“Picture-Thinking”:
Sovereignty and Citizenship in Bangladesh

Nusrat S. Chowdhury, Amherst College

ABSTRACT
This article offers insights into the classic impasse of citizenship and sovereignty in post-colonial South Asia. It focuses on two public texts, a national identification card and a censored photograph, both generated during a state of emergency in Bangladesh, from 2007-2008. By “impasse,” I point to the ideological loop that paternalistic authority resorts to in the name of governance, where a repressive, corrupt, and/or un-democratic governmental apparatus is blamed for the underdeveloped political rationality of its citizens. For the very same reason, sovereignty as domination is justified in order to protect these masses from their own unruly nature, that is, from becoming members of crowds as opposed to proper citizens. Examining the humor surrounding the electronic circulation of an identification document, amidst attempts to roll out a national ID card during the Emergency, I draw attention to the limits of the non-ancestral mode of political power that attempted to interpellate a new kind of citizen. My analysis of a photograph, that was later censored, of a man kicking an official in military uniform suggests that the crowd forms the always-threatening backdrop against which a range of individual and collective identities of the citizen are articulated. On an analytical level, I develop a theory of “picture-thinking” as a key function of sovereignty. I take the formulation from William Mazzarella who, following G. W. F. Hegel and Gustave Le Bon, historicizes the purported opposition between so-called rational...
citizens and affective crowds. Ultimately, I argue that the post-colonial sovereign, quick to blame the crowds for “picture-thinking,” more often than not, partakes of this very act. [Keywords: Citizenship, crowds, political emergency, democracy, visual culture, Bangladesh, South Asia]

A crowd thinks in images, and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the first.
—Gustave Le Bon (2002 [1896]:15)

In February 2007, precisely a month after the declaration of a national state of emergency in Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus—the Nobel-winning “guru of micro credit”—wrote a letter to its citizens. It was published on the same day as headlines in major vernacular and English dailies, and articulated the desire of the 2006 Peace Prize winner to join national politics. In the intimate register of a personal letter, addressed to an individual, yet generalized citizen (“prio nagorik”—Dear Citizen), Yunus sought popular opinion on his political aspiration in the form of letters and text messages (as cited in bdnews24.com 2007a). Two more letters followed in which he expressed enthusiasm and consequent disenchantment with the idea of running for office. Yunus’s correspondence with the nation began at a time when more familiar modes of political communication, such as meetings, protests, and congregations were illegal. He eventually decided against floating a new political party. Yet, the letters remain symptoms of a moment of conjuncture in Bangladeshi national life in which technocratic governance—with its promise of transparency, immediacy, and honesty—seemed to have finally left behind a much-maligned plebian political culture.

In this Social Thought & Commentary piece, I explore the classic impasse of citizenship and sovereignty in post-colonial South Asia by analyzing the visual culture of this political episode. By “impasse,” I point to the ideological loop that paternalistic authority—both colonial and nationalist—has historically resorted to in the name of governance. Whether in the case of Nehruvian developmental politics, the debates on censorship across South Asia, or the withholding of democratic rights for the sake of democracy in the Bangladesh Emergency (Chakrabarty 2007, Mazzarella 2013, Mohaieman 2014, Wasif 2009), a circular logic of governance has
been at work. In this logic, a repressive, corrupt, and/or un-democratic governmental apparatus is blamed for the underdeveloped political rationality of its citizens. For the very same reason, sovereignty as domination continues to be justified in order to protect the masses from their own unruly nature, that is, one could say, from becoming members of crowds as opposed to proper citizens. As we shall see, maintaining the border between the two became particularly untenable and all the more necessary for the purposes of governance during the Emergency.

Calling it a coup “that dare not speak its name,” The Economist had this to say about the Emergency: “The army, in the tradition of ‘guardian coups’ from Fiji to Thailand, has stepped in with the usual list of apparently noble goals. The interim government it is backing will enable credible elections, clean up the country’s extremely politicised civil service, fight corruption, fix the country’s power crisis and keep food prices in check—and then return to the barracks” (The Economist 2007). The Bangladesh army’s version resonates with the official story of a similar political moment under Indira Gandhi in neighboring India three decades earlier (Tarlo 2003). This time, there was one crucial difference: at a first glance, as the BBC rightly noted, the general public in Bangladesh seemed content to be under Emergency rule (Mustafa 2007). Even liberal democrats, The Economist added, cheered on the new government for imprisoning incumbent politicians and state functionaries with ruthless precision, addressing long-standing grievances against the corruption and criminalization of public life.

This two-year period, I argue, can be read as a unique background against which a circular logic of governance unfolded in the most theatrical manner. In doing so, this ethnographic context can illuminate the status of everyday politics and political sovereignty in contemporary Bangladesh. As points of illustration I have chosen two forms of media: a national photo identification card, also considered a voter ID card, that was issued for the first time during the Emergency, and a photograph that was censored around the same time. When read against the backdrop of Yunus’s letters, they reveal what I have described here as the classic impasse of post-colonial sovereignty (Chakrabarty 2007, Mazzarella 2013).

The ID card is of a citizen of Bangladesh. It has been circulating on Facebook, the social networking site, as a parody of the national photo-ID. The photograph features a scene of a civilian assault on a uniformed soldier. The card was introduced to accomplish the long-overdue task of
making a proper list of legitimate voters and their identification, thereby curbing electoral fraud. The photo in question was considered unsuitable for national consumption for its alleged damaging impact on the public image of the military, which backed the Emergency government. It was censored in national media soon after publication.

On an analytical level, I develop a theory of “picture-thinking” as a key function of sovereignty. I take the formulation from William Mazzarella (2010) who, echoing Hegel (1998) and Le Bon (1960), historicizes the opposition between reason and affect that informed classic crowd theory as well as more recent ruminations on political collectivity. In this theoretical trajectory, the crowd appears to haunt the modern fiction of democratic citizenship (Ortega y Gasset 1932). Mazzarella explains,

Hegel, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, states quite explicitly that the condition of progress toward autonomy of reason is a willingness to let the naively concrete attachments of “picture-thinking” (1998[1807]:64) be penetrated and surpassed (sublated) by the strain of conceptual thought. And it is precisely a slide back into the chaos of picture-thinking that defines the crowd...But it is also worth noting that, within this discourse, thinking in pictures also means thinking with the body. (2010:9)

More recently, James Scott (1998) has made us attentive to another kind of “picture-thinking” that is at the core of modern state power as it aims to individualize, identify, and govern. Studying an ethnographic instantiation of this seeming opposition between an autonomous subject and affective crowds, and by further exploring the analytical possibilities of the term “picture-thinking,” I argue that the sovereign, quick to blame the crowds for picture-thinking as characterized in Le Bon’s quote at the beginning of this article, more often than not partakes of this very act. I come to this understanding by examining the dialectic between citizens and crowds as played out in the juxtaposition of the two visual texts. To read these in relation to the other texts whose public circulation was officially sponsored or encouraged, such as Yunus’s letters, is to point to the failure of an individuating mode of identification that is both historical and foundational. An ID card, for Scott, is a quintessential example, and it is to this topic I first turn.
Kasu Mia's Joke

It all started on January 11, 2007, when the president dissolved the parliament, initiating an official state of emergency that lasted until December 2008. This was hardly the first declared emergency for Bangladesh. The first president of the newly born nation had invoked emergency laws on December 28, 1974, a mere three years after independence. The political oppression and the suppression of rights in this period reached a height that was thought to have precedence only in the actions of the Pakistani Armed Forces in the nine-month war that led to the independence of Bangladesh from what is commonly perceived as a quasi-colonial relationship between the two wings of Pakistan (Umar 1980). With the assassination of the first president in 1975, the country began a period of military rule that lasted, with minor exceptions, about 15 years. The recurrence of a state of emergency in 2007-2008, however, was unique even to this political mise-en-scène where multiple coups took place and martial laws were instituted in regular intervals since independence (Muhammad 2008, Wasif 2009). The reasons have partly to do with the Emergency’s spectacular and unforeseen anti-corruption agenda, as well as the communicative strategies through which it made its presence felt.

For the most part, the official view that this “interruption” of the democratic process could, in fact, cleanse national politics of at least some of its corrupt, kin-dependent, semi-feudal afflictions found wider resonance. With the two former heads of state in jail and most of their political and business allies in hiding, exile, or prison, the rhetoric of change—for a change—did not sound predictably hollow. The first-ever decision to issue national identification cards for the much-anticipated elections was hailed as a necessary move in the right direction. The massive logistical enterprise of taking photos and entering the biographical information of citizens was outsourced to the military. This ambitious plan could change the way electoral battles were fought and criminals were chased, a major news source declared within a week of the publication of Yunus’s first letter (bdnews24.com 2007b). The card to be issued for voter identification was also to serve as a photo ID, a previously non-existent state document in a country about 40 years old. The emancipatory and democratic possibilities afforded by the ID card were comparable to the aura of the transparent ballot boxes also to be introduced for the first time in the national elections. The visual economy within which a drive to transparency took place was mediated by a sense of being looked at from afar. From foreign
governments and international donor agencies to transnational media, to echo Rosalind Morris on Thailand, “[t]he demand for transparency is thought to compel the performance of a certain honesty, and this honesty (or at least its performance), is thought to secure the possibility of smooth exchange relations in turn” (2004:226). The following comment from a reader of an English-language daily highlights a representative sentiment:

Ironically, as Bangladeshis we do not have any identity to prove who we are. It is even incomprehensible by many foreigners that how a citizen of a country does not have any legal means of proving his/her citizenship. There is no birth certificate or social security number for the common people… Most important of all is the creation of public trust in a national identity system…[T]rust is also achieved when an identity system is reliable and stable, and operates in conditions that provide genuine value and benefit to the individual [sic]. (Ferdous 2007)

Still, performances of transparency signaled the possibility of secrets elsewhere, and trust seemed particularly elusive at a time of grand expectations and greater suspicions. Anxieties persisted around the potential success of a timely gathering of the requisite data for the elections to take place at all. In a densely-populated country with inadequate infrastructure, the possibility of success was understandably far-fetched. Some wondered if it was another ploy to thwart the elections. Theories, conspiratorial and otherwise, were also advanced with an aim to unveil the political schema lurking behind the smokescreen of democratic reform. Others saw this consolidation of a graphic regime of surveillance as one of the state’s first steps toward fascism (Ahmed and Alam 2013).

As was expected, the tiny piece of plastic and the process of procuring it generated an equal amount of excitement and disillusionment. Confusion as to the proper function of the card in the everyday bureaucratic life of the citizen straddled the boundaries of desire and despair. One man at a voting center was optimistic: “I don’t care what you all say, I’m not losing my National ID, I will get to America with this card” (Mohaiemen 2008). The confusion surrounding the card was further compounded by a technical glitch: the photographs that most cards finally displayed nearly failed to serve their purpose of state recognition. Western readers would find uncanny similarities between these ID photos and those surreal, distorted, and comic representations that are magic mirror reflections.
A letter to the editor sums up the exasperation of a newly registered voter:

I was awfully shocked when I received my national ID card…Those who came to collect their respective National ID card were flabbergasted to see their photographs. They could not, like me, recognise their own pictures. Not a single person was satisfied with the distorted photograph in the identity card…The photograph in the identity card is neither colour nor black and white. It is simply an irritating and confusing picture. (The Daily Star 2008, emphasis added)

The pictorial distortions disturb the classic mode of state picture-thinking that is an ID card, thus throwing the aspiring citizen back into a crowd. The technical problems of a newly introduced computerized data entry system disrupt the way in which an ID photo seeks eye-to-eye interpellation, as it were, by its straight-on framing of the person. The “irritation” of the letter writer is partly related to the inability of the citizen to become part of this massive project of transparency and hence a part of Bangladesh’s political modernity. The irritation and confusion are precisely because one finds oneself unrecognizable—to the state and to oneself—and is therefore relegated once more to the primitive crowd.1

The state’s failure to engage its citizens in mutual recognition, moreover, exceeded the technical glitches in the logistics of taking photographs. I argue that the misrecognition bespeaks a deeper failure of identification that haunts most state projects of enumeration (Scott 1998). Let me offer a photo of an ID card of Kasu Mia, a citizen of Bangladesh, to explain what I mean.

According to the information on the card (Figure 1), Kasu Mia was born on January 1, 1962. As is typical of the format of the temporary card given to newly registered voters, it features a photo of its owner on the left with his signature on the bottom. The list of requisite information includes the name of the individual in both Bengali and English, as well as both of his parents’ names. In the

Figure 1: This image of a photo-ID has been circulating on the Internet as a joke.
photo, the 13-digit ID number in bold that appears at the bottom of the picture is displayed in English. The signature of the officer issuing the card is partially seen on the right side, while the words “Jatiya Parichay Patra”—National ID Card—are barely visible at the top.

At the outset, what is funny about the card is its failed efficacy. Kasu Mia’s father is identified not by his proper name, but rather by the kin relation by which he is very likely to be addressed in his family: he is “mrito Babur baap”—the father of his deceased son, Babu. Nor is Kasu Mia’s mother listed by her actual name; she is simply “Nayeber Maa”—the mother of Nayeb, who, we presume, is a male sibling of Kasu Mia, the owner of the ID card in question. An Althusserian drama of hailing by which a citizen is interpellated, thus, comically fails (Althusser 2001). It fails simply because, in this case, the state confronts a kinship idiom that flies in the face of its bureaucratic rationality—the enumerating and individuating im-petus of a national identification system. Whether or not this is an actual ID card of a regular citizen or a deliberately modified one is not clear from the conversations around the image. However, the fact that there is a joke to be made is adequate justification for the analysis I offer here.

The naming practices of the state, James Scott and others have argued, require a synoptic view, “a standardized scheme of identification generating mutually exclusive and exhaustive designations” (Scott, Tehranian, and Mathias 2002:5). The creation of a legal, fixed patronym shares long intimacy with the modern project of state building. Rural or working-class Muslim Bengalis such as Kasu Mia often partake of vernacular naming practices that are non-hereditary and context specific. In the larger South Asian context, Mian, among other things, is a last name for Muslim nobility. Its vernacular derivative, Mia, in contemporary Bangladesh, functions as a form of address for any adult Muslim male, either honorific or derogatory. The generic nature of Kasu Mia’s last name adds to the little drama of misrecognition enacted in his ID card.

An ID card, a mark of the individual citizen bearing rights accorded by the nation-state, is a seemingly innocent and powerful repository of political value in the context of Bangladesh’s attempted democratic reforms. When in circulation, Kasu Mia’s card condenses a number of cultural mores supposedly characteristic of a nation and its people held responsible for the failure of democracy (cf. Farquhar 2009). The card has been a joke circulated by some members of Facebook, the principal medium through which this particular state document generated conversations
and laughter. Some felt the need to clarify that the object of their laughter was not the hapless citizen Kasu Mia. Instead, it was the state that has become the butt of the joke with regard to this play of, or play on citizenship.

Many of the buzzwords of our time, from transparency to accountability, are in practical terms calls to documentation. Ethnographers routinely feel what Annalise Riles (2006) calls the “pull” of documents, yet they also despise these artifacts as sources of ethnographic knowledge. For Matthew Hull (2012), this is partly because we produce and use documents in much the way the people we study do. To study documents, then, says Riles, is by definition to study how ethnographers themselves know: the document is at once an ethnographic object, an analytical category, and a methodological orientation (2006:7). Their material qualities inflect the character of communicative practice. Exploring the formal qualities of documents, while tracing “paper trails” (Chu 2010) and exposing “paper truths” (Tarlo 2003), anthropology helps in rethinking their instrumental or informational purposes. By treating governance as material practice, it approaches documents and similar textual objects in circulation that make up what Hull (2008) calls the material dimensions of bureaucratic semiotic technologies. Documents have the potential to discharge affective energies which are felt and experienced by people to the point of acquiring fetishistic qualities, where certain kinds of potency are assumed to emanate from their very materiality (Gordillo 2006, Navaro-Yashin 2007). Such bureaucratic techniques, of which an ID card is an ur-example, are the means by which the state governs its populace.

Yet, ethnographic examples abound where illegibility and opacity are created by the very instruments of legibility. “Legibility,” Veena Das (2006) explains as she expands on James Scott’s (1998) famous formulation, “seeing like a state,” surfaces as an operative theme in the analysis of routine practices of the state because so much of the way we experience the modern state is constructed through its writing practices. Ethnographic approaches in studying the state’s documentary and statistics-gathering initiatives, however, make evident the inherent illegibility—the failure to “read” on the part of both the state and its subjects—of governmental practices, documents, and words (Das and Poole 2004).

Das and Poole explain:

In defining the state as that which replaces private vengeance with the rule of law, Weber was, of course, building on earlier traditions
of Kant and Hegel, for whom the state in modernity was defined by clear-cut boundaries between the external realm of law and the internal realm of ethics and also between the realm of universalistic reason proper to the state and primordial relations proper to the family. Inherent in this imagination of the figure of law was the creation of boundaries between those practices and spaces that were seen to form part of the state and those that were excluded from it. (2004:7)

Kasu Mia’s ID card is a case in point. It offers itself as a fecund site where assumptions about the security of identity and rights become unsettled. One can venture from the name and the parental identification—or non-identification, rather—of Kasu Mia that he is a citizen of rural or working class origin. Though he is very much a card-carrying citizen, his identification document nonetheless fails to effectively mediate an idealized citizenship as envisioned in the letters through which Yunus addressed the nation. The NGO charisma that Yunus aspired to capitalize for his entry into politics was framed in light of the disjuncture between the citizen of law and the infantile citizen of the likes of Kasu Mia (cf. Berlant 1997). NGOs, of course, operate on a similar paternalistic logic—as did the progressive developmentalism of the Emergency—which retards democratic politics all the while claiming to usher them in. The infantile citizen is still beholden to the affective relations of kinship that dismantle the public–private divide so precious to the fiction of modern liberal democracy. Universal citizenship meant, as Scott, Tehranian, and Mathias argue, “that a citizen [could] be uniquely and reliably distinguishable as an individual and not as a member of a community, manor, guild, or parish” (2002:16, emphasis in original). The new subject/citizen envisioned in the emancipatory ideal of the French Revolution was an abstract, unmarked individual who was the bearer of equal rights before the law (Scott, Tehranian, and Mathias 2002).

In Bangladesh, the fact that this supposed divide has been flouted in the most theatrical and predictable fashion in national politics adds certain poignancy to Kasu Mia’s own brand of defiance; in other words, his resistance to recognition. A dynastic political culture has thrived by mobilizing kin-terms, most popularly jatir janak (“father of the nation”), being ascribed to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the first president. Powerful politicians here are known for exploiting kin ties to further their careers. Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, both heads of state at one point, are, respectively, the daughter and wife of two former presidents. The lateral entry of their progeny
into party politics (their sons have officially joined the ancestral parties) has only signaled the continuation of a well-established pan-South Asian trend. Muhammad Yunus offered himself as a glorious exception to this soap opera of national politics. It is Kasu Mia who brings to us, albeit humorously, the failure of that exception that Yunus attempted to exploit.

Kasu Mia’s ID is a symptom of the failure of state modernity. It also elicits a barely disavowed discomfort shared by consumers of digital media over the feudalism at the heart of national politics. Kasu Mia’s naiveté, if one could call it that, is the source of the comic effect that his ID card has for a middle-class public whose Facebook walls abound in emoticons, iconic representations of the gesture of laughter at his citizenship. Freud (2003) has already pointed out that the type of comic which stands nearest to jokes is the naïve. He explains: “An inhibitory expenditure which we usually make suddenly becomes unutilizable owing to our hearing the naïve remark, and it is discharged by laughter” (Freud 2003:226). The state is the joke. No doubt. Yet, there is more to this laughter. The working-class, under-educated, and seemingly naïve citizen fails to perform an idealized citizenship while being subjected to state scrutiny. After all, a veritable index of identification, the photograph—devoid of the otherwise irritating distortions—is still imprinted on the card.

Is one laughing at Kasu Mia’s stupidity, then? Partially, at least, it seems. Stupidity, at least in ancient Greece, was seen as remaining outside the domain of the political. “The idiot is the one who is not a citizen,” Avital Ronell (2002:41) tells us. And yet, when stupidity asserts itself without remorse, it paradoxically plays on the side of truth. Stupidity, in Ronell’s reading, remains a phantom of the truth to which it points. And even after asserting that “in crowds it is stupidity and not mother-wit that is accumulated,” Le Bon goes on to credit them with deep social truths (2002 [1896]:6). Not unlike the Idiot in Dostoevsky’s novel, Kasu Mia exposes the disorder and interruption that constitute the social milieu but normally remain masked (Ronell 2002).

But we must be laughing at ourselves too, we the citizens, when we laugh at—not with, mind you—Kasu Mia, or for that matter, the state. Being at once native (a co-citizen) and foreign (keeping what Ronell [2002] describes as an “inextinguishable appeal” of the stranger and evoking a forgotten aura), our idiot evokes laughter in his fellow nationals who align themselves, if only momentarily, with the Idiot as the “we” of a nervous modernity. Ronell’s reference to modernity is a nod to the defining
relationship of identity and modernity. The latter is associated with the ability to “achieve” an identity as opposed to being always defined by identity given by birth (Siegel 1997). For the members of Facebook, the desire to clarify that they were not laughing at Kasu Mia implies that they felt the joke was uncomfortably close to mere classist derision. One can only have an ID if one is a modern citizen, and it is preposterous to think the poor could be that. In a cultural context where it is still absurd to imagine a poor person having an ID card, it could only be read as Kasu Mia’s.

Freud is once more useful in pointing out the contiguity of the sublime and the ordinary as a source of comedy:

> When an unfamiliar thing that is hard to take in, a thing that is abstract and in fact sublime in an intellectual sense, is alleged to tally with something familiar and inferior, in imagining which there is a complete absence of any expenditure on abstraction, then that abstract thing is itself unmasked as something equally inferior. (2003:261)

What, after all, could be more sublime than the idea of the modern state?3 If Kasu Mia’s ID card, the abject underside of a fetishized document, makes us laugh at the everyday, worldly affairs of the sublime state (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2007), then the laughter that it produces is at least partially one of irony. It was the Emergency that forced a nation to observe from an ironic distance when the idea of citizenship repeatedly came under violent attacks—both symbolic and otherwise—from the state itself; that, too, through its myriad technologies of citizenship. Yunus’s letters, one must add, remained eerily silent on the topic.

Kasu Mia’s story is tragicomic. The impersonal yet individuating effect of an ID card—its I/you mode of interpellation—is challenged by collective kin-relations passing for parental identification. Kasu Mia, at this moment of Althusserian proportions, is more a member of a generic crowd—Ortega y Gasset’s “mass man” (1932)—than an individually identifiable citizen. The generic density of kin terms in the ID card, equally impersonal because relatively unlocatable, though no less intimate than the second-person singular of Yunus’s letters, protects Kasu Mia, if only in an incomplete fashion and possibly even without a conscious effort on his part. In the absence of a furtive Geertzian wink or an insider’s joke shared between Kasu Mia and his fellow citizens, the laughter is an attempt to come to terms with Kasu Mia’s citizenship, his subjection and ours that can only
be partial. Using this failure as a metonym, we might speculate, in a more culturally grounded way, the failure of the project of the Emergency.

The Kick and the Crowd
That the military government’s mantra of “politics without politicization” failed to effectively mesmerize a national audience was made further apparent by the events in the coming months. This time the disenchantment with the regime came from the youth, widely thought to be a core constituency for the political vision that Muhammad Yunus had nurtured. A student protest movement that had started at the University of Dhaka over a skirmish between students and soldiers on campus sparked the most potent resistance against the regime. Three days of turmoil that turned into a riot reverberated beyond the capital, bringing charges against professors and students of public universities which resulted in their imprisonment.

If a single image could capture the public sentiment against the Emergency government, then, as the BBC wrote with unmistakable relish, it is the one of “a sandaled demonstrator in mid-air kick and a hatless army officer in terrified retreat” (Sudworth 2007). The photograph (see Figure 2) was soon censored in Bangladeshi media. The BBC article that carried it announced: “[The photo’s] publication was seen as a humiliation, every bit as great as if that flying sandaled foot had been aimed at the behind of the army chief himself” (Sudworth 2007). The photo resists the attempt at enumeration and control not simply by featuring an unruly citizen. On an analytical level, the photograph mocks state identification by indexing what I would call a logic of crowd rather than a logic of citizenship.

But first, a brief chronology: Between August 20th and 22nd, 2007, violence spread across university campuses nationwide. It started with an incident at a soccer match at the University of Dhaka campus. A verbal back-and-forth between angry students and army soldiers (who had
been camping at the University gymnasium for some time) turned into a physical fight. Most of the 200 people injured were students. One was reported dead in the protests against military presence on campus. The government imposed a week-long curfew to quell public unrest. Four professors at the Universities of Dhaka and Rajshahi, the latter located in the northwest region of the country, were detained along with 24 students for breaking Emergency rules which outlawed protests and gatherings (BBC News 2007).

The ban on this photo and the publication of another featuring the public apology that one of the incarcerated professors offered later at the court premises has since been analyzed in a Bengali essay titled, “Unruly Images: Masculinity, Public Memory, and Censorship” (Ahmed 2008, my translation). The cover of Rahnuma Ahmed’s essay, published as a booklet halfway through military rule, is an eloquent challenge to severe state measures of censorship. It features the photograph of the academic under arrest speaking to a set of microphones before him. Below it is a rectangular space of the same size that was originally intended for the censored image. The word, CENSORED, in caps, stands in for the absent photo. Both images are embedded in a background of blurred out newspaper print. Ahmed compares the forbidden photographs of American soldiers wounded or dead in Iraq with the censored photo from Bangladesh, framing her argument around the symbolic emasculation of the military mediated by the images that were later censored. As Ahmed argues, in order for the state to domesticate the effects of the “unruly” photograph, it becomes important—in fact necessary—to publicize the photograph of the apology. Since the two images are linked to each other in a cause-and-effect relationship, despite the desire to salvage the seeming omnipotence of the military, the published photograph works as a mnemonic cue for the absent photo, which allegedly compromised the military’s image.

Ahmed is of course right in reading into the photograph a dense politics of masculinity. The reference to the military uniform in the apology that one of the professors under arrest had read aloud to the nation turned a civilian’s kick into a metonym for the disgrace of the institution of the military. I agree with Ahmed that the discourse of humiliation brings the semiotics of a masculine corporeal aesthetic to the fore. The “hatlessness” of the soldier, I would add, is surely one crucial aspect of this perceived emasculation. Her point about the photo of the public apology serving as an index for the censored one is equally well-taken. In light of the argument
of this essay, however, I take a rather different tack: I want to read this photograph as a public document that resists the individuating attempts proffered in the ID card. It captures a moment of resistance to the state’s hailing of the citizen in the conventional mode of *I* and *You*. Here, then, is an ordinary man, whose back faces the camera, thereby cutting an essentially defiant mode. The fleeing uniformed figure is also seen from behind. Both characters, framed this way, become archetypes in the same manner as Kasu Mia, with his generic last name and elusive ancestry. The kicker and the soldier are not individual citizens, but instead are tokens of types locked in a contentious relationship that was born almost with the nation itself. With minor exceptions, the 15-year military rule ended with the culmination of the democracy movement that ousted the retired lieutenant-general Ershad as president in 1990 (Schendel 2009).

The civilian in the censored photo, in the dominant role of the aggressor vis-à-vis the uniformed man, is not the citizen to be identified by a state document. Instead, the faceless and hence anonymous man is an element of a crowd—disorderly, amorphous, and predictably destructive. Observed closely, one can see more people in the photo, possibly students, shopkeepers, or passers-by on the other side of the street, running away from the scene of crime while looking back at it. From Ahmed’s footnotes, one gathers that the other photos of this event found in the press and in the military’s own publications showed the university students with sticks (*lathi*) in hand, thus making themselves constitutive elements of a violent crowd. “Arms that are supposed to carry books and pens are carrying sticks,” said one of the photo captions in the newsletter published by the military. The assertion reveals the official desire to read these actions as perpetrated by masses who are either not students or, better yet, should not be treated as such by the state because of their actions that mimic those of a criminal crowd.  

4 It is the censored image that captures the potentiality of the violent contact. It freezes the moment when a civilian is more powerful and succeeds in attacking its target and possibly hurting it. The notorious mid-air kick hints at near-certain bodily contact within an instant of the camera’s click, evoking therefore an “anticipatory nostalgia” in the viewer, a suggestion that cries out actual humiliation as opposed to the possibility of an assault of a charging, lathi-armoured crowd (cf. Morris 2009).

This photograph is dangerous not simply because it offers a glimpse into a moment when a menacing crowd is being formed; the latter, if anything,
is a permanent fixture in everyday political performances in Bangladesh, and South Asia more broadly (Gandhi and Hoel 2012), a history of which is lodged in the nationalist and other struggles of the last century (Chakrabarty 2007). The photo is considered harmful because it depicts the realization of a potentiality that is generally attributed to crowds. Its danger lies in capturing what the crowd is feared for, but is rarely seen to do; in this case, physically assault a seemingly omnipotent military, or “the sovereign” (Azoulay 2008, Hobbes 1982). Its drama is also heightened due to the viewer’s inability to put a face to this figure of disobedience, in spite of the vision—however fleeting—of direct and popular sovereignty that it creates. It would be misleading, though, to take the projected anonymity of the kicker too literally, or to celebrate the power of his defiance tout court. Indeed, a defense and intelligence report exclusive to the subscribers of Bangladesh Military Forces (BMF), which conducts research on national security, was titled, “The ‘Flying Kicker’ Identified” (Ahmed 2008). The title bespeaks an acknowledgment of the official effort as well as the difficulty in naming the aggressor. In this little drama of sovereignty and transparency, the army admits to overcoming the photograph’s resistance to identification, albeit before a restricted public.

That none of the parties involved in the production of a photographic image—the photographer or the represented object—can seal off a photo’s effects or determine its meanings is by now commonsensical. In their astute theoretical ruminations around sense, temporality, and intimacy in the taking and viewing of photos, scholars have analyzed the sense of immediacy or truth value conventionally associated with the medium (Baer 2002, Barthes 1981, Benjamin 1977). Philosophical work has paved the way for anthropology to critically approach the fetish of photography’s power, the supposed eloquence of the viewed over that of the read. Anthropologists have added to the literature rich and culturally-situated evidence of photography’s occult powers in places where it has acted more than as a mere vector of representation. Photography has long been a mediating technology of colonial power itself, facilitating both the violence and the benevolence that marked its documentary and governing practices (Morris 2009, Pinney 2011).

Ariella Azoulay (2008) has found profound analogies between the concept of citizenship and the medium of photography. In theorizing what she calls the civil contract of photography, Azoulay approaches citizens primarily as those who are governed. Through various ideological mechanisms,
the nation-state forges a bond of identification between citizens and the state. It does so, as in ideological moves of any kind, by successfully erasing this fact. As photography becomes a more accessible medium of expression for those who produce and consume a global visual culture, the parties involved in the photographic act are not mediated through a sovereign power and are not limited to the bounds of a nation-state or an economic contract. “The users of photography,” Azoulay argues, “thus re-emerge as people who are not totally identified with the power that governs them and who have new means to look at and show its deeds” (2008:24).

Similar to citizenship that is also gained through recognition, photography, as the sovereign must acknowledge, cannot be simply possessed; hence, the desire to put an end to its circulation. Here, then, is one clue as to the need to censor this particular image. This is also one of the main points of Rahnuma Ahmed’s essay in which she gestures at a what I read as a vaguely Foucauldian theory of censorship in which the authoritarian regime, unbeknownst to itself, generates rather than represses the possibilities of bringing the censored image into public visibility.

What is equally fascinating about the photo is its ability to speak to the fear of the crowd and its supposed immanent potentialities. William Mazzarella (2010) has argued that canonical writing on crowds, from works by Gustave Le Bon and Elias Canetti to Sigmund Freud and Ortega y Gasset, at face value, seems hopelessly politically incorrect. Crowds—if one were to offer a laundry list of sorts—are perpetually dangerous because they contain the danger of violent eruptions. Members of crowds are irresponsible and immature and do not deserve all the privileges of mature citizenship. And despite the creative energies identified in them, they are ultimately the rabble that has to be kept from the gates. The crowds, in short, are the intimate enemy of constituted authority. They are the dark matter that pulls on the liberal subject from its past.

Mazzarella’s argument also serves as a point of departure for thinking anew the social potential of group energies. For him, to re-stage the opposition between crowds and their more recent progressive incarnations, such as multitudes, premised as it is on a theory of an autonomous liberal subject and the multitude’s supposed attachment to immanent and unmediated potentiality, is to “reproduce a misleading epochal distinction between past and present phases of modernity” (2010:698, emphasis added). I argue, and hope to have already shown through the examples of Muhammad Yunus’s letters and Kasu Mia’s ID card, that a certain sense
of epochal distinction was very much at work in Bangladesh during the political period that is the subject and the backdrop of this discussion. The crowd as a force of politics was the intimate enemy of the military regime’s agenda of effective and depoliticized governance.

One could possibly object to a reading of a photo that features a single man in violent exchange with an individual member of the military as a classic representation of a crowd. It is, however, not difficult to read the action caught on camera as a metonym for a crowd that is by definition amorphous, faceless, and brimming with uncontainable libidinal energies that are impossible to sublimate, to echo Freud (1975) on group psychology. Writing on the power of a baiting crowd, Elias Canetti observes, “The victim can do nothing to [the baiting crowd]. He is either bound or in flight, and cannot hit back; in his defenselessness he is victim only” (1984:49). Indeed, even the fact that charges were brought against the professors on the basis of their instigation of the student mobilizations (though the students protesting were not necessarily from the same universities or even the same cities), and of leading the masses into breaking Emergency laws, points to another definitional characteristic of crowd: incapable of thinking for themselves, or thinking at all, the crowd finds in the leader an ego ideal. The ban on the image and the charges against the teachers and their students bring the point home. The crowd in this context is more than politically incorrect; it is criminal. The “un-identifiable” man in the photo defies the recognition that remains the premise of both photography and citizenship. This defiance is also an essential quality of the crowd.

It is worthwhile to revisit Le Bon’s thought on crowds as this essay comes to an end. If anything, the status of this photograph in the political context of its circulation makes apparent that it is not only the governed that thinks in images, or “in its flesh,” as Ortega y Gasset said of the mass man (1932). Censoring the photo of the military’s humiliation shows that the sovereign, as the epitome of reason, more often than not participates in the kind of picture-thinking of which it routinely accuses its subjects. And I do not only mean this literally. The unreasonableness with which the sovereign approaches citizens and crowds, including their various mediatized representations, shatters the fetishized boundaries between reason and affect.

The irrationality of picture-thinking as opposed to the reasoned actions of an enlightened, autonomous subject is a fiction, but it is an ideological ruse that has been closely entwined with the making of the contemporary
political reality in Bangladesh. The ruse is constitutive because the sovereign must excise its own irrationality by projecting it onto the past, and onto the crowd that is supposed to belong to an earlier stage of political maturity. This purported retardation of citizenly maturation, as reflected in the ID card and the photograph, is typical of crowds. It is the picture-thinking aspect of its character that is ideally absent in the citizen hailed by Yunus’s letters. Their specific pronominal usage of I and you turns each reader into an intimate addressee and performatively brings a citizen into being. The latter has been hitherto absent in the national political scene known to lean more on street violence and backhanded deals than deliberations in the public sphere. Choosing the singular over the plural and the second person over the first, the letters mark a distinct shift in envisioning politics that purports to signal a radical break with the past. A sense of epochal distinction, crafted most energetically during the Emergency, was bred by an effort at violent excision, which makes up what I have described here as the classic impasse of sovereignty and citizenship in the postcolony.

Acknowledgments:
I would like to thank Joseph Masco, William Mazzarella, Rihan Yeh, and Shefali Jha for their careful comments on various iterations of this article. It has benefited from the feedback from participants in the 2009 Annual South Asia Conference in Madison, the Human Rights Workshop and the South Asia Graduate Students Conference VII at the University of Chicago, and the 2012 political theory conference at Cornell University. I want to express my gratitude to Khaled Sarkar (Senior Photojournalist, The Daily Prothom Alo) and Nasrin Siraj Annie for allowing me to reproduce the photograph and the Facebook image, respectively. Thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers for Anthropological Quarterly. The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and the Committee on Southern Asian Studies at the University of Chicago have supported the write-up of the dissertation of which this article has been a part. I am grateful to both institutions.

Endnotes:
1 I do not mean to suggest that a clearer picture would solve the problem of recognition. While I proceed to show how the ID card in question raises theoretical concerns about state initiatives in identification, the argument about the distorted photos, including the reactions to them, indicates that the middle-class citizen writing in the newspaper is particularly frustrated by the inability of the photograph to properly identify him. I believe that the “irritation” that he experiences needs to be taken seriously in order to understand the emotional investments certain kinds of citizens have in various state projects of identification.

2 Although my analysis here is restricted to reactions on social media, I see the comments here as representative of the discussions, dissatisfactions, and humor that revolved around the freshly minted ID cards during fieldwork, which coincided with the state of emergency. However, an exploration of this kind would have benefitted much from a more detailed ethnography of state documents as material objects similar to Hull’s (2012) work on bureaucracy in urban Pakistan.

3 For a discussion of the state as the sublime, see Thomas Hansen’s (2001) Wages of Violence: Naming Identity in Post-colonial Bombay.

4 The Bangladesh army’s proclamation is uncannily resonant with Jawaharlal Nehru’s speeches on politics and development in newly independent India. Theorizing the uniqueness of South Asian post-colonial
sovereignty, Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us that Nehru was not against students taking an interest in political matters. Such interest was part of the process that would make them into citizens. However, he adds, “[The students’] actions were reminiscent of the anti-British nationalist movement of the pre-independence period...It was somehow acceptable when students of a country under foreign rule resorted to them. But they were ‘not the sign of a free nation’” (Chakrabarty 2007:3293-3294). This view on the appropriateness of student agitations is echoed in Bangladesh as well where a possible ban on student politics keeps resurfacing as a topic of deliberation every now and then in the face of political disorder. And yet, similar to the argument about the efficacy of breaking laws under colonial rule in Nehru’s vision, the role of violent student politics in some of the landmark events in Bangladesh’s history, such as the Language Movement of 1952 or the 1971 Liberation War is justified, and, in fact, celebrated in popular culture and nationalist histories.

5There is a parallel here between the writings about crowds and the multitudes that Mazzarella (2010) has labeled as their “negative intimacy.” A theory of multitudes needs the figure of the crowd as its abjected other.

References:


“Picture-Thinking”: Sovereignty and Citizenship in Bangladesh


Foreign Language Translations:

“Picture-Thinking”: Sovereignty and Citizenship in Bangladesh

[Keywords: Citizenship, crowds, political emergency, democracy, visual culture, Bangladesh, South Asia]

ছবির মত চিন্তাঃ বাংলাদেশে সার্বভৌমত্ব ও নাগরিকত্বের রাজনীতি


Foreign Language Translations:

“Picture-Thinking”: Sovereignty and Citizenship in Bangladesh

[Keywords: Citizenship, crowds, political emergency, democracy, visual culture, Bangladesh, South Asia]

�বির মত চিন্তাঃ বাংলাদেশে সার্বভৌমত্ব ও নাগরিকত্বের রাজনীতি
