



Is the idea of a democracy not as appealing to Bangladeshis now as it was only a couple decades ago?

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF DEMOCRACY

# Do Bangladeshis want democracy?



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The recent survey by Open Society Foundations titled “Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?” appears to have rekindled some hope as it found that, globally, 86 percent people have faith in democracy. Perhaps it’s even more encouraging for us as the percentage of faithfuls for democracy in Bangladesh is five percent higher than the global average. However, to overlook the small print would mean not noticing the danger signals as democratic backsliding globally, and in our homeland, could lead us to a nightmarish situation.

It is already ironic that while we are observing the International Day of Democracy today, the most authoritative evaluation of the state of democracy worldwide, V-Dem Institute’s Democracy Report 2023, noted that “Advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years” were “wiped out” in 2022. V-Dem Institute, under the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, produces the second global dataset on democracy for 202 countries from 1789 to 2022. V-Dem describes Bangladesh as an elected autocracy and places it in the group of countries that fall in the bottom 10-20 percent in its Liberal Democracy Index along with countries like Iran, Congo, Somalia, Cambodia, Russia, and a few others.

Judging the share of world GDP by regime type, it observes that “Autocracies are becoming more powerful economically, and their numbers are growing... Conversely, democracies are gradually declining in their share of global economic wealth. If these trends continue, autocracies will surpass democracies in economic power over the next decades.” The V-dem report also says that the global balance of trade power is tilting in

favour of autocracies. But democracies are becoming less and less reliant on each other for trade. It notes that autocracies are becoming less and less dependent on democracies for both their exports and imports, but that democracies’ dependence on autocracies is increasing.

Freedom House, a leading think tank from the United States which claims that it has been “systematically tracking the most pressing threats to democracy and freedom around the globe,” also ranks Bangladesh as a country that is “partly free.” In Freedom House’s scoring, Bangladesh scores only 15 out of 40 for Political Rights and 25 out of 60 in Civil Liberties.

Amid such grim and depressing assessments, the Open Society survey respondents’ high level of faith in democracy and strong urge for making the powerful accountable must be acknowledged as a sign of hope. Earlier, V-Dem Institute in its report also noted this rebound in public mood and termed it “defiance in the face of autocratisation.”

According to the Open Society report, in addition to expressing faith in democracy well above the global average, Bangladeshis also valued human rights in higher numbers than the world average. The country was unique among the 30 countries polled, in that participants from Bangladesh showed a higher preference for prioritising civil and political rights (36 percent) over economic and social rights (28 percent). Another notable finding is the considerable support for accountability when rights are abused. While globally 63 percent respondents agreed that “tools such as travel bans and freezing bank accounts are useful ways to bring human rights violators to justice,” the support for these in

Bangladesh reaches 79 percent.

The small print in this survey, however, is quite worrying as authoritarian rule – either by the army or a leader who “does not bother” with parliament or elections – still appeals to nearly one-third of respondents globally. In Bangladesh, the number is nearly double the global average. One may wonder whether the last decade of absence of an effective parliament, coupled with the concentration of power to the executive and systematic capture of institutions by the state, have contributed to the normalisation of autocratisation.

Another finding of the Open Society survey that should ring alarm bells is that, globally, most of those who positively view authoritarian rule are aged between 18 and 35 years, closely followed by the group aged between 36 and 55 years. If we consider Bangladesh’s demographic composition, about two-thirds of our population belonging to the relevant age group could well be a reason for such a high level of preference for authoritarianism. The absence of democratic exercises in institutions of higher learning, like universities and colleges, could also be contributing to young people’s subjugation to power.

This year’s theme for International Day of Democracy is “Empowering the Next Generation.” This can only happen if we can ensure their rights to express their views freely and without any fear, and provide the necessary space to do so, too. Universities and colleges should urgently take steps to hold student union elections, encouraging them to participate in national conversations on issues about their future. The government should also remove all barriers to freedom of expression and organisation and ensure a free and fair election.

Most of Bangladesh’s young people, like the rest of the nation, did not have a chance to vote in the last two elections. There’s a clear warning in the Open Society survey which indicated that 70 percent of Bangladeshis fear that political unrest will lead to violence next year. Only a fair, free, and genuine election can bring an end to the continuing political crisis and rising tensions.

# Independent media’s latest stink bomb: Fake writers



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

Attacks on independent media constitutes one of the biggest threats to democracy all over the world. While we are all familiar with how political thuggery and laws are used and designed to muzzle the freedom of independent media, the latest blow is the onslaught of fake news, often used as propaganda for governments, both local and foreign. Journalism is now being attacked by a new virus: op-eds written by fake writers.

In the “old days” of journalism, when it came to news, journalists considered the most important aspect of it to be verifying information, especially if there were allegations made against a person or entity in a report. This was done by including multiple sources and conducting thorough fact-checking. When it came to features or op-eds that seemed a little too well-written to be true, the easiest thing was to do a Google search of a paragraph or phrase and, sure enough, we would find the usual copy-paste job of the plagiarist. Unfortunately, many eminent writers have been caught using such unethical means which were then exposed with the help of internet searches. Sometimes the real writers contacted newspapers and expressed their outrage at their writing being lifted by others without any kind of acknowledgement. Other times, it was a gut feeling that a sub-editor had of “something not feeling right.”

But now, editors have another big headache in trying to catch fake writers. For editors of English-language papers and media outlets in

media. The articles were written with a particular agenda – to praise government policies or showcase arguments in favour of particular countries. Using fake photos and bios, these “writers” have been fooling the media (*The Daily Star* included), and consequently the public, for quite some time.

According to the AFP report, this is part of a “sustained campaign” of disinformation by “unknown actors” ahead of the national election due by the end of January next year, and

worse, by bots. Thus, the scope of creating a platform for new writers and fresh perspectives has become more restricted. It also means that media outlets have to be extra-careful and only publish articles or opinion pieces written by known writers or those that have been referred to by reliable people.

For the public, it is a conundrum almost impossible to solve. Research has found that most people get their news from social media posts, which makes them vulnerable to fake news or news that is skewed to promote the agenda of some group, usually a political party. We have seen how this has been done, especially before elections in the US, India, and in our own country. But this onslaught of ghostwriters, with believable profiles and credentials, will create a new level of vulnerability for the public who want to read expert

**According to the AFP report, this is part of a ‘sustained campaign’ of disinformation by ‘unknown actors’ ahead of the national election due by the end of January next year, and is intended to help the ruling party government. The fake writers pose as experts, usually academics from leading universities abroad. They even have fake headshots. The more these ‘experts’ get their articles published, the more difficult it is to detect their fraud. The AFP report also suggests that a rush of such articles appeared online around September 2022.**

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views and analysis of issues that affect them. Now that some imposters have been exposed to readers, it may make them question the real ones. This facilitates further brainwashing through informal channels (such as social media platforms like Facebook or vide streaming platforms like YouTube) where misinformation and baseless views freely circulate.

The task ahead for independent media, therefore,



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Shut out

6 Merchandise

11 Spinetingling

12 Puccini creation

13 Goller’s feat

14 Neighbor of Tibet

15 Brews, as tea

17 Can. neighbor

18 Great weight

19 Under

22 Neighbor of Mich.

23 Kitchen gadget

24 Stand for a painting

25 Pill type

27 Energy

30 Be-home-by

times

31 Dr.’s org.

32 Vacuum’s lack

33 Some tires

35 Messy sorts

38 Turn away

39 Caesar’s land

40 River of Africa

41 School paper

42 Door sign

DOWN

1 Handles

2 Michael of

3 “Spotlight”

3 Pressing

4 River of Africa

5 Doesn’t fall behind

6 Took the title

7 King Kong, for

one

8 Good name

9 Correcting aid

10 Light lunch

16 Playground sights

20 Probe’s destination

21 Completely

24 Pole worker

25 Deceits

26 Blunders

27 Report card signer

28 Come into view

29 Flock leader

30 Social category

34 River to the Severn

36 Lingerie buy

WRITE FOR US, SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO [dsopinion@gmail.com](mailto:dsopinion@gmail.com).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42

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WEDNESDAY’S ANSWERS

FAUUST RADAR  
APLE AMORE  
TETON NOWIN  
OPTS UNDO  
MATERENT  
ACHEBOXTOPS  
THESEASTRO  
SYMPTOMHEN  
IRANREPS  
MENUAVOW  
EDUCEOMITS  
SITES TAROT  
HEEDS ENEMY

Bangladesh, a country where most people prefer to write in their mother tongue Bangla, finding people who write in English is challenging, and one of the greatest pleasures is to be sent opinion pieces that are well-written with salient arguments and, most of all, impressive credentials. If the writer claimed to be associated with reputable institutions (or at least reputable-sounding ones), and was found to have written other pieces for various well-known media outlets, and even had a believable author or social media profile, we thought it was enough to feel confident that they were who they said they were.

Now we know that this is not always the case.

A recent AFP investigation has found hundreds of articles in Bangladesh and international media written by authors that may not even exist. Now *that’s* a new stink bomb for the

called for “good columnists” to offset the deluge of “negative propaganda.”

Thus, the new challenge for the independent media is to detect which stories are being “fed” by certain quarters and which columnists are actually non-existent. This means that even if they have been published in various well-known platforms and say they are researchers from the University of Melbourne or some well-known or lesser known university abroad, we cannot automatically assume that they are real.

Editors, therefore, are in quite a fix. On the one hand, they are looking for fresh voices and a diversity of views to enliven their opinion pages, and on the other, they must be super vigilant of certain vested groups trying to push their agenda through opinion pieces written by ghostwriters or,

is quite daunting; though not impossible. The media must now adopt even more stringent and clever ways of gatekeeping with the help of technology. Just as AI-driven tools like ChatGPT can generate news content based on a few keywords and phrases which could be used to dupe an editor, extra layers of checking and verifying through other tools will be able to detect the fake writers. Independent media must collaborate with fact-checking groups to fight this new virus. In fact, the advent of fake writers, as with the emergence of fake news, will awaken the media from its complacency and force it to up its game in terms of not only basing stories and views on meticulously verified facts and figures, but also conducting thorough screenings of columnists and contributors to make sure their credentials and views are authentic. Surely, that’s a good thing.