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Mastanocracy: The Legitimization of Criminal Governance and Violence in Bangladesh's Garment Industry

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Abstract

The operation of criminal governance within formal-legal industrial contexts connected to global supply chains remains insufficiently theorized in management and organization studies (MOS). How such governance legitimizes violence against marginalized workers both within and beyond organizational boundaries also remains critically underexplored. By analyzing the paradoxical normalization of criminality and violence within Bangladesh's garment industry, this study exposes the systemic embeddedness of *mastans*, politically connected criminals, within export-oriented industrial governance. We conceptualize this entanglement as *mastanocracy*, a hybrid political formation of violent criminal governance that operates legitimately at the nexus of corruption, democratic erosion, elite power and social polarization, advancing the neoliberal economic and political agendas of dominant actors. This research extends MOS by broadening the boundary conditions under which criminal governance is legitimized in a formal-legal industrial environment in the Global South. It also advances the discourse on violence in contemporary organizations by revealing the broader cultural, social and political dynamics that normalize violence within and beyond organizational boundaries, compelling millions of marginalized workers to live and work under regimes of criminal governance.

Key Words: Bangladesh garment industry, criminal governance, legitimization, mastans, violence.

Introduction

On April 24, 2013, Rana Plaza collapsed in Bangladesh, killing 1,134 and severely injuring more than 2,500 workers producing clothing for Western retailers. Since the disaster, management and organization studies (MOS) have critically examined a range of interconnected issues, including the coercive power and dominance of Western buyers (Ashwin et al., 2020), the ineffectiveness of corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks (Fontana and Dawkins, 2024) and the deplorable labor conditions characterizing the Bangladesh's garment industry (BGI) (Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019). These include workplace bullying (Ahmed and Uddin, 2021), the misrecognition and misrepresentation of women workers (Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2020), gender-based violence (Anwary, 2017) and broader processes of dehumanization, displacement and dispossession (Ahmed, 2024). More violence was documented during the COVID-19 pandemic, targeting workers' deregulated bodies (Alamgir et al., 2022) with the (in)direct complicity of Western retailers and the Bangladeshi state (Uddin et al., 2023).

Despite continued academic scrutiny and extensive reports by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (see Human Rights Watch, 2015; International Labour Organization, 2017; Worker Rights Consortium, 2021), widespread violence persists in the BGI due to the neo-authoritarian dispositions of Western buyers, local manufacturers and their gatekeepers (Ahmed, 2025). This normalization of violence is not driven by 'the invisible hand of the market [that] destroys the conditions of life' of workers (Brennan, 2003: 1) but rather by compliance and governance regimes (Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019) and their identifiable agents (Žižek, 2008). For example, the Rana Plaza building was owned by a criminal, locally known as a *mastan*, affiliated with the ruling political party, who engaged in a range of illicit activities including drug trafficking, extortion and land grabbing (Mustafa and Islam, 2013). Recent studies also document the killing of union leader Shahidul Islam by mastans in retaliation for demanding unpaid wages

(Reinecke and Donaghey, 2023). Such violence cannot be disentangled from the Bangladeshi state (Ahmed, 2025; Ahmed and Uddin, 2021; Chowdhury, 2017) and its entanglement with mastans who exploit 'institutional incongruence and weak enforcement of the formal institution's laws and regulations' (Webb et al., 2009: 497).

A growing body of scholarship has examined the persistence of criminal governance in the context of drug and arms economies across the Global South (Arias, 2017; Gambetta, 1993). Lessing (2021) argues that such governance arises when criminal actors impose coercive norms, routines and regulatory practices across political, social and economic domains where state sovereignty is partial, contested or fragmented. While these regimes may resemble conventional forms of governance, they remain ontologically distinct. Their mode of governance is parasitic, structurally intertwined with state fragility, political instability and illicit markets (Arias, 2017). Paradoxically, such governance is not confined to zones of state absence but proliferates in spaces 'surrounded and intermittently penetrated by strong state power' (Lessing, 2021: 855), transforming through territorial control, political disorder and systemic violence that is enacted through turf warfare.

Yet, how criminal governance migrates from illegality across geographies into formal economies remains undertheorized in MOS, with few exceptions (e.g., Gayer, 2019). Busse et al. (2017) urge scholars to investigate how criminal governance evolves under 'slightly different contextual conditions, departing from 'known territory'… outward to unknown territory' (p. 583), thereby calling for renewed conceptualizations of its boundary conditions. We respond to this call with a study in the context of Bangladesh, which has no historical ties to transnational drug or arms markets, but is deeply integrated into global supply chains (GSCs) through its garment industry. Although praised for its contributions to the formal economy, the BGI has emerged as a site of labor violence, enacted not only by the state or managerial actors but also by mastans (Ahmed, 2025), a paradoxical configuration in which criminality and

illegality become embedded with the formal- legality of governance. This paradox demands a critical inquiry.

Situated at the intersection of labor, capital, the state, criminality and violence that shape capitalism at the global periphery, we interrogate the institutional embedding of criminal governance within the BGI, a formal-legal export-oriented industry. We examine how such governance regulates the embodied experiences of millions of workers, disciplining their movements, silencing dissent and producing compliance across the industry. In doing so, we ask the following questions: *How and why have mastans, as a criminal element of governance, become embedded within Bangladeshi garment factories? In what ways does this form of criminal governance shape workers' embodied experiences through violence within the industry?*

Drawing on an in-depth case study, we address these questions by advancing the concept of *mastanocracy*, not as an 'urban political-economic culture which may produce informal rights that help urban dwellers manage risk, uncertainty and insecurity' (Ahmed, 2004: 100), but as a modality of violent criminal governance. We therefore conceptualize mastanocracy as a *hybrid political formation, where illegal and illegitimate networks of power are entangled with state bureaucracy and industrial capital, enabling violence to enforce labor discipline on behalf of political and economic elites.*

By advancing the concept of mastanocracy, we make two significant contributions to MOS. First, while emphasizing the inseparability of governance and violence, we extend critical understandings of how criminal governance and violence become legitimized within neoliberal social, institutional and industrial contexts in the Global South. Our empirical findings reveal that mastanocracy is not an anti-capitalist dysfunction nor does it operate in opposition to the state, global capital or their local alliances. Rather, it collaborates with state institutions and powerful elites, gaining de facto immunity to enable local capital to serve global market

imperatives for low-cost fashion through violence enacted within and beyond factory floors. Second, by deconstructing binary distinctions such as external vs. internal and legal vs. illegal, our conception of mastanocracy offers new insights into the boundary conditions of criminal governance, illuminating who is involved, where and when it operates, how it is enacted, against whom and for whose benefit this violent governance is sustained within GSC.

This paper is structured as follows. We begin by critically reviewing literature on localized forms of violence in major garment-producing countries, each marked by distinct and historically situated patterns of coercion. We then introduce mastanocracy as a theoretical construct to conceptualize how criminal governance operates in violence. Next, we outline our methodological approach, detailing the research context, researchers' positionalities, data collection and analysis procedures. We then present our empirical findings, which highlight the legitimization of mastans' embedded presence and practices of violence within the industry. Finally, we articulate the study's contributions and implications, concluding with potential avenues for future research on criminal governance.

Localized forms of violence against workers in major garment manufacturing countries

Existing MOS has illuminated the precarious working conditions within GSCs, shaped by coercion from Western brands and regulatory institutions that 'have authority but do not bear any responsibility for their actions' (Muhammad, 2006: 1464). These dynamics are evidenced in brands' behaviors and, in some cases, their complicity before or after crises such as factory fires, building collapses and the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahmed, 2024; Alamgir et al., 2022; Uddin et al., 2023). Their 'colonial rescue narrative (white men saving brown women from brown men)' (Mohanty, 2011: 81), exemplified by initiatives such as the Accord and Alliance to improve labor governance, has failed to prevent ongoing violence in the industry (Ahmed and Uddin, 2021). In fact, violence against marginalized workers has intensified under a neo-authoritarian regime (Ahmed, 2025). Chowdhury (2017) contends that such violence is enabled

by elite actors, through both action and inaction; he therefore calls for critical inquiry into 'the functionalities of locally embedded elite agents... [or governance systems that] dominate over marginalized workers' (p. 945). In this section, we critically review MOS literature on garment-producing countries to illuminate both the empirical variation and theoretical complexity that underpin the perpetuation of violence against marginalized workers.

For Brickell et al. (2022), the nexus between debt and precarious working conditions characterizes the Cambodian garment industry, where debt has become the only means of survival for workers to meet basic needs such as food and housing. Factory closures and reduced working hours during the COVID-19 pandemic intensified workers' borrowing, forcing them to make bodily sacrifices, including reducing food intake. As a result, a debt-hunger nexus has emerged as a localized form of coercive governance that the Cambodian government has failed to mitigate, enabling neoliberal initiatives through NGO participation to 'continue to exert debt discipline….upon the bodies and bodily practices of the already-precarious' (Brickell et al., 2022: 605).

Meanwhile, localized norms embedded in patriarchy and the 'hegemony of men' (McCarthy et al., 2021) constitute workers' experiences in the Indian garment industry. For instance, Crane et al. (2022) document how women's lives, unlike men's, have been confined to designated hostels, described as 'walled, gated compounds that are always securely locked', where young women are 'not allowed to go outside even once in a month' and where 'wardens and security personnel are in place to ensure compliance' (p. 1942). Within these hostels, women are subjected to strict disciplinary regimes, including eating and sleeping at prescribed times. Noncompliance resulting in further violence and financial penalties. Framed within a discourse of protection and the perceived social and cultural vulnerabilities of women, hostels have thus emerged as disciplinary spaces that govern women's bodies and reinforce male domination in the Indian garment industry (Crane et al., 2022).

The Pakistani garment industry reveals a more complex scenario than those observed in Cambodia or India. For instance, violent labor practices are not 'embedded in traditional communities, violated cultural norms and carried a stigma' for women, for whom a 'factory girl' status damages social standing and marriage prospects (Munir et al., 2018: 576). These women are also compliant, never go to court, accept wages that are half those of their male counterparts and endure government-imposed pension reductions without protest. The silencing of workers through normalized exploitation highlights a broader systemic failure that culminated in the 2012 Karachi factory fire, which killed 259 workers and injured 100 others (Gayer, 2019). Initially, factory authorities were charged with murder; however, a government-led joint investigation team comprising police, intelligence agencies and Rangers exonerated the factory owners, framing the incident through the rhetoric of 'terrorism'. According to Gayer (2019), a symbiotic relationship between provincial governance and the Karachi garment industry enables their 'criminal economies' to dominate workers' lives.

Similar to Cambodia, India and Pakistan, the Sri Lankan garment industry reveals exploitative labor practices that marginalize workers based on class, caste and ethnicity (Gunawardana, 2014). Lynch (2007) explores how localized norms and expectations that are 'intensely personal, paternalistic, community-related, and localized' (p. 206) govern the lives of women workers in Sri Lankan society. For instance, economic liberalization and gender-based stigmas such as *Juki kello* (Juki girls - note that Juki is the brand name of the sewing machines popularly used in Sri Lankan garment factories), *Juki käli* (Juki items) or *Garment baduwa* (garment commodity) emerged as derogatory nicknames for women workers, symbolizing them as readily available for sexual abuse, harassment and violence. Through the intertwined narratives of nationalism, personal political connections of the factory owners and the identity of 'Juki girl/item/commodity' attributed to the women workers, gender violence has been a legitimized practice in the Sri Lankan garment industry (Lynch, 2007).

The BGI remains under greater critical scrutiny than other leading garment-manufacturing countries, primarily due to the Rana Plaza collapse. Since that event, scholars have deepened our understanding of the symbiotic relationship between Western retailers and local manufacturers, which allows the global capital to redeem itself from accountability while undermining labor rights through gendered power dynamics (Anwary, 2017; Ashwin et al., 2020). Local scholarship (Ashraf, 2017; Hasan, 2022; Muhammed, 2006) and a national policy research institute corroborate these dynamics, documenting widespread labor violence that is often sanctioned or facilitated by the state. Building on this critique, Alamgir and Banerjee (2019) examine the political economy of global safety agreements and argue that while such initiatives purport to improve worker safety, they primarily function to legitimize multinational corporations' deficient compliance regimes, which fail to confront the exploitative procurement and pricing mechanisms that underpin hazardous working conditions. Instead, they reflect the neoliberal state's regulatory transformation, wherein compliance institutions selectively safeguard capital and suppress labor.

This understanding is extended by Alamgir and Alakavuklar (2020), who expose compliance regimes for systematically misrecognizing and marginalizing women workers in the BGI. These regimes, framed as ethical interventions, deploy tokenistic inclusion that conceals systematic and structural exclusion of women workers. Their findings also challenge the legitimacy of the ethical procurement discourse. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these dynamics as Alamgir et al. (2022) demonstrate that the neoliberal development regime of labor exploitation makes workers' deregulated bodies expendable. Within gendered global production networks, labor becomes disposable, with the implicit bargain being 'live or be left to die' (Alamgir et al., 2022).

Similarly, Ahmed and Uddin (2021) reveal the intensification of labor control in Bangladeshi factories through workplace bullying, which is not an anomaly but a routine mechanism of

discipline sustained by weakened state protections and the suppression of union power. In rejecting the assumed neutrality of managerial control, they argue that it serves to reproduce capitalist logics that prioritize capital accumulation over labor rights. This critique deepens in Ahmed's (2024) exploration of wage theft, secrecy and violence in feminized Bangladeshi factories. Using Butler's notion of derealization, he illustrates that Bangladeshi employers frame young, precarious women as 'ideal workers' by exploiting their poverty, social inequality and constrained labor markets where 'ideal workers' are subjected to dispossession, displacement and dehumanization. Recently, Ahmed (2025) contends that violence is not episodic but structurally embedded in factories he characterizes as 'infernal places', where Western buyers, factory owners, managers and state police collaborate in neo-authoritarian regimes that degrade legal protection to suppress workers' resistance. Framed as economic progress, violence thus becomes a normalized mode of governance.

Taken together, these studies illuminate the multifaceted nature of violence that permeates GSCs, shaped by both transnational regimes and localized industrial and managerial practices intertwined with caste, class, gender, cultural norms, patriarchy and political patronage. Yet they also reveal a critical, underexplored dimension: the role of local criminals or criminal governance that sustains such violence. The legitimization of violence against marginalized workers cannot be fully understood without attending to these localized violent enforcers who operate at the intersection of informal economies, political patronage and cultural norms. We address this gap by conceptualizing mastanocracy as a theoretical framework of a violent criminal governance that has emerged, been legitimized and sustained in an export-oriented, formal-legal industry.

Conceptualizing mastanocracy: criminal governance and violence in the formal economy

Critical scholarship on democratic institutions, conflict and urban political formations has investigated the intersections of violence, organized crime, narcotic organizations and religious

politics in the Global South (Arias, 2017; Gambetta, 1993; Lessing, 2021; Moncada, 2021; Sen and Venkatesh, 2014). This literature provides insight into criminal actors and their control and violence over illicit markets, unregulated commodities and spatial territories. Arias and Barnes (2016) argue that criminal groups, often characterized by flexible organizational forms, function as non-state violent entities emerged and structured through kinship, informal political networks, economic imperatives or subcultural affiliations. While these actors are often ideologically unanchored, they strategically mobilize ethno-religious or political narratives to consolidate territorial authority or facilitate recruitment (Sen and Venkatesh, 2014). Their violence is conspicuous, dramatized and corporeal, materialized through public spectacles of coercion, turf disputes and ritualized domination (Moncada, 2021). Economically, they are extractive, embedded in extortion and protection economies, and operationally dependent on illicit products such as narcotics and arms markets (Eaton et al., 2024).

Despite their violent and illegal modalities, these groups are deeply embedded in partisan politics and institutional frameworks, participating in divided, collaborative or tiered governance arrangements (Arias, 2017) within corrupt political and bureaucratic systems. They play a consequential role in 'governing extensive territory and populations [by] transforming formal institutional systems into lived political experience at the local level' (Arias, 2017: 5). As Lessing (2021) notes, 'millions of people live under some form of criminal governance' operating in both marginal zones and major urban centers, 'persisting through economic booms and busts' (p. 584). Rather than directly contesting state sovereignty, such governance often emerges amid institutional withdrawal, managing functions such as taxation, dispute resolution and private protection (Gambetta, 1993). In this context, its relationship with the state is neither strictly oppositional nor subordinate but constituted through negotiated hybridity, producing forms of stability, reinforcing state authority or facilitating coercive and consent-based state-building processes (see Boege, 2019). Moreover, while bearing institutional resemblances and

manifesting in bureaucratic routines including 'bookkeeping, recruitment, and internal management practices [that] draw parallels to corporate governance' (Lessing, 2021: 856–857), criminal governance regulates both licit and illicit economies, fabricates normative orders that blur legal boundaries and orchestrates violence as a rational and instrumental modality within contemporary socio-political configurations (Eaton et al., 2024).

Despite growing scholarly engagement with criminal governance in the Global South, limited theoretical attention has been paid to how such violent governance operates within what Webb et al. (2009) conceptualize as the informal economy that 'falls within informal institutional boundaries……but outside formal institutional boundaries (i.e., laws and regulations)' (p. 493), where powerful elites abuse authority and exploit opportunities 'by taking advantage of the imperfections in the enforcement of laws and regulations' (p. 500). This dynamic is exemplified in Gayer's (2019) analysis, where protection rackets of *bhatta* (criminal tax) became structurally embedded in Karachi's garment sector. Elite industrialists of this sector actively incorporated criminal governance into managerial hierarchies by appointing enforcers as labor officers tasked with suppressing unionization and surveilling workers. What emerges here is not the absence of legal governance but a hybrid regime that synchronizes criminal authority, labor discipline and capital accumulation through a criminal-political entanglement. This mode of governance mediates and institutionalizes illegality as a productive force within local political economies (Gayer, 2019).

Yet how power, domination and violence are embedded within informal governance arrangements in historically and culturally specific ways is not fully unpacked in the literature. This is where Zulfiqar and Prasad (2021, 2022) make a critical intervention. Rather than viewing informal governance solely through the lens of entrepreneurial opportunity or institutional voids, Zulfiqar and Prasad (2021) foreground how the *biraderi* system, rooted in caste, class and kinship-based structures, produces and naturalizes violence, reiterated through

everyday practices of domination including humiliation, moral accusations and symbolic exclusion. Such violence not only deprives marginalized workers of legal protections but also denies them cultural and moral recognition, shaped by deep-seated cultural scripts that define who belongs and who does not (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021). Their detailed analysis of the constructions of 'dirty work and moral inferiority' that uphold economic and social subordination expands prevailing conceptions of informal institutional logics. Localized governance, they argue, does not merely operate in the shadows of formal institutions; rather, it is actively constituted through embedded social hierarchies and normative orders, which often intensify and legitimize violence, exploitation and domination as both acceptable and expected (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2022).

The preceding discussion on criminal governance, informal economies and the cultural-political mechanisms for maintaining social order through illicit practices, exclusion and moral regulation enriches our understanding of violence in criminal or informal governance. When analyzed through the lens of 'boundary conditions' of who, where and when (Busse et al., 2017), such criminal governance is often understood as operating outside the formal and legal zones of the state and capitalist system of production, resisting corrupt formal-legal processes of accumulation and appropriation, and generating alternative modes of governance such as the 'Sicilian mafia' (Gambetta, 1993). While these forms can be decoupled from state and corporate governance (Lessing, 2021), they embed themselves in specific socio-political and cultural contexts, thereby challenging the authority and legitimacy of formal state structures and neo-liberal economic systems.

Building on this foundation, our conceptualization of mastanocracy pushes beyond the established boundary conditions of criminal governance (Busse et al., 2017). We argue that criminal governance can be explicitly directed toward disciplining marginalized workers working within GSCs through routinized and strategic forms of violence. We contend that

mastanocracy operates by collapsing conventional bifurcations, between legal and illegal, formal and informal and internal and external domains, thereby advancing capitalistic imperatives of exploitation, accumulation and the appropriation of surplus value (see Table 1). In this configuration, mastans function as the primary agents of coercive power, transcending the boundary conditions of the informal economy and maneuvering beyond the formal constraints of legal governance. They enact forms of domination that do not 'comply with the mandates of laws (e.g., not adhering to labor laws) and regulations', yet their practices such as extortion, intimidation and the orchestration of fear are perceived as 'socially acceptable/legitimate when they are consistent with those groups' norms, values, and beliefs' (Webb et al., 2009: 493).

While mastans may be seen as deviant individuals, they are not aberrations. They are predominantly young, often teenagers or middle-aged men, cutting across class lines, who work 'in alliance with corrupt members of the state and they provide access to services, resolve disputes, commit extortion and carry out a wide array of criminal activity, much of which relies on their monopolization of violence to protect their [il]legal industries' (Atkinson-Shepherd, 2017: 235). As such, they become indispensable to both political and industrial elites because 'their economic goals cannot be achieved unless they [mastans] are legitimized as responsible actors' (Yeung and Coe, 2015: 52).

Although mastans are central, mastanocracy with 'cracy' denoting a mode of governance, is a broader assemblage of localized criminal governance (see Ahmed, 2004). It is not reducible to paradigms like the Sicilian Mafia (Gambetta, 1993) or Latin American organized criminal networks (Arias, 2017). Nor does it formally occupy positions within the state governance, corporate hierarchies or legislative institutions, nor does it directly threaten those who do. It does not supplant political authority, state bureaucracy or corporate governance. Likewise, it diverges from traditional systems such as India's Panchayat (Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016)

or Pakistan's *biraderi*-based kinship governance (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021, 2022). Rather, mastanocracy manifests as a complex hybridity, an entangled form of governance that both infuses and parasitically depends upon state bureaucracies and corporate governance.

It consolidates localized modes of rule with 'the relative strength of local customary and other non-state institutions of governance' (Beckert and Dewey, 2017: 116). Its authority is enacted through symbiotic, mutually reinforcing alliances with ruling party politicians, public bureaucrats and factory owners, thereby institutionalizing a system of violent labor governance across the industry. Through extortion, intimidation and the monopolization of force, mastanocracy becomes a critical mechanism for managing labor and enforcing capitalist discipline. As such, it is granted *de facto* 'immunity' to deploy violence exclusively against marginalized workers to 'increase wealth, and access to the resources needed to exploit illegitimate opportunities' (Webb et al., 2009: 497).

[Insert Table 1 right about here]

Methods

Research context

Although the existence of garment factories in Bangladesh dates back to pre-independence, the contemporary industry has emerged under Army General Ziaur Rahman's rise to power in 1975. He implemented economic policies centered on reviving growth by promoting private enterprise and joint ventures (Siddiqi, 2004). Capitalizing on the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA), which granted Bangladesh quota-free access to Western markets, retired elite bureaucrat Noorul Quader Khan proposed a strategic alliance with South Korea's Daewoo Corporation. General Zia personally negotiated with Daewoo's leadership, ensuring state backing. This collaboration led to the first joint-venture garment factory 'Desh Garment' on July 4, 1978, in Bangladesh (see Ahmed, 2025).

The sector rapidly attracted investors from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka due to low-cost labor and unconditional state support for both domestic elites and foreign capital. By 1985, over 587 factories were exporting garments to Western markets. This rapid growth spurred demand for land in Dhaka and surrounding areas, creating lucrative opportunities for industrial elites (Siddiqi, 2004). According to the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers & Exporters Association (BGMEA), more than 4,000 registered factories now operate in Bangladesh, generating $38.48 billion in revenue in 2024. However, Labowitz and Baumann-Pauly (2015) contested these figures, suggesting the real number exceeds 7,000 when accounting for unregistered small factories that comprise the indirect sector, which enables direct exporters to absorb fluctuations in orders.

This unchecked expansion also precipitated the rise of mastans in this industry. Military and authoritarian regimes dominated the political field for decades, eroding institutional accountability and suspending legal protections (Ahmed, 2025). Constitutional amendments that concentrated power normalized corruption and state-sanctioned violence by embedding mastans into governance mechanisms (Ruud, 2018). According to Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (2023), workers were subjected to widespread violence, physical assaults, sexual harassment and gang rape leading to 34 deaths and numerous injuries inside and outside factories, mostly committed by mastans. Their role in the systemic violence against union applicants, leaders and activists directly informed the rationale for this study.

Researchers' positionality

Throughout this research, we maintained a rigorous and reflexive awareness of our positionality as researchers. This entailed acknowledging our current status as academics in the UK and critically engaging with our identities as citizens of garment-producing nations, from which we self-initiated expatriation to pursue higher education. Through our 'political reflexivity' (Abdelnour and Moghli, 2021; Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021), we actively interrogated

how our social locations, lived experiences and broader socio-political contexts shaped the epistemological lenses through which this study was conducted.

The first author, who led the research design and data collection, was raised in a lower-middle-class household in a Bangladeshi village, then moved to a semi-urban area for secondary education and finally to Dhaka for higher education. His formative years, spanning from a remote village woven into violence to capital city, were marked by proximate exposure to systemic and pervasive violence, including 'the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation' (Krug et al., 2002: 1084). Such violence, often perpetrated by mastans, profoundly influenced his critical consciousness. In particular, his embodied experience of the Tazreen Fashion fire and the Rana Plaza collapse compelled him to interrogate the legitimization of violence in the BGI and its broader societal structures.

The co-authors of this study, both originally from Sri Lanka, offer nuanced perspectives shaped by their lived experiences of violence perpetrated by supporters of ethnocratic political parties and groups during the Sri Lankan Civil War and its aftermath. Additionally, their insights are informed by the political violence and mass killings carried out by both government forces and rebel groups between 1988 and 1989. Their collective positionalities and reflexive engagement with their research roles have been integral to uncovering the complex interplay of power, violence and resistance in the contexts they examine.

Together, our collective insights, rooted in witnessing violence perpetuated against marginalized people in our societies and informed by political reflexivity with analytical distance, along with the privilege of no longer being marginalized or exposed to such violence, provide us with a critical lens of 'insider–outsider perspectives' (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021) to explore how mastanocracy underpins violence against marginalized workers in the BGI.

Data collection

Before fieldwork commenced, various third-party sources and secondary literature pointed to widespread violence in Bangladeshi society. Nonetheless, our primary aim was to understand the political processes and structural dynamics shaping criminal governance and its violence in the BGI. Ethical approval was obtained from a UK university where the first author completed his PhD and held an academic position for four years. Data collection began by drawing on the first author's social networks, leading to a six-month empirical study in Dhaka and surrounding areas. This inquiry adopted a multi-method approach, incorporating in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and non-participant observation. The first author also maintained regular engagement with stakeholders during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Access to factory owners and managers was gained through extended dialogue. These participants detailed the mechanisms through which factories recruit labor, structure wages, organize production, allocate tasks and regulate performance through systems of reward and punishment. They also provided insight into how owners, with support from their *laatial bahini* (mastans), exert violence on workers within and beyond the factory walls, often in collaboration with state police and ruling party's Members of Parliament (MPs). Factory owners and managers were generally forthright in discussing the constraints and advantages of operating within a contested political-economic environment, as well as their affiliations with ruling party and law enforcement. They openly shared their views on ownership, authority and what they saw as the necessity of mastans involvement, which they frequently framed as a political economic and cultural requirement for managing 'this kind of business.'

Factory workers were the central participants in this study, but gaining their trust was a gradual and complex process. Many were initially reluctant to speak openly. Some viewed the first author with suspicion, assuming alignment with factory owners, while others dismissed him as

lacking the power to bring about change. These responses pointed to the significance of researcher positionality and the power asymmetries inherent in qualitative inquiry. However, it was observed that certain grassroots NGOs had already established credibility with workers. In response, the first author partnered with a local NGO that had been engaged with garment workers since 2002. This collaboration helped foster trust, enabling in-depth interviews with workers at NGO offices across five major industrial zones. These settings provided ethical safeguards and supported candid, unfiltered worker accounts.

Interviews with civil society figures including NGO personnel, independent academic researchers and a journalist specializing in industrial affairs further enriched the research. All 80 interviews (see Table 2) ranged from 20 to 140 minutes. They were audio recorded and transcribed, except for five, for which notes were taken during the discussions and developed into detailed fieldwork memos

[Insert Table 2 right about here]

A focus group discussion was also conducted with five workers, two junior managers, one academic researcher, one NGO counsellor and one journalist involved in or studying the BGI. The session lasted two and a half hours and was recorded and transcribed. Workers were initially hesitant to participate, but became more open as the discussion progressed. The NGO counsellor, academic researcher and journalist primarily facilitated the exchange. The junior managers were reluctant to share their perspectives but generally agreed with the dominant themes.

The first author also carried out 40 hours of direct observation across five factories. These observations helped document the physical organization of work processes, spatial divisions and the distribution of personnel, resources and privileges. They also shed light on working conditions, amenities and managerial conduct toward workers. Observational data revealed

how power operated in routine interactions among workers, managers and owners, including through body language, posture and gestures. Only one factory permitted the first author to engage directly with junior managers and collect photographic documentation.

This study also draws extensively on secondary data systematically collected from published sources, including reports by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, Human Rights Watch, International Labour Organization, Transparency International Bangladesh and Worker Rights Consortium, as well as peer-reviewed analyses such as Bangladesh Development Studies. This material was supplemented by national and international news coverage, primarily from *The Daily Star*, *Prothom Alo*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Aljazeera*. Together, these sources provided a multi-scalar perspective on the legitimization of violent labor control in the BGI through the hybridization of mastanocracy under global production regimes.

Data analysis

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, we conducted a rigorous and iterative examination of both primary and secondary data. This involved repeated readings of interview transcripts, observational notes and published documents to identify patterns of convergence and divergence. The volume of keywords, jargon and emergent narratives initially felt overwhelming, reflecting the complexity of workers' lived experiences. By anchoring the analysis in the research objectives and questions, we identified recurrent terms such as mastans, *goonda bahini / laatial bahini* (mastans), *otthachar* (violence), *chada* (racket), *doorniti* (corruption), *oshohay* (helplessness), *zamindars* (feudal landlords) and others that held deep significance for participants' experiences. These granular codes served as the foundation for broader abstract themes, including *mastans' rule, corrupt state, political violence, police violence, zamindari, hellish working conditions, industrial growth, country's economy, unskilled workers, greedy workforce* and other configurations that reflected systemic structures of exploitation and coercion. For instance, a factory owner asserted:

> Our public servants are so corrupt that without a bribe, they won't even issue a birth or death certificate….And our workforce is unskilled and greedy. If we truly want to accomplish anything here, mastans are our only option.

From this powerful quote, we generated codes such as *widespread corruption*, *use of mastans* and *legitimization of violence*, which illuminated the sociopolitical logic of mastanocracy as a form of criminal governance. In addition to these dominant themes, we remained attentive to emerging issues, including the operation of criminal governance within the GSC and violence against marginalized workers beyond organizational boundaries, areas largely neglected in existing MOS literature (see Figure 1). These insights refined our analytical framework and enabled a critical engagement with localized forms of criminal governance, its hybridization and its authorization of violence. The final themes, presented in the findings section, foreground not only the structural conditions shaping workers' embodied experiences but also contributing to a deeper theorization of the legitimization of mastanocracy and the normalization of violence within formal industrial governance.

[Insert Figure 1 right about here]

Findings

> From roadside tea stall owners to members of the parliament, successful entrepreneurs, and home or land owners - none are spared by the gangs led by dreaded criminals [mastans]. (The Daily Star, 31 March 2010)

We too conspicuously observed the omnipresence of mastans in the industrial hubs, including Ashulia, Gazipur, Savar and Tongi. The first author repeatedly encountered mastans stationed near the factory gates during the fieldwork. These encounters were marked by aggressive questioning, as the first author was compelled to disclose his identity and justify his presence in these highly contested spaces. Formal documentation verifying his affiliation and the nature

of this research was scrutinized, followed by a barrage of questions: *What are your ultimate objectives? Are you collaborating with international NGOs to destabilize our industry? How much money have you received for this study? Why not investigate other countries' garment industries? Are you intent on harming your own country?*

While being measured, composed, forthcoming and authoritative in his right to be there as a researcher, the first author's responses were initially met with overt hostility, fostering a climate of intimidation. Despite implementing precautionary measures for personal safety, moments of acute vulnerability arose, as the mastans' questioning often carried implicit threats. Phrases such as 'Do not write anything that harms the Bangladeshi government' or 'Now we know you, so it won't be hard to find you' were explicitly pronounced. A recurring admonition, 'If the garment industry falls, you will fall too, remember that', encapsulated the latent violence. This atmosphere of surveillance and interrogation was further reinforced by the alignment of some factory managers with the mastans' rhetoric, although others attempted to moderate the tone, as one remarked:

> This brother [the first author] is an educated and sensible man. He will not write anything harmful about us.

These interactions reveal the potential harm of conducting research in environments increasingly defined by structural and interpersonal violence (Abdelnour and Moghli, 2021).

The first author also observed the more insidious presence of mastans within factories, particularly in managers' offices. In some instances, they were seen conversing with factory managers over tea, presenting themselves as *alakar boro bhai* (local big brothers) tasked with maintaining 'peace and order' in the industrial precincts. Their visibility often extended beyond the factory premises: posters bearing the images of mastans' leaders were prominently displayed on factory walls, local shops and along main street thoroughfares, reinforcing their

hybrid role across illegalities (e.g. community dictatorship as socio-political actors) and legalities (e.g. candidates from the ruling party in upcoming local elections). A manager confirmed:

> He [mastan's leader] truly cares about us. He is always a phone call away to help us. We are truly grateful to him…Bhai [brother, directing to the mastan's leader], when will you be our MP [laughing loudly]?

Such interactions with these mastans revealed a consistent pattern of potential collaboration between criminal actors and power, intertwined with assertions of their role as protectors of a legal export-oriented industry.

In another factory, the interrogation of the first author escalated when the owner who had agreed to an interview entered the discussion. The factory owner expressed frustration over the role of certain Bangladeshi researchers living aboard, whom he described as *ootch-cho shikkhito razakar* (highly educated traitors), accusing them of undermining the country. However, the factory owner sought to reassure the mastans of the first author's benign intentions, stating:

> This brother [first author] is not like them [other researchers]. I am sure he will not write anything negative about our industry.

While the first author refrained from making any such assurances, he reiterated his commitment to representing the truth accurately.

These firsthand experiences revealed how mastans blur the boundaries between the formal and informal economies and factory governance systems. Against this backdrop, guided by our research questions, we directed specific inquiries to factory owners and managers, asking: On what authority and in what capacity do these *alakar boro bhai* gain access to factories? What roles do they assume within the industrial arena? The responses we gathered from them, as

well as from workers and members of civil society, revealed three key functions of criminal governance that mastans perform within the BGI: traders of corruption and extortion, protectors of political and industrial elites and mundane agents of violence as a means of disciplining marginalized workers. We explain these in the following subsections.

Mastans' trade: the hidden cost of criminal governance

Empirically, violence in the BGI centers on the multiple roles mastans perform as extortionists, traders and rent collectors. Since gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh has maintained its notorious reputation as one of the most corrupt countries in the world (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2024). With this range of roles embedded within them, mastans can 'get things done' in an otherwise intractable corrupt system. Manifesting as a normalized condition of corruption in Bangladesh, for all factory owners, it is nearly impossible to overcome this burden without the support of mastans. One owner commented:

> It may sound disturbing, but mastans are a blessing. They may lack formal education and may not come from decent backgrounds, but they are a thousand times better than the so-called government employees from *shikkito* [educated] and *vodro* [decent] families.

His frustration with systemic corruption among *shikkito* and *vodro* government employees is also reflected in the Transparency International Bangladesh's (2013) report, which reveals that establishing a garment factory requires approvals from at least 17 different ministries and organizations. These operate within systematically and structurally embedded bribery networks, amounting to millions of Takas for granting approvals from purchasing land for factory premises to securing utilities such as electricity and water. To 'get things done' in this corrupt environment, many owners resort to seeking assistance from mastans. One factory owner explained:

> I was asked to pay 3 million Takas ($25,000) to land officials to register the land. I could have paid, but then I would not have had access to the land. Mastans would then demand an additional 3-5 million for possession. So, I approached a local mastan who works for a government minister. He facilitated the registration and possession for only 5 million Takas.

In such a corrupt regime, the boundaries between legality and legitimacy blur due to extortion by state actors, creating space for criminals with political ties to emerge and establish a market for corruption, as seen in land registration and possession.

The mastans' influence expands significantly in the BGI. For instance, the construction industry is monopolized by ruling party leaders, including local MPs and government ministers. Mastans are closely connected to these figures and forcibly seize land, coercing landowners into selling their properties for development. Local contractors operate under these mastans, who use coercion and violence to expedite construction while supplying casual, low-paid workers from slums. This systemic network of corruption ensures no factory construction progresses without paying substantial *chada* (racketeering) to mastans. One factory owner shared the struggles his father faced during the construction of their facility:

> My father sought to build a sustainable factory, but local construction firms lacked expertise. So, he hired a foreign company. Yet a local mastan halted the project, demanding 10 million Takas ($85,000) and threatening his life. The work was stalled for two months, causing severe financial losses. Ultimately, he struck a deal with a local MP, the mastan's godfather, for 7 million Takas.

Many owners shared similar stories that reveal mastans' connections to state legislators, who often act as 'Godfathers' in Bangladeshi society (see Ruud, 2018). Once a factory is constructed, obtaining electricity, gas and water also requires bribes to government officials.

Factory owners often find it more convenient to rely on mastans, who leverage their political connections with these officials to secure expedited services. One owner expressed his anger:

> Can you imagine a society where you need to pay millions extra to have access to utilities that you are already paying the highest price than your competitors? This is our *Sonar* [golden] Bangla.

Like him, a few other owners expressed frustration with formal governance, which inevitably compels them to hire mastans as enforcers, circumventing systematic corruption. Secondary data also reveals that corrupt bureaucrats operate with impunity, shielded from disciplinary measures. The state government lacks both the will and political power to eradicate corruption, as state actors are its primary beneficiaries (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2024). The Anti-Corruption Commission is ineffective because it must seek government approval before launching investigations against government employees.

However, when mastans intervene, bureaucrats often acquiesce out of fear for their safety, quickly concluding deals. Thus, the structural core of mastans' dual role, penetrating both public bureaucracy and political authority, fuses corruption from both ends. In doing so, mastans have become coordinators of corruption: they buy corruption from the bureaucracy and sell it to clients under political patronage. In both cases, violence remains their primary weapon. One owner reflected on his experience:

> We must maintain good relations with mastans. They are effective, connected with the ruling party's MPs and ministers. Survival without mastans is unthinkable in Bangladesh.

His remarks reveal the dependency on these criminals who, backed by state legislators, act as indispensable gatekeepers controlling access to resources and protection within Bangladesh's socio-political fabric. The legitimization of such relationships signals not only the failure of

formal governance but also the necessity of a hybrid governance system involving criminals and state actors or agencies. Within this hybridity, mastans neither resist nor undermine bureaucratic corruption; instead, they reinforce it while serving industrial, political and bureaucratic elites.

Our observations further show that mastans are not merely rent-seeking agents of corruption. They are a central part of violent governance that is not isolated but embedded in a broader political economy. This hybridity was highlighted by a member of civil society, who remarked:

> The ruling elites are parasites feeding on corruption. Extortion, money laundering, land grabbing and siphoning off government funds are their income streams. Their wealth would vanish without corruption. To protect their income, they must remain in power and collaborate with mastans. They ensure electoral victory through fear and violence. Without mastans, their [political elites] grip on power would collapse like a house of cards.

Such reflections dominate among our participants, especially workers and members of civil society. Al Jazeera's (2021) investigative report also confirmed collusion between mastans and the state, linked to the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, an ex-Army General and Inspector General of Police.

Like political and bureaucratic elites, industrial elites find mastans convenient collaborators in navigating corruption's burdens. In any case, seeking help from these criminal actors results in factory owners paying substantial sums. This creates further demand for mastans and their brutality in day-to-day factory operations, which grows progressively deeper, becoming a core component in industrial governance. In the following section, we analyze how and why factory owners, despite significant economic costs, actively integrate mastans into factory governance, making them indispensable to labor discipline.

Mastans' embeddedness in the factory governance system

Here, we illuminate mastans' identity as 'protectors of the industrial elites', unpacking the localized socio-political logics grounded in violence and criminal governance. Factory owners and managers expressed profound distrust of marginalized workers, a sentiment deeply rooted in Bangladesh's rigid and often unspoken yet frequently denied class hierarchy, resembling the *biraderi* system in Pakistan (Zulfiqar and Prasad 2021, 2022). For instance, owners and managers categorically characterized workers as 'illiterate', 'uncouth', 'greedy', *'goolam'* (slaves) and *'etor'* (lowly people), citing their rural origins, poverty and consequent lack of institutional education as evidence of intellectual and cultural inferiority. In an owner's words:

> If these people [workers] can jeopardize their future for five years by electing criminals for as little as 500 Taka, imagine what they could do to this industry if offered the same amount or even less. They are barbarians, incapable of understanding their own long-term interests.

Other owners similarly expressed distrust and disdain toward workers, reflecting a dual stereotype: on one hand, workers are naïve due to their rural origins, poverty and limited education; on the other, they are 'greedy', 'impulsive', 'gullible' and capable of becoming 'violent mobs' over trivial sums of money. These stereotypes drive factory owners to hire mastans to closely monitor and control these *etor*, a point reiterated by many owners.

These industrial elites, embodying the hegemonies of Zamindars, perceive workers as a 'threat' and even as an 'enemy within' who aid the 'enemy beyond', certain countries including India, as well as researchers, media outlets and NGOs, in undermining the nation's economy and fulfilling the 'prophecy of Bangladesh as a bottomless basket.' This narrative was propagated by another owner:

> Sadly, our workers are ignorant of these geopolitical dynamics. They easily fall into traps, become instruments of enemies and unknowingly dig their own graves.

Prioritizing profit and industry growth, owners openly identify workers and members of civil society as 'enemies' of Bangladesh, thereby justifying the need for their *laatial bahini* who emerge as a strategic counterforce to neutralize threats against the industry and maintain domination and control. They also dismissed the morality and effectiveness of the state police to legitimize mastans' presence in factories, portraying them as far more 'cost-effective' and 'sustainable' in this socio-political context marked by violence, confirmed by another owner:

> While their [police] right hand collects money from us, promising to maintain order, their left hand takes bribes from workers to create chaos. Mastans wouldn't do that. They have strong principles.

We further observed mastans' presence in workers' private spaces, slum areas owned by ruling political elites. The worker participants in this study are slum dwellers, many were displaced or migrated from rural villages due to socio-economic vulnerabilities, including inadequate education, limited skills, minimal bargaining power and insufficient state safety nets. Their only housing option is cramped quarters in slums, typically no larger than 4x4 meters, for which they pay exorbitant rents averaging 2,200 Taka ($18) per month, with some paying up to 2,800 Taka ($23). Since public utilities are not legally accessible, slum owners, who are also affiliated with ruling party, illicitly secure these services with mastans' help. Slum owners also rely on mastans to enforce rent collection. One worker recounted a harrowing experience:

> During COVID-19, I couldn't pay the rent. I begged the owner for one more week, but he didn't care. The next morning, mastans stormed into our room, tossing all our belongings into the street. The *boro mastan* [leader] grabbed me by the hair and roared, 'If you don't have the rent by tomorrow, you'll be kicked out.'

Employing mastans as rent collectors, even during the pandemic, reveals the entanglement of urban poverty, violent tenancy enforcement and systemic neglect of marginalized people in Bangladeshi society. Mastans' social acceptance beyond factories also normalizes violence against workers who are already disposable, displaced and dehumanized (Ahmed, 2024).

Moreover, mastans subjugate workers' private lives for the benefit of factory capital, a power that factory management, politicians and state bureaucracy could not exercise independently. For example, mastans simultaneously facilitate employment opportunities for migrant workers within factories. However, this is far from altruism, as they extract a share of workers' monthly wages as well as from factory authorities. Many worker participants, migrating to industrial zones with no prior garment sector experience, identified mastans as gatekeepers of factory employment due to limited alternatives. In exchange for factory jobs, workers are required to pay *chada* to the mastans, explained one worker:

> When I came to Dhaka, I refused to work as a *Kajer Meye* [housemaid], a label that could ruin my marriage prospects. I stayed unemployed for two months until the *boro bhai* [mastans' leader] gave me my first job. I gave him half of my first salary [3,800 Taka] in gratitude. Since then, I have been paying 100 Taka each month for his upkeep.

Her testimony illustrates not only social stigma, informal power structures and economic precarity but also reveals the informal networks of mastans and their racketeering, which control access to livelihoods in urban settings. It appears that workers' continued good standing with mastans depends on the timely and regular payment of *chada* and strict compliance with directives issued by both mastans and factory management. These directives explicitly prohibit participation in collective actions, including demands for a living wage or any form of unionization.

Within this violent context, mastans not only guarantee a steady supply of 'ideal workers' (Ahmed, 2024) but also reinforce the disciplinary regime within the BGI. For factory owners, slums and their inhabitants represent a 'dirty world', one they deliberately avoid despite their physical proximity to factories. One factory owner commented:

> It is a forbidden place filled with dirt and dirty people that you don't want to visit or deal with its residents.

Echoing this disdain, many factory managers also expressed their 'disgust', as one stated:

> Let these dirty people [mastans and workers] mingle and handle their dirty work [hysterically laughed].

Their remarks confirm the class system in Bangladeshi society, where recruiting workers is considered 'dirty work', not because of the tasks themselves, such as 'toilet cleaning' (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021, 2022), but because of the 'type of people' involved. They explicitly expressed hatred at engaging with marginalized workers, and their attitudes toward the places these workers live reflect social polarization, suggesting that 'marginalized workers in their very existence are dirty.' Driven by this class consciousness, these Zamindars delegate mastans, who are also regarded as 'lowly, uncouth and appropriately suited' to perform such 'dirty work.' One manager candidly admitted:

> Cloth-making isn't a complex job. It only requires physical strength and obedience, not brilliance. Mastans excel at finding people who won't question or disobey but will work obediently. By assigning this task to mastans, we maximize efficiency, save resources and protect our social status.

As evident in this quote, underpinning the legitimization of mastans within and beyond factories, as well as the denial of workers' rights and contributions to industrial growth, is a specific class ideology that dehumanizes workers as 'dirty people.' This polarized class system

presents a chillingly utilitarian perspective, where power, obedience and efficiency take precedence over humanity, morality or even work ethics. The criminality and violence that mastans introduce into governance are central to labor governance throughout the industry. Non-compliance with this violent criminal governance results in severe consequences, including job termination, physical assault, rape and, in extreme cases, death. These issues will be explored further in the following section.

Mastans' rule: the agents of violence in the garment industry

During the fieldwork, all participants, from owners and managers to workers and civil society members, shared a pervasive and intense fear of mastans. This fear structures their daily existence, compelling them to navigate life under a constant threat of violence. Industrial and managerial elites, however, are able to mitigate this threat through their financial resources and political ties. Typically, they manage mastans by paying *chada*. In contrast, marginalized workers in particular remain exposed to the most severe forms of violence. Lacking wealth, social ties to powerful actors and protection from the state, these workers are treated as expendable within Bangladeshi society. Although they are indispensable to the functioning of the industry, their physical and psychological suffering carries no weight among political, bureaucratic and industrial elites. Their lives, safety and well-being are of minimal concern to those in power, as captured in the following owner's remark:

> If we become consumed by so-called *odhikar* [workers' rights], we won't be able to progress. Every developed nation prioritized economic growth first, then they turn to things like labor rights or gender equality. You can't have both simultaneously.

His dismissive tone not only ignores fair and sustainable labor conditions but also reinforces the suppression of workers' rights in the name of economic efficiency and development, a

rationale frequently invoked by all owners to justify the ongoing precarious and violent labor conditions within the industry.

In this context, we also identified the systematic reliance on mastans as an 'agent of violence' to discipline workers over even the most trivial matters. Conversations with factory owners and managers revealed that mastans are kept perpetually on standby, ready to respond to any perceived need of the factory's labor control, as one owner articulated, 'emergency service providers available on call.' Regardless of the matter's significance, managers mobilize mastans at the slightest sign of worker resistance, ensuring mastans' constant visibility and threatening presence within the factory premises. A particularly egregious case occurred at a factory owned by a MP affiliated with the ruling party. The MP's son, the factory's director, claimed his expensive iPhone had been stolen. Instead of initiating a formal investigation, he accused a young female worker assigned to clean his office of theft, creating an ordeal that an eyewitness recounted as:

> He [the director] confined her to his office, beat her and [allegedly, as we could not confirm] sexually assaulted her. When we found out, we stopped working, gathered outside and demanded justice. Within minutes, local mastans arrived and launched a brutal assault on us. Many of us were left seriously injured [voice cracked].

Such violence including physical confinement or sexual abuse is not an isolated occurrence within the BGI, but constitutes the operational logic of a wider system of criminal governance in which mastans' coercive authority and patriarchal dominance intersect with formal institutions and organizational structures. None of the workers who took part in the above protest lost their jobs, but they received a severe threat from the factory owner that 'repeating such 'anarchy' would result not only in termination but also imprisonment', as confirmed by the aforementioned worker. The intimidation did not end there. On the night of the protest,

local mastans visited his home and threatened physical violence if he participated in similar acts of resistance again.

Most recently, a 19-year-old garment worker named Hridoy was reportedly tortured and killed following allegations of theft. A video circulated on social media depicts a harrowing scene in which several men, armed with sticks, are seen assaulting him while he is stripped, bound with ropes and visibly bleeding (The Business Standard, 30 June 2025). We observed that the normalization of violence enacted by mastans has become legitimized in the industry. For example, in another factory, also owned by a MP from the ruling party, workers were denied their due wages and overtime pay for two consecutive months. As Eid approached and the unpaid wages placed them under mounting financial pressure, a group of workers went to the manager's office to inquire about the payment timeline. One of the workers from the focus group discussion recounted the incident:

> We demanded a clear date for our payment. Within minutes, five motorbikes carrying ten local mastans arrived at the factory. The leader slammed his gun onto the table and threatened, 'Forget Eid; your family will never see you alive again if you're not back at work in two minutes.' Stunned with fear, we ran for our lives.

The speed and coordination of the mastans' arrival, their violent display of the gun and the explicit death threat transform the factory into a space of terror maintained by repression aimed at crushing even the mildest forms of collective bargaining. The workers' flight in the face of a death threat signals the collapse of even minimal labor protections and the rise of mastans across the industry. The non-payment of due wages ahead of Eid has become a routinized practice as each year, widespread reports emerge in national media highlighting factory owners' failure to disburse salaries and bonuses on time (The Daily Star, 22 May 2025).

Our empirical insights also reveal the disconnect between the ruling elites and the marginalized workforce, resulting in lives that are disregarded, disrespected and devalued through mastans' violence. In the focus group discussion, a worker offered insight into how systematically mastans have shaped their daily reality, forcing them to live in a constant state of fear and anxiety:

> Our lives are under the gaze of these vultures [mastans]. They're everywhere. Even the local *cha-wala* [tea sellers], *modi-dokandar* [grocery shop owners] and *darowan* [security guards] work for them, watching us, who we talk to, where we go, what we do!

Many workers shared a similar yet harsh reality of being trapped in a cycle of fear, helplessness and despair. Their experiences reflect the omnipresent climate produced by mastans' networks of surveillance and control beyond factories. This violent disciplinary regime demonstrates that mastans are not peripheral but central to power, having created a panoptic environment in which every action of workers is monitored, even beyond organizational boundaries.

In this context, while we conducted workers' interviews at NGO offices across five industrial zones, the fear was palpable. Female workers arrived wearing burkas that many admitted they did not typically wear, even in the sweltering heat of summer nights, in order to conceal their identities. One worker described the suffocating reality:

> I usually avoid visiting NGO offices. But if I must, I go to great lengths to hide my face so no one can recognize me. You can't trust anyone. Just last week, local mastans caught one of my colleagues speaking with a journalist. They beat her mercilessly.

The inescapable atmosphere of fear, surveillance and enforced silence governing the lives of marginalized workers within informal economies reveals how dangerous a worker's freedom

of movement has become under the regime of mastans. Their widespread violence is not isolated but politically and socially legitimized by the state and industrial elites in the BGI. Mastans operate as 'boundary spanners' collaborating with the political state, neoliberal industry and urban slum owners, advancing a system of criminal governance in which violence is legitimized, particularly against marginalized workers.

That said, this normalization of violence is not confined to workers alone. Other stakeholders, including journalists, NGO employees and academic researchers interviewed in this study, were also targeted by mastans and subjected to violence ranging from repeated slaps and the tearing of clothes to the robbery of personal property. As an NGO employee confirmed:

> I've lost count of the times I've been assaulted by mastans. Many of my colleagues left NGO work. They couldn't take the violence. I don't blame them. I've thought of quitting, too. But I guess I'm built differently.

While not as extreme as the violence experienced by workers, such acts are deeply embedded in a broader system of coercion and intimidation in Bangladeshi society aimed at suppressing marginalized peoples' rights and resistance. The architects of this criminal governance are rooted within Bangladeshi political, bureaucratic and industrial elites, who benefit from maintaining a climate of fear and repression. The emergence, patronization and legitimization of mastans-led criminal governance and its normalization of violence has become a central feature of a wider socio-political and economic order shaped by localized norms and culture that ensure marginalized workers' subjugation and suppress their resistance. The collective collaboration among powerful elites, through localized practices spanning informal economies and formal governance systems, legitimizes this form of criminal governance in the BGI, securing both the industry's continued expansion and the preservation of existing power structures.

Discussion

This study interrogates the legitimization of criminal governance within the context of an export-oriented industrial regime and its normalization of violence as a constitutive force in shaping the embodied experiences of marginalized workers engaged in garment production for GSCs. Through an in-depth case study, we demonstrate that criminal actors, locally referred to as mastans, are not peripheral anomalies but structurally embedded within the architectures of criminal governance across the industry. Rather than functioning outside the formal system, these actors are integral to the mechanisms of labor discipline, effectuated through surveillance, coercion and the routinized subjugation of a marginalized workforce concentrated in peripheral urban geographies. The ascendancy of criminal power within formal governance structures is neither incidental nor episodic; it emerges through a process of hybridization wherein such criminal actors 'co-exist, compete, overlap, interact, intertwine and blend' (Beckert and Dewey, 2017: 16) with dominant political regimes, industrial elites and institutional governances. This configuration consolidates a form of criminal governance (Lessing, 2021) that sustains the conditions for the extraction of low-cost labor for global brands, while affording these actors de facto legitimacy as 'protectors' embedded within the formal institutional landscape, often operating with juridical and political impunity.

This study offers two important contributions to the MOS literature. First, while a substantive body of research has examined the operations of criminal actors and the configuration of criminal governance within illicit economies such as narcotics, arms trade, human trafficking or competition over territorial contestation (Arias, 2017; Arias and Barnes, 2016; Gambetta, 1993; Lessing, 2021; Moncada, 2021), there remains limited engagement with how and why a criminal governance crosses 'boundary conditions' (Busse et al., 2017) from illegal and informal economies (Webb et al., 2009) to become embedded with formal-legal industries and markets liked to the GSCs. Although these studies yield important theoretical and empirical

insights, they often reinforce boundary dichotomy between formality and informality, legality and illegality and legitimacy and illegitimacy. We address this lacuna by adopting an 'inside-out exploration of boundary condition' (Busse et al., 2017) and advance the concept of mastanocracy as a form of criminal governance embedded within a formal industry producing legal commodities, namely garments, for global consumers. Our theorization moves beyond spatial and illicit market framings of criminal governance to reveal its institutionalized embeddedness within a regulated industrial regime, thereby extending the analytical purview of criminal governance into the domain of formal economic production.

Our empirical findings demonstrate that corruption, criminality and violence are deeply embedded in the Bangladeshi public sector, stemming significantly though not exclusively from the 'lack of capacity, effectiveness and legitimacy of state institutions' (Beckert and Dewey, 2017: 116). These structural conditions have enabled the emergence of mastanocracy as a form of 'collaborative governance' (Arias, 2017), shaped through strategic alignment among ruling politicians, public officials, industrial elites and dominant landlords. Within this configuration, mastans function not only as violent agents who secure electoral victories for ruling parties (Ahmed, 2004) but also as crucial enforcers of industrial discipline. Through these roles, mastans transform formal governance structures encompassing state, bureaucratic and industrial systems into a mode of criminal governance that facilitates critical industrial processes such as land acquisition, factory construction and the delivery of essential utilities. Their involvement extends to routine practices including labor recruitment, surveillance and labor control.

Contrary to prevailing scholarship on criminal governance, we advance a more differentiated conceptualization by revealing that mastanocracy is not antagonistic to the state, bureaucracy, political authority or corporate ownership. It does not undermine political power, the national economy and prevailing social stratification. Instead, it exploits systemic corruption, social

polarization and partisan politics to consolidate the accumulation of capital and authority, while reinforcing elite dominance through the coercion and exploitation of marginalized people. In line with other forms of criminal governance (see Table 1), we argue that mastanocracy sustains a localized hybrid political order (Beckert and Dewey, 2017) that governs the everyday realities of millions of workers residing in industrial peripheries (Lessing, 2021).

We also contribute to the understanding of the 'legitimacy of illegalities' (Webb et al., 2009) of criminal governance operating within a legally export-oriented industry that is not only integral to GSCs but also central to the national identity of the Bangladeshi state, embodied in the label 'Made in Bangladesh.' Our empirical findings indicate that mastanocracy, along with its systemic violence, has been unambiguously accepted within the industrial context by factory owners and managers. For these neo-authoritarian stakeholders (Ahmed, 2025), mastans are 'a force to be reckoned with', not because of the threats they represent but due to the functional advantages their violent governance affords. A prevailing industrial belief holds among these powerful elite actors that Bangladesh's rise in global markets, particularly in relation to competitors such as China or Vietnam, would have been unlikely without mastans' involvement. These neo-authoritarian actors further contend that the BGI remains the principal conduit for realizing the national aspiration to attain 'developed country' status, and that mastanocracy constitutes the only viable mode of governance advancing this goal. These insights align with Lessing's (2021: 855) contention that 'state formation often depended in crucially on collaboration with, and absorption of, criminal groups.'

Second, by emphasizing the inseparability of governance and violence, this study advances ongoing debates on violence in contemporary organizations. Existing research has extensively documented various forms of violence linked to the dominance of Western retailers (Ahmed, 2025; Chowdhury, 2017), political-business alliances (Ahmed and Uddin, 2021; Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019), compliance mechanisms influenced by social norms (Alamgir and

Alakavulkar, 2020; Alamgir et al., 2022; Fontana and Dawkins, 2024) and the rise of neo-authoritarianism within GSCs (Ahmed, 2025). However, less attention has been given to workers' embodied experiences of violence beyond organizational boundaries, particularly within their private spaces, at the hands of criminal actors. Addressing this gap, we reveal a deeper layer of violence occurring at the intersection of formal and informal institutional boundaries (Webb et al., 2009). Although not explicitly grounded in traditional systems such as *biraderi* (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021, 2022), gendered and class-based violence targeting the 'ideal workers' (Ahmed, 2024) and their 'deregulated bodies' (Alamgir et al., 2022) contributes to the systemic stigmatization of workers as 'dirty, greedy, gullible, mobs' and other derogatory labels across urban industrial peripheries. These cultural stigmatizations, while morally illegitimate and dehumanizing, serve as operationally effective justifications legitimizing criminal actors' intrusion into workers' private lives. The omnipresence of mastans and their violence manifested through disciplinary regimes, extractive practices and routine coercion becomes legitimized by framing workers as subhuman subjects.

Our findings therefore complicate and reframe Webb et al.'s (2009) assertion that activities within the formal economy are inherently legal, while those outside it are generally classified as illegal. Contextualizing from the Global South, we demonstrate that political, industrial and social elites strategically depend on informality and illegality to uphold the formal industrial order and manage urban industrial zones, thereby legitimizing the sustained violence against marginalized populations employed in export-oriented industry. This violence occurs within industrial spaces, operating under hybrid governance structures and becomes legitimized, especially against marginalized workers displaced from rural regions. Within this localized Global South framework (Varman and Al-Amoudi, 2016; Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021, 2022), violence against marginalized people, both inside and beyond organizational boundaries, is perceived as effective and legitimate for state formation (Boege, 2019), enabling the attainment

of 'broad social and political legitimacy through developing…relations with [criminal] actors' (Yeung and Coe, 2015: 52). This perspective is echoed by a factory owner:

> Brother, this is Bangladesh. You cannot govern an unruly nation without some degree of violence [sinister laugh].

Concluding remarks

This study expands the conceptual boundaries of criminal governance through the notion of mastanocracy, a hybrid form of governance that operates legitimately within one of the world's leading garment-exporting industries despite the oversight of GSCs' governance mechanisms. In a context characterized by democratic erosion and the normalization of corruption within formal institutions, mastanocracy, led by mastans, emerges as a distinct configuration of hybrid criminal governance rooted in violence. It legitimizes criminality and sanctions violence against marginalized workers under the guise of industrial development and state-building. By reinforcing elite power and sustaining the symbolic and material significance of 'Made in Bangladesh', it governs the lives of millions of workers, from survival to death, serving the imperatives of global demand for cheap fashion.

As Ahmed (2025) contends, neo-authoritarian stakeholders govern GSCs, with factory floors shaped by localized violence. This suggests that criminal governance may endure in other labor-intensive sectors, such as India's mining industry in the Red Corridor or the racket networks within the construction industry (Michelutti, 2025). Future research should explore how, despite global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, criminal governance emerges and persists within formally legal sites of production, including the cocoa, fishing, palm oil, sugarcane, tea and tobacco industries across the Global South.

The roles of neo-authoritarian actors within states, societies and industries shaped by localized cultural norms, political configurations and discourses of state formation and development in sustaining such violent criminal governance require rigorous empirical and theoretical examination.

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Table 1: (Dis)similarities Between Criminal Gangs, Criminal Governance and Mastanocracy

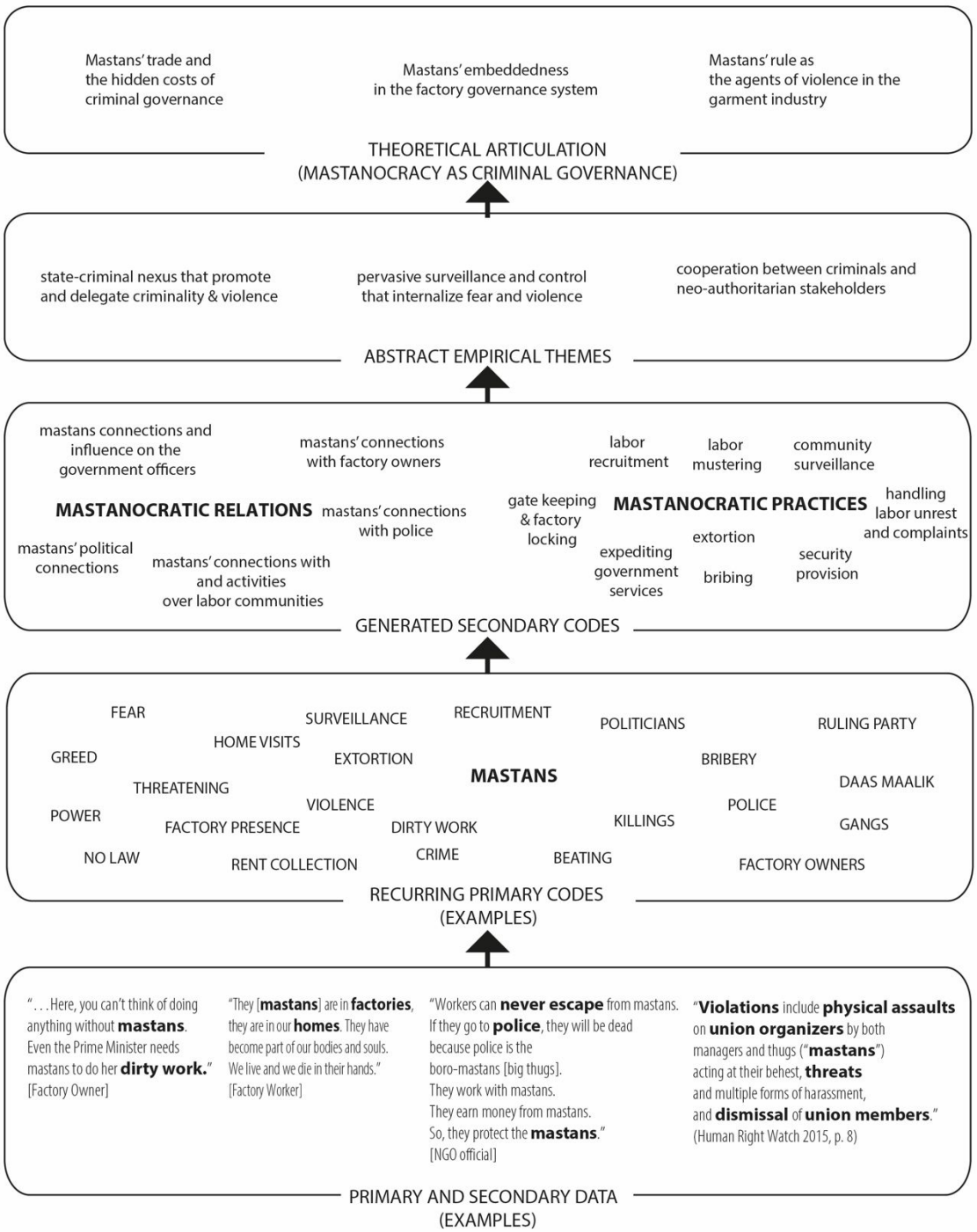
Dimensions	Criminal Gangs	Criminal Governance	Mastanocracy
Ideology / legitimacy claims	Often devoid of ideology, but may adopt symbolic political, ethnic or religious narratives	Governance justified through the provision of security, justice and social services in the absence of the state	No formal ideology: legitimacy derives from proximity to ruling political power, ability to mediate capital-labor relations and enforcement of neo-authoritarian industrial discipline
Political embedding	Sometimes mobilized by political parties during elections, mostly autonomous	Embedded in fragile or complicit states; tolerated or supported to maintain control	Clientelism and patronage; integral to the party-state nexus, operate as muscle extensions to extend the sovereign power beyond legality
Relationship with the formal governance	Ranges from hostile to co-opted; police repression and corruption co-exist	Collaborative relationship through negotiated sovereignty with state agencies	Symbiotic relations with industrial/ruling elites and law enforcement; impunity in exchange for disciplining labor and maintaining 'industrial stability'; often protected rather than policed/prosecuted
Governance style	Informal security, extortion rackets and protection services	Rule enforcement, taxation, dispute resolution and social service delivery	Discipline labor, suppress dissent, mediate wage disputes informally and violently, monitor and control workers' collective action
Economic embeddedness	Rent-extraction from illicit markets (e.g., drugs and weapons)	Control and regulate both licit and illicit markets	Extract rents from factory owners, take cuts from wages and receive kickbacks for suppressing strikes
Target population/ subjects	Rivals, youth, residents, businesses, government employees and NGOs	Whole communities within the jurisdiction	Marginalized workers and union activists; also academic researchers, NGOs and journalists who speak for the workers' rights
Modes of violence	Predominantly physical such as murder, assault and gang wars	Instrumental violence such as threats, abduction, disappearance, public punishment and symbolic control	Performative violence, less about killing but more about 'owning their livelihood' and disciplining the body such as beatings, public humiliation, rape and occasional killings used to intimidate and break resistance

Visibility and social role	Hyper visible such as vigilantly, graffiti and public presence	Semi-visible; embedded in daily governance	Especially visible in moments of labor unrest, otherwise silent but omnipresent in everyday community and factory politics
Relation to legal order	Outside the law; subject to enforcement	Operates within legal grey zones; tolerated by the state	Shielded by patronage networks and party protection; police act as collaborators, not enforcers; enforcement is rare but can happen selectively against certain individual actors when there is politically non-ignorable media attention (such as the Rana Plaza incident)

Table 2: Participants' details

Types of interviewees	**Number of Participant**	**Details of participants**
Factory workers	35 females &15 females	Female workers are between 18 and 34 years old; male workers are between 19 and 38 years old. They have migrated from rural villages and work (during the time of interview) in 10 compliance factories.
Factory managers and supervisors	10 males	All are aged between 30- and 60-years old working in 10 compliance factories in Dhaka and its peripheries. The group includes four line managers, two floor managers, two production managers and two supervisors.
Factory owners	10 males	All factory owners were born and raised in wealthy families and own multiple compliance factories located in the suburbs of Dhaka.
NGO officials	6 females & 1 male	All NGO officials work for a local NGO in six different locations in Dhaka and its peripheries. This NGO has been advocating for workers' rights since 2002.
Journalist	1 male	The journalist works for a local newspaper and covers news including the collapse of Rana Plaza and fire at Tazreen fashion.
Academic researchers	1 female & 1 male	The male is a professor at a local university and do research labor related issues in Bangladesh. The female researcher is an Assistant Professor from the USA, focusing on the wellbeing of workers in the supply chain.
	Total = 80	

Figure 1: Analytical framework



Response to Editor's comments

Thank you very much for submitting your revised paper. The revised manuscript was sent back to the original three reviewers. While all three reviewers commend you for engaging with their comments, there still feel more work is needed to move this paper towards publication. As such, and without offering any assurance of its ultimate outcome, I would like you to further revise your manuscript for publication consideration in Human Relations.

Authors' response:

Dear Ajnesh,

Thank you sincerely for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our manuscript, and for the thoughtful and detailed comments provided by both you and the reviewers. We have carefully considered all feedback and have worked diligently to incorporate each suggestion into this revised version of the paper.

We genuinely hope that you and the reviewers find the revisions satisfactory and that the manuscript is now well positioned to make a meaningful contribution to *Human Relations*.

The reviewers' comments are exceptionally clear. At this stage, to help further guide your revision, I would suggest focusing your attention on the concept of 'mastanocracy'. As you will read, the reviewers are quite sympathetic with this idea. However, they encourage you to develop and think deeper about the implications of mastanocracy. On this point, R1 suggests that you position the concept in relation to the relevant extant literature (perhaps on closely related phenomena). In a similar vein, R2 asks whether you might identify boundary conditions for mastanocracy. Setting boundary conditions could potentially go a long way in unearthing the novelty of the idea, which future researchers can use and operationalize in their own work. Given the centrality of mastanocracy in the article, I see this as critically important for carving out your paper's theoretical contribution.

Authors' response:

Thank you very much for your insightful comments regarding the need for a sharper conceptualization of the term 'mastanocracy' and for encouraging us to articulate the manuscript's theoretical contributions more clearly.

We have carefully considered your feedback, as well as the reviewers' suggestions, particularly regarding engagement with relevant literature and boundary conditions related to criminals and criminal governance. These suggestions have indeed been very insightful and useful, and we have thoughtfully addressed and integrated them into this revised manuscript through an expanded and clarified contextualization and onceptualization of mastanocracy. Below, we provide a brief overview of the revisions undertaken:

First, we conducted an extensive review of the literature recommended by Reviewer 2 (as Reviewer 1 did not suggest specific readings) on gangs, criminal actors, and forms of criminal governance or mafia in illicit markets, particularly in relation to drugs, arms, and

other illegal commodities in the Global South. Drawing on these readings, we have significantly revised and rewritten the section titled "contextualization and conceptualization of mastanocracy." Indeed, these suggested literatures were immensely helpful in contextualizing the notion of mastanocracy as a system of criminal governance. In this section, we critically examine the role of criminal actors and their intersections with organized violence, narcotics enforcement and religious politics as they assert control over illicit markets, unregulated commodities and spatial territories. We also explore how these actors are embedded socially, politically, ideologically and economically within the societies in which they operate. Building on this foundation, we engaged with the literature on the formation of criminal governance and mafia systems through hybridization processes. Specifically, we articulate how marginalized urban residents are governed through such systems, characterized by rent-seeking behavior and extreme violence, and how this mode of governance becomes normalized in their daily lives.

We also explored the concept of boundary conditions by examining how criminal governance, particularly mafia-like structures, evolves across different contextual environments. Specifically, we analyzed the case of Bangladesh, a country with limited historical involvement in transnational drug or arms markets, yet deeply embedded in global supply chains through its RMG sector. In this context, criminal governance does not operate through traditional illicit markets or gang warfare. Instead, it is embedded within the formal, legal economy. Marginalized workers here are not engaged in stigmatized or so-called "dirty work," such as toilet cleaning (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021, 2022); rather, they produce garments for everyday global consumption.

We conceptualize mastanocracy as a distinct form of criminal governance characterized by a complex hybridity that extends beyond traditional, state-centered frameworks. This form of governance coexists with state institutions and is shaped by the relative influence of local customs and other non-state mechanisms of control. We argue that *mastanocracy* is fundamentally different from other forms of criminal governance. Its actors do not engage in violence against state officials, do not oppose factory owners, and do not sabotage factory property. They refrain from taking sides between competing industrial interests. Instead, their role is to protect state actors and industrial elites, often at the expense of marginalized workers. Within this system, all forms of violence and criminal activity are legitimized as long as they are directed exclusively at these workers, both in factory settings and in their homes within urban slums. Mastanocracy thus represents a form of governance in which repression and control are systematized and socially sanctioned, provided they serve to uphold the interests of political and economic elites.

Drawing on these theoretical frameworks and empirical insights, we have refined the manuscript's core contributions. First, while highlighting the inseparability of violence and governance, we advance critical understandings of how criminal governance and violence become legitimized within neoliberal social, institutional and industrial contexts across the Global South. Our empirical findings demonstrate that mastanocracy is neither an anti-capitalist aberration nor does it operate in opposition to the state, capital, or their alliances. Instead, it collaborates with state institutions and powerful elites, securing de facto immunity while advancing neoliberal market imperatives for low-cost fashion through violence enacted within and beyond organizational boundaries. Second, by

deconstructing binaries such as external versus internal and legal versus illegal, our conceptualization of mastanocracy reveals new insights into the 'boundary conditions' of criminal governance—shedding light on who is involved, where and when it operates, how it is enacted, against whom, and for whose benefit this violent governance persists in an industry deeply embedded within global supply chains.

We sincerely hope that you and the reviewers find the revised framing and contributions both compelling and valuable.

While the primary focus of your revision should be on developing and refining the concept of mastanocracy, please be sure to avail yourself of the additional comments provided by the reviewers. For example, R3 offers excellent suggestions to strengthen the literature review and to craft a more compelling empirical narrative through the use of additional direct quotes from your fieldwork.

Authors' response:

Thank you for sharing your observations and for highlighting the reviewers' suggestions to deepen our engagement with the existing literature from the Bangladesh garment industry and to include additional quotes to strengthen the narrative of our findings.

We have carefully and substantially addressed both suggestions in this revised manuscript. Specifically, we revisited and expanded our engagement with the relevant literature, with a particular focus on the Bangladesh garment industry, the private compliance regimes of the global supply chain, and the forms of violence perpetrated by neo-authoritarian stakeholders, including factory owners, managers, and industrial police, against marginalized workers and deregulated labour bodies. In doing so, we have added approximately 400 words of new literature to enhance the contextualization of our findings.

In the findings section, we have also included eight new quotes to enrich and support the narratives presented. We have also enhanced our critical analysis in this section to further highlight the dynamics of criminal governance within the legal industry.

We would like to note that the journal's 50-page limit constrained our ability to include even more literature or additional quotes. While we aimed to be as comprehensive as possible, we also needed to ensure the manuscript remained within the required length.

We sincerely hope that the revised literature review and the added empirical quotes sufficiently enhance the manuscript's capacity to convey a compelling account of criminal governance operating within a legal industry context.

A final point is also worth mentioning. At Human Relations, we are moving toward making our abstracts more digestible for our readership that has expertise in a wide range of topics and methodologies. Since the abstract is the first thing that potential readers will read, we've been trying to make abstracts as inviting and enticing as possible. We urge you to consider how you might pose a question, make a clear statement, or make a controversial claim, so that students, practitioners, the press, and academics outside of the research area know what

the main contribution of the paper is. It will inevitably increase the chances that your paper is read by others in the future.

Authors' response:

Thank you so much for your thoughtful and insightful guidance on revising the abstract of our manuscript. We have sincerely and diligently followed your suggestions and have rewritten the abstract accordingly.

We hope that the revised version resonates with you. That said, we would be grateful for any further general or specific suggestions you may have to make it even more compelling.

If you feel able to deal with all the points raised, which will require a further revision of the paper, we would be glad to receive a revised version. This may be seen again by the reviewers.

Please let us know by return email if you do intend to submit a further revised version of your paper, which we would hope to receive within 12 weeks.

Authors' response:

We are sincerely grateful for your continued support, especially for securing three outstanding reviewers whose insights have been instrumental in helping us realize the full potential of our manuscript. We also truly appreciate your confidence in the value of this work.

Over the past 10 weeks, we have worked diligently and meticulously on this revision. We have fully engaged with the relevant literature and carefully considered the reviewers' comments, incorporating their feedback through critical analysis and thoughtful revisions throughout the manuscript.

That said, there may be a few suggestions we were unable to address in full, not out of reluctance, but due to the journal's page limit constraints. We want to reassure you that every decision was made with care and in the spirit of maintaining the clarity and coherence of the manuscript within these limitations.

We genuinely hope you find this revised version to be well-developed, polished and critically engaging, with the potential to make a meaningful contribution to *Human Relations*.

With kind regards,
The Authors

Responses to Reviewer 1 Comments:

I appreciate the significant progress the authors have made in revising this manuscript. The paper is now much more focused on mastanocracy, which emerges as a promising contribution. I see potential for this paper to make a distinctive intervention in the literature on labor governance, violence, and global supply chains.

Authors' responses:

Dear Reviewer 1,

Thank you very much for your positive response and appreciation of the revised manuscript from our previous round. We are truly grateful for your thoughtful engagement and encouragement.

As with earlier rounds, we have found your comments and suggestions to be both insightful and intellectually stimulating. They have significantly enriched our thinking and the development of this manuscript. In this revision, we have carefully, thoroughly, and diligently addressed each of your comments, giving them the utmost attention to detail, as explained in your subsequent comments.

We sincerely hope that you will find this revised version of the manuscript to be more articulate, compelling and impactful. We believe it now makes a stronger and more significant contribution to the field, and we genuinely hope it meets the standards for acceptance in *Human Relations*.

That said, several areas still require development. First, while the introduction is clearer, it sometimes reads more like a conclusion, offering strong assertions about the nature and significance of mastanocracy before the necessary theoretical and empirical groundwork has been laid. The introduction also does not articulate the paper's core theoretical contribution. The term mastanocracy is compelling, and I can see its potential applicability to other contexts, particularly within global value chains. However, how this concept extends or advances existing literature is unclear.

The introduction would benefit from positioning mastanocracy in relation to prior work, whether it is governance, violence, or their intersection, and from stating how this concept contributes something novel. My reading suggests that one of the manuscript's strengths is its refusal to separate governance and violence, treating them as mutually constitutive. I believe this is an innovative move within the context, entangling distant actors within local power disputes and violence.

Authors' response:

Thank you very much for your sharp observations and thoughtful feedback. We fully agree that the earlier version of the introduction did not adequately engage with relevant literature, particularly on criminal governance, gang activities and mafia-style protection in business contexts. We also appreciate your recognition of the manuscript's strengths, especially its analysis of the relationship between governance and violence.

In response, we conducted a thorough and careful review of the literature, with particular focus on criminal governance in (in)formal economies within the Global South. We are grateful to Reviewer 2 for suggesting valuable sources that helped us refine our arguments and better highlight the distinctiveness of mastanocracy. As a result, we have significantly revised the introduction to strengthen its theoretical foundation and ensure it serves more clearly as an entry point to the paper, rather than reading like a conclusion.

We also undertook a complete revision of the conceptual framework in this version of the manuscript. The section titled "Conceptualizing Mastanocracy" has been restructured to include critical engagement with literature on gangs, mafia systems and hybrid forms of criminal governance, with particular attention to how these systems operate through violence, rent-seeking, and social embeddedness. Additionally, we explore how criminal governance evolves across different contexts. Drawing on the case of Bangladesh's RMG sector, we show how such systems operate not in illicit markets, but within the formal legal economy. Here, marginalized workers are not engaged in stigmatized "dirty work" (Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2021, 2022), but rather in the production of goods that are central to global consumer markets. Within this context, mastanocracy governs not through overt criminality, but through normalized, sanctioned violence embedded in legal economic structures.

We hope these revisions make the manuscript more compelling, better aligned with the relevant literature, and more clearly positioned to make a meaningful contribution to the field.

Additionally, the manuscript could be more transparent regarding the role of the state and public authorities. At times, the state appears complicit in mastanocratic violence; at other times, it is depicted as absent or peripheral. This ambiguity diminishes our understanding of how mastans operate institutionally. Greater specificity is needed to unpack whether mastans are integrated into formal governance structures, shielded by political patronage, or function as independent actors. Clarifying this dynamic will also strengthen the manuscript's contribution to debates on governance.

Authors' response:

Thank you once again for your brilliant and insightful suggestions. We especially appreciated the clarity of your direction, which helped us strengthen the revised manuscript. We found great value and joy in further clarifying the collaborative governance dynamics among state actors, industrial elites, and mastans. We would like to explain how we addressed this issue in the manuscript briefly.

In particular, we emphasize that mastans play a 'pivotal' role in orchestrating and conducting the criminal governance and different forms of violence associated with that governance. They are not totally autonomous actors in the context of the garment industry. While they may operate more independently in other sectors or informal markets, their role in the RMG sector is closely tied to their connections with ruling party MPs, ministers and other politically influential figures. While we are aware of specific

names, we have chosen not to disclose them for safety reasons. Importantly, mastans do not hold formal positions within factories, the public bureaucracy or legislative bodies. However, instead of such 'formality' being attributed to them, they perform the central role in orchestrating and conducting criminal governance. They operate under the protection and authority of political patrons, making them indispensable intermediaries for both political and industrial elites. In effect, it is this informality that enables them to perform the 'criminal dimensions' of governance. As Ahmed (2004: 100–101) notes, "in the absence of adequate formal and legal rights, a space is created for [mastans] to operate between people and their imperfect institutions."

Thus, mastanocracy does not resemble a traditionally structured systems, such as the *Panchayat* in India or the kinship-based *biraderi* system in Pakistan. Rather, it represents a complex hybrid form of governance that extends the boundaries of what we understand as the state and corporate functionalities of labour management into the realm of criminality, transforming otherwise non-criminal aspects of administration and management into a form of criminality with which the labour intensification and exploitation can be deepend beyond what is possible under the formal governance and management. Such formations coexist with formal institutions and are shaped by the relative strength of local, customary and other non-state systems of governance.

We have also carefully edited our findings section to enhance the role of mastans and their integration into the collaborative and hybrid governance system operating in the BGI.

We hope this expanded and clarified discussion makes the dynamics of mastanocracy more compelling and conceptually robust in the revised manuscript.

Moreover, I encourage the authors to reflect on how the concept of mastanocracy could travel beyond the Bangladeshi context. Are there conditions under which similar forms of localized violent governance might emerge elsewhere? Articulating more explicitly the condiditions to the emergence of mastanocracy and if it is specific to certain institutional configurations, political regimes, or labor market conditions would provide an important avenue for broader theoretical relevance and future research.

Authors response:

Thank you for your insightful suggestion. Engaging with the literature on criminal governance has allowed us to delineate the conditions under which mastanocracy endures, not necessarily under the same name, form, or dynamics, but through its hybridization with political patronage, state actors, and industrial elites across legalized markets in the Global South.

Building on this, we contend that future research in MOS must critically examine how criminal governance persists and evolves within formally legal production sites, for instance, in India, where criminal gangs known as Bhai have established racket economies in Uttar Pradesh's construction sector, a phenomenon vividly portrayed in Bollywood films such as *Company*, *Satya*, *D-Company* and *Black Friday* (see Sen and Venkatesh, 2014). Michelutti (2025) highlights how these Bhai maintain close ties with Hindu Nationalists and

ruling party MPs who have facilitated the establishment of this racketeering network. Meanwhile, in Central and Eastern India's Red Corridor region, the mining industry operates under the violent regime of Maoist insurgents, known as Naxalites.

Future researchers should also investigate other industries, such as cocoa, fishing, palm oil, sugarcane, tea, and tobacco, across the Global South, despite the presence of global frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The embedded roles of neo-authoritarian actors within states, societies, and industries, intertwined with localized cultural norms, political configurations, and discourses of state formation and development, necessitate rigorous empirical and theoretical scrutiny to better understand how violent criminal governance is sustained.

We hope that our proposed research directions will inspire MOS scholars to explore the presence and legitimization of criminal governance in these and other industries throughout the Global South.

While the data collected is rich, the manuscript would also benefit from the inclusion of secondary data to further contextualize the role of mastans in Bangladesh's garment industry. For instance, are mastans discussed in local media reports, NGO publications, or public discourse? Is their role naturalized as part of doing business locally, or are there visible contestations? Bringing in such data would provide an additional layer of empirical grounding and reinforce the argument that mastanocracy is a systemic, rather than isolated, phenomenon. I also must admit that I was uncertain if the hours spent observing the local factories would bring enough data, but I understood that with the focus on the mastans and how they frame the field that it would be enough, if we have more information on how much you knew about them beforehand.

Author's Response:

Thank you very much for your thoughtful request to incorporate secondary data in support of our field observations. We truly appreciate it.

Indeed, we have analyzed a substantial amount of secondary data, particularly organizational reports published by Human Rights Watch, the Workers' Rights Consortium, Transparency International Bangladesh, and various local NGOs. Additionally, we regularly reviewed newspaper articles, especially from Bangladeshi outlets such as *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*, as well as international media sources including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Al Jazeera*. These secondary sources have greatly informed us about the criminal activities carried out by mastans operating under the protection of ruling party politicians since the birth of the country.

Our combined insights from secondary data and fieldwork have consistently indicated that these mastans do not operate neutrally. Rather, they are often aligned with and act to serve the interests of political and industrial elites. While we are aware, through primary

and secondary sources, of rivalries among different mastan groups in various parts of Bangladesh, our own fieldwork did not reveal such dynamics in the BGI.

In response to your question about observations within the factory premises, our first author spent approximately 40 hours on the shop floors of factories. However, his broader fieldwork in the Bangladeshi garment sector spanned six months. During this time, he engaged with workers in slum areas almost daily, visited local union offices, and interacted extensively with shopkeepers, street vendors, and residents in zones affected by factory operations. In total, he spent thousands of hours in these peripheries, aiming to understand the role of mastans, political actors and state agents in perpetrating violence against marginalized workers.

As you are already aware from the researcher's positionality, our first author is originally from the Northeastern part of Bangladesh. His familiarity with the context is not merely academic; he has had first-hand experience interacting with mastans since his early youth. We would like to emphasize that there is no conflict of interest between his positionality and the research topic.

We sincerely hope this explanation clarifies your concerns and demonstrates that our work is both academically grounded and substantively informed through lived experience.

While using interview data is one of the paper's strengths, the findings section often presents long quotes without sufficient analytical framing or interpretation. As a result, the reader is frequently left to infer the significance of these excerpts. I strongly encourage the authors to guide the reader more explicitly, clarifying how each quote advances the analysis and contributes to the conceptual development of mastanocracy in the discussion session and how the research understands the significance and framing of each quote.

Authors response:

Thank you very much for highlighting the need for a more critical analysis of the quotes used in the paper, which will enhance the analytical rigour of the study.

In this revised manuscript, we have carefully re-examined the findings section through a more critical lens. We have analyzed the selected quotes in greater depth, highlighting their interconnectedness with both formal and informal systems of governance and key actors. Rigorous editing has been undertaken to convey the nuanced significance of how and why mastanocracy has emerged and evolved within this specific context more clearly.

Additionally, we have further unpacked the complex relationship between violence and governance under the regime of mastanocracy, both through the interpretation of the quotes and within the expanded discussion section.

We sincerely hope that this revised version presents a more clearly defined and well-articulated conceptualization of *mastanocracy*, thereby strengthening the overall contribution of the study.

Furthermore, the literature on localized violence with examples from multiple places, governance, and labor control could be more cohesively integrated. The current treatment of related studies sometimes feels fragmented, lacking a synthesis framing how this body of work informs the analysis. A brief paragraph summarizing the key insights from this literature and clearly positioning mastanocracy in relation to it would sort this out.
In sum, the manuscript is on a promising trajectory, and with further refinement, it has the potential to make a meaningful contribution.

Authors response:

Thank you very much for your insightful and constructive suggestions. We fully agree with your observations and greatly appreciate your thoughtful guidance.

In response, we have incorporated the recommended revisions into the revised manuscript. Specifically, we have added a summary paragraph that highlights how the existing literature on localized violence across various contexts reveals the multifaceted and normalized forms of violence that permeate global supply chains. This violence is shaped not only by transnational regulatory regimes and localized industrial and managerial practices, but also by complex intersections with caste, class, gender, cultural norms, patriarchy and political patronage.

Importantly, we also draw attention to a critical yet underexplored dimension: the role of embedded, localized criminal governance in sustaining these violent regimes. We argue that the normalization of violence in these contexts cannot be fully understood without accounting for these localized power structures, which are deeply intertwined with informal economies, political networks and social norms.

To address this gap, we introduce and develop the concept of mastanocracy as a theoretical framework for understanding criminal governance. Situated within the broader political-economic and sociocultural landscape of the Global South, this framework helps explain how violent, criminalized forms of governance are produced, legitimized and sustained in industrial sectors such as the Bangladeshi garment industry through localized configurations of power and agents of violence.

We would also like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank you for your generous engagement with our work. Your feedback has been instrumental in helping us deepen the conceptual contributions of this manuscript, particularly in relation to the interconnectedness of violence and criminal governance in the lives of marginalized workers those who have long been central to the global garment industry.

We truly hope you find this revised manuscript both illuminating and impactful, and we remain hopeful that you will recommend it for acceptance. Once again, thank you for being such a thoughtful and supportive reviewer.

Best wishes,

Authors

Responses to Reviewer 2 Comments:

Thank you for engaging with my comments in the previous round of revision. I agree with your decision to shift the focus of the paper from 'coercive totalization' to 'mastanocracy'. That said, this shift also renders most of my previous suggestions irrelevant, which is completely fine. I'm happy to engage with the paper again in light of this new direction. Let me first try to recreate your thesis in simple language: You examine how 'mastans' (local criminals/strongmen) function as agents of violence-based governance in the Bangladesh garment industry (BGI). You theorize that these mastans are embedded in a localized/shadow governance system, 'mastanocracy', which operates at the intersection of formal state authority, industrial management, and criminal networks. This system normalizes violence against marginalized workers while serving the interests of political and industrial elites. You argue that mastanocracy is not a peripheral phenomenon but a central mechanism through which power operates in the BGI, showing how criminality becomes institutionalized as governance.

Overall, I am sympathetic to your critical stance and most of my comments below are meant to improve/clarify your argument.

Authors response:

Thank you so much for receiving our revised manuscript so positively. We sincerely appreciate your thoughtful engagement and the time you dedicated to reviewing our work.

We fully recognize that it can be frustrating to review a manuscript that has undergone a significant shift in focus, rendering many of the original suggestions no longer applicable. We sincerely apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused. At the same time, we are truly grateful for understanding our position in making such decision. Equally, we are grateful for your generous and constructive response to the revised version, and for the insightful readings and suggestions you have offered throughout your review.

Your comments have been immensely helpful and have significantly deepened our understanding of the topic. In particular, your recommendation to engage with the literature on criminals, criminal governance, boundary conditions and hybridization was incredibly valuable. We must admit that we were previously unaware of some of these bodies of work, but your guidance has led us to discover critical scholarship that has helped us refine our arguments, strengthen the theoretical foundations and enhance the relevance of our case study.

We are genuinely at a loss for words to express our sincere gratitude for the extraordinary support and intellectual generosity you have shown. Thank you for being such a wonderfully kind and insightful reviewer. Your guidance has not only helped us make the manuscript more academically rigorous but also more meaningful in terms of its policy implications in the field of labour conditions within the global supply chain.

By carefully and diligently following your suggestions, we believe we have made substantial improvements to the revised manuscript. Below, we provide a detailed explanation of how we have addressed each of your comments and incorporated them into the revised version.

We truly hope that you find the revised manuscript engaging, well-developed and reflective of your thoughtful feedback. Once again, thank you so much for your positive response, your valuable insights and your generous support. We are deeply grateful.

For instance, I find a conceptual slippage between describing mastans as agents operating within existing power structures versus constituting an alternative governance system. If mastans primarily serve as enforcement mechanisms for factory owners and political elites (as much of the evidence suggests), then characterizing their activities as a distinct "-cracy" may overstate their autonomy and institutional character.

Authors response:

Thank you for this insightful comment, which we believe is a central issue that needs clarification. We have addressed this in the revised version of the paper. As we further explained and illustrated in the paper, mastans play a 'pivotal role' in the contemporary regime of governance, not simply as enforcers of corporate or state apparatuses of governance. The contemporary governance in BGI is far removed from the legal and corporate apparatuses, and the mastans are not simply enforcers of formal-legal apparatuses of governance. Instead, what we see is a violence-based criminal governance in a formally legal industry (contrast to illicit industries such as drug dealing, human trafficking etc), which, ideally speaking, should have been governed through the formal-legal state and corporate apparatuses.

In this criminal system of governance, the mastan is the central pillar of power that mobilizes all other possible pillars of power contingently but through criminality and violence, including physical violence and threat of physical violence, to discipline and govern the labor community. Unlike the mafia and other forms of organized criminal systems, mastans do not explicitly operate against political authority or corporate ownership and management, but rather mobilize them contingently by helping them reinforce and sustain their power, sometimes even with the threat of violence against factory owners and managers. Nevertheless, the primary focus of their violence is against the labouring community for the purpose of intensifying production and sustaining a low-cost labour supply to the garment industry to an extent that is not possible through formal-legal doctrines and state bureaucracy and corporate management. Mastans are the central pillar in orchestrating, constructing and conducting this criminal system of governance.

While they are not entirely autonomous (neither are the bureaus in a bureaucracy), they are the key pillar of power around whose functionality the other forms of power circulate; they are the central pillar of the criminal governance system, which we hence call mastanocracy.

Thanks to your comment, we have now made this clearer in our revised manuscript.

Similarly, your main argument (mastanocracy constitutes a distinct governance system) appears more descriptive than analytically robust. While you characterize mastanocracy as a "shadow but profound system of governance" (p. 41), you fail to establish clear boundary conditions (see Busse et al., 2017) that differentiate it from other forms of criminal enterprise or patron-client relationships documented in comparable contexts. In other words, you would

benefit from rigorous conceptual development that specify how mastanocracy differs structurally and functionally from similar phenomena documented in organizational literature on informal governance systems (see Arias, 2017; Beckert & Dewey, 2017; Gambetta, 1993).

Authors response:

Thank you very much for your sharp observations and thoughtful suggestions, which have been instrumental in improving the conceptual development of mastanocracy, our theorization of a form of criminal governance presented in this manuscript.

As you rightly noted, your recommended readings have been incredibly valuable in guiding our efforts to build a more robust and grounded conceptual framework. We want to assure you that we have engaged extensively, meticulously and with great care with these bodies of literature, and as a result, we have rewritten the entire conceptual framework section of the study.

To begin, we conducted an in-depth review of the literature on gangs, criminal actors, and forms of criminal governance, particularly in relation to illicit markets involving drugs, arms, and other illegal commodities in the Global South. Drawing on this scholarship, we substantially revised and restructured the section titled "Conceptualization of Mastanocracy." In this revised section, we critically examine the role of criminal actors and their intersections with organized violence, narcotics enforcement and religious politics, highlighting how they assert control over unregulated commodities, illicit markets and spatial territories. We also examine the embeddedness of these actors, both socially and economically, within the broader societies in which they operate. Building on this foundation, we further engaged with literature that explores the hybridization of criminal governance systems. We show how large populations of marginalized urban residents are governed through such hybrid arrangements often through rent-seeking practices or extreme violence and how this mode of governance becomes normalized in their everyday lives.

Additionally, we explored the concept of boundary conditions by analyzing how criminal governance, particularly mafia-like structures, adapts to different contextual environments. In our case, we examined Bangladesh, a country not historically linked to transnational arms or narcotics markets but deeply integrated into global supply chains through its RMG sector. In this unique setting, criminal governance does not function through illicit markets or gang warfare. Instead, it is embedded within the formal, legal economy. Here, marginalized workers are not engaged in stigmatized labor such as toilet cleaning or drug trafficking; they are garment workers producing clothes for everyday global consumption.

Drawing on this synthesis of literature on violence in global supply chains and criminal governance in the Global South, we have conceptualized mastanocracy as a form of criminal governance. It is characterized by a complex hybridity that transcends traditional state-centered frameworks. Rather than opposing state authority, mastan actors work in conjunction with it. They do not engage in violence against state officials or factory owners, nor do they sabotage industrial infrastructure. Instead, they serve as enforcers who protect the interests of state actors and industrial elites, often at the direct expense of

marginalized workers. In this system, violence and criminality are legitimized so long as they are directed toward these workers, both in factory spaces and in urban slums. *Mastanocracy*, then, represents a form of criminal governance where repression is systematized and socially sanctioned to serve elite interests.

We sincerely hope you find our expanded and critical engagement with your suggested literature to be a meaningful development of the concept of mastanocracy, and that this revised manuscript demonstrates significant theoretical advancement. Once again, we are truly grateful for your generous, thoughtful and intellectually rich feedback. It has made a lasting impact on the quality and depth of our work.

Your data analysis lacks transparency. You have used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) but provide limited evidence of analytical rigor. For instance, you mention "recurring terms" and "abstract themes" (p. 59) without providing details of your coding procedures, criteria for theme development, or steps taken to ensure analytical trustworthiness (some diagrams will be helpful here).

Authors response:

Thank you for sharing your candid and constructive feedback.

In response, we have substantially revised the data analysis section of the manuscript. As part of this revision, we have included specific examples of recurring terms and abstract themes that emerged during our coding process. Additionally, following your helpful suggestion, we have incorporated a visual diagram that outlines our analytical process—from raw interview quotes to initial codes, the development of broader themes and ultimately how these themes informed the theorization of mastanocracy.

We sincerely hope that these revisions clarify the analytical procedures and enhance the transparency of our data interpretation process. We trust that the revised data analysis section now meets your expectations and provides a clearer foundation for the theoretical contributions of the study.

Once again, thank you for your thoughtful feedback and support in strengthening this manuscript.

The sampling strategy appears convenience-based rather than theoretically driven. You interviewed workers from "10 compliance factories" (Table 1), but these factories may represent only the more regulated end of the industry spectrum. You acknowledge Labowitz and Baumann-Pauly's (2015) estimate of over 7,000 factories in Bangladesh but this can also suggest that the sample may not capture the full range of experiences, especially from smaller, non-compliance factories where violence may be more prevalent.

Authors response:

Thank you once again for your sharp observations and thoughtful reflections.

We fully understand and acknowledge your point that the 10 compliance factories included in our study do not represent the entirety of the Bangladeshi garment industry.

As you have rightly noted, the lived experiences of workers in non-compliant factories are often even more severe and brutal. We agree that this is a critical dimension, and we recognize the limitations this imposes on the scope of our study.

However, like all research, our study is shaped by certain practical and ethical boundaries. In this case, the data collection was part of a broader research project that underwent a rigorous ethical approval process from a UK university. One of the key conditions of this approval was that we could only engage with factories officially registered with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). Since non-compliant factories are not recognized by the BGMEA, they fall outside the institutional frameworks that ensure minimal protections, such as corporate governance mechanisms or labor rights. As a result, we were ethically restricted from entering or collecting data directly from these factories, despite our sincere efforts.

Nonetheless, the broader focus of our study was not limited to factory compliance, but rather on how violence is perpetrated through the collaboration of criminal actors, factory owners, political elites, slum landlords and state forces such as the police. Based on both our firsthand field observations and an extensive review of secondary data, we found that workers—whether employed in compliant or non-compliant factories—are subjected to similar forms of systemic violence. These forms of violence extend beyond the factory walls and into the slum areas where workers live, particularly targeting their resistance, collective organizing and everyday private lives.

While we are unable to present data gathered from within non-compliant factories (e.g., through interviews conducted inside them), we are confident that our study captures the structural patterns and systemic nature of criminal violence faced by garment workers, especially outside the formal workplace settings.

We sincerely hope that you will recognize these limitations as a function of ethical compliance rather than a conceptual oversight. We also hope that the evidence we present, grounded in rich empirical data and supplemented by extensive secondary sources, adequately represents the broader realities of violence across the garment industry landscape.

Thank you again for your thoughtful engagement and for helping us clarify the boundaries and contributions of our research.

There is limited triangulation of data. While you collected accounts from various stakeholders, you rely heavily on interviews and focus groups. Documentary evidence, such as police reports, court records, or some form of communication between factory owners and mastans (if at all accessible), would improve your claims about the systematic nature of mastanocracy.

Authors response:

Thank you so much for this insightful and important suggestion. We are truly grateful for your close reading and for highlighting the relevance of incorporating additional secondary data to support our field observations.

Indeed, we have analyzed a substantial body of secondary data, particularly organizational reports published by Human Rights Watch, the Workers' Rights Consortium, Transparency International Bangladesh, and several local NGOs. In addition, we regularly reviewed

newspaper articles from prominent Bangladeshi outlets such as *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*, alongside international media platforms including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Al Jazeera*. These sources have provided invaluable insights into the criminal activities of *mastans*, who have long operated under the protection of ruling party politicians, patterns that have persisted since the country's early years.

That said, we acknowledge a critical limitation: we were unable to access police or court records to validate certain aspects of our data. This limitation arises from the systemic and structural violence that restricts academic research and civil society engagement in Bangladesh. As you may have seen in studies cited in our manuscript (e.g., Chowdhury, Alamgir, and Ahmed), there is considerable documentation of the risks and threats faced by researchers in this context. For instance, Ahmed's recent (2025) publication in the *Journal of Management Studies* offers a detailed account of how state apparatuses, particularly political party members and police forces have targeted academic researchers for their work. We also provided extensive detailed in this manuscript where our first author went through similar experiences.

To provide further context, our interviews with workers revealed a deeply troubling dynamic: when workers attempt to report violence or abuse to the police, they are often met with severe repercussions. Police frequently refuse to file First Information Reports (FIRs) against *mastans* or factory owners. Workers who dare to pursue legal recourse risk being arrested, beaten or falsely charged with offenses such as terrorism or anti-state activities. In many cases, workers shared that instead of helping, the police would call the *mastans*, who would then abduct, torture or even kill those who had sought help. These narratives, shared with us during fieldwork, make clear why official records might be absent or inadequate. The very institutions responsible for upholding justice are instead complicit in silencing and punishing those who resist.

We sincerely hope this explanation, along with the supporting literature referenced above, provides a clearer understanding of the hostile environment in which this research was conducted. Despite our inability to draw on police or court records, we are confident that our empirical and secondary data sources accurately reflect the systemic, state-sanctioned violence that permeates the Bangladeshi garment industry, violence that is not only normalized but actively used to suppress worker resistance.

Once again, thank you for your thoughtful feedback and for prompting this deeper engagement with the data and its limitations.

The findings section presents a detailed account of mastan activities but there are three substantive weaknesses. You conflate observed phenomena with analytical interpretation. You frequently assert mastans' centrality to governance without analytically distinguishing between structural embeddedness and strategic deployment by existing power holders. Also, the empirical material primarily shows mastans' involvement in extortion, intimidation, and violence, but lacks evidence that this constitutes a coherent "shadow governance system" rather than parasitic criminal activity. You describe mastans as "traders of corruption and extortion" (p. 65), but this characterization suggests they exploit weaknesses in existing systems rather than establish alternative governance. Finally, the findings disproportionately emphasize extreme cases of violence while providing limited analysis of variation in mastan

involvement across factories, regions, or ownership structures. This emphasis on spectacular violence risks obscuring more subtle forms of control and variation in mastans' roles.

Authors response:

Thank you very much for your thoughtful observations and constructive suggestions to enhance the analytical rigor of our findings section. In this revised manuscript, we have critically revisited the findings section to strengthen the analytical distinction between the structural embeddedness and the strategic deployment of mastans within the governance systems of the garment industry in Bangladesh.

To address your concern, we clarified that due to widespread corruption within public offices in Bangladesh, many industrial elites are reluctant to engage directly with formal governance channels, especially when dealing with bureaucratic procedures such as land acquisition, factory construction and access to utilities. As reported by several factory owners during our interviews, interactions with government institutions are often characterized by excessive bribery, inefficiency and, as described by one participant, "shameless corruption." As a result, factory owners frequently choose to bypass these channels altogether by seeking the assistance of local political leaders, including MPs or enlisting mastans who operate under their influence. Based on these accounts, we argue that mastans have established a parallel governance system rooted in intimidation, extortion and other criminal means. Responding to your helpful observation, we have removed the term "shadow governance," recognizing that it may cause confusion given the distinct nature of their operations in this context.

We also clarified that *mastans* are not formally embedded in the ownership structure of the factories. While there were unverified claims that some mastans may operate informal (non-compliance) manufacturing units, we emphasize that these are outside the scope of our study. Our focus remains on how mastans are strategically incorporated into the registered factories to manage conflict and suppress worker resistance.

We further developed our conceptual argument around mastans as "traders of corruption and extortion." Specifically, factory owners, in an effort to avoid engaging with corrupt state officials, invite *mastans* to facilitate or expedite dealings with government agencies. However, this facilitation is not altruistic, mastans charge for these services, often demanding payments lower than those expected by corrupt bureaucrats. This dynamic has given rise to a transactional relationship in which mastans serve as intermediaries who "trade" in corruption. Additionally, when state officials resist or demand more than agreed upon, *mastans* may resort to threats, intimidation or physical violence, thus also becoming "traders of extortion."

Lastly, we clarified that mastans typically operate behind the scenes within factory environments and only make direct appearances when workers organize or mobilize collective resistance. As described in our opening vignette, mastans have been deployed to violently suppress such movements, including fatal attacks on worker leaders who demanded fair wages. The forms of violence include intimidation, physical assault, sexual harassment and, in extreme cases, killings.

We sincerely hope that the revisions of this section provide greater clarity, coherence and conceptual precision. Your comments were immensely helpful in refining our arguments, and we are grateful for your support in improving the analytical depth of this manuscript.

You claim to make two theoretical contributions: (1) documenting mastans as central rather than peripheral actors in the BGI, and (2) introducing the concept of mastanocracy. Both contributions face limitations. Regarding the first contribution, while you persuasively document mastans' involvement in the BGI, you do not sufficiently establish that they function as "central" rather than auxiliary actors. Factory owners and political figures retain primary decision-making authority in the accounts presented. The evidence more strongly supports characterizing mastans as enforcement mechanisms deployed by existing power holders rather than autonomous governance agents. The second contribution (conceptualizing mastanocracy) lacks theoretical development. You define mastanocracy as a "localized governance system" that operates at "the intersection of formal and informal institutional boundaries" (p. 76), but do not situate this thoroughly within established theories of governance, criminality, or informality (see Lessing, 2021). The concept remains descriptive rather than offering explanatory power for understanding similar phenomena in other contexts.

Authors response:

Thank you very much for your critical insights and candid remarks regarding the contributions claimed in our earlier manuscript. We fully acknowledge the limitations of our initial submission, particularly our lack of engagement with the literature on criminal governance. We are truly grateful for your recommended reading list, which has been invaluable in revising our manuscript and sharpening its core contributions.

In this revised version, we have carefully rewritten our first key contribution. While prior research has extensively examined criminal actors and governance within illicit economies such as drug trafficking, arms trade, human trafficking and territorial conflicts, there remains limited attention to how criminal governance transcends 'boundary conditions' (Busse et al., 2017), moving from illicit and informal economies into formal, legal industries and markets linked to GSCs. Although these studies offer important theoretical and empirical insights, they often reinforce dichotomies between formal and informal, legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate. We address this gap by adopting an 'inside-out exploration of boundary conditions' (Busse et al., 2017), reconceptualizing 'mastanocracy' as a form of criminal governance deeply embedded within a formal industry that produces legal commodities, namely garments, for legitimate consumers. Our theorization moves beyond territorial domination and illicit market dynamics to reveal the institutional embeddedness of criminal actors within regulated industries, thereby broadening the analytical scope of criminal governance's legitimate presence.

Additionally, we provide critical insights into the 'legitimacy' (Webb et al., 2009) of criminal governance operating within an industry central not only to GSC but also to the national identity of Bangladesh, symbolized by the label 'Made in Bangladesh.' Our empirical findings confirm that mastanocracy and its attendant violence is unequivocally accepted within organizational spaces by factory owners and managers. For these powerful actors, mastans are "a force to be reckoned with," not simply due to the threats they pose, but

because of the benefits their violent governance delivers. There is a widespread industrial consensus that without mastans' involvement, Bangladesh's ascent in the global market, especially in competition with China and Vietnam, would have been unlikely. These actors further contend that the BGI remains the primary vehicle for realizing Bangladesh's aspiration to become a 'developed country,' and that mastanocracy is the governance mechanism that enables this pursuit. This perspective resonates with Lessing's (2021: 855) assertion that "state formation often depended crucially on collaboration with, and absorption of, criminal groups."

Our second key contribution highlights the inseparability of governance and violence, enriching ongoing debates on violence in contemporary organizations. While existing scholarship has documented various forms of violence linked to the dominance of Western retailers (Ahmed, 2025; Chowdhury, 2017a), political-business alliances (Ahmed and Uddin, 2022; Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019), compliance mechanisms shaped by social norms (Alamgir et al., 2022; Alamgir and Alakavuklar, 2019; Fontana and Dawkins, 2024), and the rise of neo-authoritarianism in GSC (Ahmed, 2025), less attention has been paid to workers' embodied experiences of violence beyond organizational boundaries, particularly within their private spaces. Addressing this gap, we expose a deeper layer of violence at the intersection of formal and informal institutional boundaries (Webb et al., 2009). Although not explicitly rooted in traditional systems such as the *biraderi* (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021, 2022), gendered and class-based violence against the 'ideal workers' (Ahmed, 2024) and their 'deregulated bodies' (Alamgir et al., 2022) systematically stigmatizes workers as "dirty people, greedy, gullible, mobs," and other derogatory labels across urban peripheries. These cultural stigmatizations, while inhumane and morally illegitimate, function operationally to justify and legitimize the presence of criminal actors in workers' private lives. The omnipresence of mastans and their violence manifested through disciplinary regimes, extractive practices, and routine abuse ultimately becomes normalized by framing workers as less-than-human subjects.

Our findings challenge Webb et al.'s (2009) assertion that activities within the formal economy are inherently 'legal' while those outside it are 'illegal.' We demonstrate how political, industrial, and social elites actively leverage informality and illegality to sustain formal industrial order and slum management, thereby legitimizing the perpetuation of violence against marginalized populations working in export-oriented industries. This violence, occurring within industrial spaces under hybrid governance, becomes normalized particularly against displaced workers from rural areas. Within this context, violence within and beyond organizational spaces is perceived as effective and legitimate for state formation (Beckert and Matias, 2017), facilitating broad social and political legitimacy through alliances with powerful actors (Yeung and Coe, 2015).

We sincerely hope that you find these contributions meaningful and valuable in advancing future research in management and organization studies related to criminal governance, violence and their legitimacy within formal legal industries.

I think you would benefit from integrating your findings with literature on informal economies (see some references on the first page), criminal governance, and state-business relations. For example, research on "hybrid political orders" (Boege, 2019) or "forbearance" in governance (Holland, 2016) might provide theoretically better frameworks for understanding

how violence becomes institutionalized in industrial settings OR you might argue that these existing frameworks do not fully explain the BGI/postcolonial context and hence your contribution. In both instances, you need to engage with the literature you are contributing to.

Authors response:

Thank you so much for your insightful and generous suggestions. We are truly grateful for your careful reading and especially for highlighting the concept of hybrid political orders. We found this concept to be exceptionally relevant and valuable for our study, and in response, we have rigorously and extensively incorporated the idea of hybridization throughout the revised manuscript.

Drawing on our empirical findings, we illustrate how mastans, through a process of negotiated hybridity, have become deeply embedded within the governance structure of the Bangladeshi garment industry. Their relationship with the state is neither entirely oppositional nor subordinate. Rather, it is negotiated and mutually beneficial, creating a form of stability in peripheral urban zones. These arrangements do not challenge state authority directly; instead, they often reinforce it, contributing to coercive and consent-based processes of state-building.

We demonstrate that mastans have established a system of criminal governance not directed against the state, industrial elites, or law enforcement but rather aimed squarely at controlling and suppressing the marginalized garment workers. This control is exercised across factory premises, public spaces and even within workers' private residences. It is through this violent orchestration of labor discipline that *mastans* help sustain the industry and protect elite interests.

By situating this within the broader literature on hybrid political orders, we argue that this governance arrangement represents a complex hybridity, one that extends beyond traditional notions of state control. It exists alongside formal state institutions but operates through informal, often violent, mechanisms, supported by political protection and local customary power. As Beckert and Dewey (2017) point out, such hybrid governance models thrive where legality is hollow and where economic survival, particularly for factory owners, depends on negotiating with criminal actors embedded within state networks.

We have also highlighted how these overlapping and interwoven relations—where state and non-state actors "co-exist, compete, overlap, interact, intertwine, and blend"—form the basis of the hybrid governance structures that we term mastanocracy.

We sincerely hope that you find this deeper theoretical engagement with hybrid political orders to be a valuable and impactful addition to our manuscript. Your guidance has been instrumental in strengthening the conceptual contributions of this study, and we thank you again for your generous and thoughtful input.

Finally, there is not enough attention to global corporate responsibility. While you mention Western brands briefly, you underexplore how transnational corporations might be complicit in or benefit from mastanocracy, thereby missing an opportunity to connect local violence to global supply chains.

I wish you good luck in revising this manuscript!

Authors response:

Thank you very much for your insightful suggestion to more explicitly engage with the literature on global corporate responsibility, particularly in relation to the economic benefits that Western retailers derive from normalized violence and criminal governance in Bangladesh's garment industry.

We fully agree that the Western counterparts, especially global fashion brands and retailers, have significantly profited from the violent and exploitative conditions under which garments are produced. While we are acutely aware of these dynamics and did gather substantial qualitative data indicating how Western retailers have exercised a form of colonial-style hegemony over Bangladeshi manufacturers and state actors to enable the production of cheap fashion, we regret that the scope of our study and the constraints of our data collection did not allow us to develop a detailed analysis of the direct relationship between Western retailers and localized criminal governance.

Nonetheless, we recognize this as a critically important and underexplored area of inquiry. The nexus between Western brands and criminal forms of governance in the Global South represents a highly promising direction for future research, one that could reveal how transnational capital not only tolerates but thrives on systems of systemic violence, informality, and repression. Your comment has inspired us to consider this trajectory more seriously in our future work, and we are truly grateful for the direction you have provided.

We also wish to sincerely thank you for your extraordinary engagement with our manuscript, your thoughtful gestures, incisive readings and thought-provoking recommendations have been instrumental in helping us realize the full potential of this study. Please accept our deepest appreciation for your generosity and intellectual support throughout this review process. We are immensely thankful to have had the benefit of your thoughtful guidance.

Best wishes,

Authors

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Responses to Reviewer 3 Comments:

I thoroughly enjoyed reading the revised version of your paper. Your exploration of the structures of violence and the dynamics of governance, incorporating the perspectives of workers, owners, NGO officials and journalists, is crucial for understanding how violence and violent conditions evolve, normalize, and perpetuate in the Bangladeshi garment Industry (BIG). I particularly appreciate how you have incorporated the work of Zulfiqar and Prasad (2021, 2022) on localized governance systems and the concept of Biraderi in Pakistan.

As authors, your commitment to addressing violence in the garment industry of Bangladesh—a nation-state that has experienced various political regimes and forms of governance—is highly valuable. However, I do have some concerns about the paper, which I will outline below:

Authors response:

Dear Reviewer 3,

We are absolutely delighted to learn that you enjoyed reading the revised version of our manuscript. Your kind and thoughtful appreciation of our work, particularly our exploration of the dynamics of governance and violence within the context of Bangladesh's garment industry, truly means a great deal to us. It brings us great pride and joy to know that our efforts have resonated with you and that our hard work has, at least in significant part, paid off.

We remain truly committed to addressing the multifaceted violence experienced by marginalized communities within this sector, and we hope to continue contributing to this critical discourse in the years to come.

We are also sincerely grateful for your positive response to our inclusion of Zulfiqar and Prasad's (2021, 2022) work on localized governance systems and the concept of *Biraderi* in Pakistan. Your recognition encourages us greatly.

Below, we have provided a detailed outline of how we have carefully and thoughtfully incorporated your excellent suggestions. We sincerely hope that you find the revised manuscript to your satisfaction and that it meets the standard for acceptance.

Thank you once again for your generous comments, constructive feedback and encouraging words. They mean a great deal to us.

1. Literature Review:

I recommend that you revisit your literature review to more substantially integrate the contributions of Zulfiqar and Prasad (2021, 2022). The Biraderi system in Pakistan and the aspects related to Zamindars provide valuable insights that could significantly enhance your argument if included. Additionally, I suggest exploring social studies focused on the historical legacy of the zamindar system in Bangladesh, particularly regarding the role of lathial bahinis (henchmen). During my fieldwork in the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector, I encountered various instances in which the mastans were referred to as the lathials of the factory owners.

To fortify your argument, it is crucial to integrate the works of Zulfiqar and Prasad more comprehensively into the literature, rather than merely citing them briefly. This is particularly important given that you are discussing mastanocracy, and contemporary scholarship on post-colonial governance systems is highly relevant.

Authors response:

Thank you once again for emphasizing the importance of incorporating the seminal works of Zulfiqar and Prasad. Both are outstanding scholars in the field of critical management studies, and we greatly admire their contributions, especially their insightful analyses of how sociopolitical and cultural dynamics are structurally and systematically deployed in modern organizations to violate the rights and dignity of marginalized workers.

We wholeheartedly welcomed your suggestion, and in this revised manuscript, we have engaged extensively with their work. While we had hoped to engage with their contributions even more deeply, we were constrained by the need to also incorporate additional literatures, particularly on criminality, criminal governance, boundary conditions and hybrid political orders, as suggested by Reviewer 2. These additions occupied a significant portion of the available space. Furthermore, the requirement to limit the manuscript to 50 pages imposed an additional constraint, which regrettably limited our ability to elaborate further on Zulfiqar and Prasad's works. We sincerely hope you will understand and kindly accept these limitations with sympathy.

We are also grateful for your insightful comments on the historical legacy of the Zamindari system in Bangladeshi society. During our fieldwork, this dynamic emerged as a significant finding: many factory owners expressed a sense of entitlement reminiscent of the power and status once held by Zamindars during the colonial period. You also astutely highlighted the relevance of the *lathial bahinis,* a reference that frequently arose during our interviews with factory owners, managers and workers. In our analysis, we interpreted this term as closely aligning with the concept of mastans*,* which we explored in the study. All participants confirmed that their use of the term *lathial bahinis* referred specifically to these mastans*.*

Additionally, many worker participants described living under Zamindar-like regimes, both within the factory environment and in the slum areas where they reside. In this revised manuscript, especially in the findings section, we have incorporated these perspectives and frequently referred to this concept.

However, we regret to inform you that, again due solely to page limitations, we were unable to fully incorporate a detailed analysis of the historical legacy of the Zamindari system within the Bangladeshi garment industry. We are, nevertheless, genuinely eager to explore this theme more thoroughly in our future research.

We sincerely hope you find this revised manuscript to be a thoughtful and meaningful engagement with the works of Zulfiqar and Prasad, as well as with the concept of Zamindari and *lathial bahinis* in our empirical findings. We also offer our heartfelt

apologies for not being able to include a fuller discussion of the historical legacy of the Zamindari system, given the manuscript's page constraints.

2. Methods

I also have some concerns regarding the methods section. Your observations should be more effectively integrated into your findings. For instance, the comment about the factory owner—"aligning himself with elite industrialist discourses, lamented the role of certain Bangladeshi researchers whom he characterized as ootch-cho shikkhito razakars (highly educated traitors) in undermining the reputation and growth of the garment industry"—provides valuable insight into the deep suspicion and crisis that underpins the sector. This type of narrative is important because it illustrates how suspicion has been used to form the discourse surrounding the garment industry, reinforcing the mastanocracy as the governance structure of the Bangladesh Garment Industry (BIG). However, there is no need to refer to specific names. The focus should be on why and how suspicion functions within the culture and how it impacts the political economy of the sector.

Authors response:

Thank you so much for raising this important concern regarding the inclusion of the two researchers' names in the findings section.

Please believe us when we say that we gave this issue considerable thought and deliberation. We carefully discussed whether or not to disclose their names in the manuscript. Often, we were somewhat criticized for not being sufficiently transparent in our methods section. In an effort to uphold our integrity and defend our reputation as ethical researchers, we made the difficult decision to include the names in the previous version, though with the full intention of removing them from the final version should the manuscript be accepted.

That said, we are truly grateful to you for flagging this concern and for your thoughtful suggestion not to disclose these names. We have taken your feedback seriously and have now removed both names from the revised manuscript.

Thank you again for your close reading and for helping us ensure the ethical rigor and overall quality of our work.

3. Findings Section:

In the findings section, I recommend incorporating more direct quotes from your fieldwork. This will help strengthen your argument and provide a clearer, more compelling narrative that grounds your analysis in the experiences of those within the sector.

Authors response:

Thank you once again for your valuable suggestion to include more direct quotes from our primary dataset. In this revised manuscript, we have incorporated eight new quotes to further support our analysis and strengthen the development of the concept of *mastanocracy*. We have also carefully revised the findings sections, providing a more

critical and in-depth analysis of the data to reinforce our arguments regarding violence and criminal governance.

We sincerely hope that you find the updated findings sections more compelling and that these additions enhance the clarity and strength of our overall argument.

4. Conclusion:

Thank you for your hard work on this paper. With these revisions, I believe it has the potential to become an important contribution to our understanding of the governance structure within the Bangladesh Garment Industry (BIG). I look forward to reading the revised version.

Authors response:

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude and sincere appreciation for your insightful suggestions and kind remarks. It has been a true privilege to receive such academically rigorous, yet generous and constructive feedback from you.

Your review has been incredibly valuable to us, not only in strengthening this manuscript but also in contributing to our growth as researchers. Your thoughtful suggestions helped us to better realize the full potential of this work, and we have done our utmost to incorporate them with care and diligence.

At the same time, we sincerely apologize for not being able to incorporate 100% of your comments. Please know that this was not due to any disagreement or lack of appreciation for your insights, but solely due to the strict page limitations emphasized by the editor. We kindly ask for your understanding of these unintentional constraints.

Despite this, we truly hope you find the revised manuscript to be a strong and thoughtful response to your feedback, and that you might consider recommending it for acceptance.

Thank you once again for your brilliant suggestions and thoughtful guidance.

Best wishes,

Authors