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Machiavellian and hobbesian foundations of democratic decline in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the democratic decline of Bangladesh between 2009 and 2024 through the dual lenses of Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. While recent scholarships on backsliding highlights institutional erosion and competitive authoritarianism, few studies explicitly frame these developments within early modern political theory. I argue that Bangladesh's trajectory reflects the systematic sacrifice of Machiavellian liberty, understood as institutional balance, pluralism, and civic virtue, in favor of a Hobbesian narrative of order rooted in stability, security, and development. Using process tracing and triangulating secondary sources, democracy indices, laws, and observer reports, the study identifies three phases of decline: the dismantling of electoral neutrality (2009–2014), consolidation of authoritarian governance under development discourse (2014–2018), and entrenchment of executive dominance culminating in mass upheaval (2019–2024). A Machiavellian reading underscores the hollowing of institutions and civic engagement, while a Hobbesian perspective illuminates how fear of unrest and promises of prosperity legitimized authoritarian measures. The synthesis demonstrates how regimes justify illiberalism by invoking security, yet over time this trade-off yields brittle rule vulnerable to popular revolt. The Bangladesh case highlights the enduring tension between liberty and order, offering comparative insights for analyzing democratic backsliding globally.

KEYWORDS

Democratic backsliding; Bangladesh politics; Machiavelli; Hobbes; liberty vs. Order; competitive authoritarianism

1. Introduction

Around the world, democracy is in retreat. Freedom House reports 2024 marked the 19th consecutive year of global freedom decline (Grothe 2025). This 'third wave of autocratization' has swept across many countries since the 2000s (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Unlike the abrupt coups of the past, today's democratic decline often occurs gradually, led by elected leaders who subvert institutions from within. Political scientists have documented how incumbents erode checks and balances, undermine elections, and restrict civil liberties while maintaining a facade of democracy (Miller 2021). Such patterns of democratic backsliding are evident in numerous cases, but there is a gap in the literature: little scholarship uses early modern political theory to interpret contemporary backsliding, especially in the Global South.

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This article seeks to address that gap by analyzing Bangladesh's democratic trajectory between 2009 and 2024 through the lenses of Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. Bangladesh represents a critical case for understanding democratic backsliding. After the Awami League's decisive electoral victory in 2008, the country entered a prolonged period of institutional erosion. Bangladesh's transformation into a system of electoral authoritarianism, characterized by manipulated elections, weakened opposition, and the consolidation of executive dominance (Riaz 2024). However, existing accounts have not explicitly situated these developments within the frameworks of Machiavellian liberty and Hobbesian order.

This study does not assume that democratic decline began only with the Awami League's post-2009 tenure or that authoritarian practices belong to a single party. Bangladesh's recent backsliding emerged from a longer post-independence trajectory marked by the unresolved legacies of Pakistan's domination, the military's repeated interventions in politics, intense Awami League–Bangladesh Nationalist Party rivalry, the contested role of Jamaat-e-Islami in electoral coalitions and reciprocal patterns of corruption, electoral manipulation, and repression under different governments. The article therefore uses 2009–2024 as the principal period of analysis not because earlier episodes were democratically unproblematic, but because this period shows how pre-existing institutional weaknesses were reorganized into a more durable system of executive dominance.

The argument advanced here is that Bangladesh's democratic backsliding can be understood as the systematic sacrifice of Machiavellian liberty under the guise of a Hobbesian narrative of order. The ruling regime dismantled pluralistic and participatory features of democracy, eroding liberty and civic virtue, while justifying its monopolization of power through appeals to stability, security, and development. In this sense, the Awami League government employed a Hobbesian logic of fear and order – warning of chaos and instability – to legitimize actions that, from a Machiavellian perspective, undermined the institutional foundations of liberty.

Bringing Machiavelli and Hobbes together provides a powerful analytical framework. Machiavelli's emphasis on the preservation of liberty through balanced institutions and civic participation highlights what was lost as dissent was suppressed, and political power became concentrated. Hobbes's prioritization of order and security, meanwhile, explains why many citizens and elites acquiesced to authoritarian measures in the name of peace and prosperity. Taken together, these perspectives shed light on why Bangladeshi democracy faltered during this period and why efforts to resist authoritarian consolidation faced significant obstacles.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, the relevant literature on democratic backsliding and the use of classical political theory in empirical political analysis is reviewed. Second, the methodological and analytical framework guiding the study is outlined. Third, a chronological account of Bangladesh's democratic decline from 2009 to 2024 is presented, structured into key phases and interpreted through Machiavellian and Hobbesian insights. Finally, the implications of this analysis are considered for Bangladesh's future, for comparative research on democratic erosion, and for the broader theoretical tension between liberty and order in democratizing states.

2. Literature review

2.1. Democratic backsliding

Recent studies have extensively documented the causes and patterns of democratic backsliding (also termed democratic erosion or autocratization). Three contemporary modes of democratic erosion was identified by (Bermeo 2016): promissory coups (military ousters with a promise to hold new elections), executive aggrandizement (elected leaders neutering checks on their power), and strategic manipulation of elections (tilting the electoral playing field through media control, repression, and legal maneuvers). Rather than outright suspending democracy, incumbents increasingly use these gradual tactics to undermine it. (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) similarly argue that democracies now often die by a thousand cuts: elected autocrats' chip away at institutions in 'baby steps' that may be hard to notice at first. They warn that elected incumbents can 'gradually subvert the democratic process to increase their power,' often while keeping nominally democratic institutions in place.

(Svolik 2019) provides an important insight into why societies allow backsliding: polarization undermines the public's role as a democratic check. In polarized electorates, voters often tolerate or even support anti-democratic actions by 'their' side, prioritizing partisan loyalties or promised policy outcomes over democratic principles. This dynamic helps explain how incumbents get away with eroding democracy, a compliant base and a paralyzed opposition enable executive overreach.

Research on hybrid regimes and competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010) further shows that many regimes maintain a legalistic veneer of democracy (elections, legislatures) while substantively undermining competition and freedoms. They find that since the mid-1990s, most backsliding episodes were led by elected officials and proceeded slowly and surreptitiously, often avoiding the complete abolition of opposition or elections. This means democratic decline can persist for years, creating so-called hybrid regimes that are neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian.

2.2. Political theory in empirical research

Applying classical political theory to modern cases is a less common approach, but it can yield novel insights. Quentin Skinner and others have reinterpreted Machiavelli's writings in contemporary terms – for instance, Skinner emphasizes Machiavelli's neo-Roman concept of liberty as non-domination, meaning freedom requires that no single actor monopolizes power (Lovett 2006). Studies in the history of ideas (e.g., Pocock, Strauss, Tuck) have contrasted thinkers like Machiavelli and Hobbes, but few works explicitly use their frameworks to analyze the current political situation. One exception is the intellectual history approach: Skinner on Machiavelli's republicanism and Strauss on Hobbes's absolutism provide foundations to build an analytical model. This paper leverages such theoretical interpretations: Machiavelli's Discourses (as explicated by Skinner and others) stress that liberty is preserved by an active citizenry and institutional checks, whereas Hobbes's Leviathan (as examined by commentators like Richard Tuck) posits that security under a strong sovereign is paramount, even at the cost of personal freedoms (Tuck 2002).

2.3. Bangladesh and comparative cases

Bangladesh's democratic journey has been studied by regional experts. Scholars document Bangladesh's shift from the hopeful return to elected government in 2009 to a 'hybrid regime' sliding into authoritarianism (Riaz 2024). He also argues Bangladesh experienced an incremental but consequential decline in democracy, noting rigged elections in 2014 and 2018 and the adoption of repressive laws as turning points (Riaz 2022). Comparative studies in South Asia reveal similar trends: India under Narendra Modi has seen pressures on liberal institutions, Sri Lanka under the Rajapaksas concentrated power in the executive, and Pakistan oscillates under military's shadow (Abeyratne 2024; Mohsin Ali 2025; Shah 2024). However, Bangladesh's case is distinctive in the extent of one-party dominance by a democratically elected government that gradually dismantled institutional safeguards. This raises the question: Is Bangladesh an exceptional case of backsliding or emblematic of the global trend?

Bangladesh-specific scholarship also cautions against reading the post-2009 period in isolation. The Awami League–BNP rivalry has repeatedly combined ideological polarization, dynastic leadership, street mobilization, patronage, and mutual distrust of electoral institutions. Jamaat-e-Islami's position further complicates this field because it has been both an opposition ally. In addition, the military's history of coups, direct rule, emergency governance, and behind-the-scenes political influence shows that executive dominance cannot be understood solely through civilian party competition. This broader political history helps explain why the caretaker government, election commission, courts, and coercive agencies became such crucial sites in the struggle over democratic neutrality.

A second body of Bangladesh-centred work complicates the development narrative. Bangladesh's social and economic gains can coexist with weak accountability and fragile democratic institutions (Hossain 2017). Another study depicts how growth, mega-projects, energy policy, and global-capital linkages can produce inequality, dispossession, and environmental harm rather than broadly shared emancipation (Muhammad 2021). A work on state-business relations similarly foregrounds the ties among corporate interests, energy deals, and democratic deficits (Mirza 2020).

Finally, scholarship on pluralism in Bangladesh requires attention to exclusions that exceed formal party competition. Labor-market discrimination faced by students from madrasah and non-elite educational backgrounds (Ahmad et al. 2023), student perceptions of corruption, discrimination, lack of good governance, political instability, and limited freedom of expression ([Zaman et al. 2024), the growth of online misogyny and gendered intimidation, recurrent hostility toward religious and ethnic minorities, and the exceptional governance of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) show that democratic erosion is not only an electoral or institutional process. It is also a social and territorial process through which some communities become more vulnerable to coercion, silence, and exclusion from the national political imagination (Al-Zaman 2021; Amnesty International 2017; Chowdhury 2014; IWGIA 2012).

Some analysts label Bangladesh a personalistic autocracy in the making, pointing to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's centralized control and weakening of all independent institutions (Hasan 2025; Hossain 2025). My theoretical approach adds a new layer to these accounts by framing Bangladesh's experience as a contest (or imbalance) between

Machiavellian and Hobbesian political logics, a perspective that can also be applied to other cases where regimes justify authoritarian measures in the name of order.

Hence, existing literature provides a blueprint of how democracies are eroding worldwide and some specifics of Bangladesh's decline. What has been missing is a theoretical narrative connecting the erosion of liberty to the pursuit of order. By bringing Machiavelli and Hobbes into the conversation, I aim to enrich the understanding of Bangladesh's trajectory and spark broader reflections on the liberty–order tradeoff in contemporary politics.

3. Study methodology

Research Approach: This study follows a qualitative single-case study design (Bogaards 2019; Gerring 2004), focusing on Bangladesh as an instructive case of democratic backsliding. I employ process tracing to analyze the sequence of political events and decisions from 2009 to 2024 that cumulatively contributed to democratic decline. Process tracing allows us to identify causal processes and critical junctures (e.g., constitutional amendments, elections, crises) and to interpret their significance through our theoretical lenses (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Nowack 2021).

Analytical Framework: I construct an analytical framework by mapping two conceptual models onto the case. First, a Machiavellian model, derived from Machiavelli's works (primarily The Discourses and The Prince), which values republican liberty, the rule of law, institutional checks, and the civic virtue of an engaged populace. Key indicators for this model include the presence or absence of constraints on executive power, the vibrancy of opposition and civil society (what Machiavelli might term the 'tumults' or constructive conflicts that preserve liberty), and the integrity of institutions (elections, judiciary, legislature) (Baccelli 2007; Suchowlansky 2015).

Second, a Hobbesian model, based on Hobbes's Leviathan, which prioritizes order, stability, and the consolidation of authority in a sovereign. Indicators here include the centralization of power, the use of security forces and laws to enforce obedience, narratives emphasizing security or economic development over political rights, and public tolerance of authoritarian measures due to fear of chaos (Lloyd and Sreedhar 2002). By examining Bangladesh's developments against these two models, it can be interpreted: each action either as undermining Machiavellian liberty, advancing Hobbesian order, or both.

To make the framework more explicit, I operationalize Machiavellian liberty and Hobbesian order through observable indicators rather than treating them as purely interpretive labels (Table 1). Liberty is observed through: (a) electoral neutrality, including the presence or absence of a credible interim election mechanism and a trusted election commission; (b) institutional balance, especially judicial independence, parliamentary oversight, and bureaucratic neutrality; (c) pluralism, measured through the legal and practical space for opposition parties, media, civil society, secular writers, LGBTQ activists, women activists, religious minorities, Indigenous communities, and dissenting students; and (d) civic virtue or constructive conflict, observed through whether protest and public criticism are channelled legally or criminalized as disorder. Order is observed through: (a) centralization of executive authority; (b) securitized laws and coercive policing; (c) public narratives that frame opposition, protest, or rights claims as threats to stability, sovereignty, religion, or development; and (d) evidence of public or elite

Table 1. Observational indicators of liberty and order.

Concept	Dimension	Observable indicators
Liberty	Electoral neutrality	Presence or absence of a credible interim election mechanism and a trusted election commission
Liberty	Institutional balance	Judicial independence, parliamentary oversight, and bureaucratic neutrality
Liberty	Pluralism	Legal and practical space for opposition parties, media, civil society, secular writers, LGBTQ activists, women activists, religious minorities, Indigenous communities, and dissenting students
Liberty	Civic virtue / constructive conflict	Whether protest and public criticism are channelled legally or criminalized as disorder
Order	Executive centralization	Centralization of executive authority
Order	Securitized governance	Securitized laws and coercive policing
Order	Stability narratives	Public narratives that frame opposition, protest, or rights claims as threats to stability, sovereignty, religion, or development
Order	Acquiescence to restriction	Evidence of public or elite acquiescence to restrictions in exchange for perceived peace, growth, or protection from chaos

Note: The table translates the paper's conceptual distinction between liberty and order into observable indicators. Liberty is treated as the openness of political, institutional, and civic life, while order is treated as the concentration, securitization, and legitimation of authority in the name of stability.

acquiescence to restrictions in exchange for perceived peace, growth, or protection from chaos.

The causal claim is therefore process-tracing based and rests on a sequence of observable implications: ruling elites first articulate an order narrative; that narrative then delegitimizes dissent or electoral contestation; legal and administrative changes convert the narrative into institutional transformation; coercive agencies enforce the new rules; and the resulting narrowing of civic space weakens Machiavellian liberty. The analysis tests this sequence against alternative explanations, including partisan polarization, opposition boycott strategies, Islamist mobilization, military tutelage, economic-growth legitimation, and international pressures. Where the evidence suggests that these alternatives interact with the liberty–order mechanism, the article treats them as complementary conditions rather than rival monocausal explanations.

Data Sources: The research draws on multiple sources for triangulation (Arias Valencia 2022). Academic analyses (journal articles, books, and policy papers on Bangladesh's politics) provide context and interpretations of events. I use democracy indices to gauge the extent of backsliding quantitatively – for instance, Freedom House scores for Bangladesh declined after 2011, reflecting the deterioration in political rights and civil liberties. Score for Bangladesh dropped to 39/100 by 2020, a marked decline from earlier in the decade when the country was rated Partly Free with substantially better ratings in political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House 2025). I also consult V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) data and Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index for cross-validation of trends. Primary sources such as Bangladeshi laws and constitutional amendments (e.g., the 15th Amendment in 2011), official statements, and speeches are used to capture the government's justifications in its own words. Furthermore, reports by NGOs and human rights organizations (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Transparency International Bangladesh, etc.) document specific incidents like electoral violence, censorship, and repression. International election observer reports and media articles from reputable outlets supply details on each election and political crisis.

Triangulation is strengthened by deliberately combining four types of evidence: institutional texts such as constitutional amendments and court rulings; external democracy and human-rights assessments; Bangladesh-specific scholarship and critical political-economy work; and contemporaneous media and observer reports. This combination helps reduce the risk that the analysis simply reproduces government narratives, opposition narratives, or Western democracy-index categories.

All claims in the analysis are referenced with evidence. For example, when I assert that the 2014 election was boycotted and non-competitive, I back it with sources. Where democracy indices are cited, the exact figures and their sources are given. This mixed-methods evidentiary base ensures that this study's theoretical interpretation is firmly grounded in factual developments.

Analytical Strategy: The period 2009–2024 is divided into three sub-periods corresponding to major political cycles: 2009–2013, 2014–2018, and 2019–2024. Within each sub-period, key events and institutional changes are examined, including the 2011 abolition of the Caretaker Government system, the 2013 crackdown on opposition and civil society, the 2014 and 2018 general elections, and the 2020–2021 application of digital security laws, 2024 students' protests and mass movement. Each of these developments is analyzed through two theoretical lenses. From a Machiavellian perspective, the question is whether these events represent an erosion of republican liberty and how they would affect civic virtue and institutional balance. From a Hobbesian perspective, the emphasis is placed on the role of order, stability narratives, and the strengthening of sovereign authority as mechanisms to prevent disorder.

The case selection is justified as an analytically useful single case rather than as a claim that Bangladesh is representative of all democratic backsliding. Bangladesh is selected because it combines electoral competition, rapid development claims, politicized memories of liberation, civil–military legacies, and a dramatic 2024 rupture. This creates a hard and theoretically revealing case for examining how order-based legitimation can coexist with and enable democratic erosion. Potential selection bias is addressed by specifying the scope condition. The argument applies most directly to hybrid or electoral-authoritarian settings where incumbents retain formal democratic institutions while using security and development narratives to narrow competition.

The references to India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan are used as bounded comparative probes rather than full paired comparisons. They are included because each South Asian case displays a different configuration of the liberty–order tension. Such as, India foregrounds majoritarian national order and institutional pressure; Sri Lanka links security, executive centralization, and development after civil war; and Pakistan illustrates the persistent shadow of military tutelage over civilian electoral politics. This limited comparison clarifies the portability of the framework while keeping Bangladesh as the empirical core of the article.

The analysis alternates between these perspectives to construct a composite explanation of democratic backsliding, moving beyond description to interrogate the underlying logic of regime behavior. Particular attention is devoted to the interaction between the two dynamics. On the one hand, the regime's emphasis on threats such as political unrest, extremism, and economic disruption can be seen as invoking a Hobbesian need for order, thereby securing public acquiescence to measures that, from a Machiavellian viewpoint, amount to tyranny through the concentration of power and

removal of institutional checks. On the other hand, the erosion of Machiavellian liberty – manifested in weakened checks and diminished civic engagement – enabled the regime to enforce Hobbesian order with limited resistance.

This interplay between Machiavellian and Hobbesian dynamics is central to explaining the trajectory of democratic backsliding in Bangladesh. By explicitly articulating this methodology, the study ensures transparency in connecting theoretical insights to empirical developments. The following section applies this framework to the Bangladesh case, structured chronologically with theoretical interpretation woven into the empirical narrative.

4. Case analysis: democratic backsliding in Bangladesh (2009–2024)

Bangladesh's democratic backsliding unfolded over 15 years, under the continuous rule of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League (AL) government. After a military-backed caretaker regime (2007–08) restored elections, Bangladesh had a moment of democratic renewal in 2008/2009 – but this was followed by steady decline. The trajectory was examined in three phases, highlighting how each phase reflected a progressive sacrifice of liberty in the name of order.

4.1. Historical and regional context before 2009

A brief pre-2009 background is necessary because the political logic that later enabled executive dominance was already embedded in Bangladesh's post-independence state formation. Bangladesh emerged from a violent war of liberation against Pakistan, and the memory of 1971 continues to shape legitimacy claims, especially the Awami League's self-presentation as guardian of liberation and secular nationalism. The BNP, by contrast, has often drawn legitimacy from Bangladeshi nationalism, sovereignty claims, and coalition politics that at times included Jamaat-e-Islami. These divergent historical narratives intersect with regional geopolitics. The Awami League has generally been associated with a more India-positive foreign-policy orientation, especially under Sheikh Hasina, while the BNP has often framed India through a more defensive sovereignty lens and pursued a balancing posture toward Indian dominance (Chakma 2015; Mannan 2018; Pattanaik 2005). Unresolved India–Bangladesh water-sharing disputes, especially over Farakka and Teesta, also fed this sovereignty politics because Bangladesh's downstream dependence on India made resource governance a recurring site of geopolitical grievance and nationalist mobilization (Obaidullah and Howlader 2025). The result is not merely party competition but a legitimacy struggle in which each side presents the other as a threat to the nation's foundational identity.

The rivalry also has a long institutional history. Since the 1990s, Bangladesh's two-party competition has produced a recurrent pattern of confrontational politics including opposition boycotts of parliament, hartals and street mobilization, disputes over electoral credibility, patronage and corruption, and the politicization of policing and coercive institutions (Jackman and Maitrot 2022; Jahan and Amundsen 2012; Moniruzzaman 2009; Riaz 2014). BNP-led governments, Awami League-led governments, and military-backed interim authorities all contributed to patterns of intolerance toward dissent, weakening trust in courts, the election commission, the bureaucracy, and law-enforcement agencies.

The caretaker government system was created precisely because political actors did not trust incumbents to administer elections neutrally. Therefore, the post-2009 abolition of that system should be understood as the decisive removal of an already fragile safeguard rather than as the first appearance of democratic dysfunction.

This background also points to actors often missed in state-centric accounts. Jamaat-e-Islami's contested legacy, the security establishment's memory of coups and counter-coups, religious mobilization around secularism and blasphemy, and the unresolved status of Indigenous peoples in the CHT all shaped the limits of pluralism before 2009. These histories matter because the later Hobbesian order narrative did not operate in an empty field; it drew on pre-existing fears of political violence, militancy in the name of Islam, military intervention, and foreign interference.

4.2. 2009–2014: from democratic renewal to institutional erosion

In December 2008, Bangladesh held national elections under a neutral caretaker government, which were deemed free and fair and brought Sheikh Hasina's Awami League to power with a landslide mandate. This ended two years of emergency rule and initially improved Bangladesh's democratic standing. In 2009–2010, there were hopes for strengthening democratic institutions. Indeed, Bangladesh's Freedom House scores improved with the return to elected rule (UNHCR 2009). However, early signs of trouble emerged as the ruling party's huge parliamentary majority raised concerns about unchecked power.

The 15th Amendment of the Constitution (June 2011) marked a decisive turning point. Using its over two-thirds majority in Parliament, the Awami League abolished the long-standing Caretaker Government (CTG) system for election-time neutrality (Dhaka Tribune 2024). This system, in place since the 1990s, had been an institutional check to ensure free elections by handing power to a neutral interim regime. Its removal meant that future elections would be held under the incumbent government, a clear conflict of interest. The government justified the amendment by citing Supreme Court observations and arguing that elected governments should not be interrupted. Opposition parties (the BNP and its allies) vehemently protested, seeing this as an executive power grab that would undermine fair competition. The period from 2011 to 2013 saw rising political tension: street protests, general strikes (hartals), and harsh crackdowns. In 2012 alone, clashes over the caretaker issue led to an estimated 169 deaths and thousands of injuries during protests (UNHCR 2013). The government responded with mass arrests of opposition activists.

At the same time, the Awami League pursued other legal-institutional changes that concentrated power. The 15th Amendment also included provisions like Article 7A, criminalizing any attempt to abrogate the constitution – meant to deter military coups, but also chilling any future civil disobedience. Term limits were not an issue: Bangladesh has a parliamentary system with no term limit for PM but the spirit of the amendment was to cement the AL's hold.

In 2013, further blows to pluralism occurred. The Awami League government oversaw a controversial war crimes tribunal prosecuting individuals (mostly linked to the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami) for 1971 war atrocities. While seeking justice for war crimes was broadly popular, it argued that the process was politicized (Chopra 2015). When the

Jamaat-e-Islami party was banned from contesting elections in 2013 for its Islamist charter, it removed a key ally of the opposition (Al Jazeera 2013). Meanwhile, BNP leader Khaleda Zia and opposition activists faced intensifying legal harassment and intimidation, contributing to a broader climate of fear (Freedom House 2014).

All these actions set the stage for the January 5, 2014, general election. The BNP demanded restoration of the caretaker system as a condition to participate, which the government flatly refused. As a result, the BNP and most opposition parties boycotted the 2014 election, rendering it effectively a one-party contest (Lorch 2014). Over 150 out of 300 seats were won uncontested by Awami League candidates. Voter turnout was reported at a dismal 22% (official) or even around 10% by some estimates. Not surprisingly, the Awami League won an overwhelming majority, and Sheikh Hasina continued as Prime Minister (Mostofa and Subedi 2021). There was no institutionalized conflict or competition, only an artificial confirmation of the ruler's dominance. Foreign observers and democracy advocates criticized the election as not credible. However, the government defended it as a constitutional necessity, blaming the opposition for the boycott and pointing to the need to avoid a power vacuum. The AL portrayed the opposition's shutdowns and protests as anarchic and emphasized that it had to maintain order and keep the country running – an argument that resonated with some of the public tired of hartals and unrest.

Therefore, by 2014 Bangladesh had moved from a promising democratic recovery to a hybrid regime where elections and institutions existed on paper but were hollowed out in practice (Miaji and Islam 2025). The first phase of backsliding saw institutions eroded: the neutral referee (caretaker) was removed, opposition was delegitimized and crushed, and an election became a mere formality to extend the incumbent's rule.

4.3. 2014–2018: consolidating a 'hybrid regime' – order above all

After 2014, Bangladesh entered a period of single-party dominance. With the opposition BNP largely absent from Parliament (having boycotted the election), the Awami League government faced few institutional checks. This phase was characterized by the consolidation of authoritarian practices under a democratic façade, what political scientists often term a hybrid regime or competitive authoritarianism (Mostofa and Subedi 2021; Riaz 2022).

One key development was the government's increasing grip on the media and civil society. In 2014–2015, authorities cracked down on dissenting voices, including prosecuting journalists and activists. By 2016, Bangladesh's press freedom rankings had plummeted. Journalists reported that press freedom had never been more restricted since democracy's return in 1991 (Feldman 2015). The Awami League or its allies came to control many media outlets, either directly or through owner patronage, leading to prevalent self-censorship.

The narrowing of pluralism also affected constituencies beyond opposition parties and journalists. Between 2013 and 2016, secular bloggers, atheist writers, Islamist writers, and publishers associated with both secular and Islamist currents faced targeted violence by extremist actors. State responses were often criticized as inadequate and, at times, victim-blaming. This dimension complicates the paper's liberty–order argument: while the state invoked order against dissent, it also struggled or failed to protect vulnerable dissenters from societal intolerance and extremist violence (Amnesty International 2017).

Pluralism also has a gendered and communal dimension. Online misogyny, harassment of women activists and journalists, and hostility toward feminist speech narrowed the space for civic participation, while periodic violence and intimidation against religious minorities revealed that formal secularism did not automatically translate into equal protection. In this sense, democratic backsliding involved not only the weakening of parties and institutions but also the unequal distribution of voice, safety, and citizenship across gendered, religious, ethnic, and ideological lines (Al-Zaman 2021).

Parallel to tighter media control, the state expanded its coercive apparatus: RAB and police were deployed against regime critics amid documented patterns of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances, while the 2018 Digital Security Act criminalized broad categories of online speech and has been used to arrest hundreds, repression that spikes around protests and elections (Bari 2022; Bhowmik and Fisher 2024). This law exemplifies strategic manipulation of civil liberties to fortify control: it casts a wide chilling effect on social media and press commentary.

During this period, the government also pushed an order narrative centered on economic development and security. Bangladesh enjoyed strong GDP growth (6–7% annually) and made progress on infrastructure and energy projects. Hasina's regime touted Bangladesh's rising incomes and improvements in electricity, framing itself as delivering prosperity and stability in exchange for curbing political chaos. Many citizens, weary of the violent confrontations that marked earlier decades, credited the government for a sense of order and development (Blair 2020).

Critical political-economy scholarship suggests that this development narrative should not be read only as empirical performance or public service delivery. It was also a legitimating discourse that converted growth, infrastructure, and energy expansion into arguments for political discipline. Hossain's 'Bangladesh paradox' explains why development achievements can occur alongside weak formal accountability, but Muhammad and Mirza show that the same model can deepen inequality, reinforce state-business networks, and make mega-projects and energy deals politically insulated from scrutiny (Hossain 2017; Mirza 2020; Muhammad 2021). Recent work on BRI implementation in Bangladesh further shows that infrastructure-led development can generate reputational and legitimacy effects, but these effects remain conditional on credible delivery, financing concerns, and competing regional narratives (Obaidullah 2026).

In Bangladesh, the 'development-before-democracy' narrative gained traction. However, from another perspective, the erosion of checks and balances led to rampant corruption and nepotism, as power was centralized. The ruling party's dominance over the judiciary became apparent: constitutional changes and appointments ensured the higher courts were unlikely to rule against government interests (for example, the Supreme Court was pressured in 2017 after it annulled a constitutional amendment; the Chief Justice resigned amid attacks on him by ruling party figures). The anti-corruption commission and other watchdogs were similarly politicized (Abdullah 2025; Tasnim 2017).

The causal connection between the order narrative and institutional transformation can be traced through three linked arenas. In the electoral arena, the abolition of the caretaker government converted distrust of opposition violence into a constitutional design that advantaged incumbency. In the judicial arena, the conflicts surrounding constitutional amendments and the pressure on the chief justice signalled that courts were

expected to remain within the boundaries of executive-defined stability. In the bureaucratic and security arenas, promotion, policing, and administrative discretion increasingly rewarded loyalty and risk avoidance, making state agencies less likely to mediate conflicts neutrally. Thus, 'order' was not merely a slogan; it became an organizing principle for elections, courts, and administration.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts further complicates the study's account of order and pluralism. The CHT covers a large and strategically important part of Bangladesh and has long been governed through exceptional security arrangements, land disputes, and incomplete implementation of the 1997 Peace Accord. Militarization in the CHT demonstrates that the Bangladeshi state's order-making has not only targeted electoral opposition in the capital, it has also produced differentiated sovereignty at the margins, where Indigenous communities experience citizenship through surveillance, land insecurity, and restricted autonomy (Chowdhury 2014; IWGIA 2012). This regional dimension links democratic decline to the military's broader place in Bangladesh's political order.

All these factors set the stage for the December 30, 2018, general election. Unlike 2014, the BNP decided to participate in 2018, despite its leader Khaleda Zia being imprisoned on corruption charges since February that year. The election campaign, however, was heavily tilted. International and domestic observers reported widespread pre-election repression: thousands of opposition activists were arrested, rallies were disrupted, and candidates faced attacks (Maîtrot and Jackman 2023). In 2018, a widely perceived pro-government Election Commission disqualified large numbers of opposition candidacies on technicalities, e.g., returning officers rejected 141 BNP nominations versus just 3 for the AL, while opposition parties and observers alleged partisan favoritism (The Daily Star 2018). On polling day, credible reports emerged of ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, and fake votes.

Not surprisingly, the Awami League and its allies won 288 of 300 seats in Parliament, an even more lopsided result than usual. The BNP secured only 6 seats and rejected the results as fraudulent, though a few of its winning MPs later took their oaths. The 2018 election, by most accounts, was a 'rigged' election in a hybrid regime (Paul 2021; Riaz and Parvez 2021). This was essentially the formal culmination of the autocratization process – Bangladesh at this point could no longer be considered even minimally democratic, despite the rituals of voting. Freedom House accordingly downgraded Bangladesh's political rights score after 2018, noting the election's serious irregularities and the lack of legitimacy of the mandate.

4.4. 2019–2024: authoritarian zenith and the stirring of resistance

After securing a third consecutive term in 2018, Sheikh Hasina's government tightened its grip further. Bangladesh in 2019–2021 appeared to be an entrenched one-party state. The Parliament had no effective opposition; the ruling party's internal factions were the only source of political contest, if any. The government continued to use the Digital Security Act to arrest critics – from eminent photographers and editors to ordinary Facebook users – creating a pervasive climate of self-censorship. Freedom House by 2020 classified Bangladesh as only 'Partly Free' with a score of 39/100, a steep drop from a decade earlier. Notably, due process and rule of law deteriorated: politicized courts kept opposition figures like Khaleda Zia in jail (she was only released in 2020 on conditional medical parole), and security forces enjoyed impunity for human rights abuses.

The ruling regime also bolstered its legitimacy narrative through mega-projects (e.g., launching the Padma Bridge in 2022, proudly done without foreign loans as a symbol of sovereignty and accomplishment) and through nationalist rhetoric. Any dissent was painted as anti-state or instigated by foreign interests (Jakir 2024).

However, by 2022–2023, cracks began to appear in this seemingly impregnable edifice. The public's patience with authoritarian control started waning, especially as economic pressures mounted (the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent inflation hit Bangladesh's economy, revealing governance shortcomings). Corruption scandals (like the 2020 casino scandal implicating ruling-party youth leaders, or growing reports of money laundering by elites) undermined the government's image as a benevolent strong hand. Furthermore, younger Bangladeshis, having grown up largely under one-party rule, became increasingly vocal on social media against corruption and dynastic politics – despite the risks of the DSA. In late 2022 and into 2023, the opposition BNP, though weakened, managed to stage a series of large rallies demanding a neutral caretaker government for the upcoming January 2024 election (essentially the same demand as in 2013, coming full circle). The regime initially responded with its familiar playbook: bans on protests, mass arrests, and even alleged targeted attacks (in one notable incident, a prominent BNP organizer was mysteriously abducted and later found injured). But the sheer scale of public discontent was rising (Al Jazeera 2022; HRW 2023).

By mid-2023, Bangladesh was heading into a political showdown. The international community also exerted pressure: Western governments and the UN voiced concerns that a repeat of 2014/2018 style elections would lack credibility (CIVICUS Monitor 2023; U. S. Embassy Dhaka 2023). In response, the Hasina government doubled down on security measures, while also hinting at some concessions including inviting foreign observers, or dialogue proposals that largely went nowhere (Chatterjee 2023).

The situation climaxed in late 2023 and early 2024. The BNP and its allies called general strikes and nationwide protests, some of which turned violent as police intervened. Tensions were extremely high ahead of the scheduled January 2024 polls. In what was widely seen as a predictable replay, the election on January 7, 2024, proceeded with the opposition alleging massive fraud and intimidation. The Awami League unsurprisingly claimed victory for another term. But this time, instead of resigned acceptance, post-election outrage snowballed (Ganguly and Paul 2024). By mid-2024, protests swelled – led by students but joined by wider publics – featuring 'vote rights'/'Hasina step down' calls; security forces used live ammunition and imposed curfews, with casualty estimates climbing from dozens in mid-July to over 200 by July 31, and later counts to 1,400 (United Nations 2025).

The Gen Z led popular uprising in early August 2024 led to Sheikh Hasina's ouster from power (Hossain and Obaidullah 2024). Faced with escalating protests, parts of the state apparatus refused to crack down further, and under both domestic and international pressure, Hasina agreed to step aside. Notably, the United Nations later suggested that crimes against humanity may have been committed during the regime's final crackdowns, underscoring the severity of state violence used in the name of order (Chowdhury 2025; Siddik 2024).

The military's position during the 2024 crisis is therefore analytically central. Bangladesh's armed forces had a long history of direct rule and political arbitration, yet in 2024 the outcome depended less on a classic coup than on the limits of coercive loyalty within an authoritarian coalition. Recent work characterizes the moment as a

form of partial military defection. The regime's survival required security forces to continue escalating repression, but parts of the coercive apparatus became unwilling or unable to sustain that course as protests widened and legitimacy collapsed (Islam 2025). This dynamic shows that Hobbesian order depends not only on laws and discourse but also on the continued cohesion of the coercive institutions expected to enforce them.

By the end of 2024, Bangladesh stood at a crossroads. An interim government took charge to stabilize the situation and prepare for new elections. The events of 2024 showed that while the regime had nearly snuffed out democracy, the desire for liberty was not dead.

Hence, Bangladesh's democratic backsliding from 2009 to 2024 involved a series of steps that each traded a bit more liberty for a claim of order. Starting with undermining electoral neutrality (2011) and suppressing opposition (2013–14), then normalizing authoritarian governance behind development achievements (2014–2018), and finally reaching a breaking point where the absence of any lawful means to change government led to upheaval (2024). We saw the textbook mechanisms of backsliding – executive aggrandizement, strategic election manipulation, repression of media and civil society – all present. In the next section, I explicitly analyze how Machiavellian and Hobbesian principles manifested in these developments, and how the tension between them explains the course of events.

4.5. Theory application: machiavelli and hobbes in Bangladesh's backsliding

After outlining the trajectory of Bangladesh's political decline, the analysis is interpreted through Machiavellian and Hobbesian lenses. The discussion is organized into three parts: first, a Machiavellian reading that highlights the erosion of liberty and republican institutions; second, a Hobbesian reading that emphasizes how the pursuit of order and security was invoked to justify authoritarian measures; and finally, a synthesis illustrating how these dynamics interacted.

The framework should not be read as a rigid binary in which liberty and order are mutually exclusive. In practice, democratic polities require some measure of order to protect rights, while durable order requires legitimate institutions that preserve liberty. The question is therefore not whether Bangladesh had too much order or too much liberty, but how one particular order narrative displaced institutional balance, pluralism, and civic contestation while claiming to protect stability.

4.6. A machiavellian Reading – the erosion of liberty and civic virtue

From a Machiavellian perspective, Bangladesh's backsliding represents the decay of the republic's foundations, a tale of liberty lost through the dismantling of institutions and the quashing of virtuous conflict. Machiavelli in his Discourses argued that the strength of a republic lies in its mixed constitution and the regulated conflict between different social forces, which preserves liberty by preventing domination (Skinner 1983). Applying this to Bangladesh:

1. **Institutional Checks Removed:** The abolition of the Caretaker Government in 2011 is a removal of a key institutional check that had ensured no one party could entrench itself unfairly (Chowdhury 2023). This was akin to removing the Tribunes of the

People in ancient Rome that Machiavelli praised. Without a neutral caretaker, the ruling party was free to manipulate elections, effectively allowing the 'powerful' (the ruling elite) to, in Machiavelli's words, 'subject everything to themselves' (Machiavelli 1883). The result was that the balance tilted irrevocably in favor of the incumbent, undermining the equilibrium necessary for liberty.

2. **Elimination of 'Tumults' (Constructive Conflict):** Machiavelli believed liberty is maintained when the people can challenge the great and when laws channel these conflicts productively (Tunca 2025). In Bangladesh, all avenues of legitimate dissent were progressively closed off. Opposition rallies were banned or attacked, Parliament became a rubber stamp devoid of debate after 2014, and even intra-party dissent within AL was minimal due to top-down control. There were no more 'tumults' in the Machiavellian sense – no pushback from institutions or the public that could check the ruler's excesses. This absence of contestation allowed corruption and abuse of power to flourish unchecked. For example, large financial scandals and persistent human-rights abuses (e.g., the Padma Bridge corruption case; the 2016 Bangladesh Bank heist) provoked civil-society outrage but were blunted by coercive policing and speech-restricting laws (ICT Act/DSA), producing a chilling effect (Islam, Islam, and Islam 2024; World Bank 2012). Bangladesh's civic virtue – visible in the 1990 prodemocracy uprising – was muted by fear for much of the 2010s, yet repression only stored up pressures that burst forth in 2024s mass mobilization (Chowdhury 2025; Kabir 1995). As Machiavelli argues, republics preserve liberty through regulated conflict ('tumults') and guardians like the tribunes; suppressing conflict does not remove tensions so much as intensify their eventual eruption (Pedullà 2018; Skinner 1983).
3. **Domination by a Single Ruler/Party:** By the late 2010s, Bangladesh exhibited the traits of a personalist project inside a formal republic, power concentrated around Sheikh Hasina and her inner circle, exactly the danger Machiavelli warns of when a single person or faction amasses domination, imperiling liberty (Machiavelli 1883); contemporary scholarship notes the regime's increasing personalization and dynastic overtones (Riaz 2022), with family figures elevated to prominent roles (e.g., Sajeeb Wazed as PM's ICT adviser; Saima Wazed's elevation to WHO-SEARO).

The judiciary's subservience and the neutering of the Election Commission meant that no independent entity remained to challenge executive decisions. Machiavelli's notion of liberty is closely tied to the concept of non-domination (later articulated by republican theorists) – that no citizen or group should live at the mercy of another's whims (Tunca 2025). In Bangladesh, citizens, especially those aligned with the opposition or critical voices, effectively lived at the mercy of the ruling party's tolerance. At any moment, a critical journalist could be picked up under the Digital Security Act, or an opposition supporter could be detained without recourse. This is the very definition of loss of republican liberty.

4. **Corruption and Decay of Virtù:** Machiavelli warns that when a republic grows corrupt – morally and institutionally – elite domination follows and liberty erodes; in late-2010s Bangladesh, clientelism, patronage, and politicized state appointments entrenched a personalist ruling circle, with advancement tied to loyalty and family networks, rising elite rents, and public cynicism/disengagement – a textbook pattern of a corrupted republic (Machiavelli 1883; McCormick 2011; Skinner 1983) aligned with evidence on partisan consolidation, elite capture, and patronage-linked finance in Bangladesh (Lewis and Hossain 2022; Lorch 2021).

In sum, the Machiavellian reading of Bangladesh's backsliding is one of imbalance and domination: the careful equilibrium of forces and openness to dissent that keep a republic healthy were undone. Each step – be it a legal change or an act of repression – tipped the scales further toward tyranny. Machiavelli would likely view the 2009–2024 story as a cautionary tale of how a republic dies: not overnight, but gradually, as those in power eliminate the safeguards of liberty one by one under various pretenses, until nothing remains to stop tyranny. The final popular uprising in 2024, from this angle, was a desperate attempt by the popolo (the people) to reclaim their liberty from the grandi (the powerful) – essentially a delayed eruption of the conflict that had been forcibly postponed for years (Riaz 2021; Waldner and Lust 2018).

4.7. A hobbesian Reading – the pursuit of sovereign order and security

A Hobbesian interpretation, on the other hand, centers on the regime's emphasis on order, stability, and security, even if it meant circumscribing freedoms. Thomas Hobbes, writing in the chaos of the English Civil War, argued that humans' fear of violent death and disorder leads them to submit to an all-powerful sovereign for protection (Hobbes 1909; Lloyd and Sreedhar 2002). In Bangladesh's context, the ruling party leveraged precisely such fears and presented itself as the necessary Leviathan to prevent chaos.

1. **Narrative of Stability and Development**: Across 2009–2024, Bangladesh observes a consistent order–stability frame in ruling-party discourse: opposition mobilization was labeled 'anarchy,' 'terrorism,' or 'economic sabotage,' while the Awami League cast itself as guarantor of stability and growth (BSS 2023; NDTV 2025). During the 2013–caretaker crisis, senior officials argued that hartals and street clashes would 'ruin the economy' and scare off investors, a narrative reiterated in later cycles (2018; 2022–2024) as large rallies were met with protest bans, sweeping arrests, and securitized rhetoric portraying dissent as anti-state or foreign-instigated (CIVICUS Monitor 2023; Freedom House 2014; HRW 2023). Public statements by the prime minister and ministers repeatedly invoked the violence of 2006 and mid-2000s bombings to warn of a return to chaos absent firm rule. This framing dovetailed with the government's development pitch – stability as a precondition for growth – which independent analyses document as central to the ruling party's electoral strategy in the late 2010s. By doing so, she invoked the Hobbesian fear of the state of nature (Blits 1989), implying that without her firm rule, Bangladesh could spiral into lawlessness or extremist takeover. Similarly, the impressive economic growth under her tenure was used to argue that orderly governance was yielding dividends – a not-so-subtle suggestion that political pluralism or power rotation would jeopardize this progress. Many citizens, especially in the urban middle class, did accept this argument for a time: they traded off concerns about democratic niceties for what they perceived as economic security and social order (IRI 2019).
2. **Centralization of Power as a Virtue:** Consistent with a Hobbesian logic that order requires an undivided authority, ruling-party elites framed centralization as necessary to prevent factional conflict and govern efficiently (Hobbes 1909; Lloyd and Sreedhar 2002). In practice, Bangladesh's anti-defection rule (Article 70), which vacates an MP's seat for voting against the party, kept legislators tightly bound to party whips,

weakening parliamentary independence and consolidating power in the executive (Obaidullah 2020). Independent assessments during the 2010s–2020s further describe a PMO-centric state, with the executive (especially the Prime Minister's Office) dominating policy and signaling expectations of unquestioning loyalty across the bureaucracy and security services (BTI 2024). Legal architecture also enabled rule by ordinance when parliament was not in session (Article 93), a tool observers flagged as part of executive law-making outside full legislative deliberation. Taken together, these patterns match a Hobbesian emphasis on concentrated authority to avert disorder, while empirically documenting how constitutional design (e.g., Article 70), executive practice, and discourse converged to centralize power during the period under study.

3. **Use of Coercion to Maintain Peace**: Hobbes famously asserted that covenants without the sword are useless; authority must rest on the ability to coerce (Ristroph 2011). Bangladesh's regime demonstrated this by relying on force to pre-empt or crush unrest. The presence of armed police and RAB in the streets during any protest, the mass preventive detentions, and the occasional violent dispersal of demonstrations all served as the Leviathan's sword. During salient flashpoints, authorities also curtailed communications: in 2018 the government cut or throttled 3G/4G mobile internet amid the student road-safety movement (SCMP 2018), in 2023 services were restricted around opposition rallies, and in July 2024 a national curfew and near-total shutdown accompanied lethal crowd control (Paul 2024). Hence, these patterns demonstrate a Hobbesian enforcement logic – erring on the side of repression to avert disorder – that the government publicly linked to stopping 'misinformation' and 'instigation' during volatile periods.
4. **Law as Instrument of Control:** In Hobbes's view, laws are commands of the sovereign to direct subjects' actions for the common peace (Gauthier 2018). Bangladesh's ruling party enacted and enforced laws in this spirit. The Digital Security Act 2018, the Anti-Terrorism Act (amended) and various restrictive rules on NGOs all functioned to give the sovereign extensive reach into society, to surveil and punish anything deemed subversive. The DSA, in effect, told citizens: your freedom extends only to the point that you do not criticize or challenge the sovereign's defined interests – echoing Hobbes's notion that subjects' liberty is only what the sovereign permits (Williamson 1966). The state securitized many issues: for instance, it treated mass cheating in elections not as an affront to citizens' rights, but as a matter of state security (any complaint about election fraud was met with the response that it's propaganda to destabilize the country). Hobbes's absolutism posits that justice is what the sovereign says it is (Burns 1990), and indeed the Bangladeshi government often dismissed independent or foreign criticism of its actions by saying they were protecting the nation's law and order (Al Jazeera 2021; Xinhua 2022), implying that external standards of democracy did not apply if they conflicted with the sovereign's definition of order.

4.8. Synthesis: liberty sacrificed for order – and the consequences

Bringing the two perspectives together: the Hobbesian drive for order directly contributed to the Machiavellian erosion of liberty in Bangladesh. The government's relentless focus on consolidating its own power (justified by promises of stability and development)

meant dismantling the pluralistic features of democracy that Machiavelli would consider essential for freedom. In effect, liberty was sacrificed at the altar of order.

The synthesis can be summarized in a few key interacting dynamics:

For process tracing, the synthesis can be expressed as a mechanism: threat construction → public order justification → legal or administrative change → coercive enforcement → institutional hollowing → delayed backlash. This mechanism does not deny the importance of opposition violence, Islamist mobilization, corruption, or geopolitical pressures; rather, it explains how these conditions were incorporated into a governing narrative that made restrictions on liberty appear necessary and even desirable.

1. **Rulers' Strategy**: The Awami League regime skillfully invoked Hobbesian fears to neutralize opposition to its power grabs. Each time it curtailed a liberty or undermined an institution, it presented the move as necessary for preventing greater harm. For example, when it arrested thousands of opposition activists pre-2018 election, it claimed it was preventing election violence and ensuring public safety. When it censored media or arrested online critics, it argued it was preventing communal unrest or defamatory rumors. Thus, Hobbesian logic was used as a cover or rationale for Machiavellian power consolidation. It's not that the rulers were explicitly thinking in those philosophical terms, but their actions followed that pattern: appealing to people's desire for security to get them to surrender checks on the ruler.
2. **Public Trade-off and Its Limits:** For a significant period, the public went along with this trade-off. Many Bangladeshis essentially said: 'We give up some political liberty, and in return we get economic growth, peace on the streets, and no hartals or bombings.' Indeed, the years after 2014 were relatively free of the large-scale political violence that had periodically rocked the country in previous eras. This acquiescence is the fulfillment of Hobbes's social contract – people tolerated autocracy in exchange for stability. However, as Machiavelli might predict, a polity that loses its liberty entirely becomes weak and discontent beneath the surface. By eliminating legitimate outlets for grievance, the regime created a pressure-cooker. When everyday economic issues (e.g., fuel price hikes, graft in public services) started affecting people, they had no avenue to seek redress or change leadership. So, the supposed Hobbesian stability was brittle. Once cracks appeared – such as the bungled response to student protests in 2018 (where even school students came out after deadly traffic accidents, and the government initially thugs attacked them, causing public sympathy for the students) – people's fear started to erode. This culminated in 2024 when the contract broke: the promise of order was no longer credible, and the thirst for liberty (and justice) burst forth violently.
3. **Institutional Outcomes:** By 2024, Bangladesh's institutions were hollowed out. A Machiavellian analysis would say this is why the state nearly failed when challenged – because all the republican guardrails were gone. The Election Commission, courts, parliament, civil service – none had the trust of the population, since they had been suborned by the executive. Thus, when mass protests arose, there were no trusted mediating institutions to channel demands peacefully (like a fair election commission to announce a new vote, or an impartial court to order compromise). This institutional decay is the long-term cost of sacrificing liberty. Hobbes's model undervalues that cost because he assumes the sovereign's apparatus can always maintain control;

Bangladesh showed that if the sovereign erodes everything to maintain control, in a crisis the state lacks resilience and legitimacy to manage discontent.

4. **Broader Implication – Order vs. Liberty:** The Bangladesh case exemplifies a pattern relevant to other cases of democratic backsliding: regimes often pose a false choice between liberty and order. In reality, as the synthesis shows, excessive focus on order by undermining liberty can backfire and lead to neither liberty nor order in the end. Machiavellian and Hobbesian principles must be in balance. Bangladesh 2009–2024 is a story of imbalance – Hobbesian arguments consistently trumped Machiavellian ones until the very end. The consequence was a regime that became simultaneously repressive and brittle.

Thus, Machiavelli and Hobbes offered us two contrasting lenses, and by using both we gain a fuller picture. Machiavelli helps explain what was lost in Bangladesh: the pluralism, the accountability, the citizen participation – all the ingredients of a free political life. Hobbes helps explain why those losses were accepted or even engineered: the drive for centralized control, rooted in fear of conflict and promise of stability. The democratic decline in Bangladesh was essentially powered by a Machiavellian-Hobbesian interplay, where the government played the Hobbesian card to eliminate Machiavellian resistance. The final act, however, suggests Machiavelli may have the last word – the people ultimately resisted domination, even at the risk of disorder, reaffirming that an equilibrium between liberty and order is essential for a sustainable polity.

5. Discussion: contributions and implications

As of late 2024, Bangladesh stands at an inflection point. The ouster of the long-ruling Prime Minister has opened possibilities for democratic restoration, yet the path forward is fraught. The analysis in this paper suggests that rebuilding Machiavellian liberty – the institutions and norms that enable healthy political competition – will be crucial for Bangladesh's stability. The interim government model reinstated to oversee new elections, which would address one institutional deficit. However, deeper issues remain: the bureaucracy and security forces have been politicized; the judiciary's independence needs restoration; media freedom must be secured. These are tall orders. The implication is that only by restoring these checks (liberty) can Bangladesh achieve true order – a stable, legitimate order, not the fragile Hobbesian order that collapsed. Bangladesh's experience shows that order imposed at the cost of liberty is unsustainable. For policymakers and citizens in Bangladesh, the lesson is to avoid false dichotomies. Democratic governance with pluralism may be messy, but it provides safety valves that prevent larger explosions. International actors should support Bangladesh in strengthening democratic institutions (e.g., training a nonpartisan election commission, protecting civil society activists) as part of stabilizing the country.

Will Bangladesh fully democratize again or slide back into another form of autocracy? The answer may well depend on whether the next set of leaders balance the Machiavellian and Hobbesian imperatives – ensuring security and development (as citizens demand), but not trampling opposition and dissent in the process. Encouragingly, the popular movement of 2024 indicates a reinvigoration of civic virtue among Bangladeshis, a Machiavellian positive sign. Yet, if new leaders fail to deliver order, there is a risk of authoritarian nostalgia

creeping back. The struggle between liberty and order is thus likely to continue in Bangladesh, hopefully in a healthier tension than the lopsided past 15 years.

Therefore, this study's theoretical approach offers a novel lens for understanding democratic backsliding beyond Bangladesh. Many countries have faced the liberty vs order dilemma. For example, Sri Lanka under the Rajapaksa regime saw a concentration of power justified by ending terrorism and delivering rapid infrastructure growth – until economic collapse led to mass protests in 2022, paralleling the pattern of initial acquiescence then backlash (Staniland 2025). India under its current government has seen debates on whether curbing certain freedoms (e.g., stringent security laws, majoritarian policies) is a price for national unity and development, raising similar questions about balancing order with the protection of minority rights and dissent. The Machiavelli-Hobbes framework can thus be applied comparatively: it would predict that wherever a regime is undermining institutions and freedoms while invoking stability, there is potential for eventual crisis if underlying grievances accumulate.

In this comparative analysis, Bangladesh is not presented as identical to India, Sri Lanka, or Pakistan; rather, the comparison identifies family resemblances in how South Asian regimes and political elites invoke order. India illustrates a majoritarian version of order in which national unity, security, and development are used to justify pressures on dissent and minority rights. Sri Lanka illustrates a post-war security-development version in which executive centralization was legitimized by victory over terrorism and infrastructure-led growth. Pakistan illustrates a civil–military version in which order remains tied to the military's capacity to discipline elected governments. Bangladesh's distinctiveness lies in how a civilian elected regime fused liberation-war legitimacy, development performance, and coercive party-state consolidation into a long period of electoral authoritarian rule.

The contribution of framing backsliding in this way is twofold. First, it underscores the normative trade-offs that are often implicit but not explicitly discussed in empirical studies. We often catalog what backsliding leaders do (pack courts, gag media, etc.), but this approach probes why people let them do it: the seduction of the promise of order, safety, or prosperity. It adds a psychological and ideological dimension to backsliding analysis. Second, it highlights that the endgame of backsliding regimes can be unstable. Traditional literature distinguishes between backsliding that results in stable competitive authoritarian regimes and outright democratic breakdown. The Bangladesh case shows an intermediary outcome: a competitive authoritarian regime that eventually destabilized under public pressure. It implies that some backsliding trajectories might culminate in popular upheavals (as also seen in the Arab Spring cases or Sudan 2019) – a scenario perhaps under-theorized. Machiavelli and Hobbes together help explain those dynamics: a populace will endure a lot of domination until it won't.

Theoretical Contribution: Marrying early modern political theory with contemporary politics also enriches both sides. For political theory, Bangladesh's case serves as a modern 'experiment' to test Machiavelli and Hobbes' ideas. It largely confirms Machiavelli's warning that extinguishing liberty leads to corruption and eventual turmoil, and it illustrates Hobbes's notion that people will trade freedom for security – but also the limits of that trade. For empirical political science, using Machiavelli and Hobbes sheds light on the often moral or emotional narratives driving political changes. It reminds researchers that beyond institutional and economic variables, ideas of fear and freedom deeply influence political outcomes.

The study's limits should also be made explicit. As a qualitative single-case analysis, it does not estimate the independent causal weight of development, repression, military behaviour, or opposition strategy. Its contribution is instead to identify a theoretically informed mechanism and to show how that mechanism can be traced across institutions and episodes. Future research could test the framework through paired comparisons, elite interviews, protest-event data, or text analysis of speeches and party documents.

Recommendations and Reflections: For Bangladesh and similar contexts, the key implication is the importance of maintaining a balance – a social contract that ensures both liberty and order. Governments must realize that repressing all dissent can undermine long-term stability, and citizens must remain vigilant that promises of security do not become pathways to dictatorship. International democracy support should also be nuanced: it's not only about pushing for elections or condemning crackdowns, but also about addressing the fears that incumbents manipulate. Helping countries strengthen rule of law and socio-economic safety nets can undercut the appeal of authoritarian 'order' by showing that democracy can deliver stability too.

In concluding, Bangladesh's democratic backsliding (2009–2024) and partial reversal in 2024 illustrate a powerful lesson: a society that sacrifices liberty for order may end up with neither. This echoes a long-observed truth (often attributed to thinkers from Edmund Burke to Benjamin Franklin) and reinforces that Machiavelli's and Hobbes's insights must be kept in balance. The challenge for emerging and established democracies alike is to provide security and good governance without extinguishing the liberty that gives a political system its legitimacy and resilience. If they fail to do so, as Bangladesh's experience shows, the result can be a volatile swing – from creeping autocracy to sudden upheaval – that serves neither the cause of liberty nor order in the end.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Md Obaidullah:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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