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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

From revolution to recovery

How Bangladeshi freelancers are rebuilding after July's internet shutdown

“I regret not generating clients outside of traditional marketplaces,” the 25-year-old freelancer said, highlighting the need for freelancers to diversify their income streams beyond platforms like Fiverr, Upwork, or others.

MD ZAHIDUR RABBI

Sudipta Apu, a graphic designer based in Khulna, was on the verge of completing a \$600 project when everything went dark – literally. The internet blackout that followed Bangladesh's July revolution left him and thousands of other freelancers disconnected from clients, deadlines, and income. For five days, he had no way to explain his absence, losing not only the project, but his client's trust.

Apu's story is just one of many that highlight the devastating impact of political turmoil on Bangladesh's booming freelance economy.

When the internet went dark, so did freelancer paychecks

In the wake of Bangladesh's July revolution, a different crisis unfolded, hidden behind the headlines of political change. Freelancers – reliant on stable internet connections for their livelihoods – were hit hard by the unexpected internet blackout that lasted five days. As the country navigated through upheaval, these digital workers faced missed deadlines, cancelled projects, and plummeting incomes. For many, the effects of that disruption continue to be felt months later, as clients remain wary of working with professionals

projects gone

Sohag Islam, a UI/UX designer based in Dhaka and founder of the IT firm Designera, said, “The freelancing sector in Bangladesh is suffering. In marketplaces, there are fewer clients. The clients who need urgent deliveries are abstaining themselves from ordering from Bangladeshi freelancers due to the recent unrest.”

The 25-year-old freelancer added,

If Bangladesh cannot provide stable internet connection, I think I will never do freelancing jobs in marketplaces ever again.

Shaikh Abdulla



During the internet blackout incident, Sudipta mentioned that he had eight ongoing projects worth over \$1,000 which were suddenly put on hold. The 30-year-old freelancer added that he lost one of those eight clients and received bad reviews. Bad reviews lead to a low ranking of gigs in the marketplaces, which eventually leads to fewer clients as those freelancers are not often

delivered the order. However, because of this interruption, the client was a bit annoyed. He gave me a 4.7 rating instead of 5 in that particular order.”

Apu's frustration is echoed by many, as he urged for uninterrupted electricity and reliable internet to support the freelancing community.

Shaikh Abdulla, a motion designer from Dhaka, faced one of the most severe consequences – a banned

internet connection for the benefit of not only freelancers but every citizen of Bangladesh,” said Abdulla.

Is freelancing dead in Bangladesh?

While most freelancers generate clients from traditional marketplaces, some work outside the marketplaces by developing their own clients through various means. Moreover, marketplaces take a steep commission from freelancers in each transaction. For example, Fiverr takes 20 percent while Upwork takes a 10 percent commission.

About working as a freelancer outside of traditional online marketplaces, Sumayah Islam, a freelance Shopify developer based in Khulna, described it as “every freelancer's dream”.

The 28-year-old freelancer recounted her experience: “I have been freelancing since 2016 on a part-time basis. I stopped in 2020 after having my baby. I began in 2023 again as a full-time freelancer. That is when my Fiverr account was banned due to a ‘privacy breach’ as described by the platform. Ever since, I have been acquiring clients from LinkedIn or Instagram. It is even better in the case of income as there are no platform fees.”

Despite not working in marketplaces, Sumayah also lost clients in recent times.

She said, “As most of my clients are not from Bangladesh, I lost my regular clients during the internet blackout. One of them came back after I provided them with proof that Bangladesh had an internet blackout and protests. Before the blackout, I earned around US \$1,500 to 1,600 on a monthly average which decreased to around US \$800 to 1,000 in recent times.”

Can Bangladesh 2.0 finally deliver the internet infrastructure?

The end of an autocratic regime and the victory of a people's uprising brings with it the promise of a better future, for young people especially. Despite the challenges brought on by the July revolution, freelancing remains a vital economic lifeline for many in Bangladesh, providing flexibility and opportunities beyond the traditional job market.

The new interim government under Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus brings renewed hope that essential services like stable internet and electricity will be prioritised.

As some clients are already beginning to reconnect with Bangladeshi freelancers, the road to recovery has started. While it may take time for the community to fully bounce back, there's optimism that the sector will not only survive but thrive in this new era for the country.



Freelancers -- reliant on stable internet connections for their livelihoods -- were hit hard by the unexpected internet blackout that lasted five days.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

from a country where stability seems fragile.

On July 16, the first blow came with restricted mobile internet access, followed by a complete internet blackout – without any previous warning – on July 18 that lasted for five days. For freelancers, many of whom rely on platforms like Fiverr, Upwork, and other digital marketplaces, this was a nightmare. Unable to communicate with clients or meet deadlines, their income streams were abruptly severed.

Five days offline, thousands of

“I had a monthly average income of around US \$7,000 to 8,000 but now it is around US \$2,000 to 3,000. Two of my orders were cancelled during the internet blackout which resulted in fewer messages from clients. Moreover, most of my regular clients stopped ordering from me. A few came back only recently after they heard that the situation in Bangladesh is becoming stable.”

However, Shohag pointed out that Fiverr tried to help Bangladeshi freelancers. He stated, “During the last two days of the internet blackout, Fiverr put the Bangladeshi freelancers' profiles into a ‘vacation mode’.” This helped a bit in keeping a good ranking.”

Fiverr, the global freelance services platform, also expressed its condolences on Facebook following the death of Mir Mahfuzur Rahman Mugdho, who was killed during the quota reform protest in Uttara on July 18.

Fiverr's band-aid fix: not enough

Despite efforts by platforms like Fiverr, which temporarily placed Bangladeshi freelancers in “vacation mode” to protect their ratings, many saw their profiles lose visibility, resulting in fewer clicks and orders. In some cases, accounts were even banned due to client disputes and missed deadlines, further highlighting the dire need for infrastructure improvements.

recommended to potential clients. Therefore, less number of orders lead to less earnings.

Apu, who has been working as a freelancer since 2014, said, “On average, my income has now become Tk 70,000 to 80,000. This was over Tk 1 lakh before the blackout. In my estimation, almost all the freelancers in Bangladesh have lost 10 percent of overall orders due to the blackout.”

Mentioning one particular client, Apu added, “I have a client for whom I have worked over 4 years on a regular basis. After the internet blackout, when we got back online, the internet speed was very poor. I had to cancel a US \$200 order from him because I could not properly connect with him for virtual meetings. I estimate that I would have received orders worth around US \$1,500 from that client. Unfortunately, he did not give me those orders as he needed them on an urgent basis. On September 21, he contacted me and asked if the situation in Bangladesh had improved as he had more orders to place.”

From thriving to surviving

Apu also raised concerns about slow internet and load shedding in his area. While reminiscing about a recent story, he said, “I was working the whole night for a certain project but had to wait for around 2 hours after load shedding at 3:00am. I resumed my work after 5:00am and

account on Fiverr. Following the blackout, Abdulla's account was reported by clients, leading to its deactivation.

“I regret not generating clients outside of traditional marketplaces,” the 25-year-old freelancer said, highlighting the need for freelancers to diversify their income streams beyond platforms like Fiverr, Upwork, or others.

Regarding his future plans, Abdulla who has been working for about 4 years as a marketplace-based freelancer said, “Currently, I am looking for a local job as I need a stable source of income. I had an average monthly income of around Tk 60,000 so I have faced a huge loss due to my account being inactive. If Bangladesh cannot provide stable internet connections through Starlink or any other reliable measures, I think I will never do freelancing jobs in marketplaces ever again.”

Abdulla's experience shows a growing sense of frustration among Bangladeshi freelancers, many of whom feel let down by unreliable internet and electricity. “I think a proper internet connection should be counted as a basic right for an individual and no one should hamper this right. After the July revolution, we are now in Bangladesh 2.0, so I hope the related stakeholders will work towards stable electricity and