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Democracy's digital challenge

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Tracking citizens' digital footsteps has become a new norm and it's happening on all platforms. European nations have made new legislations limiting the ability of tracking netizens and imposed heavy penalties against quite a few tech giants for excessive harvesting of private data. But, in countries that suffer from varying democratic deficiencies or backsliding, governments are increasingly targeting voices of dissent and tightening their grips over the cybersphere.

If applications of the Digital Security Act (DSA) or its previous version, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act, are to be reviewed, the situation of internet freedom in Bangladesh is too grim. According to the Freedom House's annual report on Freedom on the Net 2021, "Internet freedom in Bangladesh reached an all-time low during the coverage period, as authorities continued to arrest users under the Digital Security Act (DSA) and as new evidence of the extent of government surveillance capabilities

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came to light." It notes that Bangladeshi authorities employ legal, administrative, and other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete legitimate content. Many cases are not publicly disclosed. Ministers have publicly announced that the government is acquiring technology and capability to monitor social media posts and filter contents deemed harmful to them.

Developments in Bangladesh and countries around the world have shown

freedom on the net is inseparable from democratic rights and practices. Vibrancy of the democratic structure of a country would determine the state of that freedom. Weakening of democracy is a sign of likely emergence of digital tyranny and the combination will create an Orwellian state.

Restoration and preservation of democracy and civil rights are the only ways that can prevent such a nightmare. Citizens' activism to make digital development inclusive, transparent and democratic is therefore quite crucial.

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