

Without media integrity, elections mean little for democracy

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The 2026 election in Bangladesh was the first big political test after the July uprising, and it reminded us of something very basic: elections are not decided only inside polling booths. They are also decided in the information environment that surrounds voters in the weeks and months before they cast their ballots.

Bangladesh now has more information than at any time in its history. Many people use smartphones. News websites and YouTube channels are multiplying. Social media has become the main gateway to news for large parts of the population. This has created an abundance of information, but abundance does not automatically produce trust. Instead, we are living in what scholars call an "information disorder" where professional journalism, partisan propaganda, coordinated disinformation, and rumours flow through the same channels and fight for the same attention, often crowding out real information.

The February election made this disorder visible in a very concrete way. In the nights before polling day, fact-checking groups like Dismisslab, Rumor Scanner and FactWatch ran live debunking operations and flagged dozens of false claims circulating on Facebook and Telegram, from fabricated ballot stuffing videos to forged statements about lockdowns and polling centre closures. The Daily Star logged 24 pieces of election-related disinformation in one night and later documented 100 separate items on polls day, including photocards mimicking news agencies, edited videos, and several deepfakes.

So, the first lesson here is straightforward: access is not the problem anymore. The real question is the integrity of the information that people actually receive and trust.

The information disorder around the election did not appear in a vacuum.

It emerged in a media environment already shaken by structural and political challenges. For instance, in December 2025, mobs attacked the offices of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star in Dhaka and set the building on fire. Journalists were trapped for hours. These attacks were not only about two media houses. They sent a broader message that journalism could be punished physically for taking the "wrong" line.

partners have tried to build some protective infrastructure offering journalists mental health support and assistance with legal harassment and threats.

Efforts such as this matter because, as many reporters will admit, physical, legal and psychological safety shape what can be reported at all. When newsrooms have to worry about arson and court cases, investigative journalism and critical

rely on online and social media sources while remaining wary of their accuracy. In addition, it documented the tension between the need for clicks and the duty to verify.

One common theme in both international research and local commentary is that more voices do not automatically mean better democracy. The current media environment offers a wide range of outlets and pages, from mainstream newspapers to partisan YouTube channels and anonymous Telegram groups. The problem is that this diversity is layered on top of algorithmic incentives that reward outrage and emotional content. Moreover, Bangladeshi editors and legal experts have warned that bots and coordinated networks can create a false impression of "public opinion," which then puts pressure on politicians and journalists alike. And the mix of domestic and cross-border disinformation is not unique to Bangladesh. Because of this, the debate on media integrity cannot stop at "more access." What citizens need is access to information that is accurate, contextualised and credible enough to help them make choices. In a country where smartphone use is widespread but digital literacy is uneven, that is not a small task.

The 2026 election showed both the potential and the limits of this approach. Fact-checking organisations debunked dozens of viral claims in real time. Many media outlets amplified this work. Yet undecided voters remained a primary target for disinformation campaigns that exploited religious identity, nationalism, and fear of instability. Media literacy helps, but it cannot carry the full burden when economic incentives and political interests pull in the opposite direction.

The 2026 election has seen turnout above 60 percent, and that in itself is a sign that citizens still care about formal politics and are willing to queue to express their preferences. The question now is whether the new political settlement will strengthen or weaken media integrity. It is tempting to blame "the media" as a whole for all the pathologies of the information space. It is just as tempting to romanticise journalists as lone heroes who will somehow fix the problem through personal bravery. Both narratives are misleading. The evidence

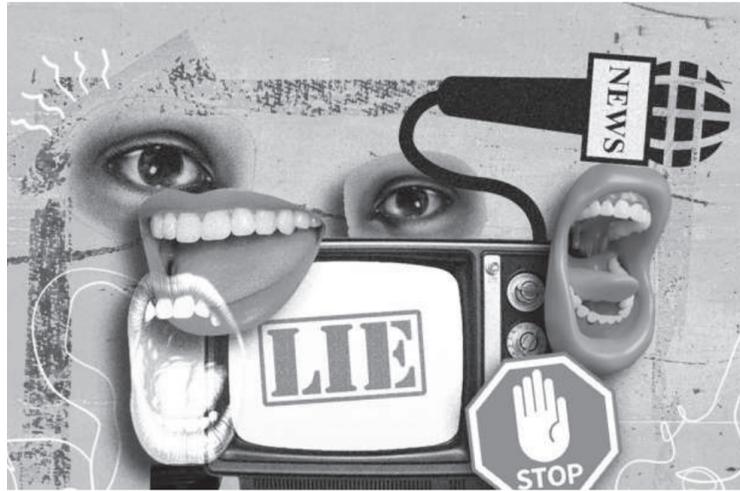
from Bangladesh and other countries points to a more complicated picture.

Media integrity rests on three pillars that work together. First, journalists need to be physically and legally safe enough to pursue independent stories. Second, news organisations require sustainable business models and internal standards that reward verification over virality. Third, citizens need support to navigate a chaotic information environment without being blamed for problems that are built into platform design and political strategies.

The urgency of media integrity will become even sharper as the country moves towards local government and city corporation elections. Considering the history of local government elections, in many ways they are even more vulnerable to manipulation because voters are closely tied to neighbourhood networks, local factions, and informal influence systems. In city elections, particularly, false claims about violence, turnout, communal tension, or candidate withdrawals can spread very quickly through Facebook pages and local YouTube channels. Such false information, misinformation, disinformation and malinformation can shape public perception before corrections have any chance to catch up. That is why media integrity matters not only at the national level but also in municipal and local contests. Without a safe, credible and reasonably trusted information environment, even grassroots elections can be distorted by fear, confusion, and manufactured narratives.

If there is one constructive takeaway, it is this: Bangladesh does not lack diagnosis. Local journalists, researchers, fact checkers, and media organisations have been mapping the problems with impressive clarity. What is now needed is a political willingness to treat media integrity as part of democratic infrastructure, not as a bargaining chip in elite competition.

That does not mean shielding journalists from criticism, and it does not mean denying that media outlets have their own biases and failures. It just means recognising that without a reasonably safe, independent, and credible media system, no election—however well organised on polling day—can deliver the kind of informed consent that democracy promises.



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

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Unsurprisingly, both local and international actors reacted. Unesco publicly expressed concern about the safety of journalists in the run up to the 12 February vote, pointing to recent attacks on media outlets and to the wider risks reporters face during political crises. A coalition led by ARTICLE 19 and other organisations submitted recommendations to the Election Commission and Unesco, calling for specific measures to protect journalists' safety and working conditions during the electoral period.

Even before the election, Unesco and local

commentary are usually the first to suffer. Unesco's global trend reporting notes that worldwide, freedom of expression has declined and self-censorship among journalists has risen sharply in the last decade. Bangladesh fits into this wider pattern.

The other side of the story—much less visible but just as important—is the political economy of media. The Media Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) has pointed out how fragile many Bangladeshi outlets have become. A 2022 MRDI-linked trust survey found that audiences increasingly

Iran's new leader and Trump's mixed messaging: Can anyone really win the war?



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At a press conference in his Miami resort on Monday, US President Donald Trump said the war will end "very soon," but that the US hasn't "won enough." His statement comes as other nations across the globe, including Bangladesh, face daily shockwaves from a disastrous war that he started. The US messaging since the war has shifted slightly, from Trump giving signals of a protracted war to one that apparently is near its end. But to what end will this consequential war end, and more pertinently, how will it end?

Trump also stated, "I think the war is very complete, pretty much." Arguably, his rhetoric appeared more contradictory and mixed than what he's been saying since the war started. Just prior to his statements on Monday, Trump called for "unconditional surrender" of the Islamic republic. The Iranian regime not only refused to give in, but the assembly announced that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's son, Mojtaba Khamenei, has been picked as the new supreme leader of the nation. The choice of Khamenei's son is in line with the regime's response to avenging his assassination. The nation's constitution does not stipulate a timeline for choosing a supreme leader, especially during war. The fact that they were able to congregate and make a decision to choose Khamenei's son as attacks continue, suggests that the regime is not falling yet.

Washington responded to the decision with unsurprising disdain, stating that any leader chosen without their approval, "won't last very long." Surely, Iran is aware of the capabilities of US Israel operations, particularly the two nations' coordinated intelligence infrastructure that led to Khamenei's assassination.

Just three days ago, US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth appeared on 60 Minutes and addressed the involvement of Russian intelligence to aid Iran by stating, "We're tracking everything. Our commanders are aware of everything... We're aware of who's talking to who, why they're talking to him..." This means the Iranian regime is either taking risks they're not prepared for, or, as their defence ministry said, Iran has yet to use its advanced military weaponry and is prepared for a longer war.

If Iran is arming up to retaliate more against the US with the help of Russia, then the war will inevitably drag on. If the Trump administration, as Hegseth suggests, is "tracking everyone," and the statement that the new supreme leader "won't last very long" actually happens, the direction of the war will be worse than it is currently. But what would make the US stop? It won't be European nations or the United Nations' Security Council where the US has a veto.

Words alone cannot explain where we are now with the war; it's rather our collective understanding of the self-interest of the US, Iran and their allies. We need to ask, can anyone really "win" this war? For Iran, "winning" means survival of the regime. And for now, the regime is surviving the killing of Khamenei and the airstrikes on Tehran, along with US precision strikes. For the US, the questions are: does attacking them continuously benefit those closest to the Trump administration and how does it affect Washington's hold over the global economy? It is worth noting that the Trump administration has not yet ruled out seizing or controlling Iranian oil assets.

The Trump administration's "America first" policy hinges on

profits of US defence contractors such as Lockheed Martin, and US technology companies such as Palantir Technologies Inc, that heavily profit from war. Trump's own sons, Trump Jr and Eric Trump, have been investing in a Florida-based company making drones in fresh demand for the Pentagon, since the administration banned foreign drones. Trump has supported US fracking companies in his presidential campaign. US fracking companies and LNG exporters directly profit from disruptions to Qatari LNG.

Trump, however, also threatened to hit Iran "20 times harder" if Iran continues disrupting shipping in the global trade chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz. But he added that such an escalation would not occur, calling the continuous flow of oil through the strait, "a gift" from the US to China, and all of those nations that heavily rely on the waterway. The oil supply disruptions through the strait heavily penalise China, while benefitting the US, now the largest oil exporter.

Trump seems inclined to take care of his wealthy friends through his "America First" policy that drives the "Donroe Doctrine" foreign policy. For example, in 2022, when oil and gas prices hit their highest, experts estimate that the US was the biggest beneficiary, and 50 percent of profits went to the wealthiest one percent of individuals, predominantly through direct shareholdings and private company ownership. The current war will have a similar effect, as oil prices surge.

Yet, it's not all win-win for the entire US domestic economy. There's a risk of recession, which may increase unemployment and affect US domestic politics ahead of the midterms. Trump faces pressure from some Republicans, but not enough to change course. We must also note the insulation from war for US citizens, who won't feel the oil supply and energy disruptions the same way that, let's say, Bangladesh is currently facing. US-China trade tensions and US global trade benefitting the rich are more important factors to observe right at this moment.

For Iran and its allies, the Iranian regime's stake is what matters

over the people. It's a regime that has survived decades of people's uprisings. Meanwhile, sanctioned Russia, which is now publicly helping Iran, is set to profit from the market turmoil in the Strait of Hormuz. The price of Russian Urals oil has risen, and demand from buyers in Asia has increased. China, on the other hand, is not directly participating in the war, and is managing the crisis to its energy security by tapping into oil reserves. China's oil refiners, the world's top importers who export to Asian markets, are, for now, cushioned from negative impact,

with recent record purchases of Iranian and Russian crude.

On the other hand, China has been in talks with Iran for safe passage of shipments; ship tracking data showed a vessel called the Iron Maiden passed through the strait, amid disruptions, after changing its signalling to "China-owner." Beyond the closure of the strait, the deterrence for Iran to come to the negotiating table with the US isn't its allies. Iran also relies on sales of China's military technology, particularly its air defence capabilities. Precision strikes from Iran may continue or even rise if

the Trump administration continues striking and weakening the regime.

The geopolitical and economic equations of the rapidly developing war suggest that governments of both the US and Iran are counting on what benefits them. But the most important facet of governance, the citizens of a country, as history has shown, often becomes the determining factor, particularly when people begin to feel the negative impacts of war. If the war drags on too long, people will protest. Who wins does not matter if the people feel they're losing.



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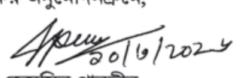


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