

Misinformation campaigns and the future of Bangladesh-India relations



Zillur Rahman is the executive director of the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) and a television talk show host. His X handle is @zillur.

ZILLUR RAHMAN

After the fall of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina last week, Bangladesh was thrown into a critical state of instability and uncertainty. There was no government till Dr Muhammad Yunus took oath as the chief adviser of the interim government on August 8. During this period, the country saw an outburst of violence and crime, which was the outcome of both pent-up political frustration against the ruling party of 15 years and the result of some bigotry, and the machinations of bad actors trying to take advantage of the lawlessness for personal gains. One of the most dangerous situations that can happen in a country is the chaos, crime, and destruction that take place after an authoritarian force is forced to abdicate. Unfortunately, Bangladesh is in such a situation.

However, this issue is not just a domestic phenomenon. Several influential groups inside Bangladesh's largest neighbour have taken the initiative to create a narrative that

It almost feels like, with the fall of Sheikh Hasina, some elements in India are behaving as though India has suffered a great loss. It is my humble opinion that, instead of immediately choosing to take the easily monetisable culture-war talking points, the enlightened Indian cultural leaders should first push for a democratic Bangladesh where actual political discourse can take place without fear of getting killed or disappeared by security forces.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

this momentary lawlessness caused by the thoughtless abdication of the former prime minister is the prelude of a Bangladesh where bigotry and religious fundamentalism are going to flare up.

The main platform where such notions are being sensationalised at the moment is X, formerly known as Twitter. Many verified accounts on X are reporting rumours as actual news and sometimes just outright propagating fake news. What's worse is that this propagation of fake news has also been noted in Indian mainstream media, as

well as among popular Indian social media personalities.

It is true that there have been concerning reports of violence against minority communities. Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Oikya Parishad reported 205 incidents of persecution of members of minority communities across 52 districts. Gobinda Pramanik, general secretary of

called for protection of the minority communities, which was answered by many. Leaders of BNP, Jamaat and other parties, too, instructed their functionaries to ensure that Hindu homes were not attacked and temples were protected.

But against this backdrop, we saw Republic TV from India spreading rumours and making strange claims.

and misleading propaganda.

The sudden upsurge in misinformation and disinformation on Indian social media coincidentally aligns with a seemingly coordinated rise in criminal activities and vandalism all over Bangladesh. Inside the country, some people are also taking to social media and calling this another attempt by pro-AL forces in India, as well as RAW, to fabricate a narrative of communalism in order to plunge Bangladesh into further unrest and instability. Needless to say, there is no evidence for any of this. Rumours beget rumours. This kind of misinformation treadmill needs to be stopped immediately lest it leads to further instances of violence, and makes the people-to-people divide between Bangladesh and India even worse.

Although it seems the Indian authorities have overtly asked for people to stop propagating fake news regarding what is happening in Bangladesh, there are many in India who firmly believe that Bangladesh is about to fall under a fundamentalist rule the moment the next general elections are held. It almost feels like, with the fall of Sheikh Hasina, some elements in India are behaving as though India has suffered a great loss. It is my humble opinion that, instead of immediately choosing to take the easily monetisable culture-war talking points, the enlightened Indian cultural leaders should first push for a democratic Bangladesh where actual political discourse can take place without fear of getting killed or disappeared by security forces. The people of Bangladesh don't need to be kept "in check" by a convenient autocrat. That is the narrative of a now-disgraced political party that has proven to lie repeatedly to the people and the world to keep power. The people of India must not fall for this narrative ever again.

India must realise the shortcomings of its foreign policy regarding Bangladesh. These should be fundamental lessons from history. Never trust a dictator to keep power. A robust and mature democracy is the only reliable international partner. Right now, India needs to revamp its approach towards Bangladesh entirely. Now is the time for genuine track 2 diplomacy. It is time for genuine people-to-people relations to ensure long-term, sustainable friendship with its most significant geostrategic partner. And this kind of change must start at home.

Bangladesh National Hindu Mahajot, recently made a video statement about the matter, in which he said that, after Sheikh Hasina's resignation on August 5, the Hindu community in Bangladesh thought they would be attacked in a massive way and there would be incidents of arson. According to the general secretary, houses of some Hindu leaders of the Awami League who were very active, as well as those of some Muslim leaders, were attacked. He also stated that some opportunistic people attacked a few local temples. Coordinators of the anti-discrimination student movement

The West Bengal Police, in a statement posted from its official Facebook page, stated that the way some local TV channels are reporting on the current situation in Bangladesh is clearly communally inflammatory and against the norms of the Press Council of India. The West Bengal Police urged viewers to exercise their own judgement when viewing this type of coverage and keep in mind that the authenticity of the footage shown by the channel is not verified by any neutral third party. They requested people not to fall into the trap of one-sided, hateful

Can the government govern itself?

The importance of institutions in democratisation and good governance



Sarzah Yeasmin is a Boston-based Bangladeshi writer. She works at Harvard Kennedy School and is currently pursuing a micro-master's in data and economics from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

SARZAH YEASMIN

Party interests and national interests have seldom aligned in the history of Bangladesh, and because of the "party archies" there is an acute dearth of strong and credible institutions in the country that can create a landscape for fairer politics. It is still premature to say that the public have won without there being any concrete agenda for correcting the historical wrongs. Institution-building and institutionalisation of best practices are a decades-long process; so regardless of the promise this transitional moment holds in the history of the country, we should tread forward with some caution. The question is, can the government govern itself? In Bangladesh's case, that is a clear no. There is engagement, enthusiasm, and energy around the issues of substance, but the political vacuum might lead the country in a regressive direction if, ultimately, we have to turn towards the vanguard of old leadership. No work has been put into developing party institutions. The problem with parties in Bangladesh is that their activism relies on backward-looking and person-centric politics and revolves around a single leader. Cultish attitudes such as pledging allegiance to one leader over the state are performative, and such performance is normalised in Bangladeshi politics.

The reason why robust political institutions have not been built during the country's lifetime is because the state apparatus is used to serve the party in power, not the people. This is a part of the broader political culture, and it will be a difficult journey out. People do not want to replace dictators with dictators. Tangible liberation is only possible when Bangladeshis can meet their full potential, when minorities do not need special protection, when people can express their views without the fear of backlash; we are not there yet. In a democratic, free and fairer Bangladesh, Bangladeshis can be pro-any social or political party, pro-any brand, and advocate for their ideologies without repercussions. The political bifurcation and polarisation in the country is murky because it is not based on differences of any substantial policy issue between the opposing parties.

Each party, while in power, has depleted the state of its resources to cater to the top leadership's and party's goals at the expense of national interests. They have broken and bent their own laws without remorse and have blamed the opposition and mysterious third-party actors for failure and unrest.

Students fought for equality and justice. Valorising looting and misogynistic language takes away from the strong ethical ground on which the student movement is established. While the former ruling government was in power, there were many unsubstantiated claims that the movement had been hijacked by the opposition and "miscreants," but there is more danger of misappropriating the goals and the language of the movement now that it has accomplished a tangible political outcome. The iconoclastic nature of desecrating the founding father's statue is deeply disturbing—denying the founding narrative of the nation because we seem not to see beyond the euphoria of this moment. Regardless of Awami League's atrocities, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has his own indelible place in the birth of this nation.

The public display of disdain does not bode well and is not conducive to creating a culture where democracy can flourish. We need to come out of our culture of belittling, shaming, looting, and euphoric mob violence if we really want good and reliable leadership, because at the end of the day, leaders are the reflection of their people, and vice versa. A dictator cannot be a dictator without support. We need a radical change in how we envision good and effective leadership and build institutions that can allow good leadership. A strong leader is not one who projects power through terror. A strong leader knows how to initiate institutions, how to adapt, listen, delegate, how to activate people to meet their potential, and take a back seat when it is necessary. The country could go in any direction, although the participation of students and civil society in creating a framework for the interim government shows promise.

So, what should be the expectation from

the interim government? The country is in shambles as it grapples with significant economic and political challenges further intensified by the current vacuum. The interim government needs to prioritise institution-building since it is only an interim government, so that the country can be ready to be handed over to good leadership. It needs to prepare the country for a democratic and fair government and simultaneously create a

In a study exploring democratisation in 15 post-conflict societies that include countries like Bosnia, Cambodia, Liberia, and Timor Leste, it was found that the design of the interim governments is foundational in determining the democratisation prospects and processes of countries after a period of conflict or shock. Factors such as inclusion of conflicting parties and diverse actors in the transitional government, putting

point of the interim government; therefore, much more work needs to be put into this major assignment that would determine the success of this transitional moment.

Bangladeshis do not want a transfer of power from criminal regimes to criminal regimes, so the choices that voters have at the ballot box would be most important. Choice should not be limited to the lesser of the two evils. As Sarjis Alam, one of the leaders of the anti-discrimination student movement, aptly says, the movement is against the system of oppression, not a particular oppressor. The purpose of a democratic election would fail if it is used to elect an undemocratic leader.

The meetings that the army chief had with different political parties and civil society representatives to ponder on the future of the country are the kinds of meetings that should be part of the regular political practice. Governments should consult with the opposition and the public, work on laws, regulations, and national strategies collectively so that they can align with national interests. Practices of finding common ground and collective participation should be instilled in institutional mechanisms and processes for decision-making. There should be opportunities for civic engagement and scope for compassionate and smart leadership so leadership can be efficient in its response to the public—so that being in the streets is not the only way to get the country moving. Historically, Bangladesh has had vibrant student movements, but that has not translated into a vibrant democracy so far. The interim government, along with sustained efforts from students, will be instrumental in creating the landscape for effective democracy during this post-conflict phase.

The model of the transitional government often determines what comes next. One likely political challenge for the upcoming transitional government will be containing oppositional and retaliatory forces and bypassing episodes of unrest that curb chances of establishing an effective democracy. The point of the anti-discrimination movement is to break away from the vestiges of the old regimes and build an independent nation where public dignity is protected, where people's potential is met. This transitional moment will be vital in fashioning an effective succession—a legitimate, viable and a fair one, so that the mass atrocities that have been normalised throughout our political history are never repeated. Bangladeshis need institutions that they can trust, a system in service of the people, a government that can govern itself.



Nothing guarantees progress unless we implement measures of accountability and build institutions that are capable of being fair, transparent, non-partisan, and impartial in fulfilling their functions. FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

political culture that fosters good leadership through setting precedents of collaboration. The country cannot move forward without addressing regulations that allow political parties to drain state resources and use terror to secure party interests. Establishing good governance and effective public service delivery should be the interim leadership's prime goals. We are in a moment of negative peace—an undesirable government has been ousted—but that does not mean that historical wrongs will be addressed adequately. Nothing guarantees progress unless we implement measures of accountability and build institutions that are capable of being fair, transparent, non-partisan, and impartial in fulfilling their functions regardless of which party takes power.

institutional constraints on the executive and decentralisation of power and governance to local levels have led to higher successes in democratisation, as power-sharing de-escalate risks of subsequent conflicts. Delegation of power provides more definite channels for transparency and accountability and more chances for civic participation. The point about conducting a fair election soon has been mentioned repeatedly, both by military and political establishments and movement actors. However, the template of a fair election assumes that there are credible processes, institutions, options, and state capacity in place to conduct and sustain a fair election. Premature elections can lead to an outcome with non-democratic actors and unfair power-grabbers. Election is the end