Journal of Political Science and International Relations
2026, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 244–257
https://doi.org/10.11648/j.jpsir.20260903.21

Research Article

Developmental Erasure: Political Blame, Institutional Hollowing, and the Developmental Reset in Developing Countries

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Abstract

Development is inherently cumulative, yet political governance in many developing countries remains highly discontinuous. Changes of governments are frequently accompanied by narratives portraying predecessors as responsible for inherited economic, institutional, administrative, and social problems. Legitimate accountability requires investigation of corruption, policy failure, and misuse of public resources. A different phenomenon emerges, however, when successor governments systematically delegitimize, abandon, dismantle, replace, or devalue inherited developmental institutions, projects, programs, and achievements primarily because of their association with a previous political order. This article conceptualizes this phenomenon as *developmental erasure* and develops *Developmental Erasure Theory (DET)* as a framework for analyzing it. DET extends the author's earlier *Democratic Formalism Theory (DFT)* from democratic institutions to development governance. Whereas DFT explains how democratic institutions may formally survive while their substantive qualities deteriorate, DET proposes that development may similarly continue in formal terms while accumulated developmental substance is progressively hollowed out. Drawing on comparative evidence from Ghana and Peru and contemporary evidence from Bangladesh, the article examines political blame, achievement delegitimization, institutional discontinuity, resource erosion, project abandonment, administrative memory loss, citizen suffering, and declining public trust. It distinguishes legitimate reform from politically motivated developmental erasure and proposes a Developmental Erasure Cycle through which political transition can generate blame, delegitimization, institutional distancing, developmental discontinuity, material deterioration, and eventual narrative confirmation. The article argues that developing countries may remain trapped not only because resources are inadequate but also because political systems repeatedly interrupt the continuity through which resources become cumulative developmental capacity. It concludes by proposing policy mechanisms for protecting public value, institutional memory, project continuity, and democratic accountability across political transitions.

Keywords

Developmental Erasure Theory, Democratic Formalism Theory, Political Transition, Political Blame, Institutional Continuity, Public Investment, Institutional Memory, Developmental Reset

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Received: 31 August 2026; **Accepted:** 14 September 2026; **Published:** 28 September 2026

1. Introduction

Development is not an event. It is a cumulative historical process. A road constructed by one government is used by citizens under another. A university established by one administration educates students for decades. A hospital initiated by one government serves patients under successive political orders. Regulatory institutions, research programs, administrative databases, and infrastructure networks may require years to establish but generate public value across generations. Political governance, however, frequently operates according to a different temporal logic. Governments seek legitimacy within relatively short political cycles, whereas infrastructure, institutional reform, and social development often require years or decades to mature. This creates a fundamental tension between *political time* and *developmental time.* Recent empirical research reinforces this tension. Studies of emerging and developing countries find systematic political budget cycles in which government expenditure changes around elections, while project-level evidence from India shows that electoral timing can reduce the likelihood that public works projects are completed [11, 12].

When political succession occurs, incoming governments inherit not only problems but also assets, institutions, knowledge, infrastructure, and unfinished developmental processes. Yet political incentives may encourage narratives of rupture: *the predecessor failed; its projects were corrupt; its institutions were ineffective; its policies were misguided; therefore, a new beginning is necessary.* Some inherited failures will unquestionably be real. Governments have a responsibility to investigate corruption, cancel economically irrational projects, reform inefficient institutions, and redirect public resources where necessary. Continuity cannot mean preserving failure. The problem arises when *political identity becomes a substitute for empirical evaluation.*

A project does not become useless simply because another government initiated it. An institution does not become dysfunctional merely because it was created under a previous administration. Nor does a successor government automatically become effective merely because it dismantles inherited structures.

This article examines the point at which legitimate correction becomes destructive discontinuity. It defines *developmental erasure* as: *The systematic delegitimization, dismantling, abandonment, replacement, or devaluation of inherited developmental assets, substantially motivated by their association with a previous political order, without adequate evidence that discontinuation will generate greater public value.*

The concept is closely related to the author's earlier Democratic Formalism Theory (DFT). DFT argues that democratic decline may occur without the visible destruction of democratic institutions: elections may continue, constitutions may remain formally operative, and legislatures may function while accountability, representation, transparency, and citizen empowerment progressively weaken [2].

The present article asks whether an analogous phenomenon can occur in development. Can development institutions remain formally present while accumulated developmental substance is progressively destroyed? It proposes that they can and develops Developmental Erasure Theory (DET) as an extension of the author's broader theoretical work on institutional legitimacy, political transformation, leadership, and governance [1-5].

The argument is particularly important for developing countries because financial resources are scarce, administrative capacity is limited, and the opportunity cost of failed public investment is high. Ghana illustrates the scale of unfinished development: Williams' database of more than 14,000 small development projects found that approximately one-third of projects that started were never completed, consuming nearly one-fifth of local-government investment [10]. Peru demonstrates the interaction between political cycles and public investment. IMF analysis of more than 230,000 local investment projects found that fewer than 40 percent of projects registered before 2010 had been completed by August 2024, while political cycles influenced project registration, payments, and prioritization [7].

Bangladesh provides a contemporary illustration of how political transition, contractor dependence, administrative complications, and institutional discontinuity can translate into direct public suffering. In Patuakhali, reporting indicated that 55 bridges and seven roads involving 22 LGED project packages, with a combined value of approximately Tk 76.57 crore, had remained stalled for 22 months by June 2026 [9].

These cases do not demonstrate that every discontinued project constitutes developmental erasure. Rather, they demonstrate why the relationship between political succession and developmental continuity requires systematic theoretical treatment.

2. Theoretical Framework: From Democratic Formalism to Developmental Erasure Theory

The intellectual foundation of DET is the distinction between *institutional form* and *institutional substance*. DFT distinguishes democratic form from democratic substance. Democratic form includes elections, legislatures, constitutions, and courts. Democratic substance includes accountability, meaningful representation, transparency, participation, institutional independence, rights protection, and public legitimacy [2].

DET extends this distinction into development governance. *Developmental form* includes projects, programs, institutions, agencies, budgets, infrastructure, policies, and administrative structures. *Developmental substance* includes accumulated public value, institutional knowledge, administrative capacity, infrastructure functionality, service delivery, human capital, policy learning, and citizen trust. Developmental form is therefore not equivalent to developmental substance. A government may announce numerous new projects while destroying accumulated institutional knowledge. It may create new agencies while dismantling functioning administrative capacity. It may increase development expenditure while reducing the effective public value generated by that expenditure. It may invoke reconstruction while repeatedly rebuilding what already existed.

Developmental erasure differs from ordinary reform in three respects. First, an inherited developmental asset must exist. Second, there must be substantial delegitimization, dismantling, abandonment, replacement, or devaluation. Third, political association with the predecessor must materially influence the decision. This third criterion is essential; without it, DET would wrongly classify legitimate reform as erasure.

The theory therefore does not advocate unconditional continuity. It advocates *evidence-based continuity or evidence-based discontinuity*. The fundamental principle is straightforward: a public asset should neither survive merely because a predecessor created it nor disappear merely because a predecessor created it. The appropriate question is whether continuation, modification, or termination produces the greatest public value.

This approach is consistent with the author's broader argument that governance claims must be tested against evidence rather than accepted merely because political narratives give them authority [1].

3. Literature Review and Methodological Approach

Institutional scholarship has long established that development depends upon credible institutions, organizational capacity, policy learning, and the ability of states to maintain effective rules over time. North emphasizes the role of institutions in shaping incentives and economic performance [8]. Andrews demonstrates that institutional reform can fail when formal institutional solutions are disconnected from actual political and administrative capacity [6]. Recent political-economy research similarly emphasizes that development outcomes are shaped by the interaction between political incentives, institutional arrangements and the distribution of power [14]. Contemporary governance measurement also increasingly distinguishes broad institutional conditions from the specific institutional mechanisms through which governance operates [13, 16].

The public-investment literature further demonstrates that development projects are not merely technical exercises. Political incentives, administrative capacity, and institutional arrangements influence which projects are selected, financed, and completed.

Williams provides particularly important empirical evidence from Ghana. His database of more than 14,000 local development projects shows that approximately one-third of projects that started were never completed and that unfinished projects consumed nearly one-fifth of local government investment [10]. Importantly, the explanation is not reduced simply to corruption or clientelism. The analysis highlights dynamically inconsistent collective choices. This is important for DET because developmental discontinuity may emerge from political incentives even where straightforward corruption is not the principal explanation.

The Peruvian evidence reinforces this concern. IMF analysis of more than 230,000 local investment projects shows serious difficulties in project completion, with fewer than 40 percent of projects registered before 2010 completed by August 2024. The IMF also reports substantial implementation delays and identifies political cycles as affecting project selection, funding, and completion [7].

The present study adopts a theoretical-comparative qualitative methodology. It combines institutional theory, governance literature, public-investment evidence, comparative country evidence, contemporary Bangladesh evidence, and the author's previous theoretical work.

3.1. Case Selection and Comparative Design

The comparative cases of Ghana, Peru, and Bangladesh are selected purposively rather than statistically. Their purpose is not to provide a representative sample of developing countries, but to illustrate whether the mechanisms proposed by Developmental Erasure Theory (DET) can be observed across different political, institutional, and developmental settings. The cases were selected because each provides evidence of a politically consequential transition in which inherited development initiatives, institutions, or policy legacies became subject to delegitimation, discontinuation, restructuring, or symbolic distancing by succeeding political authorities. Their variation in political history, institutional configuration, and developmental experience provides a useful basis for examining whether the proposed mechanisms are context-specific or potentially transferable across settings.

The cases are therefore, used as theory-illustrating cases rather than as conventional hypothesis-testing cases. The comparative analysis focuses on a common analytical sequence: (i) political transition or change in governing authority; (ii) emergence of a successor narrative concerning the legitimacy, ownership, or value of inherited initiatives; (iii) institutional or administrative actions affecting continuity; (iv) material consequences for projects, programmes, institutions, or accumulated public investment; and (v) evidence of developmental discontinuity or loss of institutional memory. This sequence corresponds to the central propositions of DET and permits comparison without assuming that all cases exhibit identical forms or degrees of developmental erasure.

3.2. Methodological Operationalization of Developmental Erasure

A central methodological challenge is to distinguish politically motivated developmental erasure from legitimate policy revision, technocratic correction, financial constraint, or executive failure. DET therefore does not treat discontinuation, delay, restructuring, or abandonment by themselves as evidence of political erasure. Such outcomes may result from genuine changes in economic conditions, feasibility assessments, technological requirements, legal constraints, financing difficulties, implementation failures, or changing public priorities. Developmental erasure becomes analytically plausible only when discontinuity is accompanied by evidence suggesting that political considerations materially influence the treatment of inherited developmental assets.

For future empirical research, this distinction can be operationalized through a combination of observable indicators. Evidence supporting a developmental-erasure interpretation may include: (a) explicit political attribution of inherited projects or policies to a predecessor government; (b) systematic rhetorical delegitimation of inherited initiatives without equivalent technical justification; (c) selective discontinuation of predecessor-associated projects despite comparable technical or financial conditions among retained projects; (d) replacement of functioning institutions, programmes, or systems primarily on political or symbolic grounds; (e) administrative decisions that interrupt continuity without a transparent feasibility, cost-benefit, or performance-based rationale; (f) loss or deliberate displacement of institutional records, procedures, expertise, or organizational memory associated with predecessor initiatives; and (g) measurable developmental costs arising from avoidable discontinuity, including stranded investment, delayed service delivery, duplicated expenditure, or loss of accumulated institutional capacity.

Conversely, evidence of genuine technocratic, financial, or executive failure would be indicated where discontinuation can be explained by transparent and independently assessable criteria such as documented cost escalation, changed demand, technical infeasibility, legal or regulatory constraints, financing shortfalls, demonstrable performance failure, environmental or safety concerns, or consistently applied administrative standards. The analytical distinction is therefore not whether a project or policy was discontinued, but why it was discontinued, how the decision was justified, whether comparable cases were treated consistently, and what institutional and developmental consequences followed.

This operationalization does not claim to provide a definitive empirical test of DET within the present theory-building study. Rather, it converts the theory's principal concepts into observable dimensions that can guide subsequent empirical research. Future studies may employ process tracing, comparative case analysis, documentary analysis, elite interviews, project-level datasets, budgetary records, administrative records, and longitudinal indicators to assess the relative contribution of political motivation, technical considerations, financial constraints, and executive performance to observed developmental discontinuity. DET is thus presented as a testable theoretical framework rather than as an empirically validated causal model.

The purpose is not to claim that all project abandonment is caused by political blame. Rather, DET proposes an analytical test. The probability of developmental erasure is expected to increase where the following conditions converge:

Political transition + predecessor delegitimization + inherited developmental asset + discontinuation + substantial sunk public investment + weak evidence for technical or economic necessity + replacement or duplication + measurable public-value loss.

This framework allows developmental erasure to be distinguished analytically from ordinary project failure, technical necessity, or economically justified reform.

4. The Political Economy of Developmental Erasure

4.1. Political Blame and Inherited Failure

Blame is politically useful. A new government inherits inflation, unemployment, debt, institutional weakness, corruption allegations, unfinished projects and administrative inefficiency. It can either accept these as governing responsibilities or present them primarily as evidence of predecessor failure. The first approach produces accountability: the problem is measured, corrected and transparently reported. The second produces political insulation by attributing present failures primarily to the past. Historical responsibility is legitimate; permanent historical blame is not.

4.2. Delegitimization of Predecessor Achievements

Political blame can expand beyond specific failures. An unsuccessful project may become evidence that an entire development program was misguided; a corrupt official, evidence that an entire institution was corrupt; and a procurement irregularity, evidence that an entire government achieved nothing. Particular failures are thereby converted into generalized political condemnation.

Developmental achievements may consequently become politically contaminated. National infrastructure can be identified with a political party rather than the state, the road becomes “their road,” the bridge “their project,” and the institution “their institution.” Yet public infrastructure is not partisan property; it belongs to citizens.

4.3. Reconstruction Versus Continuity

Reconstruction is sometimes necessary. If an institution is fundamentally dysfunctional, reform may be insufficient. If a project is economically irrational, cancellation may be appropriate. If corruption has destroyed a procurement process, restructuring may be essential. The problem is reconstruction without institutional memory. When a functioning system is destroyed and then rebuilt under a new name, the state may pay twice: first for the original institution and again for recreating its functions. The second cost includes money, time, personnel, institutional learning, and implementation capacity.

4.4. Good Governance as a Justification for Discontinuity

The language of good governance can itself be politically instrumentalized. A government may claim that dismantling an inherited institution demonstrates reform. But reform should be judged by outcomes:

1) Has service delivery improved?
2) Has corruption declined?
3) Has accountability strengthened?
4) Has administrative efficiency increased?
5) Has citizen trust improved?
6) Has public value increased?

Structural novelty is not equivalent to governance quality. Reform should therefore be assessed by substantive institutional performance rather than procedural or organizational change alone [2, 5].

4.5. Political Ownership of National Development

A central danger is partisan ownership of national development. When political leaders seek exclusive credit for development, they acquire incentives to minimize predecessor achievements. The political logic becomes: *To maximize political credit, minimize predecessor achievement.* DET identifies this as the *political-credit mechanism of developmental erasure.* The result can be a destructive competition in which governments seek ownership of development rather than continuity of development.

Recent empirical research provides support for this political-credit mechanism. Political budget cycles demonstrate that electoral incentives can shape the timing and composition of public expenditure [11], while evidence from India indicates that electoral timing can affect whether public works projects are ultimately completed [12]. These findings do not establish developmental erasure by themselves, but they demonstrate that political incentives can influence the allocation and continuity of development activity.

5. Developmental Erasure in Practice: Comparative Evidence and the Bangladesh Case

Development does not occur in a political vacuum. Roads, bridges, railways, power plants, urban transport systems and other public assets are created within particular political and institutional contexts and may become closely associated with the governments that initiate them. Political succession can therefore expose inherited development to both technical reassessment and political reinterpretation.

A new government may legitimately investigate the costs, procurement, feasibility and performance of inherited projects. Yet political transition can also encourage their reinterpretation as symbols of failure, corruption, waste or authoritarian excess. Where such narratives influence institutional priorities, development becomes vulnerable to neglect, delayed financing, incomplete complementary investment and weakened maintenance.

This chapter examines that process as developmental erasure. It need not involve physical destruction; inherited public assets may instead lose institutional protection and developmental continuity. A bridge may remain intact while connecting roads are left incomplete; a Metro Rail system may operate while maintenance, integration or planned expansion is neglected; and a strategic power plant may remain under investigation while complementary infrastructure and institutional support are delayed. In each case, an asset may lose developmental value because the institutional ecosystem required for its success is interrupted.

The broader process can therefore be represented as: Political transition → narrative construction → reclassification of inherited achievements → institutional distancing → developmental discontinuity → deterioration or underperformance → citizen suffering → narrative confirmation.

This sequence connects developmental erasure directly to DFT. Political narratives can influence policy priorities, administrative incentives, funding decisions, institutional commitment, maintenance practices, continuation of complementary projects, and public perceptions of success and failure. The relationship between narrative and development is therefore not merely rhetorical. Political interpretation can affect material outcomes.

5.1. Comparative Evidence: Ghana and Peru

Ghana: Institutional Memory Failure and Political Reprioritization: Ghana provides important evidence concerning the vulnerability of development to institutional discontinuity. Williams' analysis of more than 14,000 projects found that approximately one-third were never completed, accounting for nearly one-fifth of local-government investment [10]. The evidence does not establish that every unfinished project resulted from deliberate political hostility toward predecessors. Its significance is broader. Development becomes vulnerable when political and administrative institutions fail to preserve continuity.

Projects initiated under one administrative or political configuration may lose momentum when priorities change, personnel are replaced, institutional memory weakens, funding is redirected, or political incentives favor new initiatives over completion of inherited ones. The result is institutional memory failure combined with political reprioritization. Development consequently ceases to accumulate. Governments repeatedly begin new initiatives while unfinished investments remain incomplete. Citizens inherit partially completed roads, buildings, and public facilities, while resources already invested fail to generate their intended social and economic returns.

The Ghanaian evidence therefore illustrates a central principle of developmental continuity: a project cannot be evaluated only by whether it was initiated. Its public value depends upon whether institutions remain committed to carrying it through political and administrative change.

Peru: Electoral Time and Developmental Time: Peru provides more direct evidence of the temporal problem underlying developmental discontinuity. The IMF's analysis of more than 230,000 local investment projects found serious difficulties in project completion. Fewer than 40 percent of projects registered before 2010 had been completed by August 2024 [7]. The IMF also observed that project registration and payments tended to increase following the arrival of new administrations before declining as subsequent administrations prioritized different portfolios [7].

This reveals a structural contradiction between electoral time and developmental time. Governments operate within relatively short political cycles, whereas infrastructure and institutional reform often require much longer periods. Where political succession repeatedly interrupts implementation, projects become vulnerable to abandonment, redesign, reprioritization, delayed financing, and replacement by politically preferable alternatives.

Comparable evidence from other developing-country settings suggests that electoral cycles can influence both the allocation of public resources and the implementation of public works [11, 12]. The comparative significance of Ghana and Peru therefore lies not in establishing a universal causal pattern, but in illustrating how political time can conflict with the longer temporal requirements of development.

The political cycle can therefore undermine the developmental cycle. This problem is particularly important for DFT because political legitimacy is frequently constructed through visible new initiatives. Completing an inherited project may generate less political credit than initiating a new one. Governments may consequently seek ownership of development rather than institutionalizing continuity.

5.2. Bangladesh: Political Transition, Narrative Construction and Developmental Erasure

Bangladesh provides a revealing contemporary case because developmental discontinuity cannot be explained solely by technical failure, financial constraints or weak project management. The case also illustrates how inherited developmental achievements can become objects of political and narrative contestation following a change in political authority.

Political actors may construct competing interpretations of the preceding development record, portraying previous governments as corrupt, wasteful, economically irresponsible, authoritarian, politically motivated or incapable of serving the public interest. Such narratives do not by themselves establish developmental erasure. Their analytical significance arises when they influence institutional decisions concerning inherited projects, infrastructure, funding, maintenance or administrative continuity.

5.3. The Rights Against Rights Paradox and Developmental Continuity

The Rights Against Rights Paradox within DFT originally highlights the tension between competing legitimate rights and political claims. The Bangladesh case extends this principle into development governance. Political actors and citizens unquestionably possess the right to demand accountability, question public expenditure, investigate alleged corruption, scrutinize mega-projects, challenge policy, and expose genuine wrongdoing. These are indispensable democratic rights. Citizens simultaneously possess the right to safe infrastructure, mobility, reliable public services, economic opportunity, energy security, protection of public resources, and continuity in development.

The paradox emerges when the exercise of one legitimate set of rights undermines another. The state may legitimately investigate whether a bridge was appropriately designed, competitively procured and reasonably priced. Citizens nevertheless retain an equally legitimate right to use that bridge safely and efficiently. The state may investigate allegations concerning a Metro Rail system. Commuters nevertheless retain the right to dependable public transportation. The state may reassess the planning and economic rationale of a tunnel. Citizens and businesses nevertheless remain entitled to expect that an existing national asset will be professionally managed and integrated into the wider economy. The state may review the costs and implementation of a strategic power project. Citizens nevertheless retain the right to evidence-based energy policy and the protection of national investments.

The paradox therefore connects directly to the central logic of Developmental Erasure Theory (DET). DET does not oppose political accountability or legitimate policy change; it identifies the point at which political authority can transform legitimate scrutiny into institutional discontinuity. When inherited developmental assets are delegitimized because of their association with a predecessor, accountability may lead to institutional distancing; institutional distancing may weaken maintenance, complementary investment and administrative commitment; and the resulting deterioration may reduce public value. The problem is therefore not the exercise of political rights itself, but the possibility that those rights are exercised in ways that erode the substantive developmental rights of citizens.

More broadly, a government may review the development strategy of its predecessor. Such scrutiny, however, must not become a justification for withdrawing maintenance, operational support, complementary investment, technical supervision, or institutional protection from assets already constructed with national resources. Developmental continuity is therefore not a defence of every inherited project. It is a principle requiring governments to preserve public value where evidence demonstrates that inherited assets remain economically, socially or institutionally valuable.

An additional paradox emerges when incumbent rulers invoke the legitimate authority of accountability in ways that compromise the rights of others. The authority to investigate cannot become an authority to condemn without proof. The authority to publish findings cannot remove the obligation of impartiality. The authority to establish a task force cannot convert a politically contested assessment into unquestionable truth. The political right to challenge predecessors cannot justify the public attribution of corruption unless credible evidence and due process establish such responsibility. Thus, the legitimate power to investigate becomes problematic when it is used to produce political condemnation before impartial determination.

This is the expanded meaning of the Rights Against Rights Paradox: the exercise of political and institutional authority in the name of accountability can itself undermine due process, institutional impartiality and, ultimately, citizens' developmental rights. The solution is not to weaken accountability. The solution is to ensure that accountability itself remains accountable to evidence, impartiality, transparency, professional competence, and due process. In DET, this principle establishes the normative boundary between legitimate developmental correction and politically induced developmental erasure.

5.4. Reclassification of Development as Political Failure

Political transition can transform the meaning of infrastructure. Projects previously celebrated as national achievements may be reclassified as wasteful mega-projects, symbols of corruption, prestige investments, economically irrelevant assets, or evidence of the failure of a previous development model. Such reassessment may sometimes be justified. Projects should never be protected from scrutiny merely because they were politically significant. The central analytical question is different: *Does the existence of weaknesses or allegations automatically demonstrate that the entire project is economically worthless?*

The answer is no. A project may suffer from cost escalation, weak feasibility studies, poor procurement, implementation delays, design problems, corruption by particular individuals, inadequate coordination, or incomplete complementary infrastructure. None of these automatically establishes that the physical asset itself has no present or future economic value. The distinction between *project weakness and project irrelevance* is therefore essential.

A tunnel may initially underperform because connecting roads remain incomplete. A railway may experience low utilization because feeder networks have not developed. A Metro Rail system may require expansion and integration before achieving its full economic potential. A bridge may generate benefits over decades rather than immediately after inauguration. A nuclear power plant may experience implementation and financing difficulties while retaining strategic importance for long-term energy security.

None of these conditions automatically establishes that an asset has no present or future economic value. Underperformance at a particular stage is not equivalent to permanent irrelevance. Yet when inherited infrastructure is politically constructed as worthless, institutional incentives may shift from improving performance to demonstrating failure. The resulting cycle is: Political delegitimization → institutional hesitation → delayed decisions → reduced maintenance or complementary investment → underperformance → public dissatisfaction → narrative confirmation. This is a central mechanism of developmental erasure.

5.5. Bangladesh: Developmental Continuity, Institutional Protection and Public Value

The Padma Bridge provides a prominent illustration of the relationship between political controversy and developmental continuity in Bangladesh. Its financing history became internationally controversial following the withdrawal of World Bank financing amid allegations of corruption. The allegations and their subsequent political and legal interpretations have remained matters of significant public debate. What is clear, however, is that Bangladesh subsequently mobilized domestic resources and completed the bridge, making the project a major symbol of national capability and infrastructure sovereignty.

Its present value should not be determined solely by the political identity of the government that initiated it. The appropriate national question is: *How can Bangladesh maximize the long-term economic and social value of an infrastructure asset that now belongs to the nation?* Economic assessments have identified potential benefits from improved connectivity between Dhaka and the southwest, reduced travel time, market integration, freight movement, and wider regional development. These benefits do not make the project immune from scrutiny. Costs, procurement, and implementation should remain open to independent evaluation. But evaluation must distinguish between irregularity and irrelevance, excessive expenditure and absence of benefit, political controversy and economic worth.

The Rights Against Rights Paradox is particularly visible here. Citizens and political actors possess the legitimate right to demand investigation. Citizens simultaneously possess the right to benefit from infrastructure financed through national resources. The state can investigate the past without abandoning the future. A bridge can be audited and maintained simultaneously. Alleged wrongdoing can be investigated while complementary infrastructure continues to be developed. Accountability does not require developmental deprivation.

Developmental responsibility does not end with project completion. National infrastructure requires continuous protection. Public concern regarding soil excavation near strategic *Padma-related rail infrastructure* illustrates the importance of transparent monitoring and communication. Reports and public interpretations may differ regarding the nature and authorization of activities occurring around critical infrastructure. The central lesson is not that every public concern demonstrates actual structural danger. Rather, citizens have a legitimate right to clear information when activities occur near strategic national assets.

Where reliable information is absent, perception can quickly become allegation. Allegation can become political narrative. Political narrative can then become accepted public reality before technical evidence has been fully established. Strategic infrastructure therefore requires transparent monitoring, credible public communication, protection of surrounding land, routine maintenance, and effective coordination among relevant institutions. The broader principle is clear: *institutional protection is part of development itself.* An asset may be physically completed yet developmentally weakened if the institutions responsible for protecting its operational environment fail to perform their functions.

The Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant provides another important example of the relationship between strategic development, political narrative, and institutional continuity. Rooppur is fundamentally different from conventional infrastructure. A nuclear power plant cannot be evaluated simply by asking whether a physical structure has been completed. Successful operation requires an extensive institutional ecosystem involving specialized technical capacity, regulatory compliance, transmission infrastructure, safety systems, international cooperation, financing, trained personnel, fuel and waste management, and long-term operational preparation.

The project therefore demonstrates a critical principle: *The value of strategic infrastructure depends not only on whether the asset is physically constructed but also on whether the institutional ecosystem necessary for its operation is completed and sustained.*

Rooppur has experienced delays and financial pressures arising from multiple factors, including the complexity of nuclear commissioning, international financial constraints, exchange-rate pressures, logistical challenges, and wider geopolitical developments. These issues unquestionably require rigorous scrutiny. Questions concerning project cost, financing, contractual responsibility, implementation delays, oversight, safety, and long-term economic viability must be independently examined. Yet delay or cost escalation does not automatically establish that a project is strategically irrelevant or inherently corrupt. The necessary distinctions are between: *delay and irrelevance; cost escalation and worthlessness; allegation and proof; investigation and legal determination.*

A delay may have multiple causes. A cost increase may partly reflect macroeconomic and exchange-rate changes. An investigation may identify questions requiring further examination without establishing criminal responsibility. A project may contain serious implementation weaknesses while retaining substantial strategic value. The appropriate national objective should therefore be neither to glorify nor condemn Rooppur because of its political origins. It should be to establish what went wrong, why delays occurred, where responsibility lies, what costs are justified, what corrective measures are necessary, and how Bangladesh can ensure that the investment becomes safe, economically rational, and nationally productive.

Rooppur also demonstrates the Rights Against Rights Paradox. Citizens possess the right to demand nuclear safety, transparency, accountability, and investigation of wrongdoing. They simultaneously possess rights to reliable energy, long-term energy security, evidence-based public policy, and protection of national investment. The right to investigate cannot justify institutional paralysis. Political criticism of a predecessor cannot justify allowing strategic infrastructure to lose its productive future.

The *Dhaka Metro Rail* represents one of Bangladesh's most significant transformations in urban transport. In a city historically affected by severe congestion, mass rapid transit has the potential to generate substantial benefits through reduced travel time, improved labor mobility, greater predictability, reduced pressure on roads, and improved urban connectivity. Yet constructing infrastructure is not equivalent to protecting it.

The institutional environment surrounding Metro Rail matters. The use of areas surrounding the Diabari Metro Rail environment for cattle-market activities, with resulting congestion and pressure on the surrounding environment, illustrated a broader institutional vulnerability. The issue was not merely aesthetic. It raised a fundamental question: *Who protects strategic public infrastructure when commercial, administrative, and political interests overlap?*

Infrastructure rarely declines suddenly. Institutional deterioration often begins with weak enforcement, inadequate maintenance, encroachment, poor coordination, neglected access areas, delayed cleaning, and unclear responsibility. Over time, such weaknesses become visible as physical deterioration. Physical deterioration can then contribute to a narrative that the original investment itself was misguided. Institutional neglect may consequently transform political perception. A project initially regarded as a development achievement may eventually be represented as a failed investment, not necessarily because its original value disappeared, but because institutions failed to protect and sustain it.

Bangladesh's *flyovers* demonstrate another structural weakness: political systems often reward construction more visibly than maintenance. Construction produces immediate political recognition. It creates inauguration ceremonies, public visibility, and claims of achievement. Maintenance produces little comparable political reward. Yet the national value of infrastructure depends upon its entire life cycle. Problems associated with road surfaces, expansion joints, drainage, lighting, railings, and other components demonstrate the importance of regular inspection and preventive maintenance. The political value of constructing infrastructure may be immediate; the national value of maintaining infrastructure is continuous.

Political transition can intensify this problem. A new administration may gain greater political recognition from initiating its own projects than from allocating resources to maintain infrastructure strongly associated with its predecessor. Even without an explicit decision to neglect inherited assets, political incentives may encourage delayed maintenance, fragmented responsibility, reduced complementary expenditure, or redirection of administrative attention.

The public ultimately bears the consequences through unsafe journeys, longer travel time, congestion, vehicle damage, reduced productivity, and declining confidence in public institutions. Citizens do not experience institutional fragmentation as an abstract administrative problem. They experience it in their daily lives.

The most consequential forms of developmental erasure often emerge not through the visible destruction of completed infrastructure but through the interruption of its wider developmental life cycle.

The Politics of Digging and Institutional Fragmentation: Repeated excavation of roads provides a familiar example. Roads may be repaired only to be excavated shortly afterwards for water, sewerage, gas, electricity, telecommunications, drainage, or other infrastructure initiatives. The resulting cycle is: *Construction → excavation → destruction → temporary repair → renewed excavation.* This is not merely a technical problem. It reflects the absence of an integrated developmental system. One agency constructs a road, another excavates it, and a third restores it. Citizens bear the costs through taxation while suffering congestion, dust, damaged roads, reduced mobility, and lost time.

The political dimension becomes important where new development priorities are pursued without adequate coordination with existing infrastructure. Environmental restoration, drainage improvement, and canal rehabilitation may all be necessary public objectives. However, the legitimate authority to pursue a new policy cannot remove the obligation to protect existing public value.

The right of a government to revise policy must therefore be reconciled with citizens' right to functioning infrastructure. A project cannot be considered developmentally successful merely because it advances a new political or administrative agenda if it simultaneously destroys functioning public assets without producing demonstrably superior public value.

Stalled Projects and Citizen Suffering: The consequences of developmental discontinuity become particularly visible in incomplete projects. In Patuakhali, multiple LGED projects involving roads, bridges, and drainage structures remained stalled for extended periods, causing serious transportation difficulties for local residents [9]. The case is particularly significant because substantial physical progress had reportedly been achieved in some bridge structures while connecting roads remained incomplete.

This illustrates a fundamental principle: *Physical completion is not equivalent to functional completion.*

A bridge that cannot be effectively accessed does not generate the full value of a functioning bridge. A road that remains incomplete after substantial expenditure does not provide the mobility promised to citizens. Infrastructure must therefore be evaluated as a system rather than as isolated physical structures.

The Dhaka-Sylhet corridor similarly demonstrates how land acquisition problems, utility relocation, design complications, contractor difficulties, financial disruption, legal disputes, and administrative obstacles can transform strategically important infrastructure into a prolonged source of public suffering.

Such cases should not automatically be attributed to political transition. This methodological caution is essential. Developmental erasure does not claim that every stalled project results from deliberate political action. Rather, political transition may create conditions in which existing institutional weaknesses become more severe.

Developmental discontinuity can occur through *passive neglect as well as active destruction.* No formal decision may be taken to abandon a project. Yet responsibility becomes unclear, funding is delayed, officials hesitate, contractors leave, complementary investments lose priority, and the project gradually stops moving. The citizen nevertheless bears the cost.

Stopping the Future of Previous Development: One of the most consequential forms of developmental erasure does not involve dismantling completed infrastructure. It involves *stopping its future*. Infrastructure rarely functions as an isolated asset. A bridge requires connecting roads. A railway requires stations and feeder systems. Metro Rail requires expansion and intermodal integration. A tunnel requires connecting highways and regional planning. A power plant requires transmission infrastructure and institutional readiness.

Consequently, the political decision to delay or discontinue the second and third stages of development can substantially reduce the value of the original investment. If complementary projects lose priority because the original initiative has become politically controversial, the asset may underperform. That underperformance can then be presented as proof that the original project itself was unnecessary. The sequence becomes: *Political narrative → reduced institutional commitment → incomplete ecosystem → underperformance → political confirmation.* This is one of the clearest mechanisms of developmental erasure. Political narratives do not simply describe development. They can shape the institutional conditions under which development succeeds or fails.

5.6. The Developmental Life-Cycle Problem

The Bangladesh experience demonstrates a wider structural problem. The country does not necessarily suffer from a shortage of development initiatives. Rather, weaknesses can emerge throughout the developmental life cycle. Projects may be approved without adequate preparation, influenced by political priorities, initiated without sufficient coordination, disrupted by political transition, delayed by administrative fragmentation, deprived of complementary investment, inadequately maintained, exposed to encroachment, or judged negatively after deterioration caused partly by institutional neglect. Development should therefore be understood as a *life cycle rather than an inauguration event.* The life cycle includes:

Planning → feasibility assessment → financing → implementation → completion → complementary infrastructure → operation → maintenance → institutional protection → long-term adaptation.

Failure at any stage can reduce the value of the entire investment. Political transition becomes particularly dangerous when it interrupts this cycle.

5.7. Developmental Erasure as a DFT Mechanism

The Bangladesh case allows developmental erasure to be specified as a dynamic mechanism within the broader framework of DFT.

Stage I: Political Transition and Democratic Dissatisfaction:

A previous political order loses legitimacy. Public dissatisfaction generates demands for change and accountability.

Stage II: Narrative Construction:

Political actors construct narratives concerning the predecessor around corruption, waste, economic mismanagement, political favoritism, and developmental failure. These narratives may combine verified evidence with allegation, interpretation, and political rhetoric.

Stage III: Narrative Reclassification:

Developmental achievements associated with the predecessor are reclassified as unnecessary, wasteful, politically motivated, economically irrelevant, or inherently corrupt. The distinction between allegation and established fact may become blurred.

Stage IV: Institutional Distancing:

Inherited projects become politically sensitive. Officials may become reluctant to support them. Funding priorities may change. Administrative review may delay decision-making. Complementary projects may lose momentum.

Stage V: Developmental Discontinuity:

Maintenance weakens. Expansion slows. Coordination deteriorates. Projects remain incomplete. Strategic assets lose elements of their institutional ecosystem.

Stage VI: Material Deterioration and Citizen Suffering:

Infrastructure underperforms. Mobility declines. Roads deteriorate. Projects remain incomplete. Economic opportunities are delayed. Citizens lose time, income, and access.

Stage VII: Narrative Confirmation:

The resulting deterioration or underperformance is presented as evidence that the original development was inherently wasteful or irrelevant. The political narrative is strengthened.

The cycle becomes: *Transition → Narrative → Delegitimization → Institutional Distancing → Developmental Discontinuity → Deterioration → Citizen Suffering → Narrative Confirmation.* This mechanism extends DFT by demonstrating how political narrative can affect not only democratic institutions but also the material foundations of development.

5.8. Accountability Without Developmental Destruction

The solution is neither to protect previous governments from scrutiny nor to romanticize inherited infrastructure. Bangladesh requires rigorous accountability. The state should investigate allegations, examine cost escalation, assess feasibility, review procurement, identify implementation failures, and prosecute wrongdoing where evidence and due process establish responsibility.

But accountability must be distinguished from political condemnation. The existence of an allegation must not be transformed into a finding of guilt. An investigation into a project must not become a justification for allowing that project to deteriorate. A bridge can be investigated and maintained simultaneously. A Metro Rail system can be audited and expanded simultaneously. A tunnel can be critically reassessed while its economic integration is improved. Rooppur can be subjected to the highest standards of technical and financial scrutiny while Bangladesh simultaneously completes the institutional and transmission infrastructure necessary for safe operation.

The governing principle should therefore be: *Investigate the past without prejudging it; correct inherited weaknesses without destroying inherited value.* Independent assessments should be evidence-based, methodologically transparent, professionally competent, institutionally independent, open to review, and free from partisan influence. Their purpose should neither be to vindicate predecessors nor to delegitimize them. Their purpose should be to establish facts, ensure accountability, and protect the public interest.

5.9. Development Must Survive Political Transition

The comparative evidence from Ghana and Peru, together with the Bangladesh experience, demonstrates that development is vulnerable when political and administrative succession interrupts institutional continuity.

The Bangladesh case adds an important dimension. Political transition can transform inherited development into an arena of narrative contestation. Legitimate criticism can become politically amplified. Allegations may be publicly communicated before proof is established. Projects associated with predecessors may become politically inconvenient. The resulting institutional distancing may weaken maintenance, complementary investment, and long-term operational commitment.

This is the context in which developmental erasure becomes possible. The central argument is not that all criticism of inherited projects is politically motivated. Nor is it that every infrastructure project initiated by a previous government was economically sound. The argument is more precise: political narratives can influence institutional behavior; institutional behavior can influence developmental performance; and developmental underperformance can subsequently reinforce the political narratives that contributed to institutional disengagement.

The Rights Against Rights Paradox captures the normative danger. The right to demand accountability is indispensable. But it cannot become a license to condemn without proof. The authority to investigate cannot become authority to prejudge. The right to revise policy cannot become destruction of existing public value without credible justification.

Governments may change. Political narratives may change. Investigations may continue. But evidence must remain evidence. Due process must remain due process. Independent evaluation must remain impartial. National assets must remain national assets. The ultimate test of institutional maturity is whether a country can investigate, correct, and improve what it inherits without allowing political conflict to destroy accumulated public value.

6. Implications for Public Policy and Good Governance

The policy implication is not that governments should preserve every inherited project.

The appropriate principle is: *Continuity where value exists; correction where failure exists; accountability where wrongdoing exists.*

6.1. Public-Value Assessment and Developmental Continuity

Future empirical research should construct a *Developmental Continuity Index (DCI)* to assess the extent to which developmental value survives political and administrative transition. The DCI is not intended as a definitive measure within the present theory-building study. Rather, it provides a conceptual framework for translating the central propositions of Developmental Erasure Theory (DET) into observable dimensions that can be examined longitudinally across projects, governments and countries. Its central purpose is to distinguish the condition of developmental continuity from the political causes that may strengthen or weaken it. Sustained development requires not only continued investment but also institutional upgrading, innovation, and the capacity to preserve and build upon accumulated developmental capabilities across successive policy cycles [15].

The proposed DCI also follows a broader trend in governance research toward multidimensional measurement based on observable institutional indicators. The Worldwide Governance Indicators, for example, combine multiple data sources to assess dimensions including government effectiveness, political stability, rule of law and control of corruption, while emphasizing that broad cross-country measures should not substitute for context-specific institutional diagnosis [13, 16]. The DCI similarly treats measurement as a diagnostic instrument rather than a substitute for causal analysis.

The index could combine seven dimensions: *Project Continuity, Budget Continuity, Policy Continuity, Institutional Memory, Administrative Capacity, Service Continuity, and Citizen Trust*. Each dimension could be scored on a standardized scale, for example from 0 to 100, using multiple observable indicators. The dimensions could initially be given equal weights, with alternative weighting schemes tested through sensitivity analysis in subsequent empirical research.

Table 1. *Dimensions, Illustrative Indicators, and Measurement Scale of the Proposed Developmental Continuity Index.*

DCI Dimension	Illustrative Indicators	Possible Measurement
Project Continuity	Completion, maintenance, functional integration, appropriate expansion, and absence of	0–100

DCI Dimension	Illustrative Indicators	Possible Measurement
	avoidable discontinuation	
Budget Continuity	Stability of allocations, timely fund releases, and protection of committed expenditure	0–100
Policy Continuity	Retention, adaptation, and implementation of viable inherited policies	0–100
Institutional Memory	Preservation of records, procedures, expertise, lessons, and organizational knowledge	0–100
Administrative Capacity	Staffing, coordination, technical capability, and implementation capacity	0–100
Service Continuity	Continuity, accessibility, reliability, and quality of services generated by inherited assets	0–100
Citizen Trust	Public confidence in the continuity, reliability, responsiveness, and fairness of development governance	0–100

A simple illustrative formulation could therefore be expressed as:

$$DCI = (PC + BC + PoC + IM + AC + SC + CT) / 7$$

where *PC* represents Project Continuity, *BC* Budget Continuity, *PoC* Policy Continuity, *IM* Institutional Memory, *AC* Administrative Capacity, *SC* Service Continuity, and *CT* Citizen Trust. Higher scores would indicate stronger developmental continuity, while lower scores would indicate greater developmental discontinuity and potential vulnerability of accumulated public value.

The DCI could also be applied longitudinally. Researchers could calculate scores before and after a change of government, or at successive stages of a project's life cycle, to identify whether developmental continuity strengthens, weakens, or remains stable across political transitions. Such application could permit comparison across projects, governments, sectors, and countries and could help identify which dimensions of continuity are most vulnerable to political change. For example, a project may receive relatively high scores for physical completion but low scores for budget continuity, institutional memory, or service continuity. This would allow researchers to identify forms of developmental weakening that may not be visible through conventional project-completion measures alone.

The equal-weighting approach is intended only as an initial and transparent specification. Future empirical studies could assign different weights on the basis of theoretical justification, expert assessment, statistical validation, or country-specific evidence. Researchers could also develop sector-specific versions of the index where appropriate, while retaining the seven core dimensions to preserve comparability. The indicators should likewise be operationalized through observable evidence rather than subjective judgments wherever possible, including project records, budget allocations and releases, policy documents, institutional records, staffing and administrative data, service-delivery indicators, and systematically collected measures of citizen confidence.

The index should not, however, be interpreted as evidence of developmental erasure by itself. A low DCI could result from legitimate policy revision, financial crisis, technical failure, institutional weakness, changing public priorities, legal constraints, or other non-political factors. Its analytical value would therefore increase when combined with the operational indicators identified in Section 3.2, particularly evidence concerning political attribution, selective discontinuation, absence of transparent technical justification, institutional distancing, and measurable public-value loss. The DCI measures the *condition of developmental continuity*; the broader DET framework provides the analytical basis for investigating *why that continuity has weakened*.

This distinction is methodologically important. A decline in the DCI following a political transition would identify a pattern requiring explanation, but would not by itself establish politically motivated developmental erasure. Researchers would therefore need to combine index scores with process tracing, documentary analysis, project-level evidence, budgetary records, administrative records, interviews, and comparative analysis to determine whether observed discontinuity resulted primarily from political motivation, technical shortcomings, financial constraints, executive failure, institutional weakness, or a combination of factors.

The DCI can consequently function as a *longitudinal diagnostic instrument* rather than a stand-alone causal measure. It would enable future researchers to move from the conceptual proposition that development may be interrupted across political transitions toward systematic observation of where, when, and how continuity is weakened. In this sense, the DCI provides an empirical bridge between DET's theoretical concern with developmental erasure and measurable changes in public value, institutional capacity, and citizen experience.

6.2. Developmental Continuity Audit

Every major political transition should trigger an independent Developmental Continuity Audit. Inherited projects should be classified as: i) continue; ii) modify; iii) investigate; iv) suspend; or v) terminate. The classification should be evidence-based rather than politically determined.

6.3. Institutional Memory Protection

Major public institutions should maintain comprehensive institutional records covering policies, projects, expenditure, procurement, implementation, evaluations, failures, lessons, and outcomes. Institutional memory should be treated as a form of *public capital.*

6.4. Independent Review of Major Cancellations

Large public projects should not be cancelled solely through political or ministerial discretion. Above a predetermined financial threshold, independent professional review should be mandatory. This would help distinguish genuine public-interest decisions from politically motivated developmental discontinuity.

6.5. Cross-Government Development Commitments

Strategic national investments should receive protection from ordinary partisan competition. Major infrastructure, universities, hospitals, research institutions, national connectivity systems, and strategic development programs should be evaluated as national assets rather than partisan achievements. Political disagreement should concern how public value can be improved, not whether inherited value should be discarded because of its political origin.

6.6. Measuring Governance by Outcomes

Good governance should be assessed through: service delivery; efficiency; accountability; transparency; institutional independence; public participation; public value; and citizen trust. The number of reforms announced, institutions renamed, or structures reorganized should not itself be treated as evidence of governance quality.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has argued that development in developing countries can be undermined not only by corruption, inadequate resources, weak institutions, or poor policy choices, but also by politically induced discontinuity.

The principal theoretical contribution is *Developmental Erasure Theory (DET)*. DET extends Democratic Formalism Theory (DFT) from democratic institutions to development governance. DFT identifies the possibility that democratic institutions can survive formally while their substantive qualities deteriorate [2]. DET proposes an analogous phenomenon in development: institutions, programs, and projects may continue to exist formally while accumulated public value is progressively destroyed.

The theory does not oppose reform. It opposes the political substitution of evidence.

A government should investigate corruption. It should terminate economically irrational projects. It should reform dysfunctional institutions. But it should not destroy accumulated public value merely to erase the political identity of a predecessor.

The evidence from Ghana demonstrates that unfinished projects can consume a substantial share of local investment [10]. Peru demonstrates how political cycles can influence project selection, funding, and completion [7]. Bangladesh illustrates how contractor, financial, and administrative complications can leave partially completed infrastructure unusable and impose direct costs on citizens [9].

The ultimate loss, however, is larger than recorded expenditure. It is *developmental time.* Financial resources can sometimes be recovered. Infrastructure can be reconstructed. Institutions can be rebuilt. But years lost through discontinuity cannot be recovered.

The recommendations are therefore straightforward:

First, establish independent Developmental Continuity Audits after major political transitions.

Second, distinguish corruption investigation from institutional destruction.

Third, require evidence-based public-value assessments before cancelling major inherited projects.

Fourth, legally and administratively protect institutional memory.

Fifth, require independent professional review for major project cancellations.

Sixth, create cross-government commitments around strategic national development investments.

Seventh, develop a Developmental Continuity Index.

Eighth, make project continuation and cancellation decisions transparent to citizens.

Ninth, evaluate good governance through outcomes rather than institutional renaming or structural novelty.

Finally, recognize development as a national accumulation process rather than a partisan possession.

The deepest conclusion of DET is therefore both analytical and normative: *Governments are temporary custodians of permanent public assets.* A government has the right to correct its predecessor. It does not have the right to waste the accumulated resources, knowledge, time, and opportunities of the people merely to establish political distance from the past. Development should therefore move beyond government-to-government competition toward generation-to-generation accumulation. Only then can political change become a mechanism for developmental accumulation rather than developmental reset.

Abbreviations

DCI	Developmental Continuity Index
DET	Developmental Erasure Theory
DFT	Democratic Formalism Theory
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LGED	Local Government Engineering Department

Author Contributions

Zahurul Alam: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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