

How smart is shutting down social media?

It will severely curtail people’s fundamental freedoms

After a prolonged internet shutdown that all but brought the “Digital Bangladesh” to a standstill, broadband internet has finally been restored across the country. However, mobile internet is still suspended. More worryingly still, sources say that the government is unlikely to provide uninterrupted access to social media platforms anytime soon—at least until tech companies comply with its demands. State Minister for ICT Zunaid Ahmed Palak stated on Wednesday that social media platforms, particularly Facebook and YouTube, have not been complying with Bangladesh’s laws; as such, Facebook, along with Meta’s other popular platforms such as Messenger and WhatsApp—and ByteDance’s TikTok—will remain blocked indefinitely.

The internet was shut down at the height of the protests around 9pm on July 18, with the government offering conflicting accounts of why it occurred from the very beginning. While it claims that the shutdown occurred due to an attack on the data centres in the capital’s Mohakhali area, The Daily Star, upon visiting the centres, found no sign of damage to the building that housed them—to say nothing of the fact that it’s a technical impossibility for an entire country’s internet to be disrupted simply because of a localised disruption.

We are disturbed that the government ordered such a shutdown, which lasted for over five days—which, as highlighted by UN experts, represent a dramatic means of limiting fundamental freedoms and contravene international law. But that it did so under false pretext can only add to people’s growing mistrust of the government at a time when the latter needs to assure the former of its commitment to democratic norms and human rights. The government’s decision to prolong the ban on social media will only confirm the public’s suspicion that it is doing so to control the free flow of information about the severity of the atrocities conducted during the protests. During such a vacuum, it is natural for misinformation and rumours to spread among a population starved of information.

We have observed with increasing alarm the government’s stringent measures to curtail digital freedoms over the decade, from arbitrarily arresting people under the draconian Digital Security Act (now the Cyber Security Act) for their social media posts, to the surveillance of private data of citizens, to demanding that tech companies block certain users or content or provide their personal details. We have seen such measures being intensified in the aftermath of mass protests. We urge the government to realise that blocking social media indefinitely will only fuel panic and resentment and further alienate it from the public.

Putting aside the obvious violations of our digital rights and freedoms of speech and expression, what is to happen to the numerous businesses that are now dependent on social media for their very survival? How is the government to commensurate its grandiloquent claims of building a “Smart Bangladesh,” while taking increasingly unsmart measures to restrict people’s access to digital platforms and in the process jeopardising their livelihoods? Cutting off Bangladesh from the world at large is a great disservice to the people of this country when the government would have us believe that we are riding the waves of digitisation.

Enhance prison security measures

Narsingdi jailbreak exposes security lapses in prisons

The July 19 Narsingdi jailbreak, amid a breakdown of law and order that followed violent clashes in different parts of the country, sends out a chilling message. This was the first time such an incident occurred in Bangladesh, in which outsiders attacked a jail and aided the escape of all 826 inmates of the prison. Some were reportedly even forced to flee.

The way the incident unfolded raises questions about police intelligence, preparedness, and timely action, and the overall security lapses in our prisons. According to media reports, there were violent clashes, which left two students dead, in the areas adjacent to the prison on July 18. However, on July 19, at around 1:30pm, our correspondent saw rioters picketing, but there was no major police patrol in the area. A few police personnel initially tried to defend the prison when rioters stormed the establishment at around 4pm. The jail superintendent, too, alleged that police did not arrive at the scene before 10pm. Why extra security forces were not deployed around the prison area where deadly clashes had taken place just the day before is puzzling.

The attackers used local weapons and crude bombs, and detectives suspect that six minibuses were used to carry the fleeing inmates. Such descriptions raise the question if the attack was preplanned. It was certainly well-organised. How did our intelligence wings remain in the dark about this? Considering that the prison housed nine inmates belonging to militant outfits like the JMB and Ansarullah Bangla Team, the prison authorities should have been extra careful anyway.

We have often called attention to the security lapses in our prisons which allow extremists to mobilise within the confined, overcrowded walls. The media has reported about mobile phones being smuggled into the prisons many times. Reportedly, about 300 of the inmates who fled have surrendered to court so far. But their successful escape, especially that of the militants, does put a serious question mark on our security apparatuses. We hope that law enforcers will promptly track down the remaining escapees, bring them to book, and recover the stolen arms and ammunition. As we reflect on the violence that shook the country last week, we need to take note of our security lapses so that this kind of incident is not repeated.

How can the rulers erase so much bloodstain?



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As of Thursday, at least 156 people have died in six days’ of violence, per the tally recorded by this daily. The exact number of deaths is unknown; there is no certainty if it will ever come to light. One state minister said, “If law enforcement agencies come under attack, they will return fire. It is only natural that there would be some casualties.”

On July 16, we saw the cold-blooded killing of Abu Sayed, student of Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur and a coordinators of the quota reform movement, at the hands of police. A viral video of his final moments showed he was quite far from law enforcement. He posed no threat, yet the police member shot him. This does not match the government’s narrative.

Within such a short period of time, an unprecedented level of bloodshed took place. This exceeded even the number of deaths during the nine years’ of movement against Ershad’s autocratic regime, the biggest movement in independent Bangladesh. That movement was violent too; it saw arson and vandalism, too.

Now, the main question is: why did the situation escalate last week, resulting in so many deaths and injuries?

The quotasystem had been abolished following the quota reform movement in 2018. During a press conference on July 14 this year, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said she had been “utterly dismayed” and had “abolished the quotas” at that time. A circular was issued accordingly. Challenging that circular, some freedom fighters’ children filed a writ, responding to which the High Court annulled it on June 5 this year, effectively reinstating the quota system. The government appealed against this decision on July 6. Not relying on the government, students of public universities began their movement again, and it was completely peaceful. On July 9, two students filed a petition, which led to the court issuing a stay order against the earlier verdict. In spite of the stay order, protests continued. The Appellate Division set the hearing date for July 21. In the meantime, several ministers made comments about the movement, such as the protesters were not following the law, they are

defying the constitution, the issue must be resolved through court, the government will not bypass the court, etc. Some of those comments were condescending towards the protesters. Still, they remained peaceful.

How, then, did the protest take such a violent turn?

On July 14, the protesters submitted a memorandum to the president, saying they would launch an all-out protest if their demands were not met within the next 24 hours.

During the press conference on



FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

the same day, the PM asked, “If the freedom fighters’ grandchildren won’t get quotas, should the grandchildren of Razakars [Pakistani collaborators] get quotas?”

In response, DU students brought out processions that night. They chanted loudly, “Who are you, who am I? Razakar, Razakar,” which naturally caused an uproar. However, the students claim that the full version of the slogan was, “Who are you, who am I? Razakar, Razakar. Says who? Says who? Shoirachar, Shoirachar (autocrat).”

On July 15, AL General Secretary and Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) would give a “fitting reply” to the student protesters who had “labelled themselves as Razakars and showed arrogance.” BCL President Saddam Hussain said, “BCL

is prepared to tackle this (quota reform movement) through political means.”

That afternoon, BCL launched its attack on the protesters.

On July 16, the protesters and BCL both called for a rally in front of DU’s Raju Memorial at 12pm and 3pm, respectively. When the unarmed general students started gathering near Raju Memorial, BCL activists attacked them with metal rods, sticks, hockey sticks and guns. Many students were injured, and eventually, the protesters were dispersed.

At night, BCL members, aided by the police, searched for and found the protesters in DU, RU and JU’s residential halls and beat them up. Many were driven out of the halls.

This provoked the protesters further. On July 17, the DU coordinators of the quota reform movement asked the students to gather at Shaheed Minar with sticks. This is the first time that the protesters took up a weapon in this

movement. The same situation arose in JU and RU. Police, along with armed BCL members, conducted waves of assaults against the protesters in all three campuses.

The protesters managed to put up a strong resistance as they were bigger as a group. By that night, the members and leaders—even the female ones—of BCL, a student organisation that is disconnected from the general students, were all driven out of the residential halls and the campuses of DU, JU and RU.

A major reason why a peaceful movement became violent is the attempt to quash it using BCL’s muscle power and police-BGB’s mindless shooting. BCL’s “Helmet Bahini” indiscriminately used sticks and hockey sticks on the protesters. Who are the armed individuals, who were photographed along with the

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

We are all biomass



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In a recent commentary, philosopher Michael Marder looks beyond the immediate horror of what is taking place in Gaza to consider the ontological implications of what we see in the long-distance drone shots of the ruins. Allow me to quote him at length:

“... Gaza is rapidly transformed into a dump, where high-rise buildings and human bodies, ecosystems ... and orchards are mutilated beyond recognition and reduced to organic-inorganic rubble. A solidarity with dumplified lives, places, and worlds requires something other than compassion. So what could that be?”

Marder’s answer is to propose “another kind of solidarity based on the shared condition of biomass.” To say, “I am biomass” is to “identify with a vanishing life,” to see Gaza as “a condensed and particularly blunt version of a planetary tendency.” The rendering of all life into mere biomass—chaotic heaps of organic and inorganic matter—can be found everywhere, but it has been “accelerated in Gaza at the cutting edge of the most recent technologies of devastation. Rather than compassion, then, what

is required is the solidarity of the dumped, who dare assert, ‘We are biomass.’”

This notion of biomass echoes an insight from philosopher Levi Bryant, “In an age where we are faced with the looming threat of monumental climate change, it is irresponsible to draw our distinctions in such a way as to exclude nonhuman actors.” And yet, in today’s capitalist societies, efforts to mobilise a large majority of people in the name of our shared ecological condition consistently fail. We all know that we are part of nature and fully dependent on it for our survival, yet this recognition does not translate into action. The problem is that our choices and outlook are influenced by many other forces, such as biased media reporting, economic pressures on workers, material limitations, and so forth.

In her 2010 book *Vibrant Matter*, philosopher Jane Bennett has us picture a polluted trash site, where not only humans but also rotting trash, worms, insects, abandoned machines, chemical poisons, and so on each play some active role. This scene of biomass exists on the same spectrum

as the situation in Gaza, though the latter is an extreme case. Around the world, there are numerous large physical spaces, especially outside the developed West, where “digital waste” is dumped, and thousands work separating glass, metals, plastic, mobile phones, and other man-made materials from the chaotic heaps. One such slum, Agbogbloshie, near the

What makes the exploitation of biomass different from the capitalist logic is that it accepts a chaotic wasteland as our basic predicament. Though this condition can be partly exploited, it can never be abolished.

centre of Accra (the capital of Ghana), is known as “Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Life in these environments is a horror show, and the communities that live in them are strictly hierarchically organised, with children forced to do the most dangerous work, under extremely hazardous conditions. Yet, because this exploitation of biomass appears ecologically attractive (under the banner of “recycling”), it responds perfectly to the demands of modern technology: “In the technological age,” writes philosopher Mark Wrathall, “what matters to us most is getting the ‘greatest possible use’ out of

BCL men, assaulting the students? Are they BCL members? It is assumed that they may have been outsiders, whose machete attacks injured many students, which further enraged the protesters.

Police and BGB fired lethal and non-lethal bullets at the students, as evidenced by published videos and photos in newspapers. This is not the conventional way of dispersing a protest. It seems it was not the police or BGB’s goal to fire shots in order to scare the protesters and disperse them; it seemed they meant to shoot at the protesters.

Throughout the protest, the government repeatedly mentioned a “third party.” Some intelligence high-ups mentioned that certain elements had “infiltrated” the movement.

The quota reform movement was led by anti-discrimination students’ movement. This apolitical movement gained popular support from the entire student community. Undoubtedly, certain members of Chhatra Dal, Shibir and leftists, along with BCL members also joined the cause. More than 50 BCL leaders resigned from their posts and aligned themselves with this movement. But the leadership and majority participation came from general students. Chhatra Dal and Shibir never came close to assuming the leadership.

Yet, the government tried to contain the movement with a headline and brutal approach, which raised casualties.

Why did AL leader Obaidul Quader, who is a former journalist and veteran politician with roots in student politics, want to use BCL to deal with such a widely supported movement? Now he can never escape the blame for what happened; his part in this mayhem will be revisited time and time again.

Even Law Minister Anisul Huq, who is an experienced lawyer, failed to show prudence. By the time he asked to sit with the students and announced intent to expedite the appeal hearing date, the situation had already spiralled out of control. Had the government sat with the students for a discussion beforehand, the situation could have unfolded differently.

This reminds me of Pablo Neruda’s poem “I’m explaining a few things”:

Come and see the blood in the streets.

Come and see the blood in the streets.

Come and see the blood in the streets!

Since independence, we have not seen so much blood being spilt during a movement. On whose hands is this blood? Can the rulers answer this question?

Translated from Bangla by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan.