Recent contributions to ‘statistical political ecology’ have identified political and economic formations associated with the killing, criminalization and intimidation of land and environmental defenders – as well as characteristics of successful resistance movements in which defenders play a part. This chapter is concerned with the land defenders who have mobilised against resurgent coal power in Bangladesh over the last decade and a half. Many of these defenders have been subjected to violence within the context of conflicts and movements that fit emerging global patterns. However, an analysis of the political economy of coal power in Bangladesh reveals particular contradictions in the measures of ‘corruption’ and ‘rule of law’ that facilitate cross-national comparison of the contexts in which defenders face violence. This chapter concludes by highlighting the degree to which efforts to promote good governance and rule of law can facilitate the expansion of violent extractive operations that put land and environmental defenders at risk. It calls for greater attention to the ‘violence footprints’ of transnational corporations and donor agencies with whom the sovereign power of the Bangladeshi state is entangled.

**Keywords:** environmental defenders; coal; Bangladesh; extractive operations.

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‘Land defenders’ and the political ecology of coal power in Bangladesh

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The emergence of environmental or land defenders as prominent figures within global environmental politics and multilateral human rights discourse has a complex genealogy. When environmental or land defenders are understood as “individuals and collectives who protect the environment and protest unjust and unsustainable resource use because of social and environmental reasons” (Scheidel et al. 2020: 1), there are clear analytical parallels with earlier work in political ecology, including on environmentalisms of the poor (Martinez-Alier 2003). The prominent role played by Global Witness and the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in highlighting the violence and threats to life experienced by environmental and land defenders has also situated concern for defenders within a broader human rights discourse.¹ Recent work in what Scheidel et al. (2020) term ‘statistical political ecology’ has sought to identify cross-national patterns in the political and economic formations associated with violence towards environmental defenders (see also Butt et al. 2019; Le Billon & Lujala 2020; Middeldorp & Le Billon 2019). This work has largely drawn on Global Witness data on the killing of human rights defenders (2002-2017), as well as on the Environmental Justice Atlas, which records socio-environmental conflicts or “mobilizations by local communities against particular economic activities whereby environmental impacts are a key element of their grievances” in dialogue with affected communities (Temper et al. 2015: 261-62).

This global comparative work has helped to identify a number of political-economic factors that appear to pose a patterned risk to environmental and land defenders, with all studies showing a particular risk of subjection to violence and killings for Indigenous defenders. Most cases of socio-environmental conflict on record relate to mining, and the greatest number of deaths of defenders is associated with mobilization against mining projects (Scheidel et al. 2020). Higher levels of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and mineral rents are clearly associated with a higher number of environmental and land defender killings (Le Billon & Lujala 2020). Weak rule of law is identified as an important condition leading to violence against defenders (Butt et al. 2019: 743), and ‘semi-authoritarian’ regimes are associated with more targeted killings of defenders than authoritarian regimes which are associated with more open repression (Middeldorp & Le Billon 2019: 333). This comparative work has also generated insights into the conditions under which mobilization against mining projects (and other bases of socio-environmental conflict) are more likely to be successful –
noting the importance of diversified protest incorporating non-violent resistance and legal action (Scheidel et al. 2020).

In Bangladesh, a number of high-profile socio-environmental conflicts that have resulted in the killing of land defenders appear to fit fairly neatly into these global trends, as discussed in more detail below. However, in this chapter we wish to reflect further from the Bangladesh perspective on some of the measures and assumptions underlying statistical political ecology studies of defenders. In particular, we are concerned with the measures and concepts of governance and rule of law used in the global indices that are used to facilitate comparison and identify patterns in the targeting of defenders. As May (2014) has argued, the rule of law functions as a foundational ‘social imaginary’ in contemporary global governance, as a set of ideals from which judgements can be made, behind which lies a moral or metaphysical order. The WJP Rule of Law Index, for example, which provides the basis for analysis of risks faced by defenders in Butt et al. (2019), surveys household and expert experience of constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, fundamental rights and regulatory enforcement (among other factors). It is difficult to be opposed to understandings of rule of law that incorporate “effective enforcement of laws that ensure equal protection…the right to life and security…[and] due process”, as per the WJP measures of fundamental rights. Who could be opposed to fair and equal treatment and due process? It is difficult to articulate opposition to the rule of law, and hard to imagine an expression of Anglo-American political discourse that is as globally prestigious as ‘the rule of law’ (Mattei 2010).

Yet, as Mattei (2010) argues, the malleability of rule of law is precisely what allows multiple constituencies to see within it what he or she believes, even if at base it is little more than a model in which decision-making is carried out by professional jurists legitimated by legal-technical knowledge. The rule of law is thus as much to do with ensuring due process in the upholding of fundamental human rights, as it is to do with regulatory enforcement. For the WJP Rule of Law Index, this includes assurance that there is ‘no expropriation of private property without adequate compensation’, but for the private sector wing of the World Bank Group, it can mean requiring enhanced contract protection for foreign investment as part of loan conditionality (Mattei 2010). In Bangladesh, IFC-funded training to enhance the rule of law has involved providing ‘capacity building’ for lawyers to ensure confidence for foreign investors in extractive (and other) sectors that their assets and revenue streams will not be held up by decisions taken by the domestic judiciary – even though this often undermines legitimate attempts made by the domestic judiciary to hold extractive industry corporations to
account for environmental harms and corruption (Gilbert 2020a 2020b). As D'Souza (2018) has argued, the globalization of concern with *human* rights goes hand-in-hand with efforts to support the rule of law to enforce *property* and *contractual* rights. Initiatives to enhance the rule of law may therefore risk intensifying the “global environmental structures that require continuous resource extraction” (Scheidel *et al.* 2020) within which defenders and socio-environmental conflicts are enmeshed.

Measures of governance and democracy are also deployed in statistical political ecology analyses of risks posed to land and environmental defenders – for example, the Combined Index of Democracy utilised by Middeldorp and Le Billon (2019). The Combined Index of Democracy (CID) constructs measures of ‘regime quality’ by drawing on a number of pre-existing measures of freedom and governance – a relatively common practice in index composition which often introduces opacity since not all underlying methodologies are in the public domain (Thomas 2010). One of the indices upon which the CID draws is the data series produced by Freedom House. The Freedom House rankings have been widely discussed in literature on private authority in global governance and governing by numbers. In particular, critics have noted that the Freedom House rankings’ growing influence correlates with the rise in ‘neoliberal’ authority and the redefinition of freedom in neoliberal terms: away from substantive socio-economic rights, and towards procedural freedoms concerned with the protection of private and business freedoms, as much as with the role of public institutions (Giannone 2010). Freedom House rankings also appear to be ‘tweaked’ to reflect US policy concerns, with allies moved up and rival states moved down (Bush 2017). Nonetheless, these rankings have proved influential, and are incorporated into others such as the World Bank’s World Governance Indicators – themselves used in other statistical political ecology analyses of defenders (Le Billon & Lujala 2020).

Does it matter that the indices available for statistical political ecology analyses of the risks faced by defenders incorporate broadly ‘neoliberal’ measures of democracy, governance, freedom and the rule of law that valorize enhanced property protection and contract protection? It certainly does not invalidate global comparisons of land and environmental defenders tout court. As shown in the next section, there are many resonances between the findings of these large-scale comparisons and the experiences of defenders and mobilizations against mining in Bangladesh. However, rooting analyses of land and environmental defenders in this rule of law ‘social imaginary’ can risk reproducing liberal developmental norms that work to further intensify violent forms of extractive development in Bangladesh and elsewhere. As such, the body of this chapter examines the mobilization
and killing of land defenders around coal mines and coal power plants in Bangladesh, highlighting how these patterns of violence fit within the global trends highlighted by Scheidel et al. (2020) and Le Billon and Luj(2020). It situates these patterns of violent development in terms of a move towards ‘developmental centrism’ (Khan 2020) that sees the Energy Ministry and Bangladesh Power Development Board take an increasingly prominent role in shaping the nation’s developmental landscapes.

The final section of the chapter draws together this critical discussion of land in Bangladesh with the notion of ‘developmental centrism’, and identifies some of the main transnational actors who work with and through the Bangladeshi state to cultivate atmospheres of violence around coal power projects. Inspired by efforts to build a ‘counter-index’ to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index which have sought to move away from grounding perceptions of corruption in countries of the Global South, and instead identified the role that key nodes in global movements of capital play in facilitating corruption, we argue for the development of a ‘Violence Footprint’ measure that can facilitate global comparative studies of land and environmental defenders in relation to the involvement of donors and foreign investors, rather than domestically-rooted measures of governance, corruption and rule of law. Firstly, however, we will briefly review some dominant approaches to the study of land, dispossession and resistance in Bangladesh.

**Land, Law and Dispossession in Bangladesh**

Land is of particular significance in rural Bangladesh, with land transmission through a lineage or *gusthi* central to identity and livelihood, and landless *gusthi* often reliant on kinship patronage or selling labour as seasonal sharecroppers (Gardner 1995: 66-72). A great deal of attention given to land ownership and dispossession in Bangladesh has been focused on the *char* lands of Noakhali – the shifting alluvial lands that generate particular problems of ownership. Adnan’s (2013) landmark work on shrimp farming in the *char* lands highlights the extent to which land grabbing by political-business elites is shaped by World Bank/IMF-led prescriptions – in this case, a push to export-led shrimp farming – and creates class-based alliances that at times cross Bangladesh’s otherwise rigid lines of party affiliation. In a different geographical context, Ahasan and Gardner (2016) have highlighted the extent to which dispossession of land is *functional* to development in Sylhet’s gas fields, and not merely a side effect. Unocal (the former owners of a gas field now operated by Chevron) were supported by police to clear land for development, and local political elites were pressured not to oppose the ‘development’ by national leaders. The state worked in concert
with transnational corporations – and indeed with local NGOs contracted to bring ‘development’ to the dispossessed.

Other writers, however, reproduce troubling tropes that sit with the rule of law ‘social imaginary’ and appear to attribute failings to endemic characteristics of Bangladeshi territory and social life, rather than to dynamic political-economic conjunctures. Feldman and Geissler (2012: 975-978) for instance, refer to ‘lawlessness’ and the character of the char lands as a ‘stateless place’ in a country with a ‘disturbing record of violence…and corruption’. This is not to deny that violence and corruption take place in Bangladesh – but it is curious to at once refer to lawlessness and ‘statelessness’, while also invoking the excessive thickness of elite business-government connections. To invoke an absence of the law and the state seems to imply the need for externally imposed ‘rule of law’ development. In his recent work on the political ecology of climate adaptation in the char lands, which opens up important lines of analyses around how elites enclose land in the context of adaptation policies, Sovacool (2018) also reproduces understandings of weak governance as embedded in and confined to Bangladesh’s national territory, arguing that “the most pernicious sets of consequences do not arise from the forces of global capitalism or neoliberalism…it is local actors - community leaders, criminals, state officials, businesspersons, political elites—who perpetuate classism, racism, elitism, and chronic poverty” (Sovacool 2018: 184). There can be no doubt that local business and political elites contribute to the perpetuation of poverty and inequality, but it seems analytically questionable to separate the environments in which they operate (cf. Adnan 2013) and the alliances they make (see below) from global, transnational and multilateral actors.3

Not only are global, transnational and multilateral actors instrumental to the processes through which land defenders become exposed to atmospheres of violence, but the framing of parts of Bangladesh as ‘stateless’ or ‘lawless’ – or the ranking of Bangladesh’s governance and rule of law as inadequate – neglects the complexity of legal arrangements in rural Bangladesh. Village shalish courts, as Berger (2020) shows, are recognised by the state for the trial of minor offences and have become central to the advancement of ‘good governance’ agendas by international donor agencies who have identified village courts as potential sites from which to advance human rights. And yet, as noted above, donors are equally involved in ‘rule of law’ and governance reform initiatives designed to enhance protection of property rights and contract enforcement in territories deemed to be insufficiently ‘civilized’ (Anghie 2006; see Gilbert 2020a) to adequately arbitrate commercial disputes with transnational corporations. As Le Billon and Lujala (2020: 7) “[c]ontemporary killings of environmental
and land defenders are part of a long history of colonialization and resource exploitation…Propelled by accumulative economic regimes…and often underpinned by racial and socio-economic hierarchies.” We must perhaps be wary of the rule of law imaginary, and ensure that the tools we utilise to measure, compare and make visible global patterns of violence towards environmental defenders do not partake of or give license to those same accumulative economic regimes.

**Land Defenders, ‘Developmental Centrism’ and Coal Power**

The widely used Global Witness dataset of land and environmental defenders killed globally “seeking to protect land, community and environment” (Middeldorp & Le Billon 2019: 325) records at least 1570 killings between 2002 and 2017. A particular spike was recorded for Bangladesh in 2016, when four residents of Gondamara village near the planned Banshkhali power plant – Mortuza Ali, Anowarul Islam Angur, Zager Ahmend and Zaker Hossain – were killed by police shooting. These killings, in April 2016, followed the government giving the go-ahead to a power plant joint venture between S. Alam Group (an increasingly prominent Bangladeshi power company) and Chinese and US partners in February of that year. Also in 2016, three Santal men – Shyamal Hembrom, Ramesh Tudu and Mangal Mardi – were shot dead by police in Gaibandha while occupying land that they claim was forcibly acquired without compensation during the Pakistan period. These killings fit into some of the prominent patterns detected by Sheidel et al. (2020) and Le Billon and Lujala (2020): mining and power-related protests are often at the centre of violence toward defenders, and Indigenous people appear to be particularly targeted. Whether Bangladesh – which registers as authoritarian on the index used in Middeldorp and Le Billon’s (2019) analysis – is here engaged in targeted killing (associated with semi-authoritarian regimes) or open repression (associated with authoritarian regimes) is perhaps difficult to parse.

The targeting of Indigenous people has also been widely documented in Modhupur, where Koch and Mandi protesting against an eco-park that would be built on their ancestral land were fired upon in 2004. Piren Snal, a young Koch man was killed instantly, and his comrade Utpal Nokrek was shot, partially paralysed and had a ‘forest case’ (alleged infringement of forestry laws) filed against him while in hospital. The criminalization and violence towards Indigenous forest users has roots in the prohibition upon Independence in 1971 of Koch and Mandi people from using forest lands they had occupied for over 300 years. Indigenous people were restricted from forest uplands (chala) and confined to khas or government land. Land to which permission had been granted (‘Record of Rights’) was treated
informally as titled land, with ownership passed down – but when in 1999 plans were released for a series of eco-parks on land occupied by 25,000 Mandi and Koch, the land was treated as ‘unsettled’ khas land; no compensation would be given (see Ahmed & Low 2020; Luthfa 2020: 239). Compensation was also not forthcoming when, with Asian Development Bank funding, land was transferred from Mandi and Bengali families to ‘social forestry’ rubber plantations in the 1980s (Pfoffenberger 2000: 99). Both Indigenous forest users and Bengali forest users have been subjected to heavy criminalisation. Hasan Ali, for example, has been appearing before Tangail Forest Court since 1998 in relation to the same forest case—one of more than 65 he is currently facing. Another 35 have been settled, incurring significant costs. Each court appearance is a further financial burden, costing around 20,000 taka per month and permanently indebting Ali. Ali, and others in Modhupur, Bangladesh, whose livelihoods have been criminalised insist that the Forest Department’s ‘social forestry’ scheme is the real driver behind depletion of the Modhupur sal (Shorea robusta) forests (Gain 2018).

This pattern of criminalization, killing and targeting of Indigenous people fits the global patterns documented by recent work in statistical political ecology, underscoring the importance of identifying cross-national trends and drivers of environmental violence. The Forest Department was also at the centre of corruption narratives when during the 2007 Emergency and military caretaker government, the Chief Conservator of Forests became emblematic of corruption when he was discovered with mattresses and jars stuffed full of money in one of his (many) houses (Chowdhury 2020: 326). But the period of emergency highlights precisely why we should perhaps be cautious using measures of governance ‘quality’ and rule of law derived from Anglo-American neoliberal social imaginaries. During the emergency, there was considerable urban middle-class support in Bangladesh for the military, based on a circular logic whereby “withholding of democratic rights for the sake of democracy” could be justified, and a “repressive, corrupt, and undemocratic governmental apparatus is blamed for the underdeveloped political rationality of its citizens” (Chowdhury 2014: 34). The exercise of sovereignty as a form of domination is thereby justified as a way to protect the “masses” from themselves – from acting as crowds rather than rights-bearing citizens.

Mass action was, however, at the centre of resistance to a (still) planned coal mine in Phulbari, north-west Bangladesh, a few months before the emergency. On August 26 2006, some 40-50,000 protestors converged on the offices of Asia Energy, a wholly-owned subsidiary of London-listed GCM Resources plc., to organise a gherao or sit-in. Police, paramilitaries and the Bangladesh Rifles fired upon the protestors, resulting in the deaths of
three young men aged 11 to 18: Al Amin, Mohammad Salekin and Tarikul Islam. A diversified campaign enrolling transnational support resulted in the seeming success of the resistance to a project that could have displaced 55,000-250,000, dewatered considerable agricultural land, and exported coal while Bangladesh remained chronically underserved by electricity supply (Luthfa 2017). Some scholars have announced the ‘death’ of the project, in part due to the successful mobilisation, and in part due to repeated failures in corporate attempts to engage with community (Faruque 2018). In March 2018, however, the license-holders for the Phulbari project (stalled now for over a decade) announced an agreement with Energy China to develop a 2000MW mine-mouth coal-fired power plant, suggesting that the mine may yet go ahead, even though transnational campaigns against it continue to mobilize.

The attempt to re-invigorate the mine by partnering with Chinese State-Owned Enterprises under the banner of the Belt-and-Road initiative is also an attempt to resuscitate the mine’s speculative value with reference to government plans to increase domestic coal extraction and coal power capacity. In their 2016 Power System Master Plan, the Government of Bangladesh have declared their intention to become a ‘High-Income Country’ by 2041. This would entail radical social, economic and infrastructural change, and result in Bangladesh no longer being eligible for donor assistance from OECD countries and the World Bank. Central to this plan, termed ‘Vision 2041’, is a radical overhaul of the country’s energy and power sector. Reliance on natural gas is set to be reduced, while reliance on domestic coal will be increased (from 0.7mt to 11mt per annum), along with reliance on imported coal (0 to 60mt per annum). It is in this context that the revival of a project which has already cost three lives, as well as the loss of further lives in opposition to up-and-coming power plants, is taking place. The potential for these coal power developments to further provoke atmospheres of violence and put land and environmental defenders at risk is palpable, and cannot be captured by broadly static measures of governance quality, democracy or rule of law. Instead, we need to turn to the historically-specific global and national political-economic shifts which have laid the ground for the re-emergence of coal power and the potential for violence against defenders.

The Bangladeshi state has made manifest its sector-specific developmental priorities and elevated a dominant bureaucratic agency in line with Vision 2041 and the Power Sector Master Plan. Their energy-ministry-centric approach to development, and the enormous power and influence afforded the the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BDPB), reflects the institutionalization of ‘developmental centrism’ (Khan 2020: 295), whereby party support for decisions taken by this specific ministry cascade down through party-affiliated
bureaucratic cadres and local activists. The presence of BDPB bureaucrats on the board of an Indo-Bangladeshi joint-venture power plant at Rampal in the Sundarbans highlights the increasing scope of their influence. The Rampal power plant has been controversial from the outset, since land acquisition took place in advance of Environmental Impact Assessment, and the EIA has been particularly lax about the risk of pollution from the plant and coal transport (Khan 2020). Approximately 4.72m tons of coal will pass through the Passur river annually, and 9150 cubic metres of water will be withdrawn and half of that pumped back in (Mookerjea & Misra 2017). In addition, while 1834 acres was handed to BPDB, only half of this was khas or government land (Mahmud et al. 2020), and 3500 claims for compensation were refused. In a now familiar pattern of intimidation of land defenders, numerous false court cases have been filed against leaders of this campaign – although, in line with Scheidel et al.’s (2020) identification of successful mobilization strategies, the landowners have entered into alliances with litigation-focused middle-class environmental NGOs, as well as international NGOs concerned with the UNESCO World Heritage status of the Sundarbans. Still, the landless tenants who were first driven off their land remain invisible to the subsequent campaign – and particularly invisible to the “consultancy firms like Price Waterhouse Coopers and the McKinsey Group who develop policy for hapless governments” (Mookerjea & Misra 2017), with Price Waterhouse Coopers having authored the feasibility study for one of the planned coastal industrial zones due to be powered by Rampal.

Notwithstanding the protest movement, landowners affiliated with the ruling party were pressed into support for Rampal, and have been able to benefit from khas allocations under elite-biased laws that deny compensation or resettlement for small landowners and the landless (Mahmud et al. 2020).

As Mahmud et al. (2020: 11) note, the bureaucratic administration is not a “neutral counterforce to local structures” in the Rampal affair, but neither can this be dismissed as or assimilated to global indices that characterize Bangladesh in terms of weak rule of law or ineffective institutions. International donor agencies are implicated in pushing Bangladesh towards coal power, as are the weakly governed financial centres which make extractive operations like Phulbari possible (see Conclusion, below). The 2016 Power System Master Plan was sponsored by JICA, the Japanese bilateral aid agency, and has been referred to by JICA officials as ‘our PSMP 2016’. The PSMP pushed, as noted above, for an increase in domestic and imported coal use, based on seemingly poor performance in natural gas exploration. Defending the focus on coal, a JICA energy specialist in Dhaka argued that the PSMP focus was on finding the right energy mix to deal with an expected 60,000MW
demand in 2040. Post-Fukushima, ‘as Japan cannot support coal too much, but you have to understand the Bangladesh situation…gas is depleting so if Bangladesh has no coal, they may further go for nuclear. The situation of Bangladesh is very much do or die’.

Japan has also secured 143 billion Yen financing for the Matarbari Phase 2 development, led by Sumitomo, which includes a 1200MW coal-fired power plant and a deep-sea port. This loan financing will not only indebted Bangladesh and create pressure on public finances, but forms part of a chain of 17,944 MW of coal power plants planned for a 25 square kilometre stretch of coastline. This planned string of coal plants is a reflection of the BPDB’s ‘developmental centrism’ and a coal-based growth strategy centred upon coastal Economic Zones, and will create the world’s largest coal cluster in a delicate ecological zone. Thousands of families have been, or risk being, further displaced. Employment opportunities and livelihoods have not been provided for displaced fishermen and farmers, evictions have been widespread, and where compensation has been paid it has been highly variable and arbitrary, especially where landowners have not been able to produce required documents (Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon & Waterkeepers Bangladesh 2019: 27). Opposition to the project continues along the ‘diversified’ lines outlined by Scheidel et al. (2020) for successful projects, with NGOs and Supreme Court barristers working to give voice to displaced families in Dhaka. These initiatives have highlighted the loss in income from salt cultivation and shrimp farming, the loss of thousands of jobs in the salt supply chain including on cargo vessels, lack of notice for displacement and non-payment of compensation.

While there are clear failings in terms of the letter and application of laws governing land acquisition, settlement and compensation, it is difficult to ascribe these only to governance in Bangladesh. External donor agencies are implicated too, as are World Bank group consultants who have advised in favour of the privatization and deregulation of the power sector since the 1990s – though anti-corruption campaigns never seem to focus on the “inflated value of (expatriate) ‘expert knowledge’” (Chowdhury 2020: 326). One clear example of the need to expand our lens on governance, corruption and rule of law beyond the nation state relates to Quick Rental Power-Plants. In 2012, the Government provided support for 49 “quick-rental” power plants that were established to cover a daily power shortfall of 1,500MW. Subsidies for high-sulphur fuel oil imported to run the quick-rental plants ran to an annual cost of 231.25 billion taka or US$2.93 billion (Ahmad & Tanin 2013: 280), with significant consequences for Bangladesh’s foreign exchange reserves. Certain groups affiliated with the ruling Awami League – including Summit Group, headed up by a former Awami League Minister of Commerce, and S. Alam, involved in the Banshkhali plant
discussed above – benefitted unduly from the Quick Rental Scheme (Mirza 2020). Land and infrastructure was provided by the state, and substantial subsidies paid, amounting to US$774m in 2008-14. While this might seem to constitute a clear example of corruption in the terms of the World Governance Index (i.e., capture of the state by elites and private interests), Summit has also received financing from the UK’s CDC Group, a taxpayer-funded, ‘development’-focused private equity-style fund. Should this enter into measures of UK corruption too? Equally, while Bangladesh fares poorly on the Combined Index of Democracy and WJP Rule of Law Index (Authoritarian and 115th respectively), Japan scores highly (Functioning Democracy and 15th). Yet Japanese expertise, capital and indebtedness engineering is indispensable to ongoing displacement and coal power expansion in coastal ecological zones. In the final section, we will discuss implications of this for developing new measures through which to compare the risks faced by environmental and land defenders.

**Conclusion: Violence Footprints**

This chapter began by bringing recent work on ‘statistical political ecology’ to bear on the experiences of land and environmental defenders in Bangladesh. We have shown that many of the patterns found globally seem to resonate with Bangladesh – including an association with mining, and the capacity for diversified movements to have some measure of success (Scheidel et al. 2020); levels of Foreign Direct Investment and landholding inequality (Le Billon & Lujala 2020); and a particular risk to Indigenous people (Butt et al. 2019). However, we have also encouraged reflection upon the use of global governance, corruption and rule of law rankings to conduct comparisons of the experiences of defenders across contexts. In particular, we noted the degree to which archetypal ‘neoliberal’ rankings produced by Freedom House, which privilege protection of private over public property, and economic over civil rights, have come to underpin rankings widely used by academic analysts. We also highlighted the tendency for promotion of human rights to be part of the same discourse and apparatus as promotion of property and contractual rights (D’Souza 2018). While social movements and international donors may be interested in promoting frameworks for protection of human rights, donors also participate in promoting rule of law reforms designed to increase the ease with which FDI in extractive industries – two significant risk factors for land and environmental defenders – can flow in and out of countries like Bangladesh. In some cases, these reforms actively seek to undermine the domestic judicial system, and empower transnational corporations over state sovereignty (Gilbert 2020b).
We have also outlined patterns in the political economy surrounding the targeting of land defenders in Bangladesh, in particular the ‘developmental centrism’ exercised by the increasingly powerful energy ministry. Attempts to develop and intensify coal power through domestic coal extraction and coastal coal-fired power plants tied to new Economic Zones has been intimately connected to the violence exercised on land defenders in Phulbari and Banshkhali. Threats of further displacement continue along the coastal belt incorporating the Matarbari development. Clearly, organs of the Bangladeshi state are implicated in this violence: police firing is a brutal demonstration of sovereign power over defenders’ lives. Our concern here is more with the approach to ‘writing and envisioning global space’ (ó Tuathail 2005) which sees troubling measures of rule of law and governance written (sometimes literally, in the case of certain indices) on to the map of Bangladesh. This has the effect of locating atmospheres of violence in domestic arrangements which – implicitly, within the rule of law social imaginary – emerges from a perceived ‘lack’ and failure to conform to an Anglo-American ideal (Mattei 2010).

What is needed, perhaps, is an approach to mapping the extraterritorial actors involved in provoking atmospheres of violence – for instance, London-listed companies like GCM Resources Plc., or bilateral donors like JICA. Drawing on the work of the Tax Justice Network, which has long been critical of the degree to which Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index locates (perceived) corruption in countries of the Global South, even while the facilitation of corruption through financial secrecy jurisdiction primarily takes place in OECD countries – notably London and the UK’s network of offshore territories and crown dependencies. The Tax Justice Network proposed an alternative measure that takes account of the volume of capital flow as well as the secrecy legislation adopted in facilitating territories (Cobham et al. 2015). We propose a shift in emphasis from using neoliberally-inflected indicators that write governance shortcomings into national territories, towards a tool for mapping the ‘violence footprint’ of specific transnational corporations, domestic corporations, para-statals and bilateral or multilateral development agencies. This approach would differ from existing ‘carbon footprint’ and ‘ecological footprint’ measures, which are concerned with life-cycle carbon accounting or aggregated indicators or resource and land use. It would complement the work of the Environmental Justice Atlas (Temper et al. 2015; 2020), but would focus on specific firms or agencies, and the oversight (or lack of oversight) to which they are subjected.

For instance, the near non-existent oversight of extractive industry companies listed on London’s Alternative Investment Market (including GCM Resources Plc.) is undoubtedly an
aspect of governance that has intersected with domestic political wrangling in order to cultivate an atmosphere of violence around Phulbari. Similarly, a Violence Footprint mapping project might also draw attention to governance failures in Japan – such as support for the Matarbari coal-fired project being at odds with the Cabinet’s Paris Agreement strategy and Strategic Energy Plan. A lens on Violence Footprints would not only help defenders and their supporters target involved parties more effectively, it would avoid the pitfalls of fixing the risks that defenders face within national or domestic space, and encourage the development of social imaginaries that do not risk endorsing the facilitating the expansion of violent extractive industry investment by excessively valorising the rule of law.
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While the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights has cultivated the language of environmental defenders within the UN system since 2007, there have also been earlier and parallel initiatives that use partially overlapping language. For instance, the Sierra Club/Amnesty International collaboration ‘Defending the Defenders’ (1999-2002) that was framed as providing US support for victims of US corporations overseas, partly in response to the killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa. In this campaign, however, language centred on ‘defending the rights of environmentalists’, rather than framing land and environmental defenders as a particular subset of human rights defenders, as per the UN discourse.

May (2014) draws on Charles Taylor’s concept of social imaginary but as several scholars have argued, such diffuse notions of imaginary risk reproducing unmoored notions of holistic ‘culture’ that are not grounded in relations or practice. Although the idea of social imaginary is a useful heuristic, to avoid its analytical pitfalls, the rankings themselves can be viewed as technologies of imagination (Gilbert 2020a), which do not determine but do afford particular imaginative effects. That is, the circulation of rankings of rule of law or global governance provoke geographical imaginations in which certain territories are associated with violence because of a putative lack of (nominally Anglo-American) liberal institutions and legal frameworks encompassing both human rights and property rights.

Sovacool (2018) even goes so far as to argue in severe instances, lathiya/ or stick-wielding enforcers “can kill protestors or activists (Kotikalapudi 2016).” In fact, the paper referred to by Kotikalapudi discusses the police shooting of protestors at the Banshkhali power plant.

Chalesh Ritchil also fell victim to extrajudicial killing in 2007. Chalesh, a Mandi leader from Modhupur, was arrested on 18 March 2007 by joint military and police forces and died in custody on the same day. His family and other activists who were arrested along with him allege that he was tortured at an Army camp, punishment for the role he played organising against plans for the Modhupur eco-park that would have displaced up to 25,000 Mandi and Koch. The day he was killed was due to be the first meeting of a committee established with the Government Forest and Environment Advisor to discuss the potential impact of the proposed eco-park. Modhupur police ruled in September 2007 that his death was due to a heart attack. After journalist Tasneem Khalil reported that Chalesh Ritchil’s body was mutilated in 15 different places, he was detained, interrogated and tortured by the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence in May 2007. See Khalil (2014).

The tension between nationalist-developentalist support for coal power and resistance to ecologically- and socially-destructive coal extraction projects often emerges in struggles over Bangladesh’s energy future.

Mookerjea and Misra actually report a much lower figure of only 86 acres.

Interview with JICA official, 16 July 2019

Interview with former Power Cell chairman, 19 July 2019

Thanks to Fran Lambrick and Mary Menton for prompting this terminology

See also Gilbert (2020c) for a discussion of how these and similar rankings underpin ‘criticality assessments’ with regard to critical raw materials or ‘green minerals.'