



From left: Huge crowds gathered at a BNP rally at the Prabhati School grounds in Khulna's Khalishpur; a Jamaat-e-Islami rally drew a large number of attendees at the Bandar Nagari School and College grounds in Chattogram city. The photos were taken yesterday.

PHOTOS: COLLECTED

July deniers will get 'red card' in polls

FROM PAGE 1
"yes", the people will assume they want to re-establish fascism and dynastic autocracy," he said, urging voters to remain vigilant against "vote thieves" on election day.

Turning to social reforms, the Jamaat ameer placed women's rights at the centre of the alliance's agenda.

Speaking at Muktiyoddha Maidan in Cox's Bazar town, he said that if the I-party alliance comes to power, women's education will be made free up to the master's level.

"The government will take full responsibility for their education," he said, adding that his party is committed to ensuring women's safety both at home and outside.

Pledging zero tolerance for harassment, he said a just society must protect the honour of "mothers and sisters."

Highlighting alleged misdeeds of past rulers, Shafiqur vowed to establish Insaaf (justice) and recover money laundered abroad by the previous regime.

"With this money, we will build a Bangladesh of justice. We do not believe in 'winning at any cost.' We want to win the hearts of the people," he said.

He also promised to establish a public university in Cox's Bazar and upgrade regional infrastructure to international standards.

LDP President Oli Ahmed, a key ally in the I-party coalition, speaking at the Lohagara rally, said his party would uphold the country's sovereignty at any cost.

Clarifying that the alliance is not "against India," he struck a

nationalist tone, saying, "If any neighbour thinks they can easily occupy this country, we can prepare 10 million people for war within 15 days."

Oli also recalled that he co-founded the BNP with Ziaur Rahman but left the party in 2006 after it "strayed from its founding ideals."

At a rally in Sitakunda, the Jamaat chief warned that "vote corruption" would be met with strong resistance, saying the "days of fascism" were over.

At the final rally of the day at the Chattogram Port Authority School and College ground, Shafiqur alleged that one of his social media accounts had been hacked to spread derogatory remarks about women.

"The hackers have been identified. Now we will find out who was behind them," he said, claiming the cyberattack was retaliation for his vocal stance against the harassment of women.

He also criticised political rivals for distributing "family cards" while allegedly failing to protect women's dignity.

Shafiqur further alleged that while Jamaat stood by the families of martyrs and the injured after the July uprising, another party was involved in "extortion and land grabbing."

Turning to Chattogram's development, he claimed the port had been "sold out" for decades for personal gain.

Under the I-party alliance, he said, the port would be upgraded to international standards without corruption. "The people's port will remain with the people," he added.

FROM PAGE 1

posts over the last two months and found at least four clusters of politically aligned users who move together on the platform like an organised army.

These clusters swarm posts from political or ideological opponents with waves of "haha" reactions, creating the appearance of mass ridicule and suppressing the visibility of targeted content.

Two of these clusters appear aligned with Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, while one each is aligned with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the ousted Awami League. However, no official links with any of the party were investigated.

Their operations go far beyond simple trolling. By coordinating large volumes of hostile reactions, they exploit the way Facebook's algorithm works.

Internal Meta documents leaked in the 2021 "Facebook Papers" revealed that when a post receives signs of trolling, the platform may automatically reduce its visibility. This means that coordinated "haha" attacks do not merely mock a post, they can actively push it out of public view.

Such coordinated attacks are also easy to carry out. It only takes a willing buyer, a mobile wallet, one of the many "engagement" sellers on Facebook, and just about five minutes.

Findings show that what appears to be a genuine public backlash or

them, 5,49,129 (62%) were "hahas," with at least 19,708 coming from profiles that bear all the hallmarks of bot accounts.

For this investigation, a group was identified as a cluster if its members showed explicit support for posts within their own political camp and concurrently reacted with "haha" to at least seven posts from opposing camps in tandem with other profiles.

Based on this criterion, two Jamaat-aligned clusters were identified, with 326 and 16 members each, alongside an Awami League-aligned cluster with 134 members and a BNP-aligned cluster with 12.

Analysis shows the two pro-Jamaat clusters are the most combative, primarily targeting the pro-BNP users with 1,465 attacks within this limited dataset. Their second most frequent target was the left-wing camp, facing 1,196 attacks, while the Awami League saw a comparatively lower 207 strikes.

Two Dhaka University student leaders — one from a leftist organisation and another from Chhatra Dal — are among those attacked by these pro-Jamaat clusters.

The Awami League-aligned cluster focused primarily on Jamaat-affiliated posts, followed by the NCP, and carried out fewer attacks on BNP and left-leaning content. Their targets included an NCP candidate from Dhaka as well as the female Dhaka University student who

attacks.

However, the most prolific harassment of journalists and media outlets came from a separate right-wing cluster with 234 profiles and no identifiable party link. It targeted journalistic content 970 times, nearly double the volume of the most active political clusters belonging to pro-Jamaat entities.

This group also showed strong ideological leanings, attacking left-wing posts 761 times, BNP content 488 times, and Awami League content 111 times.

THE BOT MARKET

This investigation uncovered a network of Facebook pages that openly advertise paid services to inflate social-media metrics by selling reach, reactions, and followers.

The Daily Star

are delivered almost instantly — sometimes 1,000 within a minute and 5,000 within five minutes in our case — reactions from local-sounding names take longer and cost more.

These "domestic" reactions usually exceed Tk 200 per thousand and may take 24 to 48 hours to arrive. However, this can be expedited to 24 hours with extra money, signalling the deployment of pre-programmed bot swarms, our investigation found.

Unlike the seamless delivery of international batches, "Bangladeshi" reactions often appear inconsistently. They may trickle in over 12 hours or arrive in irregular bulk bursts every 15 to 20 minutes, as service providers often struggle to keep

Despite being independent companies with no visible connection to each other, all four agencies appeared to draw from the same shared pool of bot profiles.

Our investigation established a direct link between these commercially available engagement services and the coordinated digital attacks across the political spectrum.

At least 354 bot profiles that we purchased to boost our meme posts were also among the accounts delivering "haha" reactions to the 263 posts analysed for this report.

BOTS FOR CANDIDATES

But these bots do not only attack, they also generate artificial popularity.

This investigation found that at least 547 bot accounts

confirmed that politicians regularly purchase engagement services, although he declined to give any name.

"I have had experiences where an Awami League politician came and purchased 'haha' reactions for a post, and another BNP politician purchased 'love' reactions for the same post," he said, describing a marketplace where political rivals draw from the same pool of bots.

This investigation did not examine the bot followers of all candidates. It only explored the candidates who share bots from the same click farms that sold fake engagements to the nine meme posts created for this investigation.

Of the six candidates, three did not respond to calls or text messages. The remaining three said they were unaware of any bot activity on their pages, explaining that their social media accounts are managed by party supporters or relatives.

THE SAME SERVERS

Shahriar Islam, a Rajshahi-based entrepreneur behind Tech Dream, which also sold fake engagements to The Daily Star, explained why identical bot profiles appear across so many political pages.

"We use the same servers," he said.

Tech Dream openly advertises its services on Facebook and is currently running seven ads offering engagement-boosting packages.

One of the servers Shahriar and others rely on is Fatherpanel.com, an online click farm. Its listings show that "Bangladeshi" Facebook reactions, including "haha" and "love," cost less than Tk 1 per thousand, with delivery times between 15 and 49 hours.

It also offers a range of bot-profile categories, including "100% Bangladeshi," "BD+Mixed," "Arab," and "Vietnam," with Bangladeshi-labelled profiles priced the highest. Payments can be made directly through bKash, Nagad, Upay, and other mobile wallets.

Saiful Islam Sami, who runs this farm, said he sources foreign bots from servers hosted in Vietnam, Pakistan, and other countries. "I am essentially a reseller for them."

For domestic bots, he depends on local suppliers who maintain collections of Facebook profiles.

"I only provide the services," he insisted. "I have no control over how people use them, or whether they are used politically."

Reporting and research: Zoya Islam, Mir Rowan, Nurin Sultana Toma, Abdullah Hel Bubun, Tarek Hosen and Abir Ayon
Graphics: Anwar Sohel

click farm / 'kli:k, fã:m/ noun
A business or large-scale operation that employs a high volume of low-paid workers or automated scripts (bots) to fraudulently interact with digital content (such as liking, sharing, or clicking) to artificially inflate engagement metrics or to manipulate social media sentiment.

bot /bã:t/ noun
A fake or non-human account controlled by software rather than an individual person, frequently used to amplify specific political narratives or perform "coordinated inauthentic behaviour"

ideological confrontation is often a manufactured reality, bought for a few thousand taka and used to manipulate public perceptions just days before the 13th general election.

The 263 posts examined come from a cross-section of Bangladesh's political and media landscape: 55 were from pro-BNP actors, 52 from pro-Jamaat entities, 42 from pro-Awami League figures, and 24 from National Citizen Party supporters. We also reviewed 29 posts from media outlets, 14 from individual journalists, 20 from right-wing actors without identifiable party links, and 27 from left-wing users.

Together, these posts drew 8,85,811 reactions. Of

whom we began the story.

The BNP cluster, the smallest group identified, was also the least active, striking Jamaat posts 55 times and NCP posts 30 times.

Despite their political differences, each of these clusters shared one target in common: the media. Posts from the daily Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, and New Age were frequent victims of coordinated "haha" attacks.

The Jamaat-aligned clusters attacked posts by media organisations and journalists 515 times, making them the top trollers of the media. The AL cluster targeted the media 287 times, while the BNP cluster showed minimal activity with only five recorded

approached four such click farms — Socialy, Finix IT, Tech Dreams, and Finix IT Boosting — posing as potential clients. To test their services, we created five dummy Facebook pages and ordered reactions for meme posts shared from those profiles.

The process could not be simpler: they responded almost instantly, asking no questions about who we were or how the engagements would be used. Between January 19 and 21, we purchased 30,000 reactions, both "love" and "haha," across nine posts created for investigative purposes.

Nayem Uddin, the owner of Socialy, described how the system works.

"We have contacts with people who maintain servers [collections] of Facebook profiles," he said, adding that 500-600 people maintain such "servers" in Bangladesh.

According to him, Bangladeshi server owners build these collections by purchasing Facebook accounts for around Tk 15-16 each, while foreign profiles cost slightly less. For international accounts, they rely on servers in Thailand, Vietnam and Pakistan.

"I send the link for which reactions are being purchased to one of these people with servers, and they do the rest," he explained.

Buying engagement is also cheap. Reactions typically cost between Tk 120 and Tk 200 per thousand, and in our case the rate dropped to Tk 500 for 5,000 reactions when purchased in bulk.

While reactions from profiles with foreign-sounding names

"domestic" accounts ready for immediate use.

Many of these bot accounts use AI-generated profile photos and contain little or no personal information.

When The Daily Star asked for "authentic Bangladeshi" profiles, they responded with

"The government asked Meta to activate five types of protections ahead of the elections. We have already met with the head of public policy in the region to that effect."

Faiz Ahmed Taiyeb
Special Assistant to the CA for Post, Telcos and ICT

slow deployment times. However, these accounts were noticeably more sophisticated, featuring active timelines, multiple photos, and patterns resembling those of real users.

"The Bangladeshi service is a little slow because these are organic," one seller told us. Another said it is better to use "Bangladeshi bots" because they were less likely to "drop."

"Dropping" refers to reactions disappearing if Meta detects fake profiles and removes them from the platform.

Vote for the ideology

FROM PAGE 1
and contesting for change. But we are not alone. Allah is with us, patriotic people are with us, and those who love Islam are with us."

Drawing a distinction between local and national elections, the Charmonai Pir said local polls focus on development and public welfare, while national elections determine who formulates laws in parliament. Therefore, ideology matters most in national polls, he added.

He also said both the BNP-led alliance and the Jamaat-e-Islami-led I-party alliance have announced plans to

govern under the existing democratic and legal framework if elected.

"But this system has failed to bring peace or freedom in the past," he said.

The rally was presided over by Islami Andolan Bangladesh's Nabinagar unit president Jasim Uddin Sarkar, while the party's Brahmanbaria-5 (Nabinagar) candidate, Nazrul Islam Nazu, was the main attraction.

At the end of the rally, Rezaul Karim symbolically handed over the party's election symbol — the hand fan — to the candidate and urged voters to cast their ballots for peace.

158 killed in 600 incidents of political violence

FROM PAGE 1
political affiliations of judges and prosecutors appointed to the ICT.

It added that journalists and professionals were named as accused in murder cases, raising serious questions about the misuse of the justice system.

Addressing the event, TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman warned that failure to control mob violence could affect the upcoming February 12 election.

He added that the

phenomenon of mob violence in Bangladesh "actually started from within the government," saying the Bangladesh Secretariat became one of the first places where mobs emerged.

According to him, these groups later gained power in this way, weakening the government's moral authority.

On election-related violence, Iftekharuzzaman cautioned, "We all hope there won't be a single killing... But we cannot guarantee that. From that perspective, we

believe the risk of violence will remain not only until February 12, but also for several days afterwards."

He said the government was aware of the risks and had the authority, skills and experience to act. However, he expressed concern based on Bangladesh's past electoral history. "Elections in Bangladesh have rarely been completely free of violence... Lessons from previous polls must be used to prevent violence this time."

The TIB chief also

expressed concern over the post-July accountability process, saying journalists have been detained in mass cases over allegations of involvement in killings during the movement.

He asked whether such actions against journalists were acts of justice or acts of revenge, warning that this approach makes it difficult to identify real perpetrators and supporters of authoritarianism.

While responding to reporters' questions, he said, "Politicians and

bureaucrats have learned nothing from the July movement and remain focused on protecting their own interests. As a result, they objected to proposals placed before the consensus commission aimed at creating a government accountable to the people."

He said if the basic concept of a "note of dissent" is accepted, then decisions reached through consensus could still be implemented.

"Prioritising the opinions of the majority is a global practice,

though it remains unclear whether this will be followed in Bangladesh... If a referendum verdict goes in favour of 'yes', implementation of reforms will depend on the goodwill of the future government."

He also said, "The interim government could have set an example by making their wealth statements public, but it did not."

Iftekharuzzaman criticised two recent ordinances — the Broadcasting Commission Ordinance and the Media

Commission Ordinance — saying the media has been deliberately ignored and new risks have been created.

He questioned whether the interim government truly believes in allowing the media to work freely, professionally and safely, describing the reform commissions concerned as symbolic measures aimed at placing the media under greater government control.

On judicial reform, he said, "The interim government has taken some positive steps, including forming

a judicial appointment committee and moving toward an independent judicial secretariat."

However, he noted that the effectiveness of these measures would ultimately be tested under the next government, adding that politicisation within the judiciary remains a major challenge.

He urged political parties to make a strong commitment to keeping state institutions and professional bodies free from politics.