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Naomi Hossain

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devtrac@soas.ac.uk

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Abstract

1974 saw the first - and last - famine in independent Bangladesh. The disaster killed two per cent of the population and caused a crisis of legitimacy for the new leadership. Its catastrophic aftermath saw the emergence of an agreement among ruling elites and citizens that protection against mass starvation was a priority for the legitimation of political rule. This article draws on the 1974 Bangladesh famine to revisit theories of the politics of famine at a time when episodes of mass starvation are on the rise. The effort at theory-building draws specific attention to how to incorporate the geopolitics of famine and humanitarian relief into the analysis of the political reasons famines occur or are not prevented.

Keywords

Bangladesh
Famine
Politics of famine
Mass starvation
Disaster
International aid
Food aid

1. Introduction

The 1974 famine was the first and last episode of mass starvation in independent Bangladesh. The famine struck a new nation with a history of famines and other disasters resulting from its location in the Bay of Bengal and vulnerability to global economic volatility. When the famine struck, poverty and malnutrition were chronic after centuries of colonial and neo-colonial rule, exacerbated by the war of liberation from Pakistan in 1971. Disasters had played a major role in political history: the liberation war was triggered in part by the callous response of Pakistani rulers to the 1970 Bhola cyclone (Hossain 2018), while the Indian independence struggle against British rule was energised by the 1943-44 Bengal famine (Mukherjee 2011). By 1974, a pattern of political history had been established in which entrenched rulers lost legitimacy and faced opposition from failures to protect people against crises of subsistence and survival (Hossain 2017).

This paper has two aims. First, it aims to analyse the politics of the 1974 famine. Although it killed around 1.5 million people, it has largely been ignored since its appearance as a case study in Amartya Sen’s ground-breaking essay on the causes of famine (Sen 1981).

The present article reviews debates about the causes of the 1974 famine and explores its political effects. The aftermath of the famine saw the destruction of a regime that had seemed powerful and popular after its leading role in the struggle for national independence. Among its political effects were recognition that famine incurred high political costs. After 1974, systems to prevent and mitigate mass starvation were accorded a high priority, and Bangladesh has not seen episodes of mass starvation since (Hossain 2017).

The second aim is to contribute to famine theorising. Focusing on the political aftermath of famines shows the emergence of what Alex de Waal has termed an 'anti-famine social contract', binding commitments to prevent and protect against mass food insecurity. A key proposition here is that the elements of such a contract or commitment can be discerned in Bangladesh post-1974, and include investment in and liberalisation of agriculture and agrarian markets, targeted social transfers, and early warning and foodgrain reserve management systems, all systems relatively well-resourced, authorised and protected from undue political influence.[i] These elements have broadly shaped public policies on food security and social protection since 1974 (Hossain 2017).

The article is organised as follows. The next section reviews recent famine theorising and key hypotheses about the political dimensions of famine, including Amartya Sen's assertions about democracy as a famine preventive, Dan Banik's specification of the Sen claims, critiques by Olivier Rubin, de Waal's work on 'anti-famine social contracts'. De Waal's later work and Jenny Edkins' analysis of mass starvation as intentional political acts are relevant, as is David Keen's account of the 'benefits of famine'. The application of selectorate theory to famine causation is also explored, in relation to the role of international aid agencies.

The following section describes the famine, providing the context, a summary of arguments regarding its causes, and a brief account of its incidence. This is followed by an account of the political aftermath and reforms following the famine in Bangladesh. This section draws also on evidence of the political effects of other famines elsewhere in the world. A concluding section summarises the main arguments about the political effects of the Bangladesh famine, and the implications for famine theorising.

2. Theories of famine politics

How can we understand why famines were prevented in Bangladesh after 1974, in what was a 'faminogenic' (Marcus 2003) context for decades after? Common sense theories assume famines occur because of a decline in the availability of food because of ecological disasters, war, or population growth (Devereux 1993). Such explanations are of limited help here. In the years since 1974, Bangladesh experienced major floods and cyclones, and its population more than doubled. Yet it also undertook significant investment in food security and disaster response, financed by external aid. It created space for international and domestic non-state actors to work with impoverished groups. These policies endured across administrations and regime types, relatively well-insulated against the vagaries of politics at home and abroad (Hossain 2017). In other

words, intentional action was taken to prevent mass hunger and to alleviate its acute forms in Bangladesh. It is therefore necessary to understand the determinants of this intentional action to prevent famine after 1974. Ecological and demographic factors are not irrelevant, but they cannot be the determinants of successful prevention of mass starvation following the famine. To understand why actions were intentionally taken to prevent famine it is helpful to turn to theories of the politics of famine.

The ‘new’ politics of famine

Amartya Sen’s groundbreaking essay ‘Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation’ proved that famine resulted when people could not access food – not necessarily because not enough food was available, moving explanations of famine away from their ecological and Malthusian roots and towards analysis of the reasons people lack or lose their ability to access sufficient food (Devereux 2006b; Rubin 2019). Following this breakthrough, famine theory took a political turn, reflecting the ‘complex political emergencies’ of ecological collapse, decimated livelihoods, violent conflict and low levels of stateness that characterised recent famines (Devereux 2006a). These theoretical shifts treat politics as central, with an ‘analytical focus on failures to prevent famine, rather than on the triggers of food shortage or disrupted access to food' (Devereux 2006a, 7).

Sen’s other contribution to theories of famine politics, the proposition that famines do not occur in democracies with a free press, has had a more chequered career (Devereux 2001; Rubin 2009; Burchi 2011; Rubin 2011). It has spawned multiple arguments and empirical tests, including Dan Banik’s study of the political and institutional determinants of starvation in democratic India (Banik 2007), and Olivier Rubin’s cross-country comparative analysis (Rubin 2009; 2008; 2011). Results from both suggest mixed but weak support for the proposition that democracy and a free press are sufficient to deter famine, or even that they make famine less likely. One reason is that democratic institutions do not necessarily generate strong incentives to prevent or mitigate starvation. In the Indian state of Orissa (now Odisha) incoming governments blamed the previous party and concealed evidence of hunger on their own watch, while local collective action was too weak to make effective demands on an also weak local government system (Banik 2007). Democratic competition can actually hinder famine relief and prevention. Citing Paul Brass’s account of the Bihar famine in the 1960s, Rubin notes that:

> [T]he ‘Bihar Famine crisis was not only politicized from its onset, but it was democratized.’ … many different voices in the democratic process – the free press, the citizens and the opposition parties – all had a say in defining the situation … Questions such as whether or not there was a famine; who should intervene to prevent the famine; and who should bear the responsibility for the famine were the focus of a political struggle ultimately leading to a suboptimal response (Rubin, 2009, p. 705).

Multiparty democracy may not endow states with the capacities and resources to respond, even where the political incentives are present (Rubin 2008). At the time of the

2002 famine, Malawi was an electoral democracy with a free press exerting pressure on political discourse and creating incentives for politicians to act. It was also a poor country with a significant problem of hunger and malnutrition, highly dependent on aid donors who were pushing for liberalising reforms of the food system. In 2002, donors failed to support Malawi's relief system, and several key policies squeezed its public finances (Rubin 2008; also Devereux and Tiba 2006). Banik similarly finds that institutions mandated to deliver nutritional and emergency assistance were under-resourced and faced limited pressure to respond to the hunger crisis in Orissa: administrative procedures were not operational, the bureaucracy was unmotivated, and judicial and quasi-judicial interventions lacked teeth (2009). The Orissa case illustrates a situation in which mixed political incentives to declare and address the famine were matched by a weak and uncoordinated administrative system.

Democratic institutions and a free press also had little impact on chronic hunger in Malawi and India: if pressure on governments to prevent hunger depends on the shock value of media coverage of starvation, chronic hunger may not qualify as 'news' at all. Yet extreme poverty and chronic hunger make episodes of mass starvation more likely (Currey 1978; 1992; Rangasami 1985).

These advances on Sen's democracy-famine proposition have methodological implications. Rubin's important body of work concludes that the democracy-famine proposition does not hold: democratic competition can be adverse and authoritarian rule positive for famine prevention and mitigation, as China after the Great Leap Famine shows. Political incentives and institutional capacities to prevent or mitigate famine are not reducible to regime type, but are distributed in different ways and to different degrees across political systems. The complexity and variety of famine means that case-specific analysis is necessary to theorise from specific famine episodes (Rubin 2009). Banik's fine-grained analysis of the politics of hunger in India points to the institutions and centre-local dynamics shaping the capacities and incentives to act to understand how the exercise of political power shapes efforts to address famine.

Alex de Waal's concept of an 'anti-famine social contract' takes up the challenge of investigating political incentives and institutional behaviours directly, drawing attention to the political features of sustained efforts to prevent famine (de Waal 1996). Examining the emergence of the famine codes and the post-Independence approach to famine in India, he argues that '[f]amine prevention is intimately bound up with the entire ideology of Indian nationalism' (pp. 196). Historical political struggles are necessary to establish such a contract, but its enforcement depends on whether and how rulers recognise that it is a 'political necessity' to respond:

> The basic reason why a government prevents famine is because its interests - the power of its leaders - depends on it. There is a political *incentive* to prevent famine. Elected politicians fear the retribution of their constituents in the polling booths, and hope for the electoral reward of successfully delivering famine prevention. Civil servants fear disgrace or demotion of (sic) their failure to prevent famine is exposed (de Waal 2000, 13).

In contemporary developing countries, de Waal also points out that external actors, in particular the 'humanitarian internationale' may have limited incentives to act: 'there is no international social contract that can enable those vulnerable to famine to enforce their will on international institutions' (de Waal, 1996, p. 203).

From policy failure to priority regime

The assumption that states are motivated to prevent famine has itself been challenged. Jenny Edkins argues against 'technical' understandings of famine, noting that they are always the result of political choices and practices which warrant close investigation (Edkins 2002). Edkins is critical of Sen's treatment of states as essentially benign liberal institutions, and, in agreement with de Waal, argues for the treatment of mass starvation as a criminal act (Edkins 2002; 2006; also de Waal 2018). Capitalist development and the building of modern states are implicated in episodes of mass starvation. Thirty million subjects of European empires were killed in late 19th century famines as peasant and other forms of economic organisation were forcibly incorporated into capitalist market systems (Davis 2001, 9), while the attempt to impose communist economic principles on Chinese agriculture in the totalitarian Great Leap Forward project of the late 1950s similarly led to tens of millions of deaths (Jisheng 2012).

Following Edkins in moving away from 'technical' approaches to famine which treat them as policy failures, famines may be seen as part of broader processes of dispossession and conflict that benefit some groups (Keen 2008), and not 'failures' of policy at all. David Keen's study of the Sudanese famine of the 1980s showed how central government in the north, military officials, and local political actors pursued political and economic gains from mass displacement and loss of livelihoods. At the same time, the distribution of humanitarian relief disconnected was politicised and benefited powerful groups (Keen 2008). Paul Howe has argued that famine may occur or be prevented because of how 'priority regimes' result in famine processes through neglect, as side-effects or trade-offs for in the pursuit of other policy agendas, as well as through deliberate strategies of 'famicide' (Howe 2006).

Another approach to theorising the politics of famine which ends up in a similar place to Edkins, Keen and Howe (albeit from a very different theoretical starting point) is the application of selectorate theory to explaining why governments might fail to act to prevent or mitigate famine. Plümper and Neumayer show that:

> governmental inaction in the face of a severe famine threat can be the rational outcome of a political support maximisation calculus. Governments may rationally fail to act against famines when the political costs of action are higher than the political costs of inaction (Plümper and Neumayer 2009, 50).

Both democracies and autocracies may choose rational inaction, depending on whether potential famine victims are key segments of their support base. International food aid can help relieve pressure on government relief efforts, but autocracies are more likely than democracies to allocate food aid to key constituencies rather than those who need it most.

Incentives and capacities to mitigate or prevent famine

These contributions help clarify key propositions about why governments fail to mitigate or prevent famines. These can be summarised as political incentives and institutional capacities respectively to either mitigate (in the short-term; Table 1) or prevent (in the medium-term; Table 2) episodes of mass hunger. We do not address the third potential category of political actions, namely the active promotion of famine, although we recognise that the politics of promoting famine are increasingly evident and important in recent famines (Keen 2008).

The literature on the politics of famine causation and prevention identifies three levels at which these political incentives and institutional capacities are likely to operate:

- national, where core political competition is staged, policies get made and implemented, and aid relations negotiated
- sub-national, where policies are implemented with national oversight and government meets citizens on the frontlines
- international, where aid relations are negotiated, and which authorise and resource the implementation of aid programmes, both emergency and developmental. Dependence on humanitarian aid means the political incentives and institutional capacities to mitigate famine in the short-term or prevent it in the medium-term are shaped by considerations at the level of the international community, in particular aid relations.

Table 1 Why governments (fail to) mitigate famine (short-term or emergency responses)

To mitigate	National	Sub-national	International
Political incentives	Electoral defeat Unrest / national security Rents / corruption Threat to legitimacy Challengers Aid (Rents / corruption)	Unrest Loss of legitimacy Accountability	Bilateral relations International image Legal & policy requirements
Institutional capacity	Information and warning systems Food reserves Administration	Information and warning systems Administration Oversight & accountability mechanisms	Food aid / aid Aid relations

Table 1 provides a non-exhaustive list of potential political incentives and features of institutional capacity which help to explain why governments may act to mitigate famine through effective relief or emergency measures in the short-term. National political incentives are likely to include the expected political costs of failing to act: losing elections and legitimacy, vulnerability to political challengers, and the threat of unrest. Positive incentives may include receipt of aid, but flows of food aid may also create incentives for corruption. Having the institutional capacity to respond implies information and early warning systems, foodgrain reserves, and administrative capacity to distribute relief. Sub-nationally, the political incentives to act may include accountability to the centre, which in turn depends on effective oversight and management from the national level, as well as information. Internationally, the political

incentives to support emergency famine relief may result from international law and policy frameworks, the desire to maintain bilateral relations with the famine-affected country and to be seen to be trying to help starving people. But international actors may lack the capacity to supply or finance food aid, or the necessary aid relations through which to facilitate transfers and assistance.

Table 2 Why governments (fail to) prevent famine (medium-term / food security measures)

To prevent	National	Sub-national	International
Political incentives	Service delivery Security Development Aid Threat to legitimacy	Service delivery Security Development Aid	Bilateral relations International image Legal & policy requirements Rents Ideology
Institutional capacity	Agricultural inputs & extension Food security systems including early warning & information Food reserves	Agricultural inputs & extension Level of overall development Security	Aid Technical assistance Foodgrains

The political incentives to prevent famine through building food security for the medium-term are likely to be similar at each level, although accelerating development and economic growth may be an additional factor. The institutional capacities to prevent famine in the medium-term differ from those needed to deliver effective relief, however, involving longer-term technical support for investments in food systems more broadly. Prevention strategies require a degree of stability and level of overall development that may not be present in conflict or violence-affected settings as found in recent famines.

For aid-dependent developing countries, we would expect that in the short-term, at least some incentives and capacities to deliver food aid to the hungry would need to be present at all three levels for famine to be mitigated. These incentives and capacities do not exist independently of each other: if their incentives are sufficiently strong, national political elites may draw on their political capital at the sub-national level to enjoin local elites to deliver aid (or refrain from actively starving people) or make commitments to international donors to attract emergency aid. Ultimately, and again drawing on the insights of Rubin, de Waal, and the selectorate famine theorists, we would expect national political commitment to mitigate (or prevent) famine to be the single most important factor, and the source of incentives and capacities at other levels. However, in the absence of other conditions, national political commitment is unlikely to be sufficient to mitigate full-blown famine.

Famine prevention is a longer-term project, and we can expect that where the political incentives exist, institutional capacity may be built or strengthened over time to prevent famine. Ultimately, however, aid-dependent developing countries may need to reduce their reliance on emergency aid i.e. on the international level to be assured of national food security over the medium- to long-term.

The next section describes how the 1974 famine unfolded in Bangladesh, the context and debates about the main causes of the catastrophe, including, where information is

available, an account of the variables identified above as present and relevant to the 1974 famine episode. This descriptive and contextual account is followed by an analytical discussion, applying the proposed framework to the evidence provided.

3. The causes of the 1974 famine

There are four main explanations of the 1974 famine: the floods, entitlement economics, the politics of international food aid and the famine relief distribution system.

The floods

The 1974 floods were unusually destructive (Currey 1978). The floods followed the 1970 cyclone, the 1971 liberation war, and the OPEC oil price crisis that exacerbated inflation. A majority of Bangladeshis had been under severe livelihood and nutritional stress for years by the time food prices spiked in August (Franda 1981). The floods played a specific role in tipping millions from stress into disaster:

> *[T]here is no denying that the flood accentuated human suffering that was already in evidence, and all those families who were living well below poverty level, finally succumbed to the pressure. By the end of July, the scenario in all flood-affected regions of the country, was flood leading to loss of human and cattle life, loss of agricultural land and crops, loss of homestead, and loss of employment, all of which combined to lead to starvation and outbreak of epidemic diseases (particularly cholera)* (Alamgir 1980, 126–27).

Bangladesh was facing a macroeconomic crisis and food supplies were scarce. Aid flows helped fill the gap, but only while the floods were visible, and 'observers formed the impression that the government was 'crying wolf' and exaggerating the flood damage' (Crow 1984, 1757). Another flood hit northern districts in September, by which time disease and hunger were widespread. The government made an emergency appeal for food aid, declared famine and opened 4,300 *langarkhana* (feeding camps) aiming to feed up to three million people per day.

Famine economics

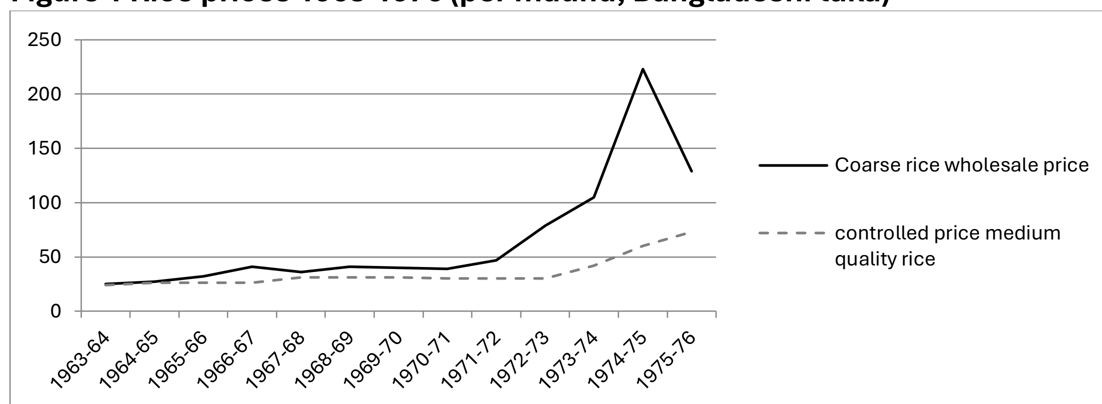
As the floods rolled out, the food gap was calculated at 3 million tons (Alamgir 1980, 129). But the extent to which low food supplies caused the famine remains contentious. Sen pointed out crop yields were lower before and after 1974, and the regions hit hardest by the famine saw a rise in production that year (Sen 1981, 141). But local-level differences, a broken transport system, fears of forcible procurement and smuggling to India meant supplies were erratic and uneven, and a decline in foodgrain availability could not be ruled out entirely (Alamgir 1980, 239).

There is more agreement that famine occurred because people had no entitlements to the food available. The floods meant less work harvesting crops, and alongside new

technologies, declining jute export earnings, and rapid growth of the rural population led to the agricultural wage declining by 43 per cent between 1973 and 1974 (Alamgir 1980, 311). The material endowments of Bangladeshis had been depleted over so many years that the floods pushed people over into the abyss:

> *[E]ntitlement failure in 1974 turned out to be as precipitous as it was mainly because of severe entitlement contraction that had occurred in the preceding years, partly through natural calamities and partly through the destructions and dislocations caused by a prolonged war of liberation. The destruction of assets (houses, cattle, etc) caused by these events was a direct dent in the 'endowment set', especially for the rural people. Endowment contractions of this kind must have accentuated the gravity of the famine* (Osmani 1987, 332).

Figure 1 Rice prices 1963-1976 (per maund, Bangladeshi taka)



Source 1 Author's calculations from Alamgir (1980, 260, Table 7.1)

Coarse rice prices increased more than four-fold between 1971 and their peak in 1974 (see Figure 1)(Alamgir 1980, 260). Why prices spiked in 1974 is another matter of debate. There is some evidence that speculative hoarding was at work (Ravallion 1985). Grain traders assumed prices would rise because of predicted crop damage from the floods (Ravallion 1985; Quddus and Becker 2000; Del Ninno, Dorosh, and Smith 2003), leading to 'the collapse of confidence in the government's ability to stabilise the price situation in the coming months' (Islam 2003, 223). Prices started to rise months before the floods. The extent to which smuggling mattered is less clear, but food prices dropped sharply after Sheikh Mujib's assassination in August 1975, as grain traders and dealers lost political protection and dumped stocks (McHenry and Bird 1977).

The politics of international food aid

Food aid was vital for the Bangladesh economy and government spending (Clay 1979). By mid-1973, the government was having difficulties securing the necessary commitments because of global commodity spikes and its own corruption and mismanagement (Atwood et al. 2000). World food prices were high and the government bankrupt, so commercial imports were unviable (Rothschild 1976). Because Bangladesh had sold Cuba jute sacks worth USD5 million, US PL480 food aid was withheld on grounds that recipients could not trade with communist countries. Even when the

government of Bangladesh cancelled future trade, US government lawyers stalled until after the jute sacks were shipped in October 1974; only then was food aid agreed, a year after the initial request (Islam 2003). 'This grim drama', recalls Sobhan, was being transacted in the capital city in the full view and knowledge of the US embassy as to the nature and gravity of the crisis' (1979, pp. 1979).

Why did the US government delay food aid? For Sobhan, the Cuba-PL480 crisis was an attempt to call Bangladesh to heel:

> *Its decision to suspend PL-480 shipments to Bangladesh against pre-committed food aid on grounds of Bangladesh's miniscule exports of jute goods to Cuba should thus be seen not just as an attempt to constrain the regime's external relations, but as a direct assault on the viability of the regime. The political motivation underlying this embargo may be derived from the fact that at that time Kissinger sought a special dispensation for Sadat's Egypt to continue exporting cotton to Cuba while receiving US PL-480 commodity aid.* (Sobhan 1991, 104).

Certainly, the US government deployed food aid to wield power over bankrupt, hungry Bangladesh (McHenry and Bird 1977), and geo-strategically unimportant Bangladesh was a low priority (Rothschild 1976). The crude but then-popular ideology of 'triage' – that resources should be concentrated on those likely to survive rather than those destined not to – was also among the ideological baggage with which the US government addressed the Bangladesh famine (Rothschild 1976; Tweeten 2001; Hossain 2021).

The domestic politics of famine relief

The failure to provide adequate relief is the reason the Awami League government is blamed for the famine. People were dying in the streets of Dhaka by August, weeks before the official famine declaration:

> *By the end of August, the whole of Bangladesh turned into an agonizing spectacle of confusion and human suffering. With the addition of the flood, it was 1943 re-enacted. Streams of hungry people (men, women and children), who were nothing but skeletons, trekked into towns in search of food. Most of them were half-naked. Events such as husbands deserting wives and children, or wives doing the same, parents trying to sell children, mothers killing babies out of frustration and anguish, man and dog fighting for a piece of bone, women and young girls turning to prostitution became very commonplace* (Alamgir 1980, 128–29).

By September there was a 14-fold increase in unclaimed corpses on the streets of Dhaka (cited in Currey 1978).

On declaring famine, government set up *langarkhanas* or feeding camps across the country. At their peak, 5,792 camps fed 4.35 million people, six per cent of the population, but allocations were meagre, some offering bread worth only two or three hundred calories each day; corruption was widely reported, and the *langarkhanas* drew the hungry in, but failing to nourish or protect them against disease:

> *[U]tterly inadequate quantities of eatables or semi-eatables are distributed to hundreds of men, women and children by persons with lathis (sticks) in their hands … In the unions of Rangpur, I have seen* langarkhanas *where hundreds of starving people came from four, five, six miles afar and wait all day, finally to get only one chapatti (hand made bread) the weight of which varies according to daily relative supply of Ata (wheat flour) … the journey to and from the* langarkhanas *back to the village may cost more calories than the* langarkhana *supplies* (Anisur Rahman, cited in Alamgir 1980, 176).

Allocations under the Public Food Distribution System was probably the single greatest obstacle to effective emergency relief. The system was massive, covering 20 million Bangladeshis by 1977 (World Bank 1977), but the main channel, Statutory Rationing, benefited better-off urban people, public sector workers and 'priority groups' like industrial workers, while Modified Rationing distributed the residual to some of the rural poor. Urban bias, corruption and leakage meant that only a small proportion of the rural poor ever saw any of this residual (Chowdhury 1988). The Modified Rationing channel ran short of foodgrains, but Statutory Rationing was never diverted towards famine relief (Sobhan 1979). In 1974, nearly 60 per cent of the PFDS rations went to urban people, although less than 9 per cent of the population was urban (Muqtada 1981).[ii] All the urban population was officially covered during 1973-75, compared to only 6 per cent of rural people (Chowdhury 1986).

Why did the government fail to reallocate foodgrains towards relief? By September 1974 the rural poor were visibly starving en masse. Sheikh Mujib's speech at the United Nations acknowledged the situation:

> *Bangladesh was born in the rubble of war. Ever since we encountered a number of natural disasters in sequence. The last one is this unprecedented flood … Natural disaster has not only prevented the economy from growing but also created almost a famine situation* (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at United Nations (25th September,1974) 2013).

Also in 1974, Sheikh Mujib acknowledged that 27,000 people had starved to death, a figure from which the government appears to have taken comfort:

> *Everybody expected that few millions will die by starvation, after the flood and after the inflation… And round about 27,000 people have died by starvation. Which is a fact. We have tried our best, consciously we have tried our best.* (An Unfashionable Tragedy 1975).

Any recently elected government would have 'consciously tried their best' to prevent such a catastrophe: the 1943 famine had sealed the fate of the British Raj and factored in the politics of partition (Bose 1990; Mukerjee 2010), and the callous neglect of the Bhola cyclone victims spurred the liberation war. Reallocating rations may have been administratively infeasible: 'by the end of 1974, there was not any civilian institutional group in Bangladesh to implement Mujib's program of national reconstruction'

(Maniruzzaman 1975, 125), let alone famine relief. In any case, by September it was too late to stabilise prices or distribute relief through rationing channels: the administrative challenge had become to feed the hundreds of thousands who had left home seeking food. The numbers fleeing hunger were swelled by the 10 million Bangladeshis displaced by the war. The civil administration was not equipped, nor the army coopted for the task. Although the UN post-war office continued to operate in Dhaka, the government was substantially on its own in dealing with this new catastrophe (Hossain 2017).

Even if the administrative capacity had been present, there was no political will to divert foodgrains away from the urban and middle classes, deemed 'too politically hazardous for a regime already under severe political attack for the sharp escalation in prices' (Sobhan 1991, 101). The starving rural poor were no political threat, but urban and middle-class groups were. Leftist opposition groups and factions within the party were challenging the Awami League's leadership (Maniruzzaman 1975); food security was an explicit concern. And it was not only the poorest who were affected: the industrial workforce, low paid public sector workers, and even the middle classes struggled to meet rising living costs (Sobhan 1979).

The politicisation of food security may have inadvertently drawn political attention away from the masses, fixing it on politically active urban groups. Rationing formed part of the overall package of public service benefits service, 'the means by which subsistence wage goods were guaranteed to politically essential elements of society and government, through a period of increasing instability of supply and rapid price inflation' (Clay 1979, 130; see also Rashiduzzaman 1977, 795). From a political economy perspective, the protection of Statutory Rationing through the famine period was part of a structural class bias operationalised in the form of rations for the urban and middle classes (Chowdhury 1988; Chowdhury 1986; Franda 1981). That the Awami League government put in place structures to prioritise the middle classes was entirely consistent with their support base. Food aid provided the resources on which this short-lived political settlement rested, financing a significant portion of the public sector benefit package at the time, helping the Dhaka government appease the politically important urban and middle-class groups. And so food aid was not reallocated to shield the rural masses from starvation.

Analysis of the failure to mitigate famine in the short term

Returning to the discussion summarised in Table 1 about why governments fail to mitigate famine, it seems that at the national level, the political leadership had strong political incentives to deliver effective famine relief: it knew the failure to do so would be costly for its legitimacy, the prospects for further unrest, challenges from the left, and (until it installed a one-party state) potential electoral defeat. Warning systems were in place and the authorities knew famine was coming, but the post-war administrative system was weak and demoralised and foodgrain reserves were inadequate. The political incentives to supply relief to the starving were weaker, however, than the political incentives to protect the vocal and politically-organised urban and middle-class populations, to whom most food aid was allocated. Despite the urgent situation and collective political costs, some national political leaders hoarded and stole relief goods, testifying to the fractured nature of Sheikh Mujib's political authority. Sub-nationally,

there were weaker political incentives to act, and those that did influence relief management related to local security. Rent-seeking is believed to have occurred in the form of corruption in the *langarkhana*.

Internationally, the major food aid donor, the US, was disinclined to help. It pointed to legal restrictions against helping the famine effort but ideological issues are likely to have played a role, not least the fact that Bangladeshi policy was not aligned to the West and the influence of theories about 'triage' in the geopolitically insignificant context of Bangladesh. It is also the case that compared to earlier periods, US food aid was running relatively short due to the 1973-4 OPEC crisis, and so internationally, too, institutional capacity to share food aid was comparatively limited.

4. The effects of the famine

While little has been written about the political effects and aftermath of the famine, there is tacit consensus that it was a turning point in elite recognition of the sources of political legitimacy:

> *[T]he occurrence of a famine so soon after independence caused a massive crisis of legitimacy for the then government whose violent overthrow a year later was seen as an expression of the loss of this legitimacy. The crisis of legitimacy due to a failure to contain the famine appears to have become for subsequent governments a crucial political concern* (Rahman 1995, 278).

The famine was followed by sharp reversals in food security policy aimed at preventing food crises which suggest a process of institutional learning and cognitive change among the policy elite. Testimonies from the political and social elite suggest it triggered individual, political and organisational trajectories of wider national importance.

Political upheaval after the famine

Famine has often delegitimised ruling groups, affecting the balance of political power. In wartime Bengal, the Communist Party's failure to focus on hunger lost them support after the war, whereas the Muslim League's support for starving peasants contributed to their party's postwar provincial electoral success (Bose 1990). In the Indochina famine of 1945, the nationalist Viet Minh died alongside the Tonkin peasantry, and their strategy of seizing granaries to feed the starving helped build their support in the north (Bose 1990). In Ethiopia armed peasant groups fought long-running campaigns against the state following the 1973 famine, and Tigrayan separatism grew out of the unrest (de Waal 1991). The enduring effects of the famine in Tibet have also featured in the political memories and popular grievances against Chinese rule (Jisheng 2012).

Famines may also directly affect the balance of political power if contending elites recognise that the crisis creates the possibility for regime change. The Irish famine made it possible for a fractious political class to overcome its differences in a more unified articulation of common interests against Britain (Kinealy 1994). In China, grassroots

cadres were dissatisfied with the moderate reforms after the famine, while Communist party leaders like Deng Xiaoping were disgusted by Mao's failures to acknowledge the famine, weakening his hold on the party leadership (Becker 1996). The 1973 famine in Ethiopia was implicated in the loss of peasant, middle class and student support for Haile Selassie's empire (Clapham 1990; also de Waal 1991; Shepherd 1975).

Revolutions as in Ethiopia are rare after a major famine. But before the floods started in June 1974, Bangladesh was already in ferment, and hunger, inflation and corruption were high on the political agenda. The left (the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) and the United Front) rallied against the ruling party, besieged offices tasked with distributing relief and campaigned for universal foodgrain rations and tackling corruption, smuggling, and speculation (Maniruzzaman 1975, 121). The economic and food crisis were blamed on smuggling to India and the regime was criticised as overly pro-India (Khondker 1985). By late 1974 foreign aid had dried up, leaving 40 per cent of the budget unfinanced. The government took an aggressive stance against the underground far left (Maniruzzaman 1975), and by late 1974 thousands of Awami League workers had been killed by the regime's opponents, and far leftists had been jailed, killed or driven underground by the regime's paramilitary *Rakkhi Bahini* (Karim 2005).

Disillusion spread across middle- and upper-class idealists who had joined forces with the peasant classes to fight for an egalitarian 'Golden Bengal' only a couple of years previously. The former Planning Commission member (and famine researcher) Anisur Rahman reflected that

> *'The war and its aftermath were painful not only because of what happened, but because of the dream that has been shattered. So many things were promised and so much we have lost. And we lost that dream to a great extent because of the betrayal of the so-called nationalist elites … We ate together, starved together, suffered together and shared our lives. [But after independence] The elite rejected the people.'* (quoted in Tripathi 2014, 234).

Rahman was among a group of intellectuals that accused the regime of causing the famine with their tolerance of smuggling and corruption (Weinraub 1974). Criticism of Sheikh Mujib personally had been muted until the famine, but 'the people now cursed not only the government but also Sheikh Mujib himself (Mascarenhas 1986, 44); '[t]he year of the famine became the pivot of Mujib's decline' (Lifschultz and Bird 1979, 46). The emotional quality reported of public disillusionment suggests his fall was painful precisely because he had been so beloved (and as Father, symbolically and literally responsible for feeding them).

The Awami League's loss of legitimacy did not lead to a mass political uprising, but the series of coups after the famine were influenced by the expectation that such an uprising was possible. Fearful for his control of power, Mujib changed the constitution to establish a single party 'BAKSAL' regime in early 1975, with himself as all-powerful President. A coup by junior army officers in August assassinated Mujib and his family in a gruesome attack in August 1975.

There was a notable lack of public grieving after this brutal mass murder (Tripathi 2014, 250). In a rare contemporary account of rural views of Mujib's assassination, Hartmann and Boyce reported mixed emotions:

> 'My brother died fighting for independence', [one man] said sombrely. 'Now they have murdered the Father of our Nation.'
>
> 'Mujib was a thief,' [another man] retorted. 'He gave all our wealth to India.' By afternoon, the villagers' initial anxiety had given way to euphoria. 'No one is crying for Mujib,' [one woman] told us. 'He has got his due.' There was almost an air of celebration in [the village], as groups of villagers gathered to discuss the news (1983, 240).

Contemporary accounts indicate that Mujib was personally distressed by the famine and recognised what it meant for his own legacy. He made few public appearances the year of the famine. He told a UN official: '"Country is fighting for survival. I am fighting for survival."'(Gerlach 2010, 168). Unlike Selassie or Mao, Mujib made little attempt to conceal or downplay the disasters, begging the international community for assistance. This does not absolve Mujib for the failures of his administration, but it does indicate a sense of moral responsibility which distinguishes the 1974 famine from others: the regime leadership was aware that the famine was politically costly, and had historical and social affinities with the starving masses.[iii] No such moral responsibility or affinity is detected among those who ruled over the Irish, 1943 Bengal, or Ethiopian famines, least of all in imperial British attitudes to the 'late Victorian holocausts' (Davis 2001).

Following the famine, the assassinations and a series of coups, political power finally settled for the next fifteen years on military regimes. These were able to control the army, hold off political opposition, and appease international finance with stability, food security and a move away from the earlier emphasis on socialism.

Policy and institutional change

A series of post-famine ruptures in public policy shifted Bangladesh onto a development pathway from which no subsequent government has substantially deviated. A consensus about the essentials of development policy emerged among political, bureaucratic and business elites (Hossain 2017). Parallel cognitive breaks can be seen in the ruling elites of other post-famine polities. The Great Leap Famine transformed the Chinese development project by wreaking 'drastic cognitive changes ... among both elites and masses' about the radical collectivisation that had caused the catastrophe (Yang 1996, 240). In Bangladesh, the brief flirtation with socialism ended; 'the ideology of the state emerged as a distinct form of 'Bangladeshi' nationalism in which beating the 'basket case' label was a motive force' (Hossain 2017: 131).[iv]

The first rupture with the left-leaning policies of liberation was the government's capitulation to donor pressures over macroeconomic management. At a time when the fragile new state most needed external support, donors pushed for devaluation, monetary stabilisation, cuts to public subsidies and market-friendlier policies (Sobhan 1982). In April 1975, the government devalued the currency, having already agreed to

reform investment policy. Donors kept ‘Bangladesh twisting in the wind’ through 1974 (Sobhan 1982, 193), cutting down on aid commitments during its crisis.

The second rupture came with the government of General Zia, on whose rule aid donors looked more favourably (Sobhan 1982, pp. 196). Zia established an institutional culture of military-bureaucratic rule, repressed opposition and dissent, changed the constitution to reject socialism and secularism, opened its arms to Western and Middle Eastern donors, and reoriented economic and social policy towards market competition with some pro-poor interventions. The Zia regime brought some economic and political stability in a period with fewer ecological and economic shocks. When Zia, too, was assassinated in 1981, he was replaced by General Ershad who ruled until toppled by a democratic uprising in 1990. By then the foundations of the national development project were established.[v]

Many within the political and policy elite recognised that economic reforms were necessary (Sobhan 1982), but even then resisted World Bank prescriptions to privatise public grain procurement and cut subsidies out of fear of another famine (Adams Jr 1998; Chowdhury 1988; Chowdhury 1986). Averting famine ‘remained uppermost in the minds of donor programmers and government policymakers for the next 20 years’ with management of public food stocks central to the policy agenda (Atwood et al. 2000, 153). Procurement and pricing policies were used to gradually increase production and stabilise prices, while also reducing the regressive rationing system and targeting food to the most vulnerable. The system was geared towards responding to shocks through price monitoring, food assistance and deregulating foodgrain trade (Ahmed, Haggblade, and Chowdhury 2000; Raihan 2013; Islam 2012; Murshid 2022).

Social relations

Relations between those who rule and those who starve during a famine are irrevocably altered. Ireland lost most of its population to death or migration, but the remainder became guinea pigs for the testing of Malthusian ideas about health, poor relief, and the re-structuring of agrarian relations towards capitalist modes of production (Nally 2008). Communist famines ‘helped the regimes to enforce the collective order’, paving the way to force through industrial and other policies (Wemheuer 2014, 248). In China, draconian birth control and internal migration controls were introduced after the Great Leap Famine (Wemheuer 2014), while agrarian and economic reforms were developed with greater caution (Jisheng 2012). In the USSR, state policy emphasised living standards after the famine, and foodgrain imports became more important (Wemheuer 2014).

Bangladeshi public policy was reoriented towards rural, agricultural and food security concerns, reversing the earlier urban bias (Ahmed et al. 2000). This also included a reorientation towards women, in particular poor rural women. The famine had demolished any lingering notions that the benevolent patronage of rural elites could protect the poor, hitting rural landless folk who usually depended on seasonal labour markets, reinforcing trends towards landlessness (Alamgir 1980) (BRAC 1992, 6). Into the breach left by this broken moral economy, a new set of actors emerged with financing from charity and international aid. The best-known of the actors that emerged in the post-

famine period are rural credit or microfinance organisations. Leaders of the two most important, BRAC and the Grameen, both cut their teeth on famine relief work. Professor Yunus of the Grameen Bank recalled:

> *The year 1974 was the year which shook me to the core of my being. Bangladesh fell into the grips of a famine … They were everywhere. You couldn't be sure who was alive and who was dead. They all looked alike: men, women, children. You couldn't guess their age. Old people looked like children, and children looked like old people. The government opened gruel kitchens to bring people to specified places in town. But every new gruel kitchen turned out to have much less capacity than was needed … I started to feel useless in the face of so many starving people pouring into Dhaka. Social organisations set up feeding centres in various parts of the city* (Yunus and Jolis 1999, 3-5).

He began to question the value of economic theory, and to consider practical responses. F. H. Abed, founder of BRAC, similarly cited the 1974 famine as a turning point, during which he learned that poverty reduction efforts needed to work directly with women. These are lessons that have remained central to BRAC's strategy to date, influencing successive generations of Bangladeshi policymakers (Hossain 2017).

The incentives and capacity to prevent famine after 1974

The famine renewed political commitment to preventing famine and mitigating extreme hunger, incentivised by the decimation of the regime that failed to prevent the famine, which was seen to have lost legitimacy because of its failure. It was not a mass uprising, but a coup by junior officers, aware of the loss of legitimacy of the regime and its new vulnerability, that killed the formerly popular leader and removed his party from power. Political commitment to tackle famine subsequently grew at the national and international levels, and entailed the improvement of relationships between them, visible in particular in the growth of aid following 1974. The drastic effects of the famine also incentivised political elites at national and international levels to invest in state capacity to improve food security and disaster response. State institutions to prevent and respond to famine were insulated against routine domestic and international politics, and have endured.

Concluding discussion

The 1974 famine was the first and last such episode in independent Bangladesh, even though it remained poor, food-insecure, and acutely vulnerable to ecological and global economic crises for decades after. In attempting to show why Bangladesh prevented famines after 1974, this article has drawn on the modest body of literature on the politics of famine, which draws attention specifically to the political incentives (regardless of regime types) and institutional capacities (regardless of levels of development) to mitigate (in the short-term) and prevent (in the medium-term) such catastrophes.

This account of the Bangladesh episode in 1974 enables us to revisit and refine political theories of famine, pointing to the need explore not only the political dimensions of the causes of famine, which receive significant attention, but also its political effects, which do not. As the article shows, the political effects of famine can result in enduring institutional arrangements and political incentives to prevent its reoccurrence, and even agreements of the kind that Alex de Waal calls 'anti-famine social contracts'. The Bangladesh case confirms the findings of Dan Banik and Oliver Rubin that democratic institutions and political competition are by no means sufficient to prevent famine; a popularly elected party facing threats from the left was not motivated to reallocate foodgrains to those who needed them most. Similar to what Banik has shown for Bihar, political competition may in fact have made it more likely that the focus of emergency relief would remain urban and middle-class groups. In its aftermath, the Bangladesh case also supports arguments made by Alex de Waal about an anti-famine social contract: the horrors of the catastrophe wrought cognitive change among key members of the elite and a shared commitment to investment in famine prevention. An important feature of the Bangladesh story is the delayed and reluctant release of food aid by the US, which was very likely influenced by ideological factors regarding the economic unviability of the devastated new nation.

Three features of the Bangladesh case stand out in particular as relevant to theorising the politics of famine. First, that as the selectorate theorists point out, aid-dependent countries rely on aid to help them relieve famines, but even then, the choice of who gets the food aid will depend on the groups that are politically-relevant to the balance of power (Plümper and Neumayer 2009). In 1974, these politically-relevant groups were not the starving rural landless. Second, as the 'new' famine theories relevant to the 21st century famines have argued, key relevant political actors are supra-national: the Bangladesh case supports the view that more needs to be understood of the political incentives for international actors to intervene in famine. The forced starvation in Palestine in 2023 and 2024 points clearly to international political incentives to support a campaign of ethnic cleansing, whereas the contemporaneous famines in Sudan and Ethiopia appear to date to relate more to a relative lack of interest and/or capacity by the international community to intervene. Third, the Bangladesh case draws attention to a singular political effect at the heart of the move towards an anti-famine contract: the total loss of legitimacy by the ruling group, marked by the brutal murder of a political leader who was till recently a beloved national hero, and against which the nation failed to protest. The power of this dramatic loss of legitimacy to commit the ruling class to reversing the policy direction and prioritising food security is notable. The loss of political legitimacy may not lead to mass uprisings against the rulers during famine, but it weakens their power base and leaves them vulnerable to challenge.

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[i] The literature explaining Bangladesh's food security achievements is large but broadly in agreement about the policies and programmes that contributed. The source of record is the 2000 edited volume comprising authors from Bangladeshi academic and policy institutions as well as International Food Policy Research Institute and other researchers aptly titled *Out of the Shadow of Famine* (Ahmed *et al* 2000). For an updated analysis, see (Murshid 2022).
[ii] 1974 census figures available from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.
[iii] These come through in the pained writing by elites about this time A particularly thoughtful account of 1974 is by former head of the Planning Commission, Nurul Islam (2003).
[iv] Like most Bangladeshis, Zia was said to have been incensed by the label and determined to turn the country from the basket case to 'a basketful of hopes' (Islam 1984, 571).
[v] See (Islam 1984; Zafarullah 1996; Maniruzzaman 1988). Also (Franda 1981d; 1981a; Jahan 2005).