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Digital Pitfalls: The Politics of Digitalization in Bangladesh**Abdul Aziz**

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Abstract

The state-led investment in digital infrastructure under the ruling party's political agenda of "Digital Bangladesh" has given rise to scholarly and policy debates, especially around issues of digital surveillance and media censorship. Such concerns have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. This essay analyses contemporary Bangladesh in the context of emerging trends related to the digitalization of society. In particular, I employ the concept of "digital pitfalls" to explore the state's use of surveillance and the politics of fear to limit freedom of expression and silence critical voices in the digital age.

Keywords: digital surveillance, media censorship, social media, freedom of expression, Digital Security Act

Digital Pitfalls: The Politics of Digitalization in Bangladesh

The recent digital transformation in Bangladesh has brought many immediate benefits. It has created new jobs and boosted innovative business and services. Nevertheless, when it comes to creating a democratic and inclusive society, the story is not that simple. While the state-led investment in digital infrastructure under the ruling party's political agenda of "Digital Bangladesh" accelerates the country's digitalization process, digital surveillance and media censorship mechanisms (such as Digital Security Act) have seriously inhibited debate and dissent. While digitalization has created some opportunities, the leap into creating digital infrastructures has also engendered new vulnerabilities and reaffirmed power hierarchies within Bangladeshi society. I argue that these vulnerabilities constitute a "digital pitfall." To understand the disjuncture between fair and transparent policy deployment and biased political intervention, this essay critically illustrates the "digital pitfalls," or in other words, the dangers of politicizing the expanding digital ecology in Bangladesh.

Recent scholarship highlights how governments employ seemingly banal surveillance practices and digital policies to restrict and suppress citizens' agency in order to impede democratic debate and dissent (Behrouzian, Nisbet, Dal, & Çarkoğlu, 2016; Busch, Theiner, & Breindl, 2017). Foucault's (1979) concept of governmentality suggests that state-sponsored technologies of constrained or regulated freedom have the power to make citizens voluntarily obedient to top-down models of docile citizenship. Feenberg (2005) argues that while technology may offer some benefit to ordinary citizens and disenfranchised groups, ultimately it reinforces power hierarchies in such a way that "technological power is the principle form of power" in a society (p. 49).

A recent cross-national study of Bangladesh and other countries shows how the government's online surveillance practices obstruct civic participation and processes of democratization (Stoycheff, Burgess, & Martucci, 2020). Bangladesh has been experiencing a significant decline of democracy as a result of various factors including the employment of legal measures to restrict free expression of views and ideas within society (Riaz, 2020). While there has been significant growth in the media industry in Bangladesh, a recent study found that a corrupt nexus between powerful political parties and media has led to the stifling of press freedom (Riaz & Rahman, 2021). Most media outlets in the country are owned and controlled by industrialists who have the patronage and backing of the ruling party, Bangladesh Awami League (BAL). Thus, the boundaries of journalism and digital public spheres are restricted by the regime with the support of politically backed media owners, and, in short, the two powerful institutions of state and corporate media work together to push their own interests. More specifically, such boundaries are enforced through strategies such as the politicization of the journalists' associations, (such as the Association of Television Channel Owners (ATCO) and the National Press Club), the imprisonment of journalists, the use of tailored advertisements, production of politically motivated television shows, and even the removal of published news stories or articles for "content violation" in the absence of any legal evidence. For instance, a daily newspaper (*Amardesh*), television channel (*Diganta TV*), and online news sites (*Netra News* and *Joban*) were all shut down or blocked due to their pro-opposition or anti-government stance.

In particular, activists have expressed their concerns over the government's weaponization of the Digital Security Act (DSA) to limit press freedom and repress critical voices in digital spaces (Adams, 2019). Proposed by the ruling party, (BAL) and signed into law in October 2018, the Digital Security Act contains several laws related to Bangladeshi media and creative industries. In fact, in 2017, 76 journalists faced criminal charges, while in

2018, more than 90 cases were brought against rights activists, journalists and opposition figures under the DSA. Furthermore, the DSA, whose provisions are vague, has been used by the government to threaten journalists and political opponents on the pretext of battling so-called “fake news” and disinformation.

The growing media control by the government has become even more apparent in the context of COVID-19 as the government has weaponized the DSA to silence dissident and critical voices on social media. It could be argued that the pandemic has been mobilized as a pretext to control critical voices on digital space through restrictive mechanisms. Many people have recently been detained over social media posts and news criticizing the government’s coronavirus management. According to BBC and Aljazeera reports, at least 50 people, including 20 journalists have faced criminal charges for spreading “false news” on Facebook and for reporting on the government’s mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic between April and May 2020. Overall, the pandemic has thus further exacerbated the government’s digital surveillance mechanisms and regressive press policies, precipitating a mis-information crisis on the impact of the pandemic and Coronavirus infections (Aziz, Islam, & Zakaria, 2020).

Meanwhile, the DSA also prohibits journalists from obtaining any documents, information and pictures of the government offices without “official consent,” which makes investigative journalism on urgent issues of public interest almost impossible. Additionally, several administrative bodies including the armed, intelligence and law enforcement agencies as well as the telecommunications regulatory authority, all have been working together to either impose censorship or intimidate anyone who criticizes the government, resulting in a widespread “culture of fear.”

According to a recent *Aljazeera* investigative documentary, the Bangladesh Army allegedly purchased “mass spying equipment,” such as IMSI-catchers, a mobile phone and a

web monitoring system. However, none of the mainstream media outlets in Bangladesh have reported on these allegations due to fear of the draconian DSA act as well as the compromised affiliation of media owners with the ruling party, presumably underlying their silence. Indeed, only a few editorials referenced the absence of coverage of this issue (e.g., “Why the silence?,” 2020), suggesting that “invisible fear” about the DSA has had a “chilling effect” on the media due to the threat of material repercussions, including imprisonment, harassment and even the disappearance of journalists. As media scholar James Carey once observed, “when democracy falters, journalism falters, and when journalism goes awry, democracy goes awry” (Carey, 2007, p. 13)—this would seem to be the case in Bangladesh.

As the Internet becomes increasingly accessible, social media and smartphones have become transformative agents through which the struggle for democracy and civic movements are organized across the globe. While the absence of meaningful electoral competition in Bangladesh has made it difficult for people to mobilize collectively within the political sphere, the growth of digitalization raises the question of how such digital transformations as cheap smartphones, which are enabling easier access to social media and other digital tools can propel Bangladesh towards democratic change. At the present juncture, this would not seem to be the case. This is because politicians and policymakers in Bangladesh have often focused on the introduction of digital technologies for economic development, however, they have not been supportive of its use for political purposes with the result that citizens’ rights of expressions and political engagement on social media have been undermined.

Instead, as the discussion above illustrates, Bangladesh has witnessed a trend of authoritarianism through digital surveillance and media censorship with the state blocking websites and deploying security agencies to monitor social media. In other words, everyday technology has become a tool by which the government oppressively controls the Internet

and social media users. At the same time, politically backed media outlets continue to act as “propaganda tools” supporting the government’s agenda while remaining silent about the regime’s restrictive mechanisms. Thus, it is no surprise that there is little significant and in - depth investigative reporting about election fraud, political oppression, money laundering, massive corruption and rural political elites’ illegal land grabbing in Bangladeshi media outlets.

Such tendencies are moreover often justified by political elites in the name of so called “political stability.” Thus, the debate over digital surveillance and press freedom in Bangladesh is critical because these developments pose a threat to a democratic and inclusive society. Consequently, I emphasize the need to recognize the “gap” between the emancipatory potential embodied in digitalization and actual politics that result in “digital pitfalls.” As social media become more and more accessible to wider swaths of the population, I also call for ensuring more democratic participation in the social and political landscape of Bangladesh.

However, the “pitfalls,” that include surveillance on social media and censorship of media content, cannot be reduced to technological concerns; they are intertwined with democratic political practice and regulatory intervention, and should be understood as such. Therefore, effective strategies for addressing these “pitfalls” in Bangladesh should include a focus on social, political and regulatory issues. Academics and policymakers should engage in critical debates and robust discussion to examine the implications of government control and power asymmetries as they relate to digital technologies in contemporary Bangladesh. At the same time, the media needs to have the freedom to deliver unfettered information that would facilitate the candid assessment of government performance and enhance democratic participation.

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