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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 analysing 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

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boundaries, compelling millions of marginalized workers to live and work under regimes of criminal governance.

Keywords

Bangladesh garment industry, criminal governance, hybridization, 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 frameworks (Fontana and Dawkins, 2024) and the deplorable labour 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 (see 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 (Moncada, 2021).

Yet, how criminal governance migrates from illegality across geographies into formal economies remains unexplored and under-theorized 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 labour violence, enacted not only by the state or industrial 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 labour, 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 labour 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 versus internal and legal versus 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 it is directed and who ultimately benefits from this violent governance within GSC.

This article 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 violence. We then introduce *mastanocracy* as a theoretical construct to conceptualize how criminal governance operates through 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 BGI. Finally, we articulate the study's contributions and implications, concluding with potential avenues for future research on criminal governance functions via violence.

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' behaviours 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 labour 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 labour practices are not 'embedded in traditional communities, violated cultural norms and carried a stigma for them and their families' 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 resistance. 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 labour 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 kalli* (*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 allow the global capital to redeem itself from accountability while undermining labour 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 labour 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 compliances 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 labour.

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 in the GSCs. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these dynamics as Alamgir et al. (2022) demonstrate that the neoliberal development regime of labour exploitation makes workers' deregulated bodies expendable. Within gendered global production networks, labour 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 labour 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 labour rights. This critique deepens in Ahmed's (2024) exploration of wage theft, secrecy and violence in feminized Bangladeshi factories. Using Butler's notion of de-realization, he illustrates that Bangladeshi employers frame young, precarious women as 'ideal workers' by exploiting their poverty, social inequality and constrained labour 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 the GSC of fashion industry, 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 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 centres, ‘persisting through economic booms and busts’ (p. 584). Rather than directly contesting state sovereignty, such governance often emerges in contexts of institutional withdrawal, assuming functions such as taxation, dispute resolution and private protection (Gambetta, 1993). In this context, its relationship with the state is neither 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 industry. Elite industrialists of this sector actively incorporated criminal governance into managerial hierarchies by appointing criminals as labour 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, labour 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 *bira-deri* 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 analysed 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 towards 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 manoeuvring 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 labour 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).

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-labour relations and enforcement of neo-authoritarian industrial discipline
Political embedding	Mostly autonomous, but sometimes mobilized by political parties during elections	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 labour 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 labour, 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 labour 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)

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). It neither formally occupies positions within the state governance, corporate hierarchies or legislative institutions, nor directly threatens 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 labour governance across the industry. Through extortion, intimidation and the monopolization of force, mastanocracy becomes a critical mechanism for managing labour 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).

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 centred on reviving growth by promoting private enterprise and joint ventures (Siddiqi, 2004). Capitalizing on the Multi-Fibre Arrangement, 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 4 July, 1978, in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2025).

The sector rapidly attracted investors from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka due to low-cost labour 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, 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 United Kingdom 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; Zulfikar 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. However, 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 ethno-ocratic 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 a legal export oriented industry.

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 4 years. Data collection began by drawing on the first author’s social networks, leading to a 6-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 labour, 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 *laatal 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.

Table 2. Participants' details.

Types of interviewees	Number of participant	Details of participants
Factory workers	30 females and 20 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 and 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 and 1 male	The male is a Professor at a local university and do research labour-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		

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

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 towards 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 labour 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.

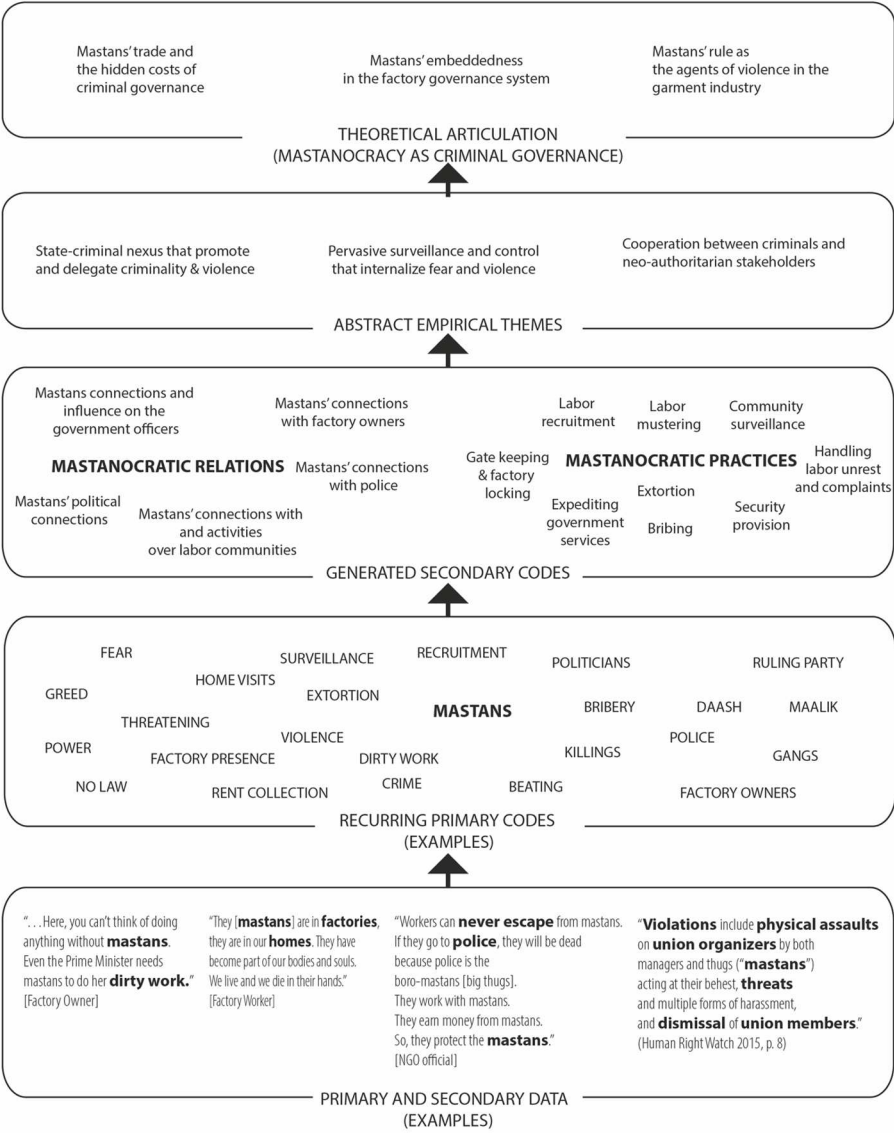


Figure 1. Analytical framework.

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, 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* (the big brother of the area) 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 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 BGI. 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 first-hand 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 centres 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 *shikkhito* [educated] and *vodro* [decent] families.

His frustration with systemic corruption among shikkhito 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 (\$24,650) 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 Takas 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 (rack-teering) 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 (\$82,000) 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 require 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 reveal 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. Mastans 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. Aljazeera'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 analyse how and why factory owners, despite significant economic costs, actively integrate mastans into factory governance, making them indispensable to labour 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 [MPs] 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 interests.

Other owners similarly expressed distrust and disdain towards workers, reflecting a dual stereotype: on the 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 *laatal 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 violent socio-political context, confirmed by another owner:

While their [industrial 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 many 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 4×4 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, illicitly secure these services with *mastans*’ help. They 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, as explained by 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 only because of the tasks themselves, such as 'toilet cleaning' (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021, 2022) but also because of the 'type of people' involved. They explicitly expressed hatred at engaging with marginalized workers, and their attitudes towards the places these workers live reflect social polarization, suggesting that 'marginalized workers in their very existence are dirty'. Driven by this class consciousness, these contemporary 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 labour 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 labour 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 labour 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 labour 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 follows:

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, 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 labour 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, 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, another 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 GSC. 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 BGI. Rather than functioning outside the formal system, these actors are integral to the mechanisms of labour 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 labour 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 linked 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 ready-made 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 labour recruitment, surveillance and labour 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 Alakavuklar, 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 labour-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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