

# When coercion becomes a governance mechanism



**A CLOSER LOOK**

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**TASNEEM TAYEB**

There are moments when a country's anxieties arrive in the form of an ordinary-looking story: a raid, an arrest, a factory dispute in a crowded industrial belt. It is tempting to read them as separate incidents in the daily churn. And yet, some stories keep returning in different contexts.

Last week, two reports related to extortion sat near each other in the public conversation. One was almost cinematic: an overnight drive in Dhaka's Mohammadpur and Adabor area leading to detention of a hundred. The four-hour sweep was framed as a push against extortionists, teen gangs, and criminal groups. The other report was messier: an export-oriented factory in Rugganj was allegedly attacked after the owner refused to pay an upfront "one-time" demand and a monthly payment thereafter, which was met with a sluggish and contentious police reaction, alongside reports that the victim faced significant hurdles in filing a case that accurately reflected their version of events.

The Rugganj incident carries competing theories: the owner calls it retaliation; the local BNP leader calls it a dispute that escalated. The deeper question is what becomes possible when coercion—whether justified, disguised, denied, or plainly transactional—begins to behave like a parallel authority.

The most useful way to read extortion is not as a moral failure. Morality doesn't help a business owner at 11pm when people are breaking a gate. The more revealing way to read it is as a power dynamic: who, in practice, can impose costs and expect compliance.

In the Mohammadpur-Adabor crackdown story, the state appears decisive. It arrives at night, coordinates a drive, communicates purpose, and shows numbers. It is an authority with visibility. In the Rugganj factory account, authority looks different. This is authority as delay, friction, and ambiguity. Capacity seems to exist. So why does it feel, to citizens and businesses, as if it does not reliably belong to them when they need it? That is the contrast worth sitting with. The state can act, sometimes impressively. Yet, other actors appear able to impose obligations—money, deference, silence—outside legal mandate. In that condition, the citizen's relationship to governance changes subtly.

People begin to calculate to adapt. A factory owner or trader does not need to admire a coercive actor to believe that refusal carries consequences and protection may arrive too late. Once that belief settles, extortion becomes more than theft. It becomes a pricing mechanism in the economy. Hidden payments operate like an informal tax. Formal taxes have schedules and receipts. Informal extraction has variables: who asks, how much, how often, and what refusal results in.

Markets can navigate inflation and even regulatory change. They are less comfortable with things that have no official name. That is why "law and order" language often fails to capture what businesses actually fear. It is not just violence. It is the possibility that the cost of business is being set by actors whose authority is not legible, and therefore not governable.

Rugganj sits inside the industrial horizon of Narayanganj. When a story emerges from there, it travels quickly through business networks. In Prothom Alo's reporting, local businesspeople speak with an unsettling normalcy about paying "some" extortion as routine, while also expressing fear at the scale and brazenness of the factory attack. Routine is one thing; demonstrative violence is another. It teaches others what refusal costs.

as an "unwritten rule." He argued that money collected on roads should not automatically be called extortion if taken at fixed rates and described as welfare contributions under "mutual understanding." He also acknowledged that the labour organisation aligned with the ruling party typically dominates these arrangements, while insisting this dominance does not automatically make the collection extortionate as it operates

is rarely paying in a balanced atmosphere of choice. They are doing so inside a confined zone of consequences. The question is: what happens to the public's expectation of the law when a minister starts blurring the line between crime and custom?

Civil society reacted with unusual speed and sharpness. Transparency International Bangladesh warned that this kind of wording risks legitimising a criminal offence, and that it collides with anti-corruption commitments made by the regime. Their concern was institutional. If extortion is reframed as a compromise, the logic travels to other sectors where informal payments already shadow formal rules.

Early statements become signals, and signals settle into expectations. When allegations of coercive extraction intersect with ruling authority early in a governing cycle, reputational cost spreads outwards, from individuals to the perceived shape of power.

A state needs to remain the only authority that can impose obligations with credible enforcement. Once that exclusivity becomes porous—once citizens and businesses start treating coercive non-state demands as optional—the meaning of governance shifts. This is where the two stories, placed side by side, begin to feel less like a contradiction and more like an early warning about how authority is being experienced.

A government can live with disorder. What governments struggle to survive is the normalisation of parallel power: the silent public adjustment to the idea that compliance serves more than one authority.

Extortion is not just a crime story. It is a governance signal. It shows who can add to the cost of operating here. And the danger here lies in its normalisation. Once citizens live as if authority is shared, the state may still conduct raids and count detainees. It will no longer be in charge.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Then there is the way language is beginning to strain under this topic. In recent days, a newly appointed minister offered a public definition that tried to separate coercion in the transport sector from what he described

within a framework of agreement.

If dominance is present, the border between "agreement" and "compliance" becomes difficult to distinguish. You can call a payment "voluntary," but the person paying

# Are Trump's visions for a new Iran achievable?



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**RAMISA ROB**

As the world grapples with the death of Iran's supreme leader, and as airstrikes continue, the trajectory of the war and, most importantly, whether Iran will survive the fall of its leader are questions of the hour. Iran's endurance is worth scrutiny as they remain exposed, but it is also worth asking what exactly the US can achieve. If regime change is the goal, killing Ayatollah Ali Khamenei alone doesn't achieve it. US President Donald Trump, however, seems to be pursuing it. In a brief telephone interview with *The New York Times* on Sunday, Trump offered three contradicting visions of the outcomes he hoped for in the war he launched on Iran.

One of the options he reportedly suggested was a blueprint of what he did in Venezuela, where the top leader was removed but the rest of the government remained intact, and more willing to work with the US administration. But that is difficult to emulate in Iran. The governance structure is far more complicated. The office of the supreme leader is heavily

monitored, controlled by a complex network of institutions, created with the intention of preserving the resilience of the Islamic republic, rather than one person in power. The whole regime is built deliberately to remain in power, even if the leader falls.

Iran's constitution explicitly anticipates sudden leadership loss. It is a regime of strongmen, not an authoritarian regime dependent on one strongman. Article III stipulates that if the supreme leader dies or is unable to perform the duties, authority transfers immediately to an interim council composed of the president. On Sunday, Iran formed a provisional leadership council with President Masoud Pezeshkian and Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i, head of the judiciary, as key members. There exists no deadline for picking a successor to Khamenei. During war, an interim leadership council can lead the nation for a long period.

The government is also protected by the army, Artesh, and the powerful

Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) which constitutionally exist to serve the regime. Arguably, both are weakened after the strikes, but the IRGC's main goal has always been to fortify the structure of the regime, rather than certain leaders and commanders. Trump and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would have to infiltrate the entire system of the IRGC for the regime to change. Only in the case that the US killed the current assembly members including the president, the top branch of the IRGC, and infiltrated the middle would it be possible to find a form of an Iranian government that would be willing to work with the US, like in Venezuela.

Trump also told *The New York Times* that he had "three very good choices" for new leadership in Iran. "I won't be revealing them now. Let's get the job done first," he said. Trump also told *The Atlantic* that he was open to talking to Iranian leaders. There is a possibility that Trump may have made deals with leaders like the US-backed Reza Pahlavi, or infiltrated other leaders in the Iranian regime. What can be gauged from his vision, though, is that the US does want a puppet government in Iran—one that it can control. The airstrikes should be viewed with a clear US aim for regime change.

But till now, the Iranian president and national security officials have only shared hostile language towards the US, and vowed to avenge Khamenei's death. It is especially hard to imagine a candidate who would be

willing to make concessions to Israel, if that is a goal for Trump. But Trump dangled a carrot of lifting sanctions on Iran if the new leadership would pragmatically work with him.

During the 12-Day War last year, Khamenei went into hiding where he named three possible successors: Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i; Ali Asghar Hejazi, Khamenei's chief of staff; and Hassan Khomeini, grandson of the founder of the Islamic republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. It is unlikely that Khamenei's choice aligns with Trump's, and it is likely that the Islamic republic jurists' picks would align with Khamenei, especially after his death.

The concept of Trump picking three leaders is again predicated on the collapse of the entire regime itself, so he has to achieve parts of his first vision to achieve the second. But the unthinkable is not impossible, especially as the Gulf states have also pledged to defend themselves against Iranian attacks and essentially form an anti-Iran coalition.

Trump's final hope for Iran is to see the elite military forces, including officers of the IRGC, turn over their weapons to the Iranian populace. As in the 2000 Serbian Bulldozer Revolution, the US president's hope hinges on the idea that Iran's security forces would stand back—the same security forces that have murdered citizens during protests.

Since Khamenei's death, analysts have warned of the opposite of Trump's vision:

the creation of a "garrison state," where the military would be more emboldened to dominate social, political and economic life. That sort of military rule in Iran would prove even more ruthless for the public, who already live in a nation where security forces know fewer red lines than they know bloodshed.

The two-tiered military structure of Iran, along with the Basij, a volunteer militia, supporting their efforts to crush protests, makes it harder for the whole system to execute a US-backed coup of sorts. So far, the regime has reacted promptly with full support of the IRGC, so on a surface level, Khamenei's death has not hurt the regime enough to surrender to public protesters. The public itself remains divided; foreign intervention often gives rise to widespread nationalist sentiments. And foreign intervention in internal politics, where the US president already has picks for Iranian leaders, is not exactly the sign of a democratic revolution.

But a long war, with casualties rising in Tehran, could mount public pressure against the regime. The outcome of that would likely be a civil war, in which case the US or Israel would have to provide assistance to the dissenters against the Iranian local strongmen, their forces, and maybe even their proxies. Is the Pentagon and US prepared to deal with the geopolitical engineering that is required to pull off an Iranian regime change?

**CROSSWORD**  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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5 Beach robe  
11 Michigan, for one  
12 Serengeti setting  
13 Certain something  
14 Like some winter days  
15 Fish food  
17 Water cooler  
18 Allergy sound  
22 Tea additive  
24 Knock  
25 "Do---say!"  
26 Play stub line  
27 Some carpets  
30 Zodiac dozen  
32 Comic strip unit  
33 Thurman of film  
34 Second-place winner  
38 Lunchbox lunch, informally  
41 Script bit  
42 Writer Susan  
43 Kind of palm  
44 Calls  
45 Shortly, in poems  
DOWN  
1 Thunder sound  
2 One of the Beatles  
3 European language  
4 Spooky gathering  
5 Let fly  
6 Financially solvent  
7 European language  
8 Tether  
9 Play part  
10 Dissenter's vote  
16 Piano part  
19 European language  
20 Sign  
21 Makes a choice  
22 Door fastener  
23 Workplace watchdog; Abbr.  
28 European language  
29 Water channel  
30 Nearest star  
31 Staunton of Harry Potter films  
35 Mysterious loch  
36 "Do--others..."  
37 Hammer end  
38 Try the tea  
39 Cigar bit  
40 Chinese leader

11-9

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T A P S O R I G I N  
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