

INDIAN MEDIA PROPAGANDA ABOUT BANGLADESH

What purpose does it actually serve?

Ramisa Rob
is in charge of Geopolitical Insights at The Daily Star.

Mahadev Ghosh
is an independent researcher and a columnist for Geopolitical Insights at The Daily Star.

RAMISA ROB AND MAHADEV GHOSH

Since the student-led mass uprising toppled Sheikh Hasina's regime in Bangladesh on August 5, a new reality dawned on the horizon for the nation grappling with uncertainty. But in neighbouring India's media, an alternate reality of what was not seen on the streets of Bangladesh emerged. An incessant flow of misinformation and largely disinformation flooded social media. The attacks on Hindu minorities, which did indeed take place, was put on steroids to distract and distract from the real sentiments of the movement.

There was a clear and apparent campaign by the "Godi media"—a term coined by veteran Ramon Magsaysay award-winning Indian journalist Ravish Kumar to refer to media outlets that share unobjective alliances with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—to paint Bangladesh's democratic uprising against its former dictator as purely "anti-Indian" (in a roundabout way) and claim it was engineered by everything ranging from religious extremist forces to the US "Deep State." The latter claim came from none other than Republic TV's Arnab Goswami, who was initially reportedly funded by a prominent BJP politician, but he claims the shares have been bought back. Appearing on his channel, Goswami said, "When Rahul Gandhi goes to London and says America must save Indian democracy, this is the intervention he is probably talking about," as he pointed towards videos of Gono Bhaban being ransacked, buses being burnt in Dhaka and so on playing in the background. BJP MP Anurag Thakur called out Congress party's supposed hypocrisy in Lok Sabha by saying, "You spoke about Gaza but not about minorities

had done its job properly, we would've had an easier time talking about what we are facing." This account itself shows that the endless distortion of the violence against minorities in Bangladesh in the pro-establishment media in India has taken attention away from the real attacks that happened and, in fact, caused more harm. So then, who does this propaganda about Bangladesh serve?

Before Hasina's ousting, writer Aakar Patel in The Wire had written an article, interviewing people in these pro-establishment channels, who said the overt majoritarianism under Narendra Modi has produced a condition where "existent bigotry is given a platform to be amplified." Along with this, this section of the Indian media used the situation in Bangladesh to attack the Congress party and the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (I.N.D.I.A.) and breed further division in India itself.

The necessity of an aggressive stance against the opposition has been clear after the elections where BJP failed to reach a majority on its own, in spite of its slogan, "Abki baar 400 paar," which means, "This time surpassing 400" of the 543 seats in Lok Sabha. BJP did not even reach the magic 272 seats needed to form a government, and had to rely on the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi called the results "a moral and political defeat for Mr Modi." Although Modi did in fact bring home a third term, his grip on the nation seems to be dwindling and the difference between the parties widening, which can be further seen by analysing the contrast in their approaches towards Prof

There was a clear and apparent campaign by the 'Godi media' to paint Bangladesh's democratic uprising against its former dictator as purely 'anti-Indian' (in a roundabout way) and claim it was engineered by everything ranging from religious extremist forces to the US 'Deep State.'

in Bangladesh." The same sentiments were echoed by Aaj Tak's Sudhir Chaudhary when he compared the attacks against minorities in Bangladesh to the genocide in Gaza. "No country, no community in the world stepped forward to stop this genocide. Like how they did for Rafah," he said.

Hindus in Bangladesh themselves called on the Indian media to display facts. Bipra Prasun Das, a 21-year-old Hindu student from North South University in Dhaka, whose ancestral home was burnt down during the week of Hasina's fall, told Indian media watchdog News laundry, "If the Indian media

Muhammad Yunus-led interim government in Bangladesh.

For instance, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said it was "natural that we will deal with the government of the day," and that the relationship between the two countries has had its "ups and downs." Jaishankar's comments were stiff, steering clear of any jubilation or adversity, which was in sharp contrast to how Congress leader and former diplomat Shashi Tharoor addressed it. Speaking to NDTV, Tharoor said Prof Yunus taking over was "a very good sign, he is a highly respected figure, he has a reputation that

goes beyond politics," elaborating that he is also "a figure that would certainly contribute to stability in Bangladesh" and that "stability is in our [India's] interest." When asked about reports on attacks on minorities, Tharoor said there was indeed anarchy for a couple days, but he also stated, "I have also seen reports

been Indian pride into Hindu nationalistic pride. This is a page out of a cultural populist's playbook, the use of "us vs them," as we have seen time and time again by Prime Minister Modi. The "Hindu pride"—which is more to do with politics and little, if none, with religion—is sold to the public because real metrics don't

propaganda, aligned with the ousted Awami League, such as Sajeeb Wazed Joy's recent post on Facebook about controversial journalist Chandan Nandy's report suggesting, without evidence, that "Bangladeshi student movement 'coordinators' met ISI, US handlers in Pakistan, Dubai and Doha between April



In his Independence Day address, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised that 1.4 billion Indians are worried about the safety of Hindu minorities in post-Hasina Bangladesh, in New Delhi on August 15, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

of Bengali Muslims protecting Hindu temples and protecting Hindu homes," adding that "we should be telling both sides of the story."

In this context, it's also important to note the BJP's realpolitik foreign policy. Debidatta Mahapatra of the *Times of India* explained India's current foreign policy as it stood on the sidelines of the Russia-Ukraine war, until Prime Minister Modi's recent historic visit to Ukraine. "As realist prudence demands, India cannot simply undertake a moralist standpoint and ignore the dictates of realpolitik," described Mahapatra. This very use of realpolitik in India's neighbourhood policy—which is understandable as nations do act in their own interests—has bred the anti-India sentiments that we saw in the Maldives earlier this year.

Undoubtedly, the portrayal of India's international strength by the BJP, the hosting of the G20 Summit and its renewed importance on the world stage are all causes for national pride for India. BJP capitalises on it, reframing what would have historically

indicate the best picture.

Raghuram Rajan, former governor of India's central bank who resigned two years into BJP taking power, stated that Modi's goals of becoming a developed economy by 2047 was unachievable, citing high dropout rates and lack of high school education in the country of 1.4 billion where more than half are below the age of 30. Youth unemployment stands at 45.4 percent, one of the highest in the world. The Global Hunger Index rated their child wasting rate as the highest in the world—at 18.7 percent—exceeding countries with active conflicts such as Yemen. This makes it imperative for the BJP to hold onto realpolitik policies to sell its position in the world to its people at the cost of fostering antagonistic attitudes with its neighbours—which are all a part of what the *Hindustan Times* calls the "Modi-Doval-Jaishankar" playbook. The playbook can be summarised as "shaping democratic verdicts" when deemed necessary.

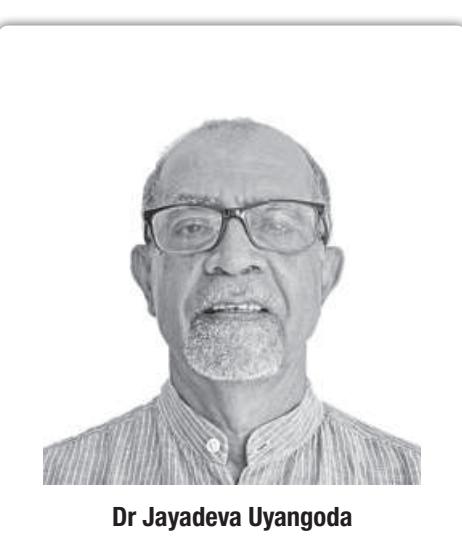
Many commentaries have been written to understand the purpose of the Indian media's

and September (in) 2023." By painting the democratic uprising as Islamist or anti-Indian and leveraging it to attack the Congress party, the BJP's media allies demonstrated the lengths to which they would go to mask the domestic challenges India is currently facing under the BJP rule. This includes the prevailing communalism and violence in Manipur which the pro-establishment media and BJP politicians have ignored, while Modi recently wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that he discussed the issue of "Hindu minorities" in Bangladesh, with US President Joe Biden.

Irregardless, at the end of the day, Bangladesh and India need to maintain a good relationship. For the pro-establishment media in India to continue pursuing the divisive commentaries and the current brand of journalism will needlessly harvest an anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh and cultivate harmful sentiments between ordinary citizens of the neighbouring countries. And that is the last thing that South Asia needs right now.

'Active citizens can serve as a social check on the government'

As we approach a month of Sheikh Hasina's fall in Bangladesh, Dr Jayadeva Uyangoda, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Colombo in Sri Lanka, speaks to Ramisa Rob of The Daily Star regarding the parallels with Sri Lanka's democratic movement in 2022, and the lessons to learn for Bangladesh.



Dr Jayadeva Uyangoda

Do you see any similarities between the ouster of the Rajapaksa family in Sri Lanka and the fall of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh?

Yes, indeed. In my view, there are four key ones. First, element of spontaneity: both protests were citizens' direct actions which suddenly erupted with no prior leadership or direction. Second, both were borne from people's accumulated anger against an autocratic ruler. Third, both began as low-key movements against the government without a political agenda, before long acquiring a mass character driven by people's desire for change. And fourth, they were democracy-enhancing protests opening the political and social space for new initiatives for setting in motion a process of substantive change.

How would you describe the political climate in Sri Lanka freshly after the revolution and what can Bangladesh learn from it?

In Sri Lanka, the political climate became "normalised" in a very strange manner when a right-wing backlash against the protest movement succeeded in July-August 2022 to overcome the political challenge from the protesters. A new elite coalition was swiftly forged by the Rajapaksa family and Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the right-wing United National Party, to save the status quo by using their parliamentary majority. This new coalition used its majority to consolidate the authority of the weakened ruling class. That soft "counter-revolution" succeeded without much violence. The protest movement slowly began to dissipate

in the face of a repressive response by the government led by the new president.

The first lesson I would suggest for Bangladesh from Sri Lanka's experience is: be watchful of a possible counter-revolution, which might not be very soft. Second, continue the democratising role of the protest movement as an ongoing political actor as a citizens' check on the political parties as well as other actors who want to take the country away from democratic consolidation. And lastly, if possible, initiate a new democratic coalition to participate in the next parliamentary elections so that the agential role of the student movement for democratic transformation can be sustained.

How do you think the region as a whole can navigate the culture of nepotism, political dynasty, and loyalism?

It is not easy to clean up corrupt governance in South Asia unless through popular uprisings, like what we saw in Sri Lanka in 2022 and in Bangladesh in 2024. I notice that in Bangladesh, there are efforts being made at present to rid the politics of these political and social evils. An active, alert and vigilant citizens' movement, without pursuing political power, will hopefully be a powerful force to cleanse our political systems and cultures by democratic means and continue to function as an active social check on governments, bureaucracies, and public institutions.

In terms of economy, Sri Lanka's recovery has been noted, though we understand the economic crisis still persists. Is there a cautionary tale that you want to tell Bangladesh?

Beware of the IMF-inspired solutions to the economic crisis without calculating their immediate social and political costs. Do not accept the solutions offered by the IMF as well as your own economic bureaucracy without calculating the terrible social cost of economic recovery. Similarly, do not allow the IMF or your own economic bureaucracy to pass the burden of the crisis recovery on to the ordinary, poor, working, and middle-class families through varieties of direct and indirect taxation. These families are already victims of the social mismanagement of the economic growth of your country. And ignore the social and political consequences of economic crisis management.

How do you view the tensions in the region since Sheikh Hasina's fall?

I think the tension with India was unavoidable. A similar crisis occurred to China-Sri Lanka relations when Mahinda Rajapaksa was the president. My humble view is that India needs to review, reset, and re-imagine its relations with Bangladesh as well as other neighbours for a democratic and peaceful South Asia.

How did Sri Lanka navigate geopolitical relations after the 2022 protests, and what can Bangladesh do to achieve harmony in the region?

The geopolitical challenges for South Asia today are quite complex. They have the potential to generate tension, and even enmity, among the South Asian states too. At the moment, we don't have a truly South Asian intergovernmental forum to discuss, debate and understand these challenges at the level of governments. I have always thought that SAARC needs to be revived in the true spirit of cooperation and solidarity among the peoples as well. It has been too statist and overtly bureaucratised.

Sri Lanka's protest movement did not raise issues concerning foreign policy as such. There are some murmurs from some in Sri Lanka that it has become closer to the US and India, at the expense of the relations with China and Russia. Obviously, the regional and global powers were watching what was going on in Sri Lanka during the protests because of its geopolitical significance. They were also obviously watching whether there would be a regime change in Sri Lanka and what would be the political colour of the

post-protest regime, as I am sure is being discussed now in Bangladesh. The simple lesson we have to learn is that internal political changes in our societies are not free of worrisome consequences to regional and global powers, and that there is always the likelihood of external interventions, mostly covertly and sometimes overtly. That is also why the small countries in the world today need a new and updated version of the vision of non-alignment to protect their peoples from the unwanted fallouts from the big power—there are quite a few of them around us these days—rivalries.

Are the Sri Lankan people better off now, and if so, how can Bangladesh follow the same path?

Well, soon after the citizens' protest became subdued, the government's immediate response was to restrict the democratic space for protests and the politics of resistance. The government introduced new repressive legislation restricting civil rights and upgraded the repressive capacities of the police, turning it to more or less like a semi-military force, obviously to curb more effectively the next phase of protests. So avoiding that is crucial for Bangladesh.

Yet, one good thing about democracy in Sri Lanka continues to remain, the knowledge of which perhaps may benefit Bangladeshi citizens. Politically alert and democratically conscious citizens continue to play their role as a living democratic force. The forthcoming presidential election, scheduled for September 21, will tell us where Sri Lankan people are as democrats.