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Freedom on the Net 2024 - Bangladesh

Key Developments, June 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024

Internet freedom in Bangladesh continued to decline during the coverage period as the ruling Awami League (AL) party manipulated the online information environment ahead of the 2024 general elections. Online activists and journalists encountered increasing levels of physical violence and supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) faced harassment, censorship, and arrest, especially surrounding the January 2024 general elections. Additionally, internet and communications services were throttled several times ahead of BNP rallies. Authorities continued to target opposition leaders, journalists, government critics, and ordinary users under the now-repealed Digital Security Act (DSA) and its replacement, the Cyber Security Act 2023 (CSA), fueling self-censorship online.

- Authorities throttled internet services ahead of opposition party rallies and protests three times during the coverage period, once in October 2023 and twice in July 2023 (see A3).
- In September 2023, an AFP Bangladesh report revealed the existence of a network of seemingly fake experts—posing as academics from prestigious universities, using stolen photos, and attributing fabricated quotes to real analysts—who produced hundreds of articles praising Bangladesh government policies (see B5).
- In July 2023, the Chattogram District’s administration shut down the offices of CplusTV, a news-sharing YouTube channel and Facebook account, and C Vision, a news-sharing Facebook page, for “illegally operating without licenses” (see B6).
- In September 2023, the government repealed the Digital Security Act (DSA)—which was passed in 2018 and assigned criminal penalties and fines for individual’s online activities—and replaced it with the Cyber Security Act (CSA). The CSA maintains many of the provisions in the DSA and also introduces new provisions that criminalize online speech, some of which are similarly broad but prescribe less severe penalties (see C2).
- In June 2023, Golam Rabbani Nadim, a correspondent for both the popular news site Banglanews24.com and the cable news channel Ekattor TV, was attacked and killed, allegedly at the orders of Mahmudul Alam Babu, a local government leader. Nadim previously reported that Babu was secretly married and covered allegations that he had abused his wife (see C7).

Political Overview

The ruling Awami League (AL) has consolidated political power through sustained harassment of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and those perceived to be allied with it, as well as of critical media and voices in civil society. Corruption is endemic, and anticorruption efforts have been weakened by politicized enforcement. Due process guarantees are poorly upheld and security forces violate human rights with near impunity. Violence and discrimination against religious minorities and refugees, particularly Rohingya who have fled Myanmar, are significant problems.

Note: In July 2024, after the coverage period, widespread student-led protests erupted across Bangladesh. In response, authorities arrested over 10,000 protestors, killed hundreds, cut off internet access, and blocked social media platforms. The protests continued, and on August 5, 2024, then prime minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country. An interim government supported by the protest leadership assumed power that month. The crackdown and its aftermath will be documented in detail in next year's Freedom on the Net report.

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

Information and communications technology (ICT) usage and speed continue to grow in Bangladesh, due in large part to government efforts to extend fiber-optic networks to more remote areas. However, the country lags in terms of internet quality and affordability (see A2).

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), internet penetration in Bangladesh was 44.5 percent at the end of 2023, compared to 41.6 percent at the end of 2022.¹ The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reported that 74.5 percent of the population owned a smartphone in 2023.² According to GSMA Intelligence, the number of mobile connections surpassed the total population in January 2024.³

According to Ookla's Speedtest Global Index, as of April 2024, Bangladesh's median mobile download speed was 23.83 megabits per second (Mbps) and the median mobile upload speed was 10.80 Mbps. The median fixed-line broadband download and upload speeds were 46.52 and 45.31 Mbps, respectively.⁴

Poor infrastructure sometimes hampers connectivity for internet users. In a January 2022 ruling, the High Court directed mobile service operators to improve their offerings.⁵ However, as of February 2024, mobile operators have failed to ensure the minimum internet download speed stipulated by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC).⁶ From June 2022 to June 2023, over a third of the 15,335 customer complaints received by the BTRC were related to the service quality provided by mobile providers.⁷

The country's 4G connectivity speeds continued to improve over previous coverage periods.⁸ As of December 2023, 57 percent of mobile phone users in Bangladesh used 4G services.⁹ The government is retiring 3G connectivity, and there has been a ban on the import and production of 3G devices since January 2023.¹⁰ The government and service providers are also expanding 5G service.¹¹

In May 2024, at the end of the coverage period, Cyclone Remal hit Bangladesh, causing 15,000 cell towers to go offline and disrupting mobile and internet services for 36 hours. The outages affected nearly 30 million people, largely in coastal districts, including Barguna, Barishal, Patuakhali, Noakhali, Chattogram, and Khulna.¹²

In October 2023, internet and telecommunications services were disrupted after a fire broke out in Khawaja Tower in Dhaka, where several International Internet Gateway (IIG) service providers' offices are located.¹³ The disruption affected nearly 5 million broadband users and 24 million mobile internet subscribers over a period of several days.

The next month, in November 2023, the Bangladesh Submarine Cable Company Limited (BSCPLC) reduced the bandwidth it offered to 19 IIG operators by nearly 500 Mbps due to defaulted payments totaling 3.8 billion Bangladeshi taka (\$34 million).¹⁴ Users across Bangladesh faced slow speeds for nearly four days; speeds were only restored once operators began repaying the BSCPLC.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

Despite the rapid growth of internet infrastructure in Bangladesh, disparities persist. Issues related to affordability, service quality, and low levels of digital literacy prevent many from accessing the internet, particularly rural populations and those with fewer socioeconomic opportunities.¹⁶

A gender gap, especially regarding mobile connectivity, remains a pressing issue. The GSM Association's annual *Mobile Gender Gap Report 2024* found that 85 percent of Bangladeshi men owned a mobile device, while only 68 percent of women did.¹⁷

According to UK-based Cable, in 2023, the average price of 1 gigabyte (GB) of mobile data in Bangladesh was \$0.23. Meanwhile, in 2022, the average monthly household income stood at 32,422 taka (\$291).¹⁸

Since the BTRC set a maximum rate for fixed-line broadband services in 2021, users pay no more than 500 taka (\$4.48) a month for a connection with a minimum speed of 5 Mbps, 1,000 taka (\$8.97) for 10 Mbps, and 1,200 taka (\$10.76) for 20 Mbps.¹⁹ In October 2023, the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunication, and Information Technology (MPTIT) imposed new regulations on mobile operators, requiring them to update their plan offerings to remove any data packages that are valid for less than seven days, while also prohibiting price increases, effectively mandating that the operators offer more affordable data plans.²⁰

Government projects are also underway to bridge the rural-urban digital divide. In October 2023, the BTRC drafted the National Broadband Policy 2023, which aims to incentivize investment in improving connectivity and broadband infrastructure in underserved regions.²¹ Connected Bangladesh, an ongoing project under the ICT Division of the MPTIT, is expected to improve connectivity in 617 remote communities by December 2025.²² The government also previously announced plans to connect every village in Bangladesh with fiber-optic cable by 2025.²³

Additionally, the Bangladesh Telecommunications Company, Ltd. (BTCL) is aiming to expand the company's internet protocol (IP) network by December 2025 to increase its bandwidth, which would improve rural connectivity and support 5G services.²⁴

As part of the government's Digital Bangladesh by 2021 program, 20,000 local-level digital centers, tasked with providing low-cost access to government and nongovernment service portals and related e-services, are expected to be established by the end of 2024.²⁵ In February 2024, the

Cabinet of Bangladesh and the ICT Division of the MPTIT signed a memorandum of understanding with Sublime, a private company, to establish 50,000 digital service centers in rural areas across Bangladesh over the next few years.²⁶

In December 2023, the Bangladeshi government granted a satellite internet license to Elon Musk's satellite ISP Starlink to reach remote areas not covered by the existing networks.²⁷ However, Starlink is currently prohibitively expensive for many segments of the Bangladeshi population.

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.

During the coverage period, authorities throttled internet services ahead of opposition party rallies and protests. In October 2023, the BTRC directed telecom operators to shut down internet services for nine hours during a BNP rally in Naya Paltan, where the BNP is headquartered.²⁸ Similarly, in July 2023, connectivity was disrupted during two BNP rallies in Naya Paltan, posing barriers to journalists reporting on the event.²⁹ Network operators declined to comment on the internet outages, though a police commissioner told reporters that they may have been caused by insufficient infrastructure.³⁰

In January 2024, Election Commission Secretariat (ECS) Secretary Mohammad Jahangir Alam told journalists that mobile networking and internet systems would be fully operational on the day of the general elections.³¹

In July 2024, after the end of the coverage period, the AL-led government ordered a nationwide mobile and broadband internet shutdown amid widespread student protests opposing quotas for government jobs. Broadband internet was restored 5 days later, and mobile internet was restored after 11 days.³² Authorities also blocked social media and communications platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Signal, for 14 days in July (see B1).³³ In August, authorities again shut down internet services and blocked platforms, lifting the restrictions once then prime minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country 24 hours later (see note).

During the previous coverage period, the BTRC directed mobile service operators to reduce internet speeds. These orders often occurred during BNP rallies and nationwide protests mounted by the BNP and affiliated organizations against inflation and mismanagement in the energy sector.³⁴

The government manages the fiber-optic infrastructure that connects Bangladesh with international undersea cables. The government-owned BSCPLC operates two submarine cable landing stations and, as of October 2022, had a market share of 75 percent. According to an April 2022 BSCPLC filing, another planned submarine cable, due for completion in 2025, would double its overall bandwidth capacity.³⁵

In August 2022, the government issued three submarine cable licenses to three private entities, who are expected to land those cables by 2026. The projects are expected to break the existing monopoly of BSCPLC.³⁶ Meanwhile, 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? | 4 / 6

There are no serious legal or regulatory barriers restricting the diversity of service providers.

Users have four options for mobile connections. As of April 2024, Grameenphone, owned by Telenor, held 43.3 percent of the market, followed by Robi with 30.2 percent and Banglalink with 23.1 percent.³⁷ The state-owned Teletalk held the remaining 3.4 percent of the market.

In 2019, a BTRC audit found that providers Grameenphone and Robi owed the regulator over 125 billion taka (\$1.12 billion) and 8.67 billion taka (\$77.8 million), respectively, in taxes and late fees.³⁸ As of the end of the coverage period, both operators had yet to complete their full payments to the regulator.³⁹ In February 2024, the BTRC announced it would be performing an audit of BTCL and Teletalk, which are both state-owned, to investigate the full scope of their unpaid dues and determine how much they owe the regulatory commission.⁴⁰

In August 2023, the BTRC cancelled the licenses of 14 ISPs for failing to renew their licenses on time.⁴¹ In October 2023, the BTRC cancelled four ISPs' licenses for not converting their existing licenses into one of four prescribed categories outlined in 2020 guidelines.⁴² In November 2023, the BTRC cancelled 48 additional licenses, citing similar reasons.⁴³

In June 2022, the BTRC barred Grameenphone from selling new SIM cards to customers, citing poor service quality.⁴⁴ The ban was partially lifted in September 2022, and fully lifted in January 2023, after Grameenphone showed improvement across service indices outlined by the BTRC.⁴⁵ However, the operator lost 3.5 million customers due to the ban.⁴⁶ In March 2023, the BTRC suspended the sale of Robi's newly launched eSIM cards, alleging that the provider had not obtained approval to sell them.⁴⁷ The ban was withdrawn a week later.⁴⁸

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 related issues. However, in practice the body lacks independence and represents the interests 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 Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) responsible for the regulation of the sector, with the BTRC acting as an auxiliary organization.⁴⁹ In 2014, the Ministry of ICT merged with the MPT,⁵⁰ creating the MPTIT. In addition, the ministry's ICT Division has an access-to-information program (renamed "Aspire to Innovate") that has considerable influence over top-level decisions related to ICT policy.⁵¹

In March 2024, the BTRC drafted the Bangladesh Telecommunication Act, 2024, to replace the Bangladesh Telecommunication Act, 2001. The draft regulation would expand the law's purview to include the regulation of social media platforms, online platforms, and all IP-based services (see C6).⁵²

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.⁵³ Social media and communication platforms have occasionally been subject to blocking and throttling (see A3).

Several news media websites were blocked ahead of and during the 2024 general elections in Bangladesh. According to the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), in January the websites of major news outlets and magazines such as Manab Zamin, *Samakal*, Jamuna Television, and Voice of America (VOA) Bangla were blocked on the day before and the day of elections.⁵⁴

In July 2024, after the end of the coverage period, authorities restricted access to major social media platforms and communication apps—including Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Signal—in response to widespread student-led protests across Bangladesh (see note and A3).⁵⁵ In August 2024, as protests continued, authorities again blocked platforms. The blocks were lifted 24 hours after they were imposed when then prime minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country.

In February 2024, the state minister for posts, telecommunication and information technology, Zunaid Ahmed Palak, requested that authorities strictly curtail online gambling applications.⁵⁶ The legality of online betting under the colonial-era Public Gambling Act of 1867 remains unclear.⁵⁷

In September 2021, the High Court ordered the blocking of all unregistered online news portals (see B6).⁵⁸ Some previously blocked outlets, such as Bangla Report and Poriborton, have been periodically accessible since they were blocked in 2019.

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 June 2023, Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, mayor of the Dhaka South City Corporation, issued a notice to the *Daily Star*, requesting 1 billion taka (\$8 million) for defamation after the paper published a satirical piece in its weekly “Satireday” column in which Taposh’s quotes were altered for comedic effect. ⁵⁹ The notice additionally requested that the paper take down the article from its website within 24 hours; the *Daily Star* complied with the takedown request.⁶⁰

In April 2024, after a Cabinet Committee on Law and Order meeting, committee chairman Mozammel Haque told reporters that the committee would be notifying social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube that their response to moderation-related recommendations from the government had so far been inadequate—and that if the companies continued to not comply, access to their platforms might be blocked temporarily in Bangladesh.⁶¹

Meta reported that between July and December 2023 it had restricted access to over 3,300 items that the BTRC reported for violating local laws, including the DSA and CSA.⁶² From July to December 2023, Google received 591 requests from the government to remove 2,943 items from Google products, primarily because they allegedly contained defamation, government criticism, and or violations of regulations on goods and services.⁶³

Critical websites and YouTube channels have been removed due to unfounded copyright complaints, which are also suspected to be sponsored by the government. The complaints have often hinged on the creation of spoof websites that republish content from the sources they seek to remove, altering the dates to make it appear that the spoofs were posted first. The spoof websites then become the grounds for copyright complaints against the originals.⁶⁴

In January 2015, the High Court banned the publication and dissemination, in print and online, of all statements made by BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman while he continued to elude arrest. In August 2024, after the coverage period, the High Court dismissed its previous ruling and lifted the ban.⁶⁵

During the previous coverage period, the government canceled the domains of numerous media outlets. In October 2022, the BTRC claimed that the government had removed over 8,000 social media links and blocked 645 websites since the beginning of that year, including for “spreading misinformation and creating confusion among the public.”⁶⁶ In January 2023, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) ordered the BTRC to cancel the domains of 191 unspecified news sites for allegedly publishing “misleading anti-state content.”⁶⁷

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

Government restrictions on internet content lack transparency and proportionality, and there are no independent appeals mechanisms for blocked websites or content removal orders. Limitations on connectivity and social media platforms are long-standing concerns.

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.⁶⁸ During the current and previous coverage period, the BTRC ordered mobile operators to decrease internet speeds during opposition rallies without a warrant or court order (see A3).⁶⁹

In the past, the BTRC has tried to expand its technical ability to block, filter, and remove content online, including on social media.⁷⁰ For instance, the Cyber Threat Detection and Response (CTDR) project, a system for monitoring websites and facilitating police requests for the removal or blocking of “derogatory” or “harmful” content,⁷¹ employs deep packet inspection (DPI) technology to enable the blocking of any online content, including Facebook pages or accounts, more quickly.⁷²

The draft of the Regulation for Digital, Social Media, and OTT Platforms, the first version of which was formally submitted in June 2022,⁷³ criminalizes a broad range of speech online and imposes new content blocking obligations that internet intermediaries must follow. The regulation also includes obligations relating to online media ethics (see B6), messaging traceability (see C4), and data localization (see C6).⁷⁴ A January 2023 revision of the draft regulation expanded the range of prohibited content to encompass statements opposing the 1971 war for independence; the country’s cultural and social values, unity or religious harmony; and anything else that undermines the laws, regulations, and constitution of Bangladesh.⁷⁵

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? | 1 / 4

Self-censorship is a longstanding issue in Bangladesh. Online journalists and social media commentators continue to self-censor on political and religious topics, and activists are increasingly hesitant to communicate online for fear of being targeted by progovernment actors or trolls.⁷⁶ Outlets which do express dissent are often those that operate from exile in a foreign country, such as Netra News.⁷⁷

In July 2023, the International Press Institute (IPI) highlighted statements by top officials, including then prime minister Sheikh Hasina and the chief justice, urging journalists not to publish news that is critical of the state.⁷⁸

The Digital Security Act (DSA) and Cyber Security Act (CSA) have contributed to the practice of self-censorship in recent years (see C3). The International Federation of Journalists’ *South Asia Press Freedom Report 2022–2023* wrote that the DSA “has been weaponized to create a culture of self-censorship” in Bangladesh (see C3).⁷⁹ Journalists and press freedom advocates have also noted that the acts’ vague language has made reporters and their editors excessively cautious about the stories they cover, especially on topics relating to LGBT+ individuals and Indigenous communities in Bangladesh.⁸⁰

Government agencies have also issued directives barring their employees from using social media in certain ways,⁸¹ potentially causing those affected to self-censor (see B5). Penal provisions for reporting false information included in the Press Council (Amendment) Bill 2022, which has yet to come into effect, may further impede journalistic activity (see C2).

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? | 1 / 4

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 due to the worsened online information environment surrounding the elections and the increase in manipulation across platforms.

Online content manipulation persists, especially around tense political moments like elections.

While authorities do not officially pressure or coerce news outlets, journalists, or bloggers to follow a particular editorial direction in their reporting, members of the media do sometimes face unofficial pressure to report favorably on specific business interests because their outlet is owned by a conglomerate or is financially dependent on advertising.⁸² Additionally, recent reports indicate that many civil servants feel coerced into endorsing the policies of the ruling party, even if they are nonpartisan themselves, citing pervasive threats of harassment and the government’s history of falsifying statements and misattributing quotes to manufacture support for the ruling party and when harassing individuals who have been critical of the government.⁸³ In September 2023, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina urged party operatives to spend at least 30 minutes per day combatting antigovernment propaganda on social media.⁸⁴

Disinformation circulating on social media has been linked to the government. In September 2023, an AFP Bangladesh report revealed the existence of a network of seemingly fake experts—posing as academics from prestigious universities, using stolen photos, and attributing fabricated quotes to real analysts—who produced hundreds of articles praising government policies. The op-eds were published in news outlets like Chinese state news agency Xinhua and quoted in major international publications like Washington-based *Foreign Policy* magazine’s South Asia Brief. ⁸⁵ A year prior to the report’s publication, in September 2022, the Bangladesh foreign ministry published an open call to recruit columnists to tackle antigovernment propaganda.⁸⁶

According to Meta’s quarterly *Adversarial Threat Report*, during the first quarter of 2024 Facebook uncovered a coordinated inauthentic behavior network, with links to the AL and the Center for Research and Information (CRI). The network posted in Bengali and English, and covered “news and current events in Bangladesh, including elections, criticism of the BNP, allegations of BNP’s corruption and its role in pre-election violence, as well as supportive commentary about the incumbent government, the ruling party and its role in the technological development of Bangladesh.” Facebook reported that it removed at least 50 accounts and 98 pages associated with the network, and that many of the accounts removed “had a corresponding presence across several platforms, including YouTube, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and Telegram, in addition to their own websites.”⁸⁷

In its covert influence operations report published in January 2024, TikTok reported that it identified and disrupted a network—comprised of 21 inauthentic accounts with over 61,000 followers—which “artificially amplif[ied] narratives in Bengali language favorable to another political party” and “attempt[ed] to manipulate Bangladesh elections discourse.”⁸⁸

Ahead of and during the 2024 general election, various progovernment and anti-opposition deepfake videos circulated online (see C7). For example, a deepfake video of Tarique Rahman, the acting chairman of the BNP who has been in exile since 2008, circulated on Facebook. In the manufactured clip, Rahman is depicted suggesting that the opposition party “keep quiet” about the Israeli military campaign in the Gaza Strip in the interest of protecting US-Bangladesh relations. ⁸⁹ The video has since been removed. It could have been intended to turn public sentiment against the BNP leader, given Bangladeshis’ strong ties with, and support for, Palestinians.

The government has issued guidelines prohibiting government employees, including teachers at government colleges, ⁹⁰ from uploading, sharing, or engaging with social media content that “tarnish[es] the image of the government” or “hurt[s] religious sentiments,” even occasionally threatening those who do not follow the guidelines with legal action.⁹¹ Ordinary social media users have also received similar warnings.⁹²

B6 0-3 pts

Regulatory constraints affect the ability of online outlets to publish.

Since September 2020, broadcasters and newspapers in Bangladesh must register their online portals separately.⁹³ In June 2022, MIB Minister Hasan Mahmud warned newspapers that have online platforms not to broadcast talk shows and videos online for licensing reasons,⁹⁴ a decision the Editorial Council protested.⁹⁵

As of September 2022, the registration fee for new sites was 10,000 taka (\$90) and the annual renewal fee at 5,000 taka (\$45). Since 2022, the MIB has required online news portals to register with the government before launching.⁹⁶ In November 2023, the MIB minister announced new legislation, slated to be presented to parliament in 2024, which would require social media platforms to register in Bangladesh.⁹⁷

In July 2023, the district administration of Chattogram shut down the offices of CplusTV, a news-sharing YouTube channel and Facebook account, and C Vision, a news-sharing Facebook page, for “illegally operating without licenses.” Press freedom organizations have condemned the shutdowns as “selective target[ing]” in response to the outlets’ coverage of local politics in the district ahead of the general elections in January 2024. ⁹⁸ In September 2022, the prime minister’s office upheld the NGO Affairs Bureau’s decision to refuse to renew the operating license of the human rights group Odhikar.⁹⁹

In June 2022, government authorities approved amendments to the Press Council Act, 1974, including provisions that impose fines on, suspend government advertisements with, and cancel the accreditations of journalists, editors, and print and digital news outlets convicted of false reporting or harming the image of the state.¹⁰⁰ The amendment had yet to be passed as of the end of the coverage period.

In June 2022, the government mandated that all overseas businesses with a branch office, liaison office, or project in Bangladesh register for value-added tax (VAT) purposes.¹⁰¹ In May 2023, the country’s central bank directed other financial institutions to deduct an additional 15 percent income tax from social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube should those platforms wish to repatriate income generated from advertisements in Bangladesh.¹⁰²

B7 0-4 pts

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

The online media landscape in Bangladesh is vibrant, and a number of online outlets give voice to a range of views. ¹⁰³ Despite some censorship of political and religious topics, as well as topics relating to marginalized communities in Bangladesh (see B4), 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. Individuals are also able to access circumvention tools, such as virtual private networks (VPNs), to bypass blocking.¹⁰⁴

The increased use of social media platforms for sharing news and the emergence of blogs and independent online media outlets have brought new voices to the fore. The ability to access localized information and create content in Bengali has contributed to the popularity of local blog-hosting and online news services, as well as Bengali-language YouTube content.¹⁰⁵

However, social media platforms and communications apps are occasionally blocked (see A3 and B1), which threatens the diversity of online content. Some marginalized communities, such as the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura ethnic groups, lack representation in mainstream news outlets.

In response to broad discrimination against LGBT+ individuals and the murder of two key activists in 2016, queer activism in Bangladesh has almost entirely shifted online.¹⁰⁶ ¹⁰⁷ In June 2023, the Bangladeshi LGBT+ community celebrated the third virtual Dhaka Pride event.¹⁰⁸

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues? | 4 / 6

While social media platforms, communications apps, and other digital tools generally remain accessible to users who wish to use them to mobilize and campaign, the government has restricted connectivity and blocked platforms during protests (see B1). Enhanced surveillance, arrests, and targeted violence also limit people’s willingness to mobilize online.

During the coverage period, politicians increasingly relied on social media for their work amid the ruling AL’s crackdown on the political opposition.¹⁰⁹ Dissidents in exile also use social media platforms to publish critical commentary about the government from outside the country.¹¹⁰

In July 2024, after the coverage period, students took to social media to organize widespread protests against the quota system for government jobs. After videos of police brutality during the protests went viral on Facebook, including one of student protestor Abu Sayeed being shot and killed by police, protestors used social media to spread awareness and organize massive online campaigns and offline protests.¹¹¹ Hundreds of thousands took to the streets in response.¹¹² In August 2024, after weeks of protests, then prime minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country (see note).

In February 2022, student protesters at Shahjalal University in Sylhet used Facebook Live to share updates and news of police brutality. They also used Facebook to garner support for their protest and a subsequent hunger strike.¹¹³ In August 2021, a feminist grassroots network led a Facebook campaign protesting 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.¹¹⁴

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,¹¹⁵ 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 dissent and forms of free expression protected under international human rights standards.

The 2006 ICT Act defines and ostensibly protects freedom of expression online,¹¹⁶ though it also includes an array of penalties for citizens who violate others' rights to communicate electronically (see C2). The act mandates the creation of cyber tribunals and a Cyber Appellate Tribunal to expedite cybercrime cases. As of April 2021, the government had established eight cyber tribunals.¹¹⁷ The Cyber Appellate Tribunal, which can reverse a cyber tribunal's rulings, had yet to be formed as of the end of the coverage period.

In September 2018, the parliament passed the DSA, which was intended to prevent cybercrime and replace parts of the 2006 ICT Act, but was instead used to infringe on free expression online. In September 2023, the government repealed the act and replaced it with the CSA, which made limited adjustments to sentencing under the act.¹¹⁸ Under the CSA, provisions related to warrantless arrests included in the DSA were removed and a number of penalties were reduced (see C2).¹¹⁹

The judicial system of Bangladesh is formally independent from the executive and legislative branches, but critics assert that it can be partisan, given the politicized role that the Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs plays in assigning, removing, and transferring High Court judges.¹²⁰ Police and regulators generally bypass the courts to implement censorship and surveillance without oversight, and pressure on judicial officers by government actors is an ongoing concern.¹²¹

The 2009 Right to Information Act enshrines access to information in law, though journalists and activists filing requests have faced challenges, including retaliation.¹²²

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.

In September 2023, the government repealed the DSA—which was passed in 2018 and assigned criminal penalties and fines for an individual's online activities—and replaced it with the CSA. Under the DSA, warrants were not required to arrest individuals and some crimes under the act were nonbailable offenses. The CSA maintains many of the provisions in the DSA and introduced new provisions that criminalized online speech. Some of these new provisions are similarly broad, though they prescribe less severe penalties than the DSA (see C1).¹²³ The month before the CSA was passed, Amnesty International voiced concerns that the law “is largely a replication of the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) that preceded it and retains repressive features which have been used to threaten and restrict the rights to freedom of expression, privacy and liberty in Bangladesh.”¹²⁴

Section 17 of the CSA criminalizes intrusion into critical information infrastructure; individuals found guilty of violating the provision face up to three years in prison and a maximum fine of 2.5 million taka (\$22,000). Individuals who damage, destroy, or disable such infrastructure face penalties of up to six years in prison or a maximum fine of 10 million taka (\$90,000).¹²⁵

Section 21 of the CSA criminalizes the publication of online propaganda against the liberation war, the spirit of the liberation war, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (often referred to as the father of Bangladesh), the national anthem, or the national flag of Bangladesh. Under Section 21, individuals can face up to five years in prison and a maximum fine of 10 million taka (\$90,000).[126](#)

Section 28 of the CSA criminalizes the publication of information which hurts religious values or sentiments. Individuals found to be in violation of the act can face up to two years in prison or a maximum fine of 500,000 taka (\$4,500).[127](#) Meanwhile, Section 29 of the act criminalizes the publication of such content online or in any electronic format; it does not prescribe a prison sentence but can be punished by a fine of up to 2.5 million taka (\$22,000).[128](#)

Under Section 31 of the act, individuals can face sentences of up to five years in prison or maximum fines of 2.5 million taka (\$22,000) for using the internet to publish or transmit content that creates enmity, hatred or hostility among different classes or communities.[129](#)

Section 42 of the CSA mirrors Section 43 of DSA, and allows police officers to search any premises or individual, seize computers and related hardware, and arrest individuals on the spot, all without a warrant.[130](#)

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.[131](#)

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. In previous coverage periods, the government frequently turned to the DSA to harass, charge, and arrest people for their online and offline speech.[132](#) Lawsuits under the DSA and the CSA, which replaced the DSA in September 2023, continued during the coverage period.

In September 2023, the Cyber Tribunal of Dhaka sentenced two leaders of the prominent human rights organization Odhikar to two years in prison and fined them 10,000 taka (\$90) each “for publishing and circulating false information, hurting religious sentiments and undermining the image of the state.” The two leaders were Adilur Rahman Khan, the founder of Odhikar, and Nasiruddin Elan, a director at the organization. Their convictions were connected to work they did 10 years earlier on a report that documented alleged extrajudicial killings.[133](#) In August 2024, after the end of the coverage period, the High Court overturned both convictions.

In November 2023, an antiterrorism unit of the police force, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), raided the home of Adam Tamizi Haque, a social media personality and businessman. The raid occurred after an AL party leader filed a case against Haque under the CSA. Haque was arrested in December 2023, sent to prison in January 2024, and eventually released on bail in April 2024.[134](#) Haque had allegedly posted threats against Prime Minister Hasina and senior AL party leaders on Facebook.[135](#)

In August 2023, Anisa Siddika was arrested under the Special Powers Act of 1974 for allegedly holding secret political meetings opposing the government.[136](#) Her son, Tanzilur Rahman, a PhD student at Michigan State University, has since claimed that his mother was arrested in an effort to

intimidate him after he posted on Facebook criticizing the government and its role in the Delwar Hossain Sayedee trials.¹³⁷ Siddika was released on bail eight days after her arrest.¹³⁸

In September 2023, Mostafizur Rahman, the general secretary of the Sylhet chapter of Muktijoddha Mancha, sued three individuals under the CSA: Foyez Ahmed, Nazmul Islam, and Nurul Islam. Muktijoddha Mancha is an organization that advocates for restoring and maintaining the freedom fighter quota system for government jobs, and it has historically supported the AL.¹³⁹ The individuals Rahman sued had allegedly used Facebook to share derogatory remarks about and manipulated photos of then prime minister Hasina, members of the ruling AL party, and affiliated pro-quota groups.¹⁴⁰

In February 2024, eight individuals were sued under the CSA for allegedly defaming and disparaging Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a prominent leader during the Bangladeshi independence movement, online. Those sued included Pinaki Bhattacharya, who is an exiled writer and online activist, and Shakill Ahmed, who serves as an administrator for the Facebook page Fight for Democracy, as well as Nazmul Islam, Shahriar Hossain Saqib, Muhammad Hasan Mia, Muhammad Abdul Hadi, and Muhammad Rezaul Karim.¹⁴¹

According to a DSA case tracker maintained by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), at least 38 cases were filed under the act between June 2023 and September 2023, when it was repealed.¹⁴² According to an April 2024 CGS report, at least 4,520 people were charged in 1,436 cases under the act while it was in effect.¹⁴³

In September 2023, the minister of law, Anisul Huq, clarified that existing sentences and penalties imposed under the DSA would not be affected by the law's repeal, but that ongoing legal proceedings that had been filed under the DSA would be adjudicated under the newly passed CSA.¹⁴⁴

In May 2024, Tithy Sarker, a Jagannath University student, was sentenced to five years in prison based on charges filed against her in 2020 under the DSA for her Facebook posts that year, which allegedly contained derogatory remarks about religion. Sarker was already imprisoned for four years while she awaited trial; the court granted her one year of probationary house arrest to fulfill the rest of her sentence.¹⁴⁵

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.¹⁴⁶

In July 2021, the BTRC launched the National Equipment Identity Register (NEIR) system, which automatically registers mobile phones to the country's international mobile equipment identity (IMEI) database.¹⁴⁷ In January 2024, the MPTIT minister briefly instructed the commission to deactivate all unregistered mobile phones, though he later reversed the decision in March 2024.¹⁴⁸

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. However, if passed, 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,¹⁴⁹ potentially undermining the online anonymity provided by end-to-end encrypted communications.

In October 2022, the National Telecommunication Monitoring Center (NTMC) recommended that the government allow Rohingya refugees in the city of Cox’s Bazar to use Bangladeshi SIM cards—in lieu of SIM cards from Myanmar or Bangladeshi SIM cards belonging to other individuals—to facilitate targeted prosecutions of crimes that occur inside refugee camps.¹⁵⁰

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.¹⁵¹ In November 2023, the cabinet approved a draft Personal Data Protection Act, which has been widely criticized for being “likely ineffective in addressing privacy concerns” (see C6).¹⁵²

In January 2023, *Haaretz* reported that the NTMC had acquired Spearhead, a vehicle-mounted surveillance system sold by Cyprus-registered firm Passitora.¹⁵³ Spearhead can monitor targets within a radius of 500 meters, intercept encrypted messages and chats, including those on social media platforms, and inject spyware into mobile phones or computers. A unit that can reportedly intercept data, including encrypted messages and chats, was delivered to Dhaka in June 2022.¹⁵⁴

In May and October 2022, four members of the RAB travelled to the United Kingdom to receive training on cybersecurity and surveillance techniques, including on the use of a “backpack IMSI [International Mobile Subscriber Identity] catcher, a portable mass surveillance tool that acts as a mini–mobile phone tower and can intercept phone calls and text messages.”¹⁵⁵ The RAB had previously obtained an IMSI tool in 2019 from a Canadian company.¹⁵⁶ In September 2022, Netra News reported that the RAB had procured an interceptor for decrypting and hacking online communications sent via the Telegram app. ¹⁵⁷ The RAB has a track record of human rights abuses that include extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and torture.¹⁵⁸

In January 2023, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that Bangladesh purchased three surveillance systems in Cyprus from firms run by Israeli nationals.¹⁵⁹ Analysts said that the government’s augmented surveillance capacity was focused on monitoring and silencing dissent and monitoring opposition activities, including ahead of the January 2024 elections.¹⁶⁰

In February 2021, Al Jazeera alleged that Bangladesh had bought Israeli-made surveillance equipment capable of monitoring hundreds of mobile phones simultaneously in 2018. The Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), the country’s military intelligence agency, purchased the tool, known as the P6 Intercept, from Israel-based firm PicSix, which is run by former Israeli intelligence agents.¹⁶¹

In August 2021, Israeli company Cellebrite announced that it would no longer sell its phone-hacking technology in Bangladesh.¹⁶² Previously, a joint investigation between Al Jazeera and *Haaretz* had revealed in March 2021 that Dhaka purchased Cellebrite’s UFED, a tool that can unlock and extract data from mobile phones, including encrypted data.¹⁶³

A Citizen Lab report from September 2018 had alleged that Israeli technology firm NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware may be in operation in Bangladesh.¹⁶⁴ In December 2021, the High Court questioned the inaction of the Digital Security Agency to conduct an inquiry into the use of

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.166

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).167

The 2001 Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Act empowers the government to request that telecommunications providers retain the data of any user for an unspecified amount of time. 168 Under 2010 amendments to the act, the government is allowed to intercept electronic voice or data communications from any individual or institution without a court order, and is also able to authorize various intelligence and security agencies to intercept, record, or collect data for national security or public order reasons. 169 In March 2024, the government drafted the Bangladesh Telecommunication Act, 2024. If passed, it would replace the Bangladesh Telecommunication Act, 2001 and expand the scope of the law to include the regulation of social media platforms, online platforms, and all IP-based services (see C6).170

The draft Regulation for Digital, Social Media, and OTT Platforms, 2021 (see B3) would require intermediaries to retain user data for 180 days.171

The proposed Personal Data Protection Bill, which was approved by the cabinet in November 2023 and awaiting parliamentary approval at the end of the coverage period, has been widely criticized. Experts and civil society organizations have raised concerns that the act will be "likely ineffective in addressing privacy concerns." They have also noted that because the bill would grant the government unfettered access to data servers, and effectively, citizen data, in the name of protecting personal information, it has the potential to be used to control dissent.172 The act would also establish a government Data Protection Authority. Civil society organizations like Access Now and Tech Global Institute have voiced concerns that "granting non-legislative authority broad discretion to define critical terms in a statute and shape the law's interpretation can be problematic."173

In November 2023, the government established the National Cyber Security Agency under the Cyber Security Act 2023 (CSA) to monitor online communications and combat cybercrimes.174

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?

1 / 5

Online journalists and ordinary internet users face harassment, intimidation, and violence, and reports of abduction and torture in detention in response to critical commentary on social media were common in recent years.

Violence against journalists is a significant problem in Bangladesh, although it is not always directly related to their online activity. According to the human rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 227 journalists were attacked, tortured, or harassed between June 2023 and April 2024.¹⁷⁵

In November 2023, Jagonews24.com reporter Muhammad Nahid Hasan and student journalists Abdul Alim and Abu Sayed Rony were attacked by AL party supporters. The journalists had been covering recent clashes between university personnel and members of the Chhatra League, the AL’s student wing, at Rajshahi College.¹⁷⁶

In June 2023, Golam Rabbani Nadim, a correspondent for both the popular news site Banglanews24.com and the cable news channel Ekattor TV, was attacked and killed, allegedly on the order of Mahmudul Alam Babu, a local government leader.¹⁷⁷ Nadim had previously reported that Babu was secretly married and covered allegations that he had abused his wife. Babu had filed a lawsuit against Nadim in May 2023.¹⁷⁸

In March 2023, Sultana Jasmine, a land office employee, died in police custody after being arrested for fraud allegations under the DSA. The law minister later shared that the DSA been misapplied in her case,¹⁷⁹ and a government report later documented that “marks of torture” were found on her body.¹⁸⁰ In January 2023, Raghunath Kha, a correspondent for the online newspaper Dainik Projonmo Ekattor and Deepto TV, was detained for extortion and allegedly carrying explosives, and was subsequently beaten and electrocuted while in custody.¹⁸¹

Social media users continued to face online harassment and death threats.¹⁸² Mahiya Mahi, an actress and model who competed in the 2024 general elections, faced extreme, misogynistic harassment on social media while campaigning.¹⁸³ In February 2022, a group of hackers called the Bangladesh Civilian Force (BCF) claimed responsibility for hacking and "memorializing" the Facebook accounts of several prominent activists who had critiqued religion and religious figures, effectively making their profiles inaccessible.¹⁸⁴

Marginalized groups, such as religious minorities and LGBT+ individuals, have also been the targets of offline violence due to mis- and disinformation spread on social media platforms. ¹⁸⁵

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. Additionally, cyberattacks against financial and government entities increased during the coverage period.

BDnews24.com, the country’s leading online news portal, went offline in September 2023 and returned 35 days later, in October.¹⁸⁶ Though the online-only outlet did not publish an explanation, various publications speculated that the site had been hacked.¹⁸⁷

On the day of the general elections in January 2024, the Election Commission shared that the Smart Election Management BD mobile application, designed to provide real-time voting information to voters, had been attacked by Ukrainian and German hackers.¹⁸⁸

In November 2023, hackers attacked, wiped, and stole data from an exposed database linked to the systems of the NTMC, a government intelligence body which collects people's internet activity. The stolen data includes people's personal information and bank account details. It also includes IMEI numbers, which link individuals with their registered devices and could be used to track and clone people's devices.¹⁸⁹

Cybercriminals additionally continue to target the national ID database, which holds the personal information of nearly 120 million citizens, including biometric data. In March 2024, after Nagad, a mobile financial service, experienced an alleged breach, they released a press statement reporting that hackers had been circulating links on Telegram that granted public access to Nagad users' national ID numbers and other personal information. Additionally, reporters at the *Daily Star* tested the various Telegram channels and bots that the hackers had set up and "found that it was possible to extract personal information just with a mobile number."¹⁹⁰

There are several laws protecting Bangladeshis from cyberattacks and the theft of personal data, including provisions against hacking in the ICT Act and the CSA.¹⁹¹

Footnotes

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