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Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	432
Land:	Bangladesh
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom on the Net 2022 Bangladesh
Udgivet:	18. oktober 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	28. februar 2023

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Bangladesh

PARTLY FREE

43 /100

A. Obstacles to Access	**13** /25
B. Limits on Content	**18** /35
C. Violations of User Rights	**12** /40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

40 /100   **Partly Free**

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the research methodology and report acknowledgements.

TOP

Overview

Internet freedom in Bangladesh remained low during the coverage period, though internet users experienced fewer restrictions on online mobilization. Authorities frequently arrest online critics of the government, ministers, and political leaders under the Digital Security Act (DSA), fueling self-censorship online. Security agencies continued to invest in surveillance equipment, and draft laws introduced during the coverage period would leave Bangladeshi user data even more vulnerable to exploitation. Officials have sought to increase their technical capacity and legal authority to censor online content.

The ruling Awami League (AL) has doubled down on harassment of opposition party members and perceived troublemakers, as well as media and members of civil society who criticize government policies or actions. Corruption remains a serious problem in Bangladesh, and whistle-blowers risk severe reprisals. Due process guarantees are often inaccessible for the poor, while the rich are able to evade accountability for wrongdoing. Violence and discrimination against religious minorities and refugees, particularly Rohingya who have fled Myanmar, are significant problems.

Key Developments, June 1, 2021 - May 31, 2022

- Internet penetration and internet speeds have improved across the country, though access is still limited by costs, geography, and a gender divide (see A1 and A2).
- Authorities throttled internet connections in October 2021 amid a series of attacks against Hindu people during the Hindu religious festival Durga Puja; the attacks were incited in part by videos posted online (see A3 and B7).
- The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) proposed an expansive new censorship law in February 2022 that requires companies to remove a wide range of content within 72 hours' notice, ensure messaging traceability, retain user data for 180 days, and in some cases comply with a code of ethics (see B3, B6, C4 and C6).
- Bangladeshi internet users mobilized online campaigns, reflecting a better environment for social media activism than in previous years (see B8).
- Authorities used the DSA to arrest and imprison online journalists and internet users who criticized the government (see C3).

- A draft data protection law released in September 2021 and subsequently revised would leave user data vulnerable to government abuse, as it mandates domestic data storage and appoints a national security agency as the data protection authority (see C6).

A. Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?	**3**/6

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because internet penetration and internet speeds have both increased.

Information and communications technology (ICT) usage is rapidly increasing in Bangladesh, due in large part to government efforts to expand fiber-optic networks to more remote areas. However, the country lags behind many others in terms of quality and speed. According to recent publicly available data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), internet penetration in Bangladesh was 24.8 percent at the end of 2020. [1] Government estimates of internet penetration were significantly higher in May 2022, at 75 percent. [2] That month, the BTRC reported that over 113.21 million people could access the internet via mobile service providers, which began offering faster fourth-generation (4G) technology for mobile networks in February 2018. [3] The remainder, around 11 million people, obtain service through a traditional internet service provider (ISP). [4]

In December 2021, state-owned provider TeleTalk launched fifth-generation (5G) service in some areas of Dhaka, Savar, and GopalGanj. [5] GrameenPhone, Robi, and BanglaLink acquired 5G spectrum in March 2022, and the BTRC has instructed the providers to start test runs within six months. [6]

Government programs have sought to develop and expand ICT networks in recent years. Launched in 2010, the National E-Government Network Project aims to provide networks to thousands of government offices and buildings, as well as schools across the country. [7] The project, which is scheduled to be completed in 2022, will allow internet providers and the aforementioned institutions to bring high-speed

broadband internet to over 68,000 villages and millions of subscribers. **8** In January 2022, the government announced plans to connect every village of the country with fiber-optic cable by 2025. **9** Another project undertaken by the Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited (BTCL) in February 2021 aims to expand the company's internet protocol (IP) network, paving the way for greater rural broadband connection and eventual 5G implementation. **10** The government is finalizing the implementation of another digital connectivity project that aims to provide services to over 109,000 people in rural areas, with 65 percent of the project financed by the Chinese government. **11**

According to Ookla, median mobile internet speeds were 9.7 megabits per second (Mbps) in June 2022, while median fixed broadband speeds were 32.5 Mbps. **12** In November 2021, the BTRC indicated it was considering increasing the minimum speed thresholds for mobile internet and fixed broadband internet connections, to 15 Mbps and 20 Mbps respectively. **13** Telecommunication providers often failed to meet the current mobile internet speed benchmark of 7 Mbps, according to tests conducted by the BTRC in late 2021. **14**

Poor infrastructure sometimes hampers connectivity for internet users. Between July 2019 and June 2021, the BTRC received over 25,000 complaints from consumers about poor service. **15**

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?	**1**/3

Many lower-income people in rural areas still cannot afford quality internet. Gender disparity in access, especially mobile ownership and use, remains a pressing issue. The government continued to prevent Rohingya refugees from purchasing SIM cards during the reporting period..

Consumer taxes and purchasing costs, especially of 4G-internet enabled devices, continue to contribute to the digital divide. A global comparison from 2021 found that the average price of 1 gigabyte (GB) of mobile data in Bangladesh was $0.34. **16** Mobile providers also rolled out a series of data packages with longer validity in April 2022 under pressure from the BTRC. **17**

Users complain about cost, affordability and the lower quality of internet service in rural areas, where about 62 percent of the population lives. [18] To address the issue of high internet costs, the BTRC set a maximum rate for broadband internet in June 2021. [19] Users will now pay no more than 500 takas ($5.72) a month for a connection with a minimum speed of 5 Mbps, 800 takas ($9.15) for 10 Mbps, and 1,200 takas ($13.73) for 20 Mbps. [20] It remains unclear if this step led to more affordable internet or increased internet access. [21]

In addition to socioeconomic status and geography, gender is a major factor in internet access. [22] The 2022 Mobile Gender Gap Report shows a 17 percent gap between men and women accessing the internet. [23]

The government has taken some action to address the disparity in internet access among certain segments of society. As part of the government's Digital Bangladesh by 2021 program, more than 8,200 Union Digital Centers had been established as of November 2021, [24] with the goal of providing low-cost internet access to government and nongovernment service portals and related e-services among low-income and other underserved communities, such as rural women and people with disabilities. [25]

In 2017, citing security concerns, the government banned telecommunications providers from selling mobile phone connections to Rohingya refugees, undermining access to the internet for hundreds of thousands of people who had fled to Bangladesh from neighboring Myanmar. The government also threatened providers with fines if they ignored the ban. [26] Though the ban was not widely enforced initially and many Rohingya maintained mobile access to the internet, the government again ordered mobile service providers to cease selling SIM cards to Rohingya refugees in 2019 and said it would deactivate any of their existing SIM cards. [27]

In May 2015, Robi and Facebook launched Free Internet in Bangladesh, which allowed users access to Facebook and over a dozen websites and apps free of charge. [28] In July 2020, the BTRC ordered service providers to stop providing free service to social media platforms. [29]

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?	**3**/6

Partial restrictions of internet and communication services during protests, elections, and tense political moments have become common.

On October 13, 2021, the BTRC reportedly ordered third-generation (3G) and 4G services throttled in six districts after attacks against Hindus during the Durga Puja festival; the attacks followed the spread of inflammatory posts on social media, especially Facebook (see B7). The restrictions were expanded nationwide on October 15, the final day of the festival, for about 12 hours. The minister of post and telecommunications attributed the connectivity restrictions to a "technical glitch." **30**

In April 2022, mobile providers suspended internet access under directives from the government in a small area in Dhaka amid fighting between students of Dhaka College and New Market traders. **31** The disruption lasted over four hours. **32**

Facebook and Facebook Messenger services were temporarily restricted in March 2021, during the previous coverage period. The post and telecommunications minister said the restrictions had been carried out by law enforcement agencies for national security purposes, though the BTRC said that restrictions were due to technical glitches. **33** The restrictions occurred during deadly protests against the visiting Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi (see B8). **34**

Previously, in September 2019, authorities restricted 3G and 4G mobile service in Rohingya refugee camps, escalating an existing crackdown on connectivity for the vulnerable Rohingya refugee community (see A2). **35** The connectivity restrictions were lifted in August 2020, after almost a year. **36** During the March 2021 anti-Modi protests, one source reported that some users in areas near the capital were also briefly experiencing restrictions to 3G and 4G internet service. **37**

The government manages the fiber-optic infrastructure connecting Bangladesh with international undersea cables. However, the majority of the gateways and internet exchange points (IXPs) are privately owned and managed.

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?	**5**/6

There are no serious legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers.

Users have four options for mobile connections. At the end of June 2022, the company Grameen Phone, owned by Telenor, had the largest market share at 45.97 percent, followed by Robi with 29.56 percent, and Banglalink with 20.80 percent. **38** The state-owned Teletalk holds the remaining 3.65 percent of the market.

As of June 2022, the BTRC reported 34 licensed International Internet Gateways (IIG) and 127 licensed ISPs operating nationwide. It showed an additional 491 ISPs operating at the division and district levels in the country and 2,221 ISP businesses at the subdistrict level. **39**

As of December 2021, local ISPs are barred from using local cache servers, on which providers temporarily store data from popular websites to minimize bandwidth costs. The BTRC ordered all ISPs in a February 2021 directive to transfer local cache servers to nationwide ISPs or other nationwide internet infrastructure systems, potentially raising costs for small ISPs. **40**

The BTRC announced an audit of Banglalink in August 2021 spanning the company's operations from 1996 to 2019. **41** Previously, a BTRC audit and an associated Supreme Court case forced Grameen Phone and Robi, the other market leaders, to pay expensive dues, which could create economic barriers to their continued operation. In 2019, BTRC issued a letter to Grameen Phone demanding 8.49 trillion takas ($97 billion) in dues, and another 4.09 trillion takas ($46.8 billion) in taxes and late fees that had accumulated from 1997 to 2011. **42** The BTRC demanded 867.23 billion takas ($9.9 billion) from Robi for the same reasons. Directed by the Supreme Court, Grameen Phone paid multiple installments of the sum in 2020; **43** Robi paid its fifth and last installment of what the court had directed by May 2020. As of the end of the coverage period, the BTRC had not dropped the claim for the remaining amount from the two carriers. **44**

A5   0-4 pts

| Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner? | **1**/4 |

Officially, the BTRC is an independent regulatory body responsible for overseeing telecommunications and any related ICT issues. However, in practice the body lacks independence and represents the interests and priorities of the government.

The BTRC was established under the Bangladesh Telecommunications Act of 2001. The government amended the act in 2010, making the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications responsible for the regulation of the telecommunications sector, with the BTRC acting as an auxiliary organization. **45** In 2014, the Ministry of ICT merged with the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications. **46** In addition, the ICT Division within the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications has an access-to-information program (renamed "Aspire to Innovate") that has considerable influence over top-level decisions related to ICT policy. **47**

The government is reportedly considering a draft Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation (Amendment) Act 2021 that would undermine the independence of the BTRC. The bill, a draft of which was released in September 2021 but is no longer accessible on the BTRC website, would have authorized the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications to assume direct oversight over most of the BTRC's functions. **48** The draft had not been introduced by the end of the coverage period.

B. Limits on Content

B1   0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?	**3**/6

Authorities block websites and news outlets criticizing the government, especially during tense political moments or in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media and communication platforms have occasionally been subject to blocking and throttling.

News outlets continued to be blocked during the coverage period. In September 2021, the High Court ordered the blocking of all unregistered online news portals (see B6). **49** The BTRC subsequently closed down 59 unauthorized internet protocol television (IPTV) channels, **50** stating that it only allows licensed ISP to operate internet

protocol–based data services such as IPTV, streaming services, and video-on-demand. [51] The BTRC also mistakenly blocked the website of the state news agency Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) and other prominent news portals, including BDNews24 and JagoNews24. Those websites were unblocked after a few hours following intervention by the post and telecommunications minister. [52]

The High Court reportedly directed the BTRC to block PUBG and Free Fire for being "harmful online games" for three months in September 2021, though the games appeared accessible throughout the coverage period. [53] In April 2022, after the blocking period for PUBG had been extended, the High Court dismissed a plea by Proxima Beta, the Singapore-based developer of the multiplayer online game, to unblock it. [54]

In December 2020, during the previous coverage period, the High Court asked relevant government authorities to block all digital channels belonging to Kanak Sarwar, a Bangladeshi journalist living in the United States. The directive was issued under claims that the portals in question, including his Facebook account and YouTube channel, spread historically inaccurate and antistate content. [55] The initial public interest litigation filed against him the month before was for comments made in one of Sarwar's YouTube videos by someone he was interviewing about the first president of Bangladesh. [56] Sarwar's YouTube channel appeared to be accessible in Bangladesh during the coverage period, [57] though the Bangladesh Cyber Tribunal issued an arrest warrant for Sarwar in November 2021 (see C3). [58]

In August 2020, the Bangladesh government blocked Amardesh.co.uk, an online news portal critical of the government, within 12 hours of its launch from the United Kingdom. [59] The online portal is a new iteration of the *Daily Amar Desh,* an opposition daily that had been shut down in 2013. While Amardesh.co.uk appeared to remain blocked during the coverage period, a version of the website hosted on mybangla24.com was found accessible as of June 2022. [60]

Some previously blocked outlets have since been made accessible again, News sites Bangla.Report and Poriborton, blocked in 2019 likely for publishing articles critical of the government, were available again during the coverage period. BenarNews was also found to be accessible via certain ISPs during the coverage period after having been blocked by the BTRC in 2020 for republishing a leaked UN memo warning of the disastrous potential of COVID-19 in the country. [61]

The government has also blocked or throttled social media platforms (see A3). In March 2021, during the previous coverage period, Facebook and Facebook Messenger services were throttled for 3 days during protests against visiting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Before the national elections in 2018, the BTRC briefly blocked Skype.

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?	**2** / 4

Authorities employ legal, administrative, and other means to force publishers, content hosts, and digital platforms to delete legitimate content. Many cases are not publicly disclosed.

In February 2022, the High Court ordered the BTRC to remove viral videos and photos of a businessman who died by suicide while streaming live on Facebook. **62**

The High Court also directed the BTRC to remove online content featuring "derogatory comments" made by politicians several times during the coverage period. For instance, the BTRC was directed to remove audio and video clips of Moazzem Hossain Alal, a parliamentarian from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), making comments about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in December 2021. **63** The same month, the BTRC sought to take down over 380 audio and video clips of statements by the state minister for information and broadcasting. **64**

In September 2021, a High Court justice criticized the BTRC for failing to adequately remove online content that violates "people's right to privacy." **65** In response, Posts and Telecommunications Minister Mustafa Jabbar said "the BTRC has no authority and ability to block any content from these international platforms." **66**

In March 2021, during the previous coverage period, the High Court ordered the BTRC to remove all online uploads of texts and videos of an Al Jazeera investigative story alleging that Bangladesh's army chief, General Aziz Ahmed, had been helping his brothers elude criminal pasts. The court claimed it was exercising "extraordinary jurisdiction" in its order regarding the reporting. Bangladesh's foreign ministry had

denounced the report as a defamatory and politically motivated smear campaign (see C3). **67**

Authorities and progovernment actors also employ informal means of removing online content. In early 2022, several prominent activists—including feminist writer Taslima Nasrin and blogger Asad Asaduzzaman Noor, both frequent critics of religion—reported that their Facebook profiles were inaccessible. The profiles seemed to be marked as "memorialized" through Facebook's system for designating the profiles of people who have died. A group called Bangladesh Civilian Force appeared to claim responsibility. **68**

A May 2020 report from Swedish investigative news site Netra News alleged that the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) hires civilian contractors to make false copyright infringement complaints against government critics on Facebook in order to get their pages and accounts removed. The contractors are thought to use fake accounts to target the posts and profiles of the activists, journalists, and opposition figures specified by a daily spreadsheet that includes the URLs of the content in question (see B5). **69**

Critical websites and YouTube channels are also regularly removed due to unfounded copyright complaints, which are also suspected to be sponsored by the government. The complaints frequently hinge on the creation of spoof websites that republish content from the source they seek to remove, altering the date to make it appear like the first version posted; the spoof websites then become the grounds for complaint. **70** For example, the Netra News YouTube channel was disabled for about 24 hours after a series of false copyright takedown notices were submitted to the platform in August 2021. One of the videos taken down included an expose about alleged corruption by the state minister at the Ministry of Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources. Netra News has been targeted previously for its critical reports. **71**

In December 2020, the Global Network Initiative surveyed 17 journalists, bloggers, and activists, and found that 56 percent reported having had their Facebook account disabled at least once within the last four years due to hacking or false reporting, with religious and political actors widely suspected as perpetrators. Many victims said they do not get enough support from Facebook to regain or reactivate their accounts. **72**

Authorities have threatened websites with legal action or blocking if critical content is not removed, and users occasionally delete their own posts in fear of facing criminal charges. The editor of the news outlet Bangla.report alleged in 2019 that the minister of post and telecommunications threatened to take legal action if the website did not remove an article about an individual who wanted to meet with the minister at a business summit. **73** After the editor declined to remove the content, the website was temporarily blocked (see B1).

The government periodically asks private companies to remove content. Facebook reported restricting access to 118 items between July and December 2021, for violating local laws, including the DSA. **74** In the same period, Google reported receiving 599 requests to remove 1,958 items from Google products, primarily for defamation, government criticism, and religious offense. Google complied with about 25 percent of the requests. **75** TikTok received five legal requests to remove content from 16 accounts in the same period, and took action against six for violating community standards. **76** During the period from October to December 2021, TikTok removed over 2.6 million videos from Bangladesh for community guideline violations. **77**

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?	**1**/4

The process for restricting internet content lacks transparency, and there are no independent appeals processes in place for blocked websites or content removal orders. Further, the government's restrictions on connectivity and social media platforms are disproportionate and lack transparency.

The BTRC censors content primarily by issuing informal orders to domestic service providers, which are legally bound by their license and operations agreements to cooperate. Service providers have described official censorship as ad hoc in nature, without follow-up mechanisms in place to ensure compliance. **78** For example, no official notice or explanation was given to ISPs before or after they were compelled to block Poriborton and Bangla.report (see B1). No appeals have been documented in response to censorship directives.

Courts ordered restrictions on internet content several times during the coverage period (see B1 and B2).

The BTRC has tried to ramp up its technical ability to block, filter, and remove content online, including on social media. In September 2021, the BTRC reported that it had formed a new cell to monitor online content, including social media, and to file takedown requests with digital platforms. **79** The process of transfer of ISPs' local cache servers to IEG, NIX, and nationwide ISPs (see A4) may also facilitate BTRC censorship capacity; the president of the ISP association has alleged that the Department of Telecom had been setting up deep packet inspection (DPI) in these transferred cache servers. **80**

The BTRC confirmed in 2019 that the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) had set up the Cyber Threat Detection and Response (CTDR) project. The system is reportedly intended to monitor websites, apparently for keywords, to enable police to request that the BTRC remove or block "derogatory" or "harmful" content. **81** CTDR has also reportedly installed DPI to enable blocking of any online content, including Facebook pages or accounts, more quickly. **82**

In February 2022, the BTRC introduced the draft Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms 2021. **83** The draft regulation requires intermediaries—defined broadly to include any entity that stores, transmits, or provides service for "electronic records"—to prohibit a wide range of content, including that which is deemed defamatory, insulting, hurting religious values or sentiment, threatening to national sovereignty, a breach of government secrecy, or "against the liberation war of Bangladesh." The regulation would require platforms to remove certain content within 72 hours of notification and appoint three Bangladesh-based employees to ensure compliance with the law or face potential liability over noncompliance. **84** It would also impose obligations relating to online media ethics (see B6), messaging traceability (see C4), and data retention (see C6).

Dozens of international organizations published an open letter in March 2022 to the BTRC calling for reconsideration of the regulation because of its implications for free expression and privacy. **85**

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-

censorship?	

Online journalists and social media commentators continue to engage in self-censorship on political and religious topics in Bangladesh, especially if they are critiquing the government or influential people. Online activists are increasingly hesitant to post due to attacks from progovernment actors and trolls. [86] A series of fatal attacks on bloggers in recent years (see C7), coupled with an increase in criminal charges against online journalists and other internet users under the DSA and the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act (see C3), have exacerbated online self-censorship. [87] In a report published by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in December 2018, one journalist said they had published only 10 to 20 percent of potential news stories, while another claimed to self-censor 50 percent of the time. [88] Some journalists reported that media outlets were approached by government agencies who advised them to "exercise restraint" when reporting on the attacks on Durga Puja in October 2021, while others indicated they self-censored their coverage of the violence (see A3). [89]

The DSA has contributed to a culture of fear for journalists who face potential prosecution for their reporting, [90] including during the coverage period (see C3). In May 2022, the law minister acknowledged that there were some misuses of the DSA and mentioned that the government had informed law-enforcement authorities that no one should be arrested immediately after a case under the DSA is filed, unless it concerned a serious crime. [91]

The 2021 World Press Freedom Index, produced by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), continues to rank Bangladesh as the worst country for press freedom in all of South Asia, and its global ranking was 152 out of 180 countries surveyed. [92]

B5 0-4 pts	
Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?	**2**/4

Authorities do not officially pressure or coerce news outlets, journalists, or bloggers to follow a particular editorial direction in their reporting, though disinformation circulating on social media has been linked to the government.

Netra News alleged that accounts linked to the ruling Awami League coordinated a disinformation campaign against the outlet and two of its journalists, Tasneem Khalil and David Bergman, in August 2021, in retaliation for their reporting on corruption allegations (see B2). **93** Whistleblower reports previously published by Netra News in May 2020 alleged that a unit under the DGFI—the Public Relations Monitoring Cell (PRMC)—has contracted civilians to maintain thousands of fraudulent Facebook pages and accounts. The civilians reportedly receive daily directions outlining which pages and accounts to target with false complaints, most often those of journalists, dissidents, and opposition figures. **94** The report has not been confirmed by other sources.

Facebook removed the accounts and pages of a Bangladesh-based hacking operation with similar tactics in December 2020, though it was linked to two local groups and not the government. The groups Defense of Nation (also called Don's Team) and the Crime Research and Analysis Foundation (CRAF) were found to be attempting to get content removed with false copyright claims and by hacking the accounts of their targets, as well as using the compromised accounts of the journalists, activists, and members of religious minorities they hacked to amplify their own content (see B2). **95**

Government agencies reportedly issue directives barring their employees from using social media in certain ways. In October 2020, the government introduced such guidelines for teachers at government colleges, prohibiting them from posting or engaging with posts perceived as tarnishing the government's image, demeaning services or institutions of national importance, or disrupting national unity or law and order. If teachers transgress these guidelines, immediate action can be taken by their superiors who may inform and provide evidence to the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education. Other government employees and officials have received similar circulars, including with threats of legal action against those who contravene them. **96** Everyday users receive similar warnings. In October 2020, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a press release threatening immediate legal action against those using social media to spread false or provocative messages about government, security, and military officials. **97**

Such directives were also used to control the narrative about the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, the Department of Nursing and Midwifery banned all officials and employees of government hospitals from speaking to reporters or the public without

prior permission. **98** The Ministry of Education temporarily suspended two government-employed college teachers the previous month for social media posts that officials claimed were "inconsistent" with how the government responded to the pandemic. **99**

Journalists sometimes face additional, unofficial pressure to report favorably on specific business interests due to outlet ownership by conglomerates or financial dependence on their advertising. **100**

Coordinated inauthentic behavior has been used by authorities in the past, especially around elections. During a campaign rally ahead of 2018 elections, a senior government advisor encouraged political activists in the ruling party to be more active online by flooding social media with new accounts, using both real and fake names. **101** Subsequently, Facebook and Twitter removed government-linked pages and accounts connected to state-sponsored actors engaging in coordinated manipulation. **102**

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to publish content online?	**2**/3

Regulatory constraints affect the ability of online outlets to publish. As of September 2020, broadcasters and newspapers in Bangladesh must register their online portals separately. **103** The move, enacted through the approval of a draft amendment to the 2017 National Online Media Policy, has been criticized by some as a stepping-stone toward greater government media control. **104**

In June 2022, after the coverage period, the NGO Affairs Bureau refused to renew the operating license of human rights group Odhikar. The registration order, which will limit Odhikar's ability to conduct its work, referenced research on extrajudicial killings published on the organization's website as justification. **105**

In May 2019, Minister of Information Hasan Mahmud announced that the government would mandate the registration of online media outlets, noting the need for "discipline" and guidelines for online media. **106** In September 2020, the government set the registration fee for new sites at 10,000 takas ($114) and the annual renewal fee at 5,000 takas ($57). As of October 2021, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry reported it had approved a total of 259 online outlets, with 2,000 applications under

process. [107] The government also stipulated that online news portals will need to register before launching from 2022 onward. [108] In June 2022, after the coverage period, Mahmud warned newspapers that have online platforms not to broadcast talk shows and videos online for licensing reasons. [109]

Beginning in July 2019, global social media and commercial websites operating in Bangladesh without offices in the country were subjected to a 15 percent value-added tax (VAT) on their digital services, including advertisement for foreign products. [110] In September 2020, a local sales partner of Facebook, Httpool, paid over 17 million takas ($195,000) in VAT and fines after the VAT Intelligence Directorate of the National Board of Revenue (NBR) filed a case against it over noncompliance with the VAT Law; the case was dropped after the money was paid. [111] Amazon Web Services and Google completed the process to get VAT registration in May 2021, ending a two-year-long stalemate over the issue. [112] Facebook received its registration in June 2021. [113]

The draft Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms 2021 (see B3) would establish a code of ethics for publishers of curated online content, news and current affairs, and entertainment content, potentially constraining their independence further. [114]

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability?	**3**/4

The online media landscape in Bangladesh is vibrant, with a number of online outlets that give voice to a range of views. Even with the significant state of censorship, people are able to access a variety of local and international news sources that convey independent, balanced views in the main languages spoken in the country. The ability to access localized information and create content in Bengali has contributed to the popularity of local blog-hosting services. [115] YouTube content in Bengali languages has become more popular, especially during COVID-19 restrictions. [116] Some YouTubers in the fields of food, music, entertainment, and news boast over a million subscribers.

Media outlets, social media platforms, blogs, and websites represent diverse interests within society. For example, LGBT+ people have turned to online platforms as a safe space to express their opinions and experiences in response to broad discrimination in the country. However, the overall environment in Bangladesh is hostile and

dangerous for LGBT+ people: state discrimination is prevalent and there have been violent, sometimes fatal, attacks in recent years. [117] Many activists have gone into hiding. [118]

While Bangladesh's marginalized ethnic groups are inadequately represented in the mainstream media, the popularity of social media and news sites has brought new voices to the fore. However, the blocking of social media platforms and communications apps has at times threatened the diversity of online content (see B1), though many people use virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass blocking. [119]

Other marginalized groups, such as religious minorities, have been the targets of offline violence due to mis- and disinformation spread on social media platforms. The violence during Durga Puja in October 2021, which resulted in at least 11 deaths and hundreds of injuries, was inflamed by anti-Hindu content posted on Facebook. The violence was precipitated in part by two videos posted to Facebook displaying the purported desecration of a Quran and a man criticizing Islam, and was exacerbated by other false and misleading content circulating on social media. [120]

B8 0-6 pts	
Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?	**4**/6

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 as Bangladeshi internet users mobilized several campaigns on social media, reflecting an overall improvement in the environment for online mobilization.

While social media platforms, communications apps, and other digital tools generally remain accessible to users who wish to mobilize and campaign, the government has restricted connectivity and blocked platforms during protests. Enhanced surveillance, arrests, and targeted violence also limit people's willingness to mobilize online.

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, play an important role in mobilization, protest, and awareness raising. During student protests at the Shahjalal University in Sylhet in February 2022, students used live videos on Facebook to share updates and news of police brutality against them. They also used Facebook to garner support for their protest and a subsequent hunger strike. [121] A community in Dhaka mobilized over Facebook in February 2022 to organize against the construction of a police

station on the site of a playground. [122] In August 2021, a feminist grassroots network led a Facebook campaign of protest against the portrayal of women in media, the use of sexist labels like "raater rani" ("queen of the night," or prostitute), and moral policing by media and society. [123]

During protests in March 2021 against the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during which at least 12 people were killed, Facebook and Facebook Messenger services were restricted for three days (see B1). [124] At the same time the Facebook restrictions were imposed, some users reported restrictions to 3G and 4G internet services in areas near the capital and certain other districts (see A3). [125]

In October 2020, a Facebook profile image blackout movement started trending in Bangladesh as a protest against incidents of rape in Sylhet MC college and Begumganj Upazila in Noakhali. The movement intended to show what a world without women would look like. [126] Another trending social media movement was started by the son of abducted journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol shortly after the journalist went missing in March 2020. Monorom Polok launched a campaign for his father with the hashtag #whereiskajol on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, successfully garnering international attention. His father returned after 53 days, but was then immediately arrested and detained for nine months, released on bail, and quickly charged again under the DSA (see C3 and C7). [127]

C. Violations of User Rights

C1   0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?	**2**/6

While online expression is recognized in the constitution, it remains largely unprotected in practice. Article 39 (1, 2) in Chapter 2 of the constitution recognizes the freedoms of thought, conscience, and speech as fundamental rights, [128] and online expression has historically been considered within the scope of this provision. However, other laws undermine these rights and internet users frequently face criminal penalties for free expression protected under international human rights standards.

The 2006 ICT Act defines and ostensibly protects freedom of expression online, [129] though it also includes an array of penalties for citizens who violate others' rights to communicate electronically (see C2). The DSA, which parliament approved in September 2018, is ostensibly meant to prevent cybercrime and replace parts of the 2006 ICT Act. However, it contains provisions that can infringe on free expression online (see C2). The 2009 Right to Information Act enshrines access to information in law, though journalists and activists filing requests have faced challenges, including retaliation. [130]

Sections 68 and 82 of the ICT Act, which were not annulled by the DSA, contain provisions for a Cyber Tribunal and Cyber Appellate Tribunal to expedite cybercrime cases. As of April 2021, the government had established eight cyber tribunals. [131] The Appellate Tribunal, which can reverse the Cyber Tribunal's rulings, has yet to be formed. [132]

The judicial system of Bangladesh is formally independent from the executive and legislative branches, but critics assert that it can be partisan. Police and regulators generally bypass the courts to implement censorship and surveillance without oversight, and pressure on judicial officers by government actors continues to pose a concern. [133]

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?	**0**/4

Online activists, journalists, and other users regularly face civil and criminal penalties for online expression. Amendments to the ICT Act in 2013 increased the maximum prison term for those convicted from 10 to 14 years. [134]

In September 2018, the parliament approved the draft DSA after the cabinet had approved the act earlier that year. [135] Section 21 provides for sentences of up to 14 years in prison for anyone who uses digital devices to spread negative propaganda regarding the Liberation War or Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the independence leader known as the "father of the nation" and the country's first president. Section 25 introduces sentences of up to three years in prison for deliberately publishing intimidating or distorted information against an individual online. Section 28 mandates

up to 10 years in prison for harming someone's religious sentiments. Section 29 provides for up to three years in prison for publishing information intended to defame someone. Section 31 provides for sentences of up to seven years in prison for deliberately publishing information that can spread hatred among communities. Section 32 has been criticized by rights groups for potentially stifling investigative journalism by imposing sentences of up to 14 years for recording or accessing information digitally without prior consent.

Under the DSA, no warrant is required before making ICT-related arrests, and some crimes are "nonbailable," meaning suspects must apply for bail at a court. Officials regularly fail to comply with the mandated 60-day time frame within which they must submit an investigation report for a detainee; the time frame can be extended to a maximum of 105 days, leaving users in custody for months. [136] The government has voiced an interest in stopping abuse of the DSA, but does not plan to amend it. [137]

In January 2020, a group of professors, journalists, and lawyers from the Dhaka Supreme Court filed a writ petition with the High Court requesting that it declare certain sections of the DSA illegal for being too broad and infringing on free expression. [138] In February 2020, the High Court asked the government to explain why sections 25 and 31 of the DSA are constitutional and should not be repealed. [139] As of the end of the coverage period, the hearing on those sections had not taken place.

The penal code also criminalizes online speech. Section 124A of the penal code (the Sedition Act) penalizes disaffection toward the lawful government and prescribes up to life imprisonment, with a variable fine. [140]

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?	**2**/6

In Bangladesh, individuals are frequently penalized for online activities that are protected under international human rights standards. The freedom of expression organization Article 19 in a 2020 report concluded that the government has increasingly turned to the DSA to harass, charge, and arrest people for their online and offline speech. [141]

The government does not regularly disclose the number of arrests made under the DSA, and estimates of that figure vary. According to research by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), over 2,200 people faced DSA charges in the period from January 2020 to February 2022, including 69 online journalists. [142] Rights organization Ain-O-Salish Kendra (ASK) identified over 1,100 DSA cases lodged in 2021 against online activists, journalists, and alleged government critics. [143] According to Article 19, 40 percent of cases filed under the DSA were lodged for slandering or making indecent comments about the prime minister, other ministers, or other influential people. [144] Data from the government's Cyber Crime Tribunal shows that nearly 2,000 cases were filed under the DSA between October 2018 and October 2020. [145]

Odhikar research into 134 DSA arrests found that 111 were over online posts criticizing the prime minister, other officials, or government activities. [146] In a survey of 668 DSA cases, the CGS found that a majority were filed by Awami League activists against critics of the party's leaders. The CGS also found that judicial processes in DSA cases were very slow, leading to long pretrial detention periods. [147] In a May 2021 report, Article 19 found that 410 of 631 attacks on journalists and human rights defenders in 2020 involved the criminalization of online expression. [148]

The DSA is weaponized to intimidate journalists into ceasing their critical commentary, frequently regarding corruption, and it is largely used by progovernment or state actors who file cases based on personal complaints. [149] For instance, Tanvir Hasan Tanu, a journalist with the online news portal Jagonews24.com, was arrested under the DSA in July 2021 after reporting on corruption at a hospital in Thakurgoan. The hospital's superintendent alleged that Tanu published offensive, defamatory, and false information on a digital platform with the intention to create unrest. Tanu was released on bail after one day. [150] In February 2022, journalist Jahurul Haque was arrested under the DSA for Facebook posts criticizing the police. [151] Journalist MA Sabur Rana was arrested in June 2021 over comments he made on a Facebook post that alleged that the mayor of Khulna was evading taxes. He was granted bail the following month. [152]

Authorities have also targeted the family members of activists and journalists living abroad. In October 2021, a Bangladeshi court remanded Nusrat Shahrin Raka into police custody under the DSA for allegedly posting antigovernment comments on Facebook. Raka is the sister of Kanak Sarwar, the outspoken US-based dissident (see B1). An October 2021 Netra News report claimed that a fake Facebook page had been

created a month earlier to incriminate Raka. [153] Raka was released on bail in March 2022. [154]

Photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol faces at least three DSA charges as part of an ongoing trial that began in January 2022. [155] Previously, in March 2020, a DSA case had been filed against Kajol and 31 others for an article about the arrest of Jubo Mohila League leader Shamima Nur Papia. [156] The report, which Kajol later shared on social media, alleged that influential bureaucrats and politicians were involved in a sex work and extortion scandal. [157] Kajol was abducted in front of his office one day after the case was filed, found alive 53 days later, detained by authorities, and released after eight months (see B8 and C7). [158]

DSA cases have focused on criticism of government officials. In October 2021, police arrested Ismail Hossain for allegedly posting distorted photos of Prime Minister Hasina and Minister of Road Transport and Bridges Obaidul Quader on Facebook. [159] In the same week, Farhad Asif Tipu, a journalist from Kumarkhali, was arrested for allegedly sharing an offensive post regarding the prime minister's visit to India on Facebook. A local leader from the student wing of the ruling party lodged the case. [160] The trial of seven people facing DSA charges over antigovernment Facebook posts—all of whom are free on bail or not yet arrested, including Netra News editor Tasneem Khalil, bloggers Ashiq Imran and Muhammad Wahid Un Nabi, and activist Didarul Islam Bhuiyan—began in February 2022. [161]

Opposition politicians are also targeted. In July 2021, a DSA case was lodged against Rafiqul Islam Jamal, a leader of the BNP in Jhalakathi, for allegedly making derogatory comments about Prime Minister Hasina in a Facebook post. [162]

In October 2021, Baul singer Rita Dewan and two YouTubers were indicted on DSA charges for "derogatory comments" about religion, due to videos in which Dewan made comments about Islam in a musical battle against another performer who portrayed God. [163] The case remained ongoing as of the end of the coverage period. In June 2022, after the coverage period, a Facebook user was arrested after posting on Facebook in support of derogatory remarks about the prophet Muhammad made by an Indian official. [164]

In February 2022, Dipti Rani Das, a teenager from the minority Hindu community, was released on bail after being detained for "hurting religious sentiments" under the DSA

in October 2020. [165] Facebook user Jhumon Das Apon was arrested under the DSA in March 2021 in connection to posts he had made about Islamist leader Mamunul Haque. He was released on bail in September 2021. [166]

During and shortly after the March 2021 visit of Indian prime minister Narendra Modi and the resulting protests, many internet users were arrested under the DSA for unfavorable posts about Modi and Hasina (see B8). [167]

In previous years, internet users were routinely arrested and charged for their online criticism of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, writer Mushtaq Ahmed was arrested alongside several others in May 2020 for allegedly spreading rumors and misinformation on Facebook about the government's response to the pandemic. [168] After the group's bail petitions were rejected as many as six times, Ahmed died in detention in February 2021 (see C7). [169]

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?	**2**/4

The government does not impose registration requirements on bloggers or internet users. However, registration is mandatory for online news portals (see B6). Biometric registration in the form of fingerprints, national identity cards, and related personal information is required to obtain a mobile connection, curtailing users' ability to communicate anonymously. [170] On July 1, 2021, the BTRC launched a National Equipment Identity Register system that automatically registered mobile phones to the country's international mobile equipment identity (IMEI) database.. [171] In October 2021, after a three-month grace period, the BTRC announced it would block nearly 82,000 unregistered mobile handsets. [172] It reversed its decision later that month, saying that it would not block any mobile set and that the BTRC's goal was to create and maintain a database of all active phone sets in the country. [173]

Bangladeshi users are not prohibited from using encryption services to protect their communications. There are no laws requiring users or providers of encryption services to turn over decryption keys to the government.

The draft Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms 2021 (see B3) would require that messaging companies be able to identify the "first originator" of online

information, [174] undermining online anonymity provided by end-to-end encrypted communications.

C5   0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy?	**1**/6

Bangladesh recognizes the right to privacy and correspondence under Article 43 of the constitution. [175] However, there is no specific privacy or data-protection law, leaving internet and mobile phone users vulnerable to surveillance and other violations of their privacy. [176]

News reports indicate that the Bangladesh government plans to expand its surveillance capacity. The cabinet approved the purchases of one mobile interceptor device from Swiss company Toru Group in June 2021 [177] and another mobile interceptor from a US company in January 2022. [178] In September 2021, the High Court rejected a petition asking the government to curtail its surveillance of phone calls, which have sometimes been leaked for political purposes. [179]

A February 2021 Al-Jazeera investigation alleged that Bangladesh had bought Israeli-made surveillance equipment capable of monitoring hundreds of mobile phones simultaneously in 2018. The DGFI purchased the tool, known as the P6 Intercept, from Israeli-based firm PicSix, which is run by former Israeli intelligence agents. [180] Another February 2021 report found that the notorious paramilitary force the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) procured international mobile subscriber identity (IMSI) catcher technology, also known as "stingrays," which permit the bulk interception of mobile phone traffic, from the Canadian company Octasic in 2019. [181]

In August 2021, Israeli company Cellebrite announced that it would no longer sell its phone-hacking technology in Bangladesh. [182] Previously, a joint investigation between Al-Jazeera and the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* had revealed in March 2021 that the Bangladesh government had recently purchased Cellebrite's UFED, a tool that can unlock and extract data from mobile phones, including encrypted data. The investigation also mentioned Bangladesh's investment in surveillance drones and Wi-Fi interceptors, as well as a training project for members of the RAB on the use of UFED that began in 2019 and was set to end in June 2021. [183] The RAB has a track record of human rights abuses that include extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and torture. [184]

A CitizenLab report from September 2018 had earlier alleged that Israeli technology firm NSO Group's Pegasus spyware may be in operation in Bangladesh. The spyware is covertly installed on a target's phone after they click on an exploit link, granting the operator access to information including passwords, contacts, text messages, and live voice calls from messaging apps, as well as the ability to open the camera and microphone. [185] In December 2021, the High Court questioned the inaction of the Digital Security Agency to conduct an inquiry into the use of Pegasus. [186]

Separately, the government introduced the smartphone app Corona Tracer BD in June 2020. The app uses Bluetooth proximity tracking to alert users if they have come into contact with a person who has a confirmed COVID infection. [187] There is little information about what data the app uses, how it is stored, and who has access to it. Over one million people had downloaded the app by May 2021. [188]

Social media monitoring remains a concern in the country. In September 2021, the BTRC disclosed that its newly formed cybersecurity cell would monitor different social media platforms for antigovernment, antistate, and 'objectionable' content, though it remained unclear what technology the cell would use. [189] In March 2020, the Ministry of Information announced that a new unit would monitor social media for "rumors" related to COVID-19. [190] The ministry scrapped the order after two days in the wake of public outrage. [191]

The privacy rights of mobile phone users have also been threatened. In December 2018, it was revealed that the BTRC had collected the personal information of about 70 million mobile subscribers and shared it with other government agencies for a purported "survey." [192]

In September 2019, the BTRC confirmed that the government set up the Cyber Threat Detection and Response project (see B3). [193] News reports from 2017 had revealed that the government was planning to install internet monitoring equipment worth approximately $19 million by May 2018 for the project's purposes. Reports claimed the equipment would perform granular analysis of network traffic using DPI in order to help the government enforce the ban on pornography and conduct monitoring to combat militancy. [194]

In 2018, a proposal submitted by the Ministry of Home Affairs to buy approximately $27 million worth of equipment from foreign companies to upgrade its mobile

telephone, internet, and related surveillance networks was approved. [195] The proposal enables the National Telecommunication Monitoring Center (NTMC), which operates under the ministry, to conduct "lawful interception" to assist local law enforcement agencies. Foreign companies listed in the proposal include the US firms Verint Systems and SS8, German firms Trovicor and UTIMACO, the Italian firm RCS, the Chinese firm Inovatio, and the Swiss firm New Saft; the listed firms advertise equipment capable of analyzing data traffic, calls, emails, and audiovisual materials online. [196]

In 2014, leaked documents were published on WikiLeaks detailing a Bangladesh law enforcement agency's purchase of FinFisher software two years prior. FinFisher is used to monitor digital traffic. [197]

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users' right to privacy?	**2**/6

Service providers and technology companies are required to aid the government in monitoring the communications of their users. Rights groups have raised concerns about the security of the country's mobile phone–registration process and possible access to biometric data by third parties (see C4). [198]

Bangladesh lacks a dedicated personal-data protection act. [199] The government can request that telecommunications providers retain the data of any user for an unspecified period, according to the 2001 Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Act. [200] The act was amended in 2010, and now allows the government to intercept electronic voice or data communications from any individual or institution without a court order to ensure the security of the state. The act also requires domestic service providers to cooperate with the government in intercepting such communications, though there are no clear provisions governing the process or the penalties for noncompliance. [201] Numerous leaks to social media of personal audio and video communications potentially secured by authorities with the aid of providers led the government to announce a plan to revise the amended Telecommunication Act and propose an addition to the DSA to safeguard data privacy in the fall of 2020 (see C5). [202]

The government is reportedly finalizing the draft Personal Data Protection Act. A draft released in September 2021 widely expands government access to personal data, including by mandating data localization for personal information and appointing the Digital Security Agency, an intelligence agency, to oversee the data protection authority. [203] In July 2022, after the coverage period, the government posted another draft with minor changes. [204] Rights groups like Transparency International criticized it for the lack of clear definitions and the Digital Security Agency's role, citing fears that the bill may be used as another tool to control dissent in the name of protecting personal information. [205]

The draft Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms 2021 (see B3) would require intermediaries to retain user data for 180 days. [206]

In 2017, Facebook refused to sign a memorandum of understanding with the Bangladesh police requesting that the social media platform require additional identification, including national identification numbers, from Bangladeshi nationals to register an account. [207]

Between June and December 2021, Facebook received 463 requests and 62 emergency disclosure requests from the government pertaining to 876 users. Facebook provided at least some data in 67 percent of cases. [208]

C7   0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities?	**2**/5

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because there were fewer reported cases of physical violence in retaliation for peoples' online activities.

Online journalists and everyday internet users sometimes face harassment, intimidation, and violence, and reports of abduction and torture in detention in relation to critical social media activity emerged in recent years.

In May 2022, three journalists with the news site Territorial News were attacked while reporting on a shark-smuggling operation in Cox's Bazar. [209] Also in May, members of the student wing of the ruling Awami League party, the Chhatra League, attacked a journalist with the online outlet The Daily Campus while he was reporting on their

attack on a BNP-linked march. [210] According to statistics from rights group ASK, 210 journalists were harassed from January to December 2021, of whom 13 had received threats from ruling party members or their affiliates. [211]

In July 2022, after the coverage period, journalist Hasibur Rahman Rubel was found dead in Khulna. He worked with several outlets, including news site CrimeVisionBD.com, though it is unclear if he was killed in retaliation for his reporting. [212]

On February 25, 2021, during the previous coverage period, writer Mushtaq Ahmed died in detention at the Kashimpur High Security Prison. He had been detained in May 2020 alongside colleague and cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore in relation to an article he posted on Facebook criticizing the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and for sharing cartoons drawn by Kishore on the same platform (see C3). [213] Kishore says that Ahmed had told him that he had been tortured by electric shock. [214]

In March 2020, journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol was abducted in front of his office one day after a case was filed against him and others under the DSA (see B8 and C3). The case stemmed from a report Kajol shared on social media alleging influential bureaucrats and politicians were involved in a sex work and extortion scandal. [215] Kajol was found alive 53 days later, 250 kilometers (155 miles) away from his office, in Benapole near the Indian border. [216] He was then detained by authorities and eventually released on bail in December 2020.

Beatings by progovernment actors in retaliation for critical online commentary have also risen in recent years. In August 2020, Chhatra League members accused Dhaka University law student Saleh Uddin Sifat of carrying out "antigovernment activities" on social media and beat him so severely that he required hospitalization. [217]

Family members of dissidents, including of those living in exile, also experience harassment for their relatives' online activities. France-based online human rights activist and government critic Pinaki Bhattacharya, who fled Bangladesh in 2018 fearing detention by the DGFI, relayed on Facebook that police interrogated his family in October 2020 about themselves, Bhattacharya, and their modes of communication with each other. [218] They also called Bhattacharya's wife to interrogate her.

Online harassment and death threats continue to pose a threat to those expressing themselves on social media. A 2021 survey of 298 teenagers found that over 70 percent experienced some form of online harassment, including cyberstalking, bullying, and blackmail. [219] In June 2020, an Oxford graduate student from Bangladesh named Shamir Montazid posted a picture of himself standing in front of an LGBT+ pride flag. He was then attacked online by trolls and cyberbullies who accused him of indoctrinating youth with "liberal gay values." [220]

C8 0–3 pts	
Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?	**1**/3

Hacking groups, including one allegedly hired by the government, target journalists, activists, and dissidents in Bangladesh. Cyberattacks against financial and government entities further raise concerns about the state of cybersecurity in the country, as people in Bangladesh increasingly turn to internet-based financial services. [221]

Attacks on government websites and services apps have occurred occasionally. In August 2021, the minister for ICT reported cyberattacks against Surokkha, the Covid-19 vaccination registration app, that were thwarted. [222] In May 2022, cybersecurity firm Cisco Talos reported that a South Asian hacking group had targeted the RAB for intelligence-gathering purposes. [223] Beginning in August 2021, several spear-phishing emails loaded with Trojan attacks were sent to high-ranking RAB officers. [224]

In January 2022, the website of the state-owned mobile operator Teletalk was hacked and defaced. It was restored after two hours. [225] An October 2021 report by the Cyber Crime Awareness Foundation identified an increasing rate of hacks against social media accounts in Bangladesh. [226]

May 2020 reporting from Netra News cited whistleblowers alleging that the DGFI maintains a team of civilian, contracted hackers who work for the Signal Intelligence Bureau (SIB). [227] The hacking team reportedly has sophisticated technology that gives it the ability to intercept SMS messages to access verification codes for two-factor authentication. Netra News also claimed to have evidence that the SIB hacked into the Facebook account of Bhattacharya in September 2018 by intercepting two-factor authentication passcodes. The whistleblower cited in the Netra News reports

also alleged that the unit maintains a "collection of hacked accounts" that it uses for high-value hacking operations.

Malware attacks used to steal user information pose threats to cybersecurity in Bangladesh. In February 2021, the Cyber Threat Research team of the e-Government Computer Incident Response Team (BGD e-GOV CIRT) identified a malware campaign targeting the websites of critical services. **228** The campaign used a version of Remote Access Trojan (RAT) to steal users' personal information by creating fake government websites mimicking domains including the Bangladesh Police, Islami Bank, the Government Corona Portal, and Brac Bank, among others. **229**

Private-sector actors are also frequently subjected to technical attacks. In April 2021, BGD e-GOV CIRT published a report stating that Hafnium, a Chinese hacking group, had compromised the email servers or website portals of 147 entities in Bangladesh. **230** These included government entities such as the Bangladesh Bank, the Bangladesh Army, and the BTRC, as well as other financial institutions and businesses. **231**

There are several laws protecting Bangladeshis from cyberattacks and theft of personal data, including provisions against hacking in the ICT Act 2006 and the DSA. **232** In November 2021, the central bank noted it was launching a team to counter cyberattacks in the financial sector. **233**

Footnotes

1   International Telecommunication Union, "Statistics," accessed on March 24, 2022, https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx,

2   Calculated based on number of internet subscribers reported by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission for May 2022 and Bangladesh's population as of December 2020 as per World Bank Data. Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, "Internet Subscribers," September 2022, http://www.btrc.gov.bd/site/page/347df7fe-409f-451e-a415-65b109a207f5/; "Population total – Bangladesh," World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=BD

3   "Bangladesh enters 4G era on Feb 19," The Daily Star, February 14, 2018, http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/bangladesh-enters-4g-internet-ser...; "Bangladesh internet users cross 100 million," BDNews24, May 14, 2020 https://bdnews24.com/technology/2020/05/14/bangladesh-internet-users-cr...; "Bangladesh completes 5G auction", European 5G Observatory, April 6, 2022, https://5gobservatory.eu/bangladesh-completes-5g-auction/

4   Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, "Internet Subscribers in Bangladesh," April 2022, http://www.btrc.gov.bd/site/page/347df7fe-409f-451e-a415-65b109a207f5/-.

5   "Everything you need to know about 5G in Bangladesh," The Daily Star, December 29, 2021, https://www.thedailystar.net/tech-startup/news/everything-you-need-know....

More footnotes

On Bangladesh

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

39/100   **Partly Free**

Internet Freedom Score

43/100   **Partly Free**

Freedom in the World Status

Partly Free

Networks Restricted

Yes

Social Media Blocked

No

Websites Blocked

Yes

Pro-government Commentators

Yes

Users Arrested

Yes

In Other Reports

Freedom in the World 2022

Other Years

2021

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