As a result, the state's efforts in agricultural development, including the provision of fertilizer subsidies and distribution, do not effectively offer substantial assistance to impoverished farmers, essentially leaving them to fend for themselves.

Because Bangladesh faces food deficits, international trade and food aid remain crucial for maintaining

results in disruptions in the steady supply of food grains.

Fourth, despite some advocating for the mobilization of the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) to ensure a stable food grain supply, this government institution is hindered by issues such as rent-seeking, public corruption, and administrative inefficiencies. Consequently, it is not capable of effectively managing imports.

By highlighting these four primary shortcomings of the state, I argue that international trade is an unreliable means of ensuring food availability within Bangladesh's neo-patrimonial state.

The problems of food accessibility in Bangladesh

This book delves into two crucial facets of food accessibility: the state-sponsored direct entitlement generation mechanism and market regulation aimed at ensuring price stability. Food accessibility remains a persistent issue, particularly among the impoverished population. The challenges associated with food accessibility are intricately tied to the state's inherent weaknesses, marked by limited capacity, poor governance, rent-seeking behavior, corruption, and partial reform efforts.

Given the prevailing socio-economic conditions and widespread poverty in Bangladesh, this chapter asserts that state-sponsored patron entitlement generation remains essential to ensure food accessibility for vulnerable segments of the population. Traditionally, the Public Food Distribution System (PFDS) has been instrumental in generating entitlements in Bangladesh through a variety of projects and programs. By highlighting three key weaknesses within the PFDS, my book underscores the significant challenges these projects and programs face:

a) The PFDS operates as a highly politically motivated system, often undermining its humanitarian objectives.

b) The state's commitment to promoting food security through the PFDS is questionable, evident in budgetary allocation trends.

c) Social Safety Net (SSN) programs do not fully address food security concerns, particularly among the vulnerable poor.

Throughout its history, the PFDS in Bangladesh has been driven by political motives. Its inception, development, and current practices suggest that the program's primary purpose is to ensure regime survival using state resources rather than genuinely advancing food security. It has historically appeased the urban middle class through urban-focused

channels and donors through various donor-recommended reforms, often fostering target errors and leakage errors through politically motivated projects and programs. Therefore, while target errors and leakage errors are typically viewed as governance issues, I argue that they serve as mechanisms for distributing opportunities among various actors to secure regime survival.

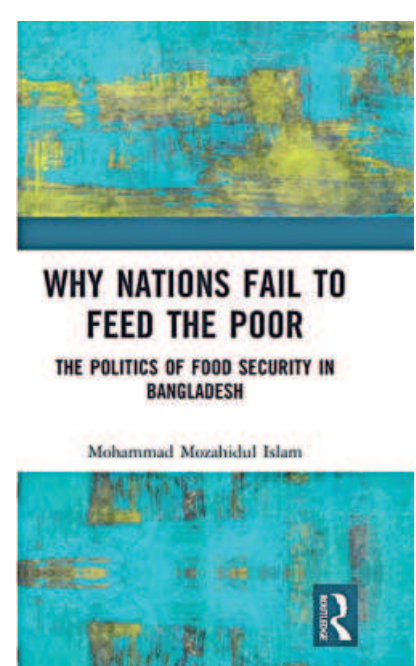
On the other hand, recognizing the impact of sudden price hikes as a significant hindrance to entitlement generation, this book examines state initiatives for market regulation necessary to stabilize prices. However, it becomes evident that market regulation in Bangladesh is primarily driven by political agendas. Under political pressure, neo-patrimonial regimes engage in token market monitoring and initiatives for the sake of price stabilization, primarily to maximize political gains rather than addressing the root causes of market failures. Consequently, public policies fail to provide effective remedies and enhance economic efficiency.

Historically, successive governments have adopted two main strategies to rectify the market: coercion through military and law enforcement agencies and market influence through public stock, particularly via the PFDS. Drawing from the food crisis of 2007/08, I demonstrate the government's policy shortcomings in terms of market influence.

The book systematically dissects the government's failure in public intervention in foodgrain markets, attributing it to several factors, including weak state capacity, poor governance, rent-seeking behavior, and public corruption. Market structure significantly influences the prevalence of bribery, extortion, and illicit payments. It's not merely that the state is incapable of providing institutional and infrastructural support for markets; it also tolerates illegal activities that undermine the market mechanism—a consequence of the patronage politics inherent in neo-patrimonial governance.

In conclusion, "Why Nations Fail to Feed the Poor: The Politics of Food Security in Bangladesh" elucidates the structural deficiencies in the state's institutional capacity to promote food security. It argues that the root cause of food insecurity is deeply entrenched within the Bangladesh state itself and the political institutions that bind the state and society.

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food availability. Importing food grains effectively to bolster food availability in Bangladesh presents four significant challenges.

First, uncertainties revolve around food grain imports, mainly linked to the global rice market.

Second, the decision-making process within the Bangladeshi government is sluggish. This is exacerbated by the absence of robust infrastructural capacity for an effective early warning system, which is vital considering that natural disasters like floods and droughts are the primary causes of food availability fluctuations. Furthermore, the state has failed to provide essential statistical services necessary for informed decision-making regarding food availability.

Third, due to patronage politics and poor governance, effective state regulation and monitoring of private sector traders are lacking. This often