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# Bangladesh In the Shadow of COVID-19

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CARNIVAL OF CORRUPTION, CONTROLLING  
INFORMATION, AND COERCION

**ASIA'S PATH FORWARD**

By Ali Riaz

## INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has been experiencing a slow and incremental process of democratic backsliding since 2011, particularly after the one-sided election in 2014. Now it has joined the bandwagon of countries experiencing a dramatic decline in civil rights and freedom of expression in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. In many countries, under the pretext of public health emergency, new laws have been passed which provide governments with unrestricted powers with little or no accountability. In several countries, governments are cracking down on critical voices. Since early March, the Bangladeshi government has intensified its attacks on dissenting voices through existing legal instruments and extrajudicial measures. With the opposition in disarray, and parliament becoming de-facto one-party affair due to the managed election in 2018, there are no effective accountability mechanisms in place. The pandemic provides a pretext for further restrictions on civil rights, accelerating the backsliding process. Since March, when the first case of infection was identified and the first death was reported in Bangladesh, official intolerance of criticism has intensified, even as the government's response to the pandemic continues to be haphazard, ill-planned and plagued with corruption. Under the shadow of the pandemic, Bangladeshis are witnessing a carnival of corruption due to the absence of accountability and impunity of the ruling party leaders. They are also seeing the government's measures to control the flow of information and experiencing the widespread use of coercive measures against its citizens.

Like many other countries, Bangladesh was ill-prepared to handle the pandemic, although leaders of the ruling party underestimated the danger of COVID-19 and claimed that the country was ready.<sup>1</sup> Denial, deliberately limiting the number of tests, uncoordinated responses and complacency marked the responses in March and early April. It soon became evident that the public healthcare system was beginning to fail<sup>2</sup> after years of neglect and corruption.<sup>3</sup> Patients were turned away from hospitals and health workers complained of lack of protective equipment.<sup>4</sup> Half-hearted measures, such as a 'general

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<sup>1</sup> <http://southasiajournal.net/coronavirus-what-ministers-leaders-said/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://globalvoices.org/2020/06/14/covid-19-is-rapidly-exhausting-bangladesh-healthcare-system-amidst-alarming-rise-of-infected-people/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.newagebd.net/article/105481/covid-19-exposes-healthcare-system-vulnerabilities>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/covid-19-bangladesh-hospitals-forced-turn-patients-200407131633280.html>

holiday' in place of lockdown, was declared in late March, and the economic impacts of the pandemic, particularly on the poorer segments of the society, began to become obvious.

## CARNIVAL OF CORRUPTION

With a growing number of positive cases and economic activity stalling, the government took several steps to mitigate the situation, including declaring economic stimulus packages in late March and early April worth \$11 billion. These packages, primarily consisting of loan guarantees to the business sector, left the most vulnerable behind.<sup>5</sup> The misplaced priorities and ambiguous modalities of these stimulus packages were evident. The government also decided to extend the social safety network, provide food relief, and enhance its Open Market Sales (OMS) program to provide rice in subsidized prices, steps which deserve applaud. However, as soon as the relief program began, widespread theft of relief materials and subsidized food supplies were reported in the press.<sup>6</sup> Government officials, ruling party leaders and public representatives became involved in embezzling relief materials. As of July 18, a total of 111 elected representatives of local level councils, mostly representing the ruling Awami League, were temporarily suspended. Nearly 1,000 cases of specific corruption in relief distribution have been reported in the press in three months. Newspapers reported 600 complaints lodged with the police stations, and arrest of 591 people. About 100 leaders and activists of the ruling party have been expelled for their involvement. Public outcry and hundreds of spontaneous demonstrations for relief and against mismanagement took place throughout the country.

But these incidents of theft pale in comparison to what happened with the government's cash transfer program. While cash transfer was a key component of the stimulus packages of governments all around the world, Bangladeshi stimulus packages completely ignored the option until mid-May. It was decided that the government will provide a one-time cash of Taka 2,500 (\$30) to the most vulnerable 5 million people through mobile financial services. But as the list of the recipients was being made, it became a repeat of the relief distribution scam, with the ruling party activists, their families, local officials, and local representatives listed to receive the money. Dozens of cases were reported in which a single phone number belonging to influential local AL leaders was used to list dozens, in some cases hundreds, of names.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/bangladeshs-covid-19-stimulus-leaving-the-most-vulnerable-behind/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/corruption/six-lakh-fake-beneficiaries-eat-food-aid-meant-poor-109810>

As if this were not enough, by April it was discovered that companies approved by the government and allegedly connected to ruling party members have supplied ordinary masks instead of N95 masks for the doctors in public hospitals.<sup>7</sup> An investigation about the supply of fake N95 mask concluded that this was “planned fraud and punishable offence,”<sup>8</sup> The report was not made public and no punitive measures have yet been taken. Widespread criticisms in the press, social media and public discourse failed to stop this practice as revealed in July when an AL leader’s company was found to have supplied fake N95 masks.<sup>9</sup>

News of rampant theft and misappropriation were followed by a series of shocking reports which not only show the extent to which corruption has jeopardized public health but also how these corrupt practices received the blessings of ruling party leadership and government officials. In July it was discovered a government-approved hospital for COVID-19 treatment, owned by a well-connected AL activist, was engaged in a larger scam.<sup>10</sup> The hospital was operating with an expired license while receiving lucrative contracts and government equipment. At least two other hospitals have been closed based on similar allegations. Corruption in medical supplies to hospitals<sup>11</sup> and inflated pricing of materials in donor funded emergency projects came to light. But except for the resignation of the Director General of the Directorate of Health Services (DGHS) amid criticism<sup>12</sup> and the removal of the DGHS Directors of Hospitals and Clinics and Planning and Research,<sup>13</sup> there seems to be little attempt to bring this widespread corruption under control.

## CONTROLLING INFORMATION

One of government’s key strategies has been to control information about the extent of the pandemic, implying that government strategies have been successful in containing the pandemic while concealing the extent of corruption.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.newagebd.net/article/104844/bangladesh-govt-yet-to-initiate-probe-into-face-mask-scam>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/corruption/2020/07/17/probe-body-n95-mask-scam-planned-a-punishable-offence>

<sup>9</sup> <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/07/24/bangladesh-arrests-ruling-party-linked-supplier-over-fake-n95-mask-scam>

<sup>10</sup> <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/crime/rab-seals-regents-headquarters-hospitals-103054>

<sup>11</sup> <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/corruption/acc-probe-alleged-corruption-n95-mask-ppe-purchases-91534>

<sup>12</sup> <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/health/dghs-director-general-abul-kalam-azad-resigns-109702>

<sup>13</sup> <https://businesspostbd.com/post/2503>

In February, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) began holding daily briefings in which the Director of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) provided updates and responded to media questions. Concerns were raised as to whether the statistics provided at the press briefing were complete. With a remarkably low number of tests, questions were raised whether the numbers could be considered reliable. The briefing was shifted to an online format on March 23 amid rising cases of COVID-19. As the situation further deteriorated, conflicting information was provided by the DGHS and the Health Minister. Against this background, the online briefing was recast as a “Daily Health Bulletin” in which no media questions were accepted. The Daily Health Bulletin provided nothing more than the information available on the DGHS website: an array of information including total number of tests, testing kits, new cases, number of quarantined persons, etc. The number of calls made to the Government Hotline was included. Gradually, however, various figures began to be dropped from the briefing. The number of laboratories approved for the tests increased, and figures of each testing site located in various districts were provided until April 24. On April 23, the Health Ministry created a media cell whose mandate included to ‘take steps against the perpetrators behind fake news.’<sup>14</sup> On August 11, the government announced that the daily online briefing will be discontinued, while the DGHS will issue daily ‘press release’ with ‘necessary information’.<sup>15</sup>

While government sources ‘confirmed’ cases of COVID-19 deaths, they have ignored those who have died of COVID-19 symptoms. As of July 18, the total number of deaths with symptoms were 1,874. The official death toll stood at 2,751 excluding those who died of symptoms.<sup>16</sup> Serious discrepancies between the information available in the IEDCR and the World Health Organization (WHO) emerged in June raising questions about the reliability of the data.<sup>17</sup>

The government is not only providing less and less information, it has also clamped down on individuals challenging the official narrative and sharing information. In March, the government instructed the doctors of a public hospital<sup>18</sup> and nurses working in all public hospitals not to talk to the media.<sup>19</sup> A

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<sup>14</sup> <https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/covid-19-bangladesh/media-cell-formed-prevent-propaganda-about-covid-19-73195>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/coronavirus-latest-updates-in-bangladesh-33-die-2996-test-positive-1943233>

<sup>16</sup> <http://peaceobservatory-cgs.org/uploads/cgsPDF/23-07-20-11-30-990-Covid19graphics%2015.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://medium.com/netranews/bangladesh-statistics-update-continuing-contradiction-between-who-and-government-covid-19-data-8023841f74b2>

<sup>18</sup> <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/05/03/bsmmu-doctors-forbidden-from-speaking-to-journalists-posting-on-social-media>

<sup>19</sup> <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/04/18/bangladesh-asks-nurses-not-to-speak-to-media-amid-covid-19-crisis>

doctor was sent to jail for allegedly spreading misinformation.<sup>20</sup> In April a doctor was removed from his post after complaining about the lack of PPE.<sup>21</sup> Instructions went out to public officials in May not to upload, share, comment on or react to social media posts, including image, audio or video with 'damaging' messages on any state or important officials.<sup>22</sup> The government appointed fifteen officials to monitor the content of 30 television channels,<sup>23</sup> a decision which was canceled after protests from journalists.<sup>24</sup>

## COERCION: SILENCING THE CRITICS

In conjunction with the attempt to control information, the government has gone after critics and targeted journalists who have tried to expose this corruption. People of all walks of life have been targeted by the government and activists of the ruling party for expressing their views, particularly on social media. The government and ruling party activists are exploiting the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA), enacted in October 2018. The DSA is a vaguely worded law with serious loopholes, allowing warrantless arrests and indefinite detention without legal recourse.

At least 101 cases of alleged defamation and rumormongering were recorded from March through June, with a total of 174 accused in these cases. According to Article 19, a media watchdog, among the accused are 47 journalists, of which, 23 have been arrested. Additionally, 61 journalists have been attacked and assaulted between March and June, either by the members of the law enforcing agencies or the supporters of the ruling party. But it is not only the journalists who are being persecuted. Altogether 8 students have been accused of posting misinformation on Facebook; one college student, four university students, two secondary school students and one from a madrassah. Cartoonists and bloggers are included in the list.

The indiscriminate use of the DSA is illustrated by the arrest of a 15-year old for 'defaming' the Prime Minister on Facebook. He was sent to a juvenile detention center in the midst of the pandemic, when the government is supposed to release prisoners from overcrowded prisons.<sup>25</sup> In early June, eleven

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/spreading-rumours-doctor-put-3-day-remand-1884649>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/04/30/mugda-general-hospital-director-made-osd>

<sup>22</sup> <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/05/07/bangladesh-shields-vips-from-criticisms-by-public-servants-on-social-media>

<sup>23</sup> <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/03/26/bangladesh-deploys-15-officials-to-monitor-tv-coverage-of-coronavirus>

<sup>24</sup> <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2020/03/26/information-ministry-cancels-order-on-media-monitoring-over-covid-19-rumours>

<sup>25</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/bangladesh-boy-15-arrested-for-facebook-criticism-of-pm-1.1593004320296>

people, including a cartoonist, were charged, among other things, with “undermining the image” of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.<sup>26</sup> In many instances, the accused are arrested at home by plainclothes police without any form of identification or warrant. For example, Didarul Alam Bhuyian, an organizer of an advocacy group for social reform, was picked up from his home and government agencies initially denied that they had arrested him.<sup>27</sup> This mode of arrest not only violates High Court instructions regarding arrests but sends a chilling message that the arrested might become a victim of enforced disappearance. In the past years, enforced disappearances, allegedly by law enforcement agencies, have become common: in 2019, 34 people disappeared in this way.

The widespread abuse of the DSA is intended to create a climate of fear, and it is succeeding. Two things are easily discernable from the cases filed under the DSA since its introduction in October 2018. Firstly, most of these are filed by ruling party activists who are not the injured party in the case. Between January and June, 50 cases have been filed by the leaders and activists of the ruling Bangladesh Awami League and 40 by law enforcement agencies. By allowing anyone to file a case even when the plaintiff is not personally affected, the DSA has essentially franchised censorship to party activists, and beneficiaries of the government. Unfortunately, university administrations are following suit in order to display their loyalty to the ruling party. In two instances, two separate universities filed cases against their own lecturers<sup>28</sup> and suspended them.<sup>29</sup> Both of the accused remained in jail as of the end of July.

Secondly, these cases are filed alleging defamation of ruling party leadership. At least 60 cases filed in the past months allege that Facebook posts have defamed the prime minister, members of the parliament or local administration. Of these cases, 27 were filed for alleged defamation or criticism of the Prime Minister, and 14 for defaming members of the parliament. These cases are not only sending the accused to jail and putting them in a difficult position to defend themselves, but also send the message that the Prime Minister and parliament members are above criticism.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/bangladesh-cartoonist-writer-charged-anti-government-posts-200507102957266.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2020/05/06/rab-allegedly-picked-up-rashtrochinta-organiser>

<sup>28</sup> <https://scroll.in/latest/964739/bangladesh-lecturer-held-for-facebook-post-allegedly-mocking-former-minister-who-died-of-covid-19>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/arrested-under-digital-security-act-ru-teacher-suspended-1921309>

## THE WAY FORWARD

Widespread corruption, the government's all-out effort to control the flow of information, and the silencing of any dissenting views through coercion attest to the absence of an accountable system of governance in Bangladesh. The ongoing democratic backslide in Bangladesh engendered this situation and the pandemic has only accelerated the pace. This does not auger well for the future of the nation. The pandemic may cause lasting damage to the country, not only in terms of death and economic loss, but also in terms of governance, driving it towards an authoritarian system.

There are reasons to be concerned about this trajectory. The Bangladeshi government, national and international civil societies, and international donor agencies such as the World Bank, the IMF and the ADB have responsibilities to address these trends. Equally important is the role of the private sector in Bangladesh. The rampant corruption is deeply tied to the absence of accountability, but as the economic crisis is upon the country, particularly with the global pandemic, it is imperative to create an accountability mechanism beyond the existing system. The proposal floated by the country's leading think tank, the Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), particularly the eminent economist Rehman Sobhan, about appointing a task force to oversee the implementation of the budget warrants serious consideration.<sup>30</sup> I would like to go further and suggest appointing an independent national accountability and transparency commission comprised of members of the civil services, civil society organizations, NGOs, policy research organizations, trade bodies and the private sector for overseeing the implementation of the relief efforts, social safety networks, stimulus packages, and the external aid received by the country in the wake of COVID-19. Corruption is badly hurting the private sector as business opportunities and stimulus are being limited to politically connected and unscrupulous businesses. Effective economic recovery is necessary for the private sector to stay afloat and flourish. They should build bridges with the anti-corruption bodies and engage with the civil service to establish transparency. International organizations such as the Center for International Private Enterprise and Transparency International, can contribute through developing forums which will bring various stakeholders together and provide a platform to voice their concerns and include them in the process of combating corruption.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://cpd.org.bd/budget-fy2021-task-force-needed-to-improve-accountability-of-the-covid-budget/>



Between April and June, international donors have committed \$3.1 bn to Bangladesh to address the pandemic.<sup>31</sup> This has made 'record foreign aid disbursement from development partners.'<sup>32</sup> There are allegations of attempted corruption in the World Bank and the ADB supported projects in health sector, with procurement allocation for equipment as high as four times of market price.<sup>33</sup> Exorbitant amounts were allocated for developing websites. Donor agencies and governments should create monitoring mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability to prevent corruption involving local stakeholders.

The first step to bring an end to the growing persecution of dissenting voices is to suspend the Digital Security Act without any delay and scrap the law altogether. Digital security measures to protect individuals from harassment, and deter cybercrime and related matters can be legislated through discussions with all groups of people concerned, and ensuring that such laws do not become open license to create a culture of fear and are not allowed to be used for silencing anybody.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://preview.tinyurl.com/yyze4e9k>

<sup>32</sup> <https://tbsnews.net/economy/foreign-aid-crosses-record-7b-amid-covid-19-106306>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.kalerkantho.com/print-edition/first-page/2020/06/04/918961>



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