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**Who Trusts Government?
Understanding Political Trust
among the Poor in Bangladesh**

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Who Trusts Government?

Understanding Political Trust among the Poor in Bangladesh

Naomi Hossain

INTRODUCTION

The notion that poor people's votes are bought under multiparty democracy has a fantastically strong hold on the imagination of the Bangladeshi elite. As with all myths, there are probably elements of truth – some people do accept payment for voting in a certain way, and others vote for patrons as the price of their protection. It is not the kind of practice that is easily measured, although the latest Afrobarometer survey found many more citizens of African nations believed vote-buying occurred than reported personal experience of it (Logan, Fujiwara and Parish 2006). It remains a powerful idea, yet explanations of the mechanics of vote-buying are often unconvincing. This is particularly true because they so often depend on poor people behaving like automatons in the polling booth, programmed to deliver the right vote.

The myth of vote-buying shows the gap in our understanding of the politics of poor people. In its effort to highlight the powerful constraints that limit the political choices of the poor, it closes our eyes to the fact that poor people nevertheless make political choices. It suggests a failure of the imagination of the elite and middle classes with respect to the politics that poor people might themselves bring to the polling booth. It signals, too, the extreme pessimism that shapes much thinking about the politics of poverty.¹ This paper tries to contribute to more realistic thinking on this issue, by demonstrating that even if their political values are sometimes hard to understand and counter-intuitive, this does not entail that their political views are uninformed or meaningless. The paper addresses this by drawing on original research into expectations of government among poor Bangladeshis, conducted in 2005. The focus is on explaining the most striking finding of that research, which was the moderate degree of trust in government displayed by poor Bangladeshis.

¹ See Moore (2003) for an explanation of the sources of this pessimism.

Why would poor Bangladeshis trust their government? There is a rich debate globally on the cultural and institutional factors that shape how political trust is formed, which section 2 draws on to identify explanations with potential for the Bangladesh case. The paper then turns to the findings about poor people's views of government as we found them to be in Bangladesh in 2005, in the core section 3. There is a discussion of the approach taken, including the analytical choices required by the limitations of the methods. This is followed by a discussion of the findings of good intentions and responsiveness to the poor, and of what government delivers for the poor. Here the paper considers the possible origins of ideas about government as the protector of the poor, contrasts the perception of responsive government with the machinery of government response, and looks at the evidence on what government has in fact delivered to the poor, and why.

The final section of the paper draws the discussion together. It concludes that trust in government was a rational response to the conditions and choices faced by the poor in Bangladesh during the democratic period 1991-2006. It argues that this political trust needs to be seen in its comparative context - compared to government in the past, and compared to their experiences of other institutions that affect their material wellbeing; this means that a positive trend in providing material wellbeing may be a significant feature of political trust among the poor. A second determining factor may be the limits of the location of the poor: part of being poor is having your access to people and institutions and knowledge filtered, so that your view on an institution like government is skewed and narrowed. And finally, these determinants of political trust among the poor are likely to differ from those that shape the politics of middle classes and elites in ways that are significant and enduring.

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE TRUST GOVERNMENT? EXPLANATIONS FROM THE GLOBAL EVIDENCE

What does the global political culture literature tell us about political trust among the developing country poor? There is a rich literature on issues of political trust, with an emphasis in recent debates on addressing the phenomenon of low or declining political trust - 'Why People Don't Trust Government'. This explores different meanings and dimensions of political trust, and debates whether this threatens support for democracy worldwide or is evidence of healthy questioning scepticism demonstrating stronger, not weaker, engagement

with politics. There are important differences in whether cultural or institutional explanations are given greater explanatory weight.² Overall, the evidence is consistent with widespread or growing political disenchantment or critical awareness in the advanced, mature democracies.

However, the focus has been on explaining patterns of cultural change in mature democracies that have not necessarily held in poor developing countries. The evidence on political values in poor developing countries is comparatively limited, but what there is does not suggest a pattern of low or declining political trust.³ On the contrary, there is some evidence of high levels of political trust in poor countries: both the first and second rounds of the Afrobarometer surveys found moderate to high levels of trust in public institutions, including in Presidents (Logan and Machado 2002; Bratton *et al* 2004), and the Latinobarómetro survey showed that over the decade, presidents and governments enjoyed overall rises in trust: 39 per cent in 1997, dipping to 31 per cent in 2003, and rising again to 47 per cent in 2006 (Corporación Latinobarómetro 2006). The evidence is inconclusive, but overall suggests a less marked tendency towards disenchantment.

So how do explanations of political disenchantment help explain political trust in developing countries? The most prominent explanations of political disenchantment in mature democracies have included change in cultural values. Once a basic level of material wellbeing is reasonably assured, the preoccupation with how government contributes to that recedes and ‘postmaterialist’ values emerge; these include, among other things, a more critical awareness of political processes. That awareness may also result from parallel processes of rising access to education and information, and how material wellbeing becomes

² Norris (1999) notes that political support is multidimensional, and suggests five objects of political support or trust: the political community, regime principles (values of the political system), regime performance, regime institutions and political actors. Norris 1999 and Klingemann 1999 in the same volume, both argue that the growth of critical public perspectives reflects deeper engagement with rather than detachment from matters political. Cultural explanations are stressed by Inglehart (post-materialist values; 1990); Putnam (eroding social capital, 1995) and Nevitte and Kanji (discrepant authority orientations; 2002). Newton and Norris (2000), Norris (1999) and Mishler and Rose (2005) suggest an interplay of cultural and institutional forces (in particular, evaluations of economic and political performance) to explain declining political trust, while Catterberg and Moreno (2005) view regime performance as particularly important.

³ One scholar’s search for global indicators of political legitimacy was hampered because the seven largest developing countries - China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Pakistan, Russia and Bangladesh, 50% of the world’s population, were often missing from multi-country datasets (Gilley 2006). Where data do exist, they are so limited as to fail to suggest a pattern of declining political trust across developing countries (see Annex Table 1 on the World Values Survey). Catterberg and Moreno find trust was declining in legislative bodies and bureaucracies in the new democracies of the former Eastern bloc, Latin America, South Africa, South Korea and Turkey (2005). But their sample contains no poor or Less Developed Countries.

detached from the performance of government. How might the thesis of postmaterialist values relate to the case of Bangladesh, and similar poor, developing countries?

The Bangladeshi poor are likely to remain preoccupied with how government contributes to their material wellbeing, because they lack this assurance. Partha Chatterjee's argument that the 'politics of the governed' is the politics of getting on the list for service delivery is highly relevant here. The political preoccupations of poor people are focused on resources, and in this respect different from – and often at odds with – the political preoccupations of elite civil society (2004). A similar difference may exist in the Bangladesh case. But looked at closely, this politics of the list also reveals a politics of identity and the desire for official recognition, and is not, therefore, only about material wellbeing and the distribution of resources. Evidence about meanings of citizenship similarly suggests that a sense of recognition and one of fair treatment are core to the conception of citizenship (Kabeer 2005). Recognition and a sense of fairness are about the terms of access to services; this means that politics of material welfare also brings into focus issues of a more 'postmaterialist' kind.

The cultural processes that lead to political disenchantment may also relate to the experiences and therefore the political value formation of middle and upper class Bangladeshis. It is certainly the case that elite Bangladeshi civil society is more or less professionally engaged in articulating criticism of government and politics, and therefore to display a level of critical awareness about government that other poorer citizens are unlikely to attain.

A second set of cultural explanations about political trust relates to traditional cultures and their attitudes towards authority. One study based on World Values Survey data for Argentina, Canada, Chile, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Spain, and the United States compares people's political values against their tendency to defer to authority. Levels of satisfaction with government were found to relate closely to 'authority orientations'. This meant that citizens of societies with greater overall tendencies to challenge authority report lower levels of satisfaction with government. By contrast, in societies where deference to authority is common, they tend to report more satisfaction, reflecting the greater legitimacy of public authority (Nevitte and Kanji 2002). In other contexts, positive assessments of government have been explained away in similar terms, as an '**overly rosy view of the diminished capabilities of the African state**' by scholars using the Afrobarometer survey data (Bratton *et al* 2004: 38, emphasis in original). Similarly, the suggestion is made that it is 'out of popular

deference to “big men,” [that] **most African presidents receive enviable approval ratings**’ (pp. 50, original emphasis).

While poor people often have limited information about government, it may not necessarily follow that their political views are tightly linked to a cultural deference to authority. What is particularly unhelpful about this frame is the implied judgement that such views reflect less penetrating or meaningful understandings of politics. If cultural values of deference are the critical factors shaping political values, we should expect that these would be reasonably enduring, at least compared to modern or ‘postmaterialist’ values. Yet whereas political disenchantment in rich countries appears to be rooted in cultural factors, political trust in newer democracies seems to relate more closely to how well government performs. This suggests that levels of political trust in these ‘traditional societies’ are more likely to move with economic growth, prosperity, and so on, than to endure on the basis of slower-changing cultural forms.

Arguments about the traditional deference to authority among poorer citizens also face the problem that poor citizens’ perceptions of corruption are commonly accepted at face value. It is difficult to reconcile the view that people can be simultaneously constrained by their deference to authority and free to volunteer views that the authorities are also highly corrupt. Of course, people’s political values are often inconsistent. And surveying perceived corruption is no easier than surveying trust in government.⁴ But if we trust their views on corruption, why should their views on political trust be any less reasonable?

Institutional explanations of political trust have more immediately obvious implications for the Bangladesh case. Institutional explanations, and in particular assessments of economic performance, appear to be more useful explanations of political values in many newer

⁴ Criticisms of Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index include that reliance on perceptions can lead to overstatement of the extent of corruption. This may be particularly true where there is a lack of transparency or generalised social trust. One example of the gap between perceived and experienced corruption relevant to the present discussion is in Logan, Fujiwara and Parish’s (2006) analysis of the most recent round of Afrobarometer, which found perceptions of corruption in government were considerably higher than actual experiences of it. Studies based on a public expenditure tracking survey in Bangladesh suggest that people’s perceptions of corruption are often fuelled by a lack of transparency, and reflect resource-constrained public institutions and lack of clarity around the rules for distribution (FMRP 2007). Other studies similarly suggest that reliance on perceptions may distort the picture of where the substantive corruption problem lies (BRAC 2006).

democracies compared to mature democracies (McAllister in Norris 1999; Nathan 2007; Catterberg and Moreno 2005).

But assessments of how institutions are performing, of how the state is ‘seen’, vary by who we are and how we engage with them, as Corbridge and colleagues demonstrate for the poor of eastern India (2005). Of course government performance is intended to affect different groups differently – the poor should be affected more by poverty reduction programmes, for example. But how the integrity and effectiveness of government are viewed will differ greatly depending on where people are located in relation to the state.

Some of these differences are illustrated by the striking recent example of Thailand, which brought to global attention the political trust gap between the poor and the middle class. The rise and fall of former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra took place against a divided backdrop of, on the one hand, strong trust among the poor, keen on his government’s emphasis on health and poverty, and on the other, perceptions of untenable corruption held by the middle classes and elite. When it happens that poor people’s political values conflict with more sceptical middle class views, a common explanation seems to be that this is because of the limits to how meaningful poor people’s political judgements can be because of the limitations of who they are and where they live. One view was that many rural people have:

low levels of knowledge about democracy and therefore low standards of judgment as to its achievement. In Thailand and Tanzania, for example, rural dwellers can be characterized ... as “uncritical citizens,” who tend to accept whatever form of governance is delivered by leaders from the capital city (Bratton, Chu and Lagos 2006: 18).

One factor in limiting knowledge about government may be the familiar problem, apparently not so far affected by improvements in media and communications, that poor people are often very dependent on state broadcasting for their information about government. Surveys often reveal high levels of trust in state broadcasters which typically portray incumbents favourably. And dependence on public news broadcasts does appear to have contributed to poor people’s faith in the political leadership in Bangladesh, as we will see below.

It is worth noting that if poor people lack information on which to make more conventional political judgements, it does not appear to be because they lack interest or engagement in politics. There is evidence that rural people are more and poorer people equally likely to vote as their urban and better-off fellow citizens in developing countries, in a pattern which differs markedly from the developed world (Bratton, Chu and Lagos, 2006).

Turning next to the findings about political trust among the poor in Bangladesh in 2005, we will look at how these different explanations from the global evidence illuminate the evidence from Bangladesh

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AMONG THE BANGLADESHI POOR

The Approach and its Limitations

The research that yielded these unexpected findings about trust in government originally aimed to study expectations of government among the poor. There is evidence that even amid the crises of post-independence, there were political limits to how much neglect of the poor would be accepted without overt resistance. Governmental legitimacy was grounded in, minimally, efforts to assist during crises and to protect the limited public entitlements of the poor against elite capture and corruption.⁵ But after 35 years of independence and a decade and a half of multiparty democracy, there had been no large-scale famine since 1974, social sector spending had risen, natural disasters were being managed, with the whole supported by a moderately buoyant, well-managed economy. The background to the research was that it looked like a good time to ask questions about the relationship between government and the poor. What did poor people expect from government? Had their standards of governmental performance risen, so that they expected more than the basic provision of protection against famine and the rule of law?

There was no obvious methodological model for the research, so the team experimented, finally settling open-ended focus group discussions, with a focus on assessing how specific sectors had performed. Images were used to initiate discussions of definitions and meanings;

⁵ Some of these issues are explored in Adnan's review of village studies of the 1970s and 1980s (1990). Jahangir (1995) explores the politics of hunger, while Chen (1986) and Kramsjö and Wood (1992) document instances of resistance to elite capture of resources intended for the poor.

timelines were used to construct political histories; and groups ranked what they thought should be the governmental priorities. Discussions were organised with 22 small groups of men or women, usually neighbours or people from similar occupational groups, most of whom were acquainted with each other in advance. These group characteristics helped to establish a degree of rapport among the participants, which the researchers felt might be particularly important given that the topics to be discussed could be perceived as sensitive. The discussions took place in three locations: Dhaka city; the remote rural and extremely poor district of Nilphamari; and in the district of Chapainawabganj, which has a rich history of peasant resistance.

Most of the researchers had considerable experience in the facilitation of focus group discussions, and most were also trained in social anthropology. Efforts were made to ensure all were able to participate actively, partly through the use of images and participatory methods such as timelines constructed as a group. These appeared to help open up the discussion, and to stimulate interest and confidence to participate among most participants. However, it was not always possible to encourage all participants to speak, particularly about some of the more complex and more potentially controversial issues. In the analysis of the material generated through these focus groups, an effort was made to identify topics and themes that enjoyed the most significant degree of consensus or broad agreement. The findings discussed in the present paper are an example of a set of issues on which attitudes and beliefs appeared to be substantially shared, other than differences of degree and on specific points. Researchers worked in pairs to try to ensure the discussions were participative and yet also steered towards the topics of interest, while also maintaining an accurate record of discussions. This also enabled one more and one less experienced researcher to be paired. All discussions were conducted in Bangla, and most were recorded. The process of analysis of the findings involved group discussion among all the researchers to explore their experiences and reflect on what they felt were the key findings from the 22 focus groups. This was followed by a more structured analysis of the note or audio records of the discussions, organised around specific themes and questions.

Many of these discussions were characterised by animated discussions about government, covering its scope and purpose, its personnel and how they could be accessed, its performance and legitimacy, with particular reference to food security, education and law and order; accountability and transparency, including corruption; and the rules of protest.

Conducting the research taught us much about the degree and nature of political engagement. Politics is a popular preoccupation, is the first thing to note. Those based in Dhaka had most direct engagement with parties, and men from the *Shantal* minority groups with strong traditions of protest were the most critically aware. Yet discussion of politics was reportedly widespread, as was access to television or radio news broadcasts.⁶ Many people reported attending party rallies and meetings when invited – both a form of entertainment and an important symbol of their recognition;⁷ young men are regular visitors to neighbourhood political party ‘clubs’; everyone votes, in what is, again, a popular festival and celebratory atmosphere.⁸ A significant exception to this general picture of political engagement was that of the extremely poor women, for who matters of politics and government seemed both more opaque and, frankly, less interesting.

Research which involves inviting relatively powerless participants to speak about more powerful structures and individuals risks that fear or what others view as cultural deference to authority may prevent them from speaking freely. This is a particular concern here, given the need to explain findings consistent with such a concern. Could the use of one-off focus group discussions have been so superficial as to have failed to uncover the deeper antagonisms between poor people and government? It is possible. It is also true that ethnographic, case study or other more in-depth methods are preferable for a deeper understanding of government-poor relations. But if it is only through the deeper and more enduring relationships established through ethnography that political culture can be adequately studied, this is a failure that reaches well beyond the present research. We felt the issue was interesting enough to study, even with imperfect methods, and that it was possible to make sense of the findings within the limitations of the approach.

⁶ A 2006 survey of media use found 65 per cent of adults in Bangladesh reported watching television at least once a week, and 41 per cent of households owning televisions, up from 8 per cent in 1995 (cited in BRAC 2006). Broadcast media remain dominated by public broadcasting, although there has been growth in private cable channels (since the 1990s) and radio stations (in Dhaka only, since 2006).

⁷ The accounts of citizenship in Kabeer (2005) shared an emphasis on the importance of recognition.

⁸ The idea that politics may be part of popular culture is at odds with the pessimism and indifference that characterises the Critical Citizens and Disaffected Democrats of contemporary advanced democracies. By contrast, Asian electoral politics in the 2000s has been characterised by strikingly popular elements with definite mass appeal - film stars and celebrity culture in Indonesia, the Philippines and India, ironic blogs and internet-based mobilisation in Thailand and South Korea, popular theatre in India, and lively mass media campaigns everywhere. In the Philippines, political campaigns take on the features of cockfights, and in Malaysia, too, elections are an opportunity for gambling (chapters in Chua (ed.) 2007). Poor people’s interest in politics in Bangladesh makes more sense when seen within this wider context of popular engagement.

One way of reading the findings that takes into account how constraint and the polite forms shape what is said about government is to treat them as part of public discourse. Looked at in this way, it is obvious that these expressions may reflect some caution in what poor people say about powerful actors, and awareness of the limits to acceptable public discourse about the powerful. But caution and a tendency to rose-tint government did not appear to hobble public criticism of government completely: poor people with whom we spoke criticised local elites as corrupt and self-serving, they discussed their suspicion of government ‘spies’, and they argued, often angrily, that government was failing in its clear responsibility to act on food price inflation. This suggests that acceptable public discourse among the poor allows for disaffection.

The Elements of Political Trust among the Poor

What evidence supports the finding of political trust among the Bangladeshi poor? The elements of political trust among the poor include: the belief that government is a) well-intentioned and b) moderately responsive to the poor, and that c) government has a reasonable record of delivering what poor people need. We will look at each of these findings next, exploring each in relation to what happened to affect the relationship between government and the poor during the period.

Government is Well-intentioned with Respect to the Poor

Government was felt to be generally well-intentioned with respect to the poor, but this depended on a narrow definition of government, focusing on the elected political leadership, specifically the Prime Minister and her ministers. People were hesitant about viewing other institutions and arms as ‘government’ proper. Although they recognised that local government distributes resources from central government, they did not think that meant they were *shorkar* precisely. This may explain why the term *sthaniyo shorkar* (local government), which highlights its links to the centre, is less commonly used than the universal ‘chairman’ and ‘member’, which stress their significance as local representatives. One reason there may be reluctance to include local government within a pro-poor definition of well-intentioned government may be that local representatives are a useful explanation of why policies that sound so well-intentioned often fall short on the ground. This is linked to beliefs that appear

to be common among poor people about problems of corruption being concentrated among locally powerful actors. It suggests an understandable desire to blame those whose actions can be observed, and who are ready to hand. Some similar rationale may explain why other public officials were not seen as part of *shorkar* proper, but as employees of government or *shorkari lok* (the government's people).

It is interesting that while political leadership as government could be credited with pro-poor intentions, political parties were widely understood to be self-interested groups, whose interests could, but did not necessarily or often enough, coincide with the interests of the poor. Political parties were not confused with government, even though state institutions and processes had been heavily marked by partisan affiliation by the mid-2000s. Many participants had a good grasp of political history, particularly key events to do with how the two main parties had alternated in power over the previous 15 years. Possibly this helped create a stable idea of government as distinct from party. Political party activity has become increasingly more common at the local level since 1991, so many ordinary citizens will be more familiar with political parties than they once were, and be able to see the difference firsthand. People in Nilphamari cited the example of the unpopular nephew of the then-Prime Minister to illustrate the distinction between party and government: although they acknowledged his power, local people vehemently denied he was part of government.

The perception was that government was growing in size and reach and impact, and that this was a good thing. The language used was sometimes of benevolence and protection - government cast as a very big patron. Metaphors of family were common, so that the head of the government was likened to the head of a very large family, with the implied acceptance of a duty of care. Also common was the description of the Prime Minister as *deshar raja* (literally, the king of the country). This did not seem to suggest heredity: while parties were calmly accepted as dynastic, it was widely known that *rajas* change after each election.⁹

Two definitions of the purpose or role of *shorkar* emerged. The first was neutral, centring on the management of public affairs, as in the body that 'manages the state' (according to rickshaw-pullers in the poor northern district of Nilphamari) or 'runs the country' (women

⁹ The *raja* description may have its own pro-poor connotations in Bengal, where, to a greater degree than elsewhere in the subcontinent, fitness to rule or 'kingship' has been rooted more in the protection of the than in ritual power or hereditary rule (Greenough, 1983; Price, 1989).

NGO group members, also in Nilphamari). The second was normative, and stressed that government was about delivering good things to the *jonogon* (the general people) or the *public* (which people believe to be a Bengali word, and which has definite connotations of political engagement). Government was also defined as having specific responsibilities to the poor: small traders explained government as ‘those who have taken full responsibility for looking after us’, while Dhaka rickshaw-pullers felt government was ‘for poor people, for making sure poor people can eat and survive decently’.

The idea that government is in some way special to the poor may have emerged from the founding myths of nationhood. Independence was won through a struggle against the economic oppression of poverty and inequality as well as political domination and cultural repression, which national sovereignty was to address.¹⁰ And independence is recent enough (1971) that many of those who struggled are still alive and in positions of political leadership, so that the meaning and substance of independence remain live issues within contemporary political competition, including at the local level. A story from a research colleague brought this to life: a small farmer in Kishoreganj in 2006 had spoken of how he had been cheated of a relief card by local party men. He did so by stating that ‘*Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal)’ has now turned into ‘mercenary Bangladesh,’¹¹ contrasting the gap between the shared prosperity and wellbeing that symbolised the goals of the independence struggle, and his present day struggle to get the relief card that was his by right.

It is true that the government initially struggled to establish progress on poverty, particularly in the crisis-ridden 1970s and 1980s. But as we will look at in more detail below, from the 1990s onwards, considerably faster progress was being achieved. And throughout, government has remained comparatively important as provider of food security and protection against natural disasters, within a larger process of state expansion over 36 years of national sovereignty.

Looked at from this perspective, no other institution of national stature comes close as an alternative champion of the poor. Political parties of the left are chronically weak and fragmented, with none making a credible claim to represent the poor. The two main parties

¹⁰ The classic account is Maniruzzaman (1980).

¹¹ I am grateful to Mrinmoy Samadder for bringing this to my attention, from his research into local party politics (summarised in BRAC 2006).

do not appear to have different positions on poverty, enjoy special claims to represent the poor, or to compete between each other over specific poverty policies (Hossain 2005). While the situation for both religious organisations and trade unions may be changing, neither has to date championed causes of particular relevance to the rural poor masses.

The obvious candidate for pro-poor champion in national public life is the highly effective, large-scale development NGOs. NGOs have succeeded in service delivery, but their claims to represent the interests of the poor have often lacked credibility. This has partly been because claims to collective representation of the poor have been dented by troubles around partisan affiliation of a segment of NGOs in the mid-2000s (World Bank 2006; White 1999). But the emphasis on credit in NGO development activity has also shaped NGO relations with their own clientele. As microfinance has dominated activity since the 1990s, NGOs are increasingly synonymous with suppliers of credit; this means that while NGOs may be viewed as useful service-providers, the relationship is in many respects the relationship of money-lender to borrower. The need to pay interest – often under duress – to NGOs makes it particularly unlikely that they will be perceived as champions of the poor. It is not surprising, then, that opinion polls suggest that NGOs and microfinance providers enjoy less grassroots popularity than might be expected from how they are feted internationally (see BBC 2005).

Government is moderately responsive

Government was also deemed moderately responsive to the poor, although it was never clear how it comes to know their needs. The system is opaque and direct communication is difficult. Poor people felt their dependence on brokers or community leaders limited their access to government; but there was also an emerging sense that the monopoly on official access was breaking down in parts, as people acquired more mobility, literacy and media access. Some people believed that government acquires its information about the poor and their needs through the media, others that ‘government people’, party activists and MPs’ staff, feed information upwards. A few spoke of government ‘spies’ embedded in communities, suggesting discomfort about the idea that government could find out what people were doing in secret. International influence was recognised to be strong, with some views that the ultimate *malik* (proprietor) of government was the United Nations or, because of aid dependence, the international community. The UN was believed to have some power to

replace government should it fail, and government was understood to depend on the UN for approval of its activities.

While it was not clear how government knows of its poor citizen's needs, there was faith in democratic accountability as a source of pressure to respond to them. While many detected an element of altruism among selected politicians, the bigger picture was that government helps the poor because it is in its interests to do so. One woman in Nachole explained the special claims of the poor on government: 'Did the rich vote the government in? No, the poor did. So of course the government will do what they want.' Other responses were less complacent about their electoral power:

Sometimes they do what the poor want, but 95 out of a 100 times they don't.

The other 5 times is during elections, because if they don't win the vote, they won't be elected.

There was a palpable and understandable pride when poor people talked about having voted to successfully unseat political leaders. But faith in the democratic process might well have been shaken by faulty elections or the incremental progress alongside numerous setbacks experienced by the poor. But by 2005, each of the three competitive multiparty elections had brought a new government to power, accompanied by renewed commitment to progress on poverty reduction and service delivery. It may be for these reasons that faith in elections as the ultimate source of governmental accountability to the poor was strong.

In between elections, however, accountability to the poor was clearly limited, but under conditions of last resort, collective action or protest was noted as the means of pressuring an unresponsive government. Our research could only dip into the rich political culture of protest that governs when, where and the forms of protest against government, including rules about when restraint is appropriate. There was some faith in the power of protest and the threat of protest as a corrective on government action. The *public* was depicted as a volatile entity, easy to anger and in the interests of government to placate. Yet aggressive or destructive forms – hartal (strikes) and *bhang chur* (riot) - were seen as the preserve of opposition political parties, and more harmful than good for the *public*. More acceptable and less risky forms of protest included petitions to the chief local administrative official and group visits to local government offices. Many poor people commented on a degree of

caution in how government handles the *public*, suggesting awareness of its latent power. But caution was clearly exercised on both sides. ‘What can you do? For five years we will have to suffer’, remarked one rickshaw-puller in Nilphamari on the issue of what could be done about a government that was failing to respond to the needs of the poor.

It makes some sense that there should be little clarity about how government comes to respond to the poor, because there has been little visible progress in strengthening formal mechanisms for more accountability to the poor. Efforts led by the state to create more responsive institutions have been limited and reversible. Decentralisation of the public administration, in particular, can be summarised as having been short-lived, too closely aligned to competitive partisan agendas, and prone to local elite capture. Evidence of positive results for the poor have been limited.¹²

Civil society accountability initiatives have also been surprisingly weak in Bangladesh, at least, compared to the institutionalised successes of activism around social accountability in the Bolivian Law of Popular Participation or India’s much-emulated Right to Information Act (Goetz and Jenkins 2005). Bangladeshi NGOs have been more prominent as public service delivery agents, and efforts to promote accountability to the poor has rarely resulted in enduring change (Thomas *et al* 2003).

One possibility is that it was through local party politics that government could achieve its responsiveness. Evidence is sketchy, but democratic political competition appears to have encouraged both major parties to build party structures reaching deeper into rural society through the 1991-2006 democratic period. Yet neither party succeeded in establishing systems of internal democracy at local or other levels.¹³

To explain why poor Bangladeshis believe their government and/or their political leaders to be responsive, it may help to try to recognise the persuasive power of state television, particularly broadcasts about political leaders. Political leaders appear to be successful in their use of state television to promote views of their personal benevolence, in a clear

¹² Bangladesh’s decentralisation experiments in the 1980s failed to produce pro-poor institutions; more recent efforts have also been stalled and reversed (Crook and Sverrisson 2003, BRAC 2006).

¹³ Research into local party politics in Kishoreganj in 2006 found party structures had ‘decentralised’ and a growing demand for local candidates, but party power remained centralised (BRAC 2006).

example of the acts through which governments claim their legitimacy (Barker 2001). Gupta found rural north Indians had accepted the (state) television view that the then-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was ‘for all the poor’, and that any problems with policies were rooted in implementation, not intentions (1995: 391). Similarly, poor Bangladeshi women with whom we spoke were highly impressed by broadcasts showing the then-Prime Minister personally distributing goats to women who looked very like themselves. Several men also described how the government was bringing ‘the tide of development’ to the country, along lines broadcast by state television. It may indeed be easier to believe that the Prime Minister personally cares for poor people like yourself when you regularly witness her distributing shawls and rice with her own hands, and have reasons to believe that it is local corruption that limits your own access to such benefits. It is interesting that (state) television seems to have such power in support of political trust, compared to how it is believed to destroy trust in advanced democracies (the ‘video malaise’ thesis).¹⁴ It is no doubt awareness of this power that has caused Bangladesh governments to exercise tight control of terrestrial television which now reaches a majority of the population.¹⁵

Government (sometimes) delivers for the poor

There was a strong sense that the power and reach of government had increased over time. Many viewed this as progress, which could be read directly off the fact of ‘more roads, government workers, and peace in the country’. *Shantal* men in Nachole dissented, arguing that people were less fearful of government, and less ‘simple’ than before. Governmental performance appeared to be judged largely in terms of how it had delivered peace, infrastructure, social services, and law and order. A bridge connecting the north to the centre was cited by petty traders and rickshaw-pullers in the north as a significant improvement in communications. Expanded provision of primary schooling had registered widely, and women seemed particularly struck by this as evidence of government’s achievements for the

¹⁴ Gupta found that television promoted a favourable view of Rajiv Gandhi’s personal attitudes towards the poor (1996). The evidence on how television shapes political values in mature democracies suggests that watching news and current affairs may deepen political engagement, rather than the reverse (Hooghe 2002). Television is increasingly the vehicle through which politics becomes part of popular culture in Asia, although internet and mobile technologies are also increasing (Chua 2007).

¹⁵ The government tried to control and eventually closed a popular terrestrial television channel whose independent news programme was extremely popular. Private television channels are permitted to broadcast news programmes, but they must be followed by broadcasts of the state Bangladesh Television news programme. Ironically, this usually only succeeds in highlighting the pro-government bias of state news.

poor, possibly the result of the everyday visibility of schools, and of the high profile public policy efforts to expand access; the expansion also appears to have met latent demand and to have been genuinely popular (Hossain and Kabeer, 2004). More direct assistance in the form of regular pensions for the elderly and widowed poor and other relief goods were also noted, and the involvement of the army in relief distribution was believed to eliminate corruption. Law and order was also felt to have improved, largely because of the introduction of RAB (Rapid Action Battalion, a crime-fighting force introduced in 2004).

The worst government failure was food price rises. The animated and free-flowing discussions that this generated were one indication that the views on government being proffered were likely to be balanced and 'genuine'. People spoke heatedly of increasing difficulties in feeding families, comparing the performance of the two parties of government on food price controls. Of those with whom we spoke in 2005, a small proportion felt that economic conditions such as rising demand and high international oil prices were factors, and hoarding was also cited. But across the board, government was directly blamed for its inaction on food prices, and there was agreement that the government could and should take action to lower prices by issuing an edict or selling stockpiles of grain at subsidized prices.

Corruption was also discussed as a problem affecting government. Again, this suggested that there was little hesitancy about being critical of government where it deserved it. But blame was typically directed locally, at government employees, party hangers-on, and local government representatives. There was what we felt to be an unwillingness to discuss corruption in higher quarters, although this may have reflected the facts of location affording personal experience or suspicion of corruption. Probing on the illicit sale of government drugs from local health facilities, for instance, elicited the response that the local chairman and doctors were complicit; there was no reference to the possibility of dodgy procurement deals involving high-ranking actors within the Ministry. It is instructive that Gupta's account of discourses of corruption among rural people in north India documents the same contrast between the political leadership as 'benevolent and charitable' in contrast to corrupt local officials (1995: 390). Gupta also notes that the perception of corruption as local may reflect the fact that local corruption is usually a 'high-volume' business involving many customers, as compared to grand corruption, which is better concealed from ordinary citizens. Corbridge *et al* note that 'in the eyes of many villages in [Madhya Pradesh in India], decentralization has become little more than a recipe for the greater looting of the state' (2005: 228). Location

is clearly an important determinant of how poor people perceive the state and corruption within it.

Perceptions of corruption are one of a number of ways in which positive perceptions of government are at odds with the political preferences of middle classes and elites. Government efforts to expand the social safety net have been popular with the poor and local elites, but sections of the national elite have been hostile to programmes to protect the unproductive poor, and perceive the need for interventions that enhance the productivity of the poor; the expansion of primary education appears to have met this requirement (Hossain 2005). Human rights activists within domestic civil society and their champions within the donor community have opposed the introduction of the composite paramilitary crime-fighting force RAB, with particular reference to the extra-judicial murders barely concealed as accidental deaths through 'cross-fire'. Yet the popularity of RAB is unquestionably high, because many ordinary citizens feel that the crackdown on crime has worked, and they feel safer. In keeping with an understanding of the popular cultural dimensions of politics, it should be noted that RAB's success owes something to the high drama they bring to crime-fighting: with their all-black paramilitary gear, all-weather dark glasses and bandannas, their close resemblance to the heroes and villains of popular entertainment, and the strong visual impact of their presence is no accident.

Poor people's political views make most sense in the context of what government has delivered. Mass poverty persists in Bangladesh, with most recent estimates suggesting that 40 per cent of the population was living below the poverty line, and 25 per cent were classified as 'extremely poor' in 2005 (BBS 2006). These are not figures to be proud of. But the unpromising conditions in Bangladesh at the time of its independence make its modest achievements all the more remarkable. Other gains included the achievement of gender parity at primary and secondary school; rapid declines in infant and under 5 mortality rates, and a narrowing of the rural-urban gap in infant mortality; declining fertility rates; high immunization coverage; and some reduction in the severity and extent of malnutrition (BIDS 2001; World Bank 2003; World Bank 2005; Deolalikar 2005). While poverty, vulnerability and deprivation remain severe and widespread, the 1990s saw progress being achieved at such a pace that by the 2000s, Bangladesh compared favourably on some indicators with other countries in the region, and with others at comparable levels of economic development (Sen and Hulme 2007). This was possible because of economic policies broadly geared

towards pro-poor growth, including provision of basic education, rural infrastructure, natural disaster management, social protection, and primary and preventive health care (Sen, Mujeri and Shahabuddin 2006).

Notably, it was during the democratic period 1991-2006, particularly up to the early 2000s, that these gains were most rapid. The coincidence is so perfect that it is surprising that so little discussion has taken place to date about how these related to democratic politics. Is there any evidence to suggest that policies that explicitly aimed to benefit the poor – the expansion of primary schooling, the establishment of new safety nets for the vulnerable elderly and widowed poor, and primary healthcare and nutrition programmes – resulted from the pressures of democratic accountability on government to respond to the poor?

One analysis of social sector policies during the period 1991-2006 suggests that the pressures of democracy did play such a role. Gains in the social sectors were mainly achievements of expanded access, which were politically popular, particularly (as we have seen) among the rural poor. And contrary to widespread belief, government was responsible for some of the key service expansions of the period, not NGOs. Yet problems of corruption, poor service quality, and the fragility of some of these gains highlight that these new policies emerged out of a rough kind of responsiveness to the rural poor which was the expression of the politics of patronage, and bore little relationship to rule-based democratic governance (Hossain and Osman 2007). Emphasis on political popularity and maximum visibility ensured little attention was paid to quality or endurance, so popular participation and functioning systems of accountability were never effectively part of these new social policies. To the extent that poor people could influence how these services operated, it was through informal means (FMRP 2007). By 2006, this meant resorting to the riot and revolt that many poor people with whom we spoke in 2005 appeared to hope were acts of the past.

CONCLUSIONS: EXPLAINING POLITICAL TRUST AMONG POOR CITIZENS

Looked at within the context of what has changed in Bangladesh, there are some good reasons for the Bangladeshi poor to display the moderate degree of trust in government identified. The evidence did not suggest that poor people's politics were being forced by a suffocating deference to authority. There may be polite ways of talking about politics, but this appears to leave room for frank criticism within public discourse, if people are given the

space to raise issues they consider to be important, and to talk about these in terms that are meaningful to them. It is clear from how they speak that the language and ideas of democratic political culture are new to the poor citizens of Bangladesh. There was a lot of shifting between the old language of dependence on benevolent patrons and the new, knowing expressions of democratic participation: *public, election, party*. This capacity to blend images of benevolent political leaders with beliefs in the power of the ballot appears to be distinctive of the political culture of the poor. It would be an error to see in this only the workings of traditional culture inhibiting political expression, but equally mistaken to forget that older forms continue to matter.

Particularly when seen in the context of the material welfare government has delivered for the poor in the democratic period, poor people's views made considerable sense. Their reasons for viewing government as a protector of the poor include that it has performed reasonably well in comparative perspective: compared to previously, and compared to other institutions. There is a feeling of being empowered as voters, and a sense that democracy leads to accountability. Government is felt to be responsive, but without any visible means of direct communication between government and poor. Political trust among the Bangladeshi poor in 2005 was rooted in an evaluation of performance, but based on a sense that there was an improving trend. It was also based in an implicit contrast between government and other institutions, in which government, perhaps because of how its distance obscures its worst features from the poor, comes off well.

While political trust among the poor turns out to be considered and meaningful, there are specific ways in which poor people's understandings of government are limited. Knowledge of government may be heavily filtered through state television broadcasts and the brokers through whom they access the bureaucracy or politicians, for instance. Experience of government is also vital: what they expect from government is shaped by what they have known so far, just as what they know about corruption is quite naturally shaped by how it looks like from where they stand in the queue. This often entails a substantial difference between how government looks to the poor compared to the view from the middle class or the elite.

What may be common across contexts is a sense of optimism that poor people are getting better off, and that government plays a relatively strong role in that. The perception of this may be distorted by the limited knowledge and experience of the poor, but it must nevertheless be rooted in lived experience of positive change. And it does not seem to be just what the poor are gaining, but also the terms on which they are gaining it, that matters to their political values. For the Bangladeshi poor, there was pride in the sense that their votes and support could to some extent influence government.

Yet the Bangladesh case also shows how the perceptions of the poor may be skewed, and, therefore, how vulnerable they may be to rapid change. Speaking to poor people in 2005, there had been hesitancy about the familiar but risky politics of confrontation and protests. But one year on, and 2006 was marked by widespread direct action, amidst an increasingly rancorous political debate about electoral and other governance failures. Street rioters demanding electricity and garments workers demanding a living wage reflected the failures of formal systems to communicate with and respond to poor people. As these failures piled up in a growing list of grievances, the violence of this period could be said to have demonstrated the illusion of governmental responsiveness to the poor, a responsiveness which may more correctly have been seen as the result of effective party-run patronage machines.

These events are likely to have sorely tested trust in democratic government in Bangladesh. But if the explanation offered here of the determinants of political trust is correct, there may be more serious concerns. In January 2007, a military-backed interim government was installed with the mandate of civil society and the international community to reform electoral and political governance and eradicate corruption, as a precursor to the re-establishment of democratic elections scheduled for late 2008. This ambitious reform agenda has been hampered by continuing sharp rises in the prices of essential foods, fertiliser shortages, floods, a catastrophic cyclone in the south, and a slowdown in economic growth. If the analysis presented here is correct, the reversal in material welfare this entails is likely to seriously dent faith in the process of reform among the poor masses.

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ANNEX

Annex Table 1.
Trends in Reported Confidence in Institutions in Poor and Developing Countries,
1990-2002

Survey years	Bangla- desh	China	India	Mexico	Nigeria	Pakistan	Peru	Philip- pines	South Africa
	1996, 2002	1990, 1995, 2001	1990, 1995, 2001	1990, 1996, 2000	1990, 1995, 2000	1997, 2001	1996, 2001	1996, 2001	1990, 1996
Government	↑	No data	↑	No trend	↑	No data	↓	↓	No data
Political parties	↑	↑	↓	↓	No trend	↓	↑	↑	↓
Parliament	↑	↑	No trend	No trend	No trend	No data	↓	↑	↑
Civil service	↑	↓	↓	No trend	No trend	↓	↓	↑	↓
Police	↑	↑	↓	↓	No trend	↑	↓	↑	↑
Armed forces	↑	↑	↓	No trend	No trend	↓	↓	↑	↓
Television	↑	No data	↑	↓	No trend	↓	↓	↑	No data
The press	↑	↑	↓	No trend	No trend	↓	↓	↓	↓
Environmental Movement	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	No data
Women's movement	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑	↑	No data
The UN	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	No data	↓	↓	No data

Source: World Values Survey data, calculated online. All developing countries for which more than one data point was available were included.

Notes: An upward (downward) trend was identified where the % of respondents reporting having 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in the institution had risen (declined) between the first and last years available. 'No trend' indicates that more than two data points were available and a 'V' or inverted 'V' shape was found.