

[Working Paper Series: Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Asia – Part I]

Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Bangladesh: An Analysis

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Introduction¹

Like many countries around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered multi-dimensional challenges for Bangladesh.² This working paper examines the various challenges that are faced by the government and other non-state actors like non-government organizations (NGOs), media and businesses. It also explores the linkages among public health outcomes, human rights, and governance to assess Bangladesh's democratic governance situation.

Objectives

The following are the three objectives of this analysis:

- a) To examine the government's overall response to the COVID-19 pandemic, whilst covering specific aspects: health, economic, social, and political response;
- b) To analyze the role of NGOs, media, and private sectors to understand the overall public sentiment towards the authorities' actions in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- c) To recommend both policy and programmatic solutions to build public confidence in the state's capacity in managing novel shocks in the future.

Methodology

Analyses were completed through desk research, e-mail interviews of eight selected individuals, and short analyses of editorials in two selected newspapers and online polls in one leading Bangla newspaper. A conceptual framework called CAR³ (Capability, Accountability, Responsiveness) was applied in this analysis.

¹ Throughout the year, ADRN members will publish a total of three versions of the Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Asia Research to include any changes and updates in order to present timely information. The first and second parts will be publicized as a working paper and the third will be publicized as a special report. This working paper is part I of the research project.

² A total of 7950 people died and more than half a million infected as per official figure, dated 21 January 2021. <https://corona.gov.bd/> Accessed on January 21, 2021

³ CAR is a virtuous cycle of governance. In capability stream, it is assumed that leaders and governments are able to get things done, and to perform functions such as providing stability, regulation, trade/growth, effectiveness and security. The accountability refers to the ability of

Limitations

The originally planned focus-group discussion and social media analysis was shelved due to time constraint and additional findings were not included due to the word limit of this working paper.

Literature Review

A great deal of studies has been carried out by both national and international researchers since the first case COVID-19 patient was detected in Bangladesh on March 8, 2020. BRAC, a non-governmental development organization based in Bangladesh, conducted a rapid perception study which revealed that nearly all respondents (99.6%) were aware of the disease, and two-thirds (66%) first learned about the virus through television.⁴

Researchers also found shortages in the government's COVID-19 response. A study linked the bureaucratic strategy of 'leading from behind' responsible for the 'dysfunctional COVID-19 management system'.⁵ A separate study found that the government was slow in taking measures to cease the pandemic, and that the measures that were taken did not reach the people.⁶ Another study concluded that poor pandemic management was due to the failure of decision-makers to engage the right kind of experts. They were also found to have failed in providing proper training, Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), and workplace security which led to a high number of deaths among medical staff.⁷

Some researchers concluded that maintaining partial lockdown by operating business and economic activities while keeping social distancing and public health guidelines, was the best strategy for Bangladesh.⁸ Drawing from models of international researchers like Ali, Tariq & Hassan, Mirza & Hossain, Naomi (2020),⁹ it is evident that the government was able to successfully manage the pandemic in Bangladesh by applying politically suitable policies. However other studies were outright critical about the government's overall handling of the pandemic situation. Freedom House's global research found that democracy declined during the pandemic

citizens, civil society and the private sector to scrutinize public institutions and governments and hold them to account to ensure transparency, free media, rule of law and elections. Finally, responsiveness stream refers to the extent to which public policies and institutions respond to the needs of citizens and uphold their rights, including human rights/liberties, access to basic public services, pro-poor policy, equality, regulation and corruption. In "Measuring Change and Results in Voice and Accountability," accessed January 20, 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67715/meas-chge-res-voice-acc-wk.pdf.

⁴ BRAC, "Rapid Perception Survey on Covid19 Awareness and Economic Impact", BRAC, April 9, 2020, <https://brac.net/images/news/2020/Perception-Survey-Covid19.pdf> (Accessed 17, January 2021).

⁵ M Aslam Alam, "Leading in the shadows; understanding administrative leadership in the context of COVID-19 pandemic management in Bangladesh", *International Journal of Public Leadership*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/IJPL-06-2020-0050/full/html> (Accessed January 17, 2021).

⁶ Ayesha Siddika & Md Didarul, "Covid-19 and Bangladesh: A study of the public perception on the measures taken by the government", *The Daily Sun*, January 2014, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340479320_COVID-19_and_Bangladesh_A_study_of_the_public_perception_on_the_measures_taken_by_the_government (Accessed on January 17, 2021).

⁷ Taufique Joarder, Muhammad Nahian Bin Khaled & Mohammad Ainul Islam, "Public Perceptions of the COVID-19 Pandemic Management in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Exploration", *Research Square*, December 3, 2020, <https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-117124/v1> (Accessed January 17 2021). More than 110 doctors died while over 3000 health professional staff were infected by the disease, as per media reports.

⁸ Mashura Shammi, Md. Bodrud-Doza, Abu Reza Md. Towfiqul Islam & Md. Mostafizur Rahman, "Strategic assessment of COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh: comparative lockdown scenario analysis, public perception, and management for sustainability", *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, July 18, 2020, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10668-020-00867-y> (Accessed January 17, 2021).

⁹ Tariq Omar Ali, Mirza Hassan & Naomi Hossain, "The moral and political economy of the pandemic in Bangladesh: Weak states and strong societies during Covid-19", *World Development*, January 2021, <https://accountabilityresearch.org/publication/the-moral-and-political-economy-of-the-pandemic-in-bangladesh-weak-states-and-strong-societies-during-covid-19/> (Accessed January 17, 2021).

in about 80 countries, including Bangladesh. It quoted a Bangladeshi respondent who said: “I am more cautious in publicly criticizing government responses on COVID-19.”¹⁰

Several international organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were mostly critical about how the Bangladesh government handled the pandemic at the expense of media freedom and imposing an ‘authoritarian crackdown’ on critics. Seven international organizations issued a statement urging the international community to take a strong stand for the protection of human rights in Bangladesh.¹¹ Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) remained one of the few critical national voices that focused mostly on the government’s failure in maintaining transparency and accountability during several stages of the pandemic management.¹²

There were also studies that adopted a more balanced approach. Drawing the government’s attention to the ‘Leave No One Behind’ slogan under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they advocated for the improvement of the lives of marginalized communities during the pandemic. A sub-topic of this was the rising cases of domestic violence against women and girls. Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) produced a series of telephonic survey-based reports¹³ drawing policymakers’ attention to suppress the surge in domestic violence, labeling it as a ‘shadow pandemic’.

Some researchers analyzed the role of social media in Bangladesh during the pandemic. One study reported that participants with greater exposure to social media reported having ‘bad/fair health condition’ or ‘health-related problems’. The same study also found that participants with more access to electronic media reported health-related problems.¹⁴ Another study found that people driven by “self-promotion and entertainment” and characterized as having “deficient self-regulation” were prone to sharing unverified information.¹⁵

The role of the Government

The government stated that preparations began in January 2020 as per the national preparation and response plan. The Bangladesh Society of Medicine developed a guideline on COVID-19 management in late January 2020.¹⁶ After declaring national holidays from March 26, 2020, Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina introduced 31 directives to contain the virus and urged people to follow said guidelines.¹⁷ The government formed as many as 43 committees

¹⁰ Freedom House: “Democracy Under Lockdown: The Impact of Covid-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom”, *Freedom House*, October 2020, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/COVID-19_Special_Report_Final_.pdf (Accessed January 17, 2021).

¹¹ ANFREL, “Joint Statement: International Community: Stand against authoritarian rule in Bangladesh”, ANFREL, 2020, <https://anfrel.org/joint-statement-international-community-stand-against-authoritarian-rule-in-bangladesh/> (Accessed January 17, 2021).

¹² Md. Julkarnayeen, Morsheda Akter, Taslima Akter, Manzoor-E-Khoda, “Governance Changes in tackling Corona Virus”, *Transparency International Bangladesh*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/beta3/index.php/en/research-policy/96-fact-finding-studies/5894-2020-06-15-05-06-11> (Accessed January 19, 2021).

¹³ Manusher Jonno Foundation, <http://www.manusherjonno.org/resources/research/> (Accessed January 17, 2021).

¹⁴ Md. Tanvir Hossain, Benojir Ahammed, Sanjoy Kumar Chanda, Nusrat Jahan, Mahfuza Zaman Ela, Md. Nazrul Islam, “Social and electronic media exposure and generalized anxiety disorder among people during COVID-19 outbreak in Bangladesh: A preliminary observation”, *PLOS ONE*, September 11, 2020, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0238974> (Accessed January 18, 2021).

¹⁵ A.K.M. Najmul, Samuli Laato, Shamim Talukder and Erkki Sutinen, “Misinformation and sharing and social media fatigue during COVID-19: An affordance and cognitive load perspective”, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 159, October 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7354273/> (Accessed January 18, 2021).

¹⁶ Disease Control Division, “National Guidelines on Clinical Management of COVID-19”, *Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh*, November 5 2020, https://dghs.gov.bd/images/docs/Guideline/COVID_Guideline_v8_2.pdf (Accessed January 17, 2021).

¹⁷ <https://cutt.ly/yjA3gIW> (Official order in Bangla) Accessed on 18, January 2021

both at national and local levels to coordinate health-specific interventions.¹⁸ Senior Secretaries and Secretaries of the ministries were assigned to coordinate COVID-19 prevention and relief distribution activities.¹⁹

Stimulus Packages

The government launched several stimulus packages to sustain economic activity and to protect the most vulnerable the following couple of weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak. About 39.23%, or BDT 47,615 crore, was disbursed until October 31, out of an allocation of BDT 121,000 crore intended for 21 stimulus packages.²⁰ The stimulus package accounted for 3.7% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Bangladesh. In terms of stimulus package compared to GDP, Bangladesh only lagged behind Indonesia, among 10 selected Asian countries.²¹

On January 17, 2021, the Prime Minister approved the second round of stimulus packages of BDT 2700 crore. With this new bailout package, the total amount of financial assistance for tackling the economic fallout of the COVID-19 stood at BDT 124,053 crore or 4.44% of the country's GDP.²²

Throughout the pandemic period, the government maintained that it had successfully contained the spread of the virus and managed the economy better than any other country.²³ It brushed aside the global pandemic projections on massive fatality rates.²⁴ The government also dismissed reports from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for their 'inconsistent' projection of Bangladesh's economic growth as a fallout to pandemic impact.²⁵

Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales voiced his appreciation for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on her efforts to contain the virus in Bangladesh.²⁶ The Bangladesh Prime Minister was listed in a Forbes article as one of the top 15 female world leaders who managed the COVID-19 pandemic remarkably well.²⁷ Armed with absolute political control over all aspects of state affairs, the ruling political leadership seized the opportunity to showcase such international endorsement in its COVID-19 communication campaigns.

¹⁸ <https://cutt.ly/rjA3biF> (Official order in Bangla) Accessed on 18, January 2021

¹⁹ Ali Asif Shawon, "PM: 64 secretaries to monitor relief operations in 64 districts", *Dhaka Tribune*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/government-affairs/2020/04/20/pm-64-secretaries-to-monitor-relief-operations-in-64-districts> (Accessed January 18, 2021).

²⁰ <https://cutt.ly/ojA3ETO> (Official order in Bangla) Accessed on January 18 2021

²¹ Rejaul Karim Byron and Md Fazlur Rahman, "Bangladesh's stimulus package second highest among peer countries", *The Daily Star*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/bangladeshs-stimulus-package-second-highest-among-peer-countries-1914621> (Accessed January 18, 2021).

²² Rejaul Karim Byron and Wasim Bin Habib, "Cottage Industry, SMEs: Tk 2,700cr fresh stimulus unveiled", *The Daily Star*, January 18, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/cottage-industry-smes-tk-2700cr-fresh-stimulus-unveiled-2029481> (Accessed January 18, 2021).

²³ Tribune Desk, "PM Hasina: Bangladesh economy showed resilience amid Covid-19", *Dhaka Tribune*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/parliament/2021/01/20/pm-hasina-bangladesh-economy-showed-resilience-amid-covid-19> (Accessed January 21, 2021).

²⁴ Kamran Reza Chowdhury Dhaka, "Leaked UN Memo: COVID-19 Could Kill 2 Million in Bangladesh", *Benar News*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/draft-memo-03302020183916.html> (Accessed January 18 2021).

²⁵ "World Bank Projects 1.6pc GDP growth in 2021, Kamal refutes", *New Age, Bangladesh* January 6, 2021, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/126441/world-bank-projects-16pc-gdp-growth-in-2021-kamal-refutes> (Accessed January 21, 2021).

²⁶ Tribune Desk, "Prince Charles hails Sheikh Hasina for her strides to contain coronavirus", *Dhaka Tribune*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/04/06/prince-charles-hails-sheikh-hasina-for-her-strides-to-contain-covid-19> (Accessed January 18, 2021).

²⁷ Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, "8 (More) Women Leaders Facing The Coronavirus Crisis", *Forbes*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/22/8-more-women-leaders-facing-the-coronavirus-crisis/?sh=3368f768288f> (Accessed January 18 2021).

Good Governance Challenges

MJF and its partner NGOs found that about 21,826 people from Dalit and Harijan communities, 29,631 persons with disabilities, and 49,239 fishermen, did not receive any kind of aid between April and June 2020. In addition, only 25% of families of ethnic minorities in the hilly and plain land area were said to have received help.²⁸ The government's stimulus package also did not properly reach LGBTIQ+ groups, low-income families, returnee migrant workers, informal and low-wage earners such as daily laborers, transgender, and sex workers.²⁹

The beneficiary lists prepared by the local administrations were full of flaws as people not eligible for aid were listed. For example, 3,000 government employees and 7,000 pensioners were listed. These lists also included people who were receiving support from other social safety programs.³⁰ A survey result by TIB claimed that when preparing the list of beneficiaries, partisan political considerations were taken 82% of the time. TIB also found 218 corruption cases in regard to relief distribution, in which elected representatives (30%), local political leaders (24%), dealers (17%), and business people (14%) were involved.³¹

Cracking Down on Critics

Throughout the pandemic period, the government came down hard on critical voices and put up various restrictive measures on mainstream media and social media platforms. This resembled a situation that was evident in various countries where the pandemic turned out to be, as described by the New York Times, “a boon to governments with an autocratic bent.”³²

The pandemic also provided the perfect opportunity for the government to undermine democratic principles through both legal and extra-legal measures. During and after the pandemic, phenomenon such as centralizing power, expanding surveillance, thwarting protests, undue pressures on civil society and media, curtailing of freedom of speech, the rising of rumors and fake news, and unabated political and administrative corruption further strengthened the government's and ruling party's grip over political opponents and citizens in general.³³

²⁸ “Covid-19 Crisis: Little aid for marginalised communities”, *The Daily Star*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/marginalised-communities-theyre-getting-little-assistance-covid-funds-1938413> (Accessed January 19, 2021).

²⁹ “Covid-19 Crisis: Little aid for marginalised communities”, *The Daily Star*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/marginalised-communities-theyre-getting-little-assistance-covid-funds-1938413> (Accessed January 19 2021).

³⁰ Ali Riaz, “A Tale of Misplaced Priorities”, *The Daily Star*, July 15 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/black-white-grey/news/tale-misplaced-priorities-1928729> (Accessed January 19, 2021).

³¹ Md. Julkarnayeen, Morsheda Akter, Taslima Akter, Manzoor-E-Khoda, “Governance Challenges in Tackling Corona Virus”, *Transparency International Bangladesh*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/beta3/images/2020/report/covid-19/Covid-Resp-Track-ES-Eng-15062020.pdf> (Accessed January 19 2021).

³² Selam Gebrekidan, “For Autocrats, and Others, Coronavirus Is a Chance to Grab Even More Power”, *The New York Times*, March 30 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/world/europe/coronavirus-governments-power.html> (Accessed January 15 2021).

³³ Anwar Saeed, Narsrullah Mohammad, Jakir Hosen Mohammad, “COVID-19 and Bangladesh: challenges and how to address them,” *Frontiers in Public Health*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2020.00154/full>; Bangladesh: Pandemic as Pretext for Authoritarian Crackdown” *Human Rights Watch*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/bangladesh-pandemic-pretext-authoritarian-crackdown>; “Bangladesh: Stifling Expression using Digital Security Act must not be the Norm to Address COVID-19 Pandemic,” *CIVICUS*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/news/4413-bangladesh-stifling-expression-using-digital-security-act-must-not-be-the-norm-to-address-covid-19-pandemic>; “Coronavirus outbreak: CMP using drones to ensure social distancing,” *The Daily Star*, April 13, 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/coronavirus-in-bangladesh-cmp-using-drones-ensure-social-distancing-1892494>; “Health Minister Asks Officials not to talk to Media,” *The New Age*, April 23, 2020,

Role of the Media

The Covid-19 pandemic turned out to be “double-trouble” for the Bangladesh media. On one hand, they had to cope with various restrictive measures in media reporting. On the other hand, the media suffered heavily due to revenue loss, retrenchment, and job loss. Furthermore, about 1,068 journalists became infected while collecting news and about 40 journalists also died from the coronavirus.³⁴

On March 25, 2020, the government assigned 15 officials from the Ministry of Information to monitor the pandemic coverage broadcasted on private television channels.³⁵ The order was withdrawn two days later following a media outcry. However, it was found that the previous order was extended in disguise to additionally cover other and social media.³⁶

The authorities indiscriminately used the infamous Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 during the pandemic to silence critics in the mainstream and social media. The heightened intolerance of the authorities against any kind of criticism on all platforms sent chilling effects everywhere as no one, not even a 15-year-old boy, university teachers and students, writers, journalists, doctors, opposition activists, or a cartoonist were spared.³⁷

By the end of June 2020, about 113 cases were filed under the DSA. Of the 208 people accused, 53 were journalists.³⁸ Police also arrested several people on charges of spreading rumors and misleading information on the Coronavirus outbreak.³⁹ Nine Dhaka-based diplomats defended the rights of national media to freedom of expression, by stating that facts, during any crisis, are more important than ever to save lives.⁴⁰

In spite of these constraints, the Bangladeshi media continued to report on official COVID statistics and at the same time, exposed various corrupt practices by the government officials, especially by the Ministry of Health. The deceitful actions of the ruling party in the distribution of, food, monetary aid, and other types of relief also came under media spotlight.

<https://www.newagebd.net/article/104963/health-minister-asks-officials-not-to-talk-to-media>; Lata Lutfun Nahar, “Corruption Complicates Bangladesh's fight against COVID-19,” *East Asia Forum*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/11/13/corruption-complicates-bangladeshs-fight-against-covid-19/>; Rabbi Airfur Rahman and Rahman Mizanur, “Covid-19: Police Action during Social distancing Draws Flak,” *Dhaka Tribune*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/03/27/covid-19-police-action-during-social-distancing-draws-flak>

³⁴ “40 journalists, media staff die of COVID-19, symptoms in Bangladesh”, *New Age, Bangladesh*, December 5, 2020,

<https://www.newagebd.net/article/123483/40-journalists-media-workers-die-of-covid-19-symptoms-in-bangladesh> (Accessed January 20 2021).

³⁵ “Monitoring Media: Info ministry scraps circular mid outrage”, *The Daily Star*, March 27, 2020,

<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/monitoring-media-info-ministry-scraps-circular-amid-outrage-1886434> Accessed on 19 January 2021

³⁶ “Bangladesh: End Wave of COVID-19 ‘Rumor’ Arrests”, *Human Rights Watch*, March 31, 2020,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/bangladesh-end-wave-covid-19-rumor-arrests> (Accessed January 19 2021).

³⁷ “Bangladesh: More government critics, including a teenager, charged under Digital Security Act,” *IFEX*, July 5, 2020,

<https://ifex.org/bangladesh-more-government-critics-including-a-teenager-charged-under-digital-security-act/>, Accessed on March 31, 2021

³⁸ “Bangladesh: Increase in charges under DSA as government seeks to silence criticism,” *Article 19*, July 3 2020,

<https://www.article19.org/resources/bangladesh-increase-in-charges-under-dsa-as-government-seeks-to-silence-criticism/> (Accessed January 19 2021).

³⁹ Mohammad Jamil Khan and Rafiul Islam, “Six held for ‘spreading rumours,’” *The Daily Star*, March 30, 2020,

<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/six-held-spreading-rumours-1887568> (Accessed January 19, 2021).

⁴⁰ “Media more important than ever during Covid-19 Crisis: foreign diplomats,” *The Daily Star*, May 8, 2020,

<https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh/role-of-media-more-important-ever-during-covid-19-crisis-1900639> (Accessed January 19 2021).

Analyses of Online Polls and Editorials

To highlight the positive role of the media during the pandemic, an analysis was carried out by the leading Bangla Daily *Prothom Alo* on 37 selected online polls from March 24 to December 14. A variety of topics were selected for poll topics of which were the following: COVID-specific opinion, corruption situation during the pandemic, accountability issues, comments by opposing political parties on how the pandemic was handled, and effectiveness of the ministry of health.

On April 8, 98% of respondents agreed that the number of labs for COVID-19 tests should be increased, while on April 15, 98% stated that the number of COVID-19 tests should be increased. In March, it was recorded that 46% agreed with the statement that police should be able to take measures by identifying those spreading rumors about COVID-19 on social media. However, 50% did not agree with the statement, and 4% didn't answer.

On December 10, an overwhelming majority 96% agreed with a comment by a noted educationist Syed Monjurul Islam that a 'corruption festival' was present during the early stages of the pandemic. On September 23, only 7% agreed with the statement that measures should be taken against those involved in health corruption scandals, while the remaining 92% disagreed. On July 28, 19% endorsed a comment by Director General (DG) Health that the government must first control COVID outbreaks, then control corruption. However, this statement was met with opposition by 92% of respondents. On May 12, polls showed that 81% didn't agree that proper punishment should be ensured to the UP chairperson and members for causing irregularities in relief distribution. Only 18% believed that proper punishment should be ensured.

During the online poll on August 31, 2020, 97% didn't agree that measures taken by the ministry of health to contain and reduce the death rate were effective. Only 2% believed that the measures were effective.

On October 5, 92% disagreed with the comment made by the health minister that Bangladesh was nearly safe from COVID-19. On October 8, 96% of respondents also didn't agree with a different comment by the health minister that Bangladeshi people received the same treatment as the US President.

In the poll on March 24, 2020, 88% agreed with a remark from the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) Secretary General's comment that the government didn't make enough preparations to tackle the coronavirus. This was met with disagreement by 10% of respondents. On April 1, 90% supported and 9% opposed the BNP's demand for full lockdown in the country. On May 19, 81% of participants agreed and 15% disagreed with a remark by a BNP leader that the government was hiding COVID-related information. On the November 12th poll, 92% didn't agree with the ruling Awami League's General Secretary's statement that TIB's report on COVID-19 was political instead of research-based.

This paper conducted a short review of 74 Corona-related editorials in the Daily Prothom Alo, published from March 10, 2020, to January 8, 2021. Various topics were covered such as migrant returnees; COVID-19 situation and vaccination; corruption in the health sector; health protocols; the situation of women and children; the situation of marginalized communities; the situation of frontline workers; and economic issues were covered in these editorials. Overall, there were eight editorials on various aspects of Covid-19 specific corruption issues and four editorials on vaccines.

On the editorial published on January 6, 2021, the daily advised the Government to get approval from the World Health Organization before administering any vaccines to Bangladeshi citizens. On the 5th of December, the government was urged to be on alert for the possibility of fake vaccines and to take appropriate measures to contain this malpractice. Criticizing the government for the failure to contain corruption in the health sector during the pandemic, the paper urged the authorities to ensure punishment to those responsible for such incidences.

For analysis, 43 COVID-related Daily Star editorials published from September 3, 2020, to January 12, 2021, were selected for review. Topics such as vaccines, low-grade face masks, oxygen shortage, special loans for migrant workers, stimulus packages, COVID-specific corruption in the health sector, and media freedom were prominently featured. In several editorials, the Daily Star applauded various measures by the government such as the Prime Minister's initiatives, good progress in implementing stimulus packages, and the official decision to administer vaccines to all citizens free of charge. The paper singled out the indifferent action of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on failing to make a timely intervention to contain the corruption in the health sector. In an editorial published on November 12, the Daily Star commented the following: "The inefficiency and corruption in carrying out the social safety net [programs] have exposed the many administrative challenges currently facing the government."

The Role of NGOs

The roles of only three Bangladeshi NGOs: BRAC, TIB, and MJF, were analyzed. Through its 100,000 field workers in Bangladesh, BRAC was able to reach out to 73 million people in its COVID-19 emergency response. BRAC also distributed two million hygiene products and provided cash to about 350,000 families.⁴¹

BRAC Institute of Governance and Development at BRAC University produced nine rapid research during the pandemic period. Supported by the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), BIGD also became the only NGO from the south to join a global COVID-19 collective research partnership platform.⁴² TIB also carried out two studies exposing various types of corruption in the government's coronavirus initiatives.⁴³ In addition, TIB issued several policy statements urging the authorities to ensure transparency and accountability in COVID-19 specific operations. MJF reached out to nearly 1.2 million beneficiaries across the country by providing information services to raise awareness on various aspects of COVID-19. It also distributed monetary support to about 23,000 marginalized households.⁴⁴ MJF's COVID-19 research found that multi-

⁴¹"COVID-19 response: Getting services to those in the most need", *BRAC Institute of Governance and Development*, 2020, <https://www.brac.net/covid19/> (Accessed June 19, 2021).

⁴² "COVID Collective research platform launched to tackle global challenges caused by the pandemic", *BRAC Institute of Governance and Development*, 2020, <https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/news/covid-collective-research-platform-launched-to-tackle-global-challenges-caused-by-the-pandemic/> (Accessed January 19, 2021).

⁴³ Md. Julkarnayeen, Mohammad Nure Alam, Morsheda Akter, Taslima Akter, Manzoor-EKhoda, "Governance Challenges in Tackling Corona Virus (Part II)", *Transparency International Bangladesh*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/beta3/index.php/en/research-policy/96-fact-finding-studies/6197-2020-11-10-04-21-36>

⁴⁴ "MJF provides cash transfer support to 23,000 Covid-19 affected poor and marginalised households with the UK's assistance", *Manusher Jonno Foundation*, September 24 2020, http://www.manusherjonno.org/latest_stories/mjf-provides-cash-transfer-support-to-23000-covid-19-affected-poor-and-marginalised-households-with-the-uks-assistance/

stakeholder partnership was the key to achieving the desired development outcome intended for the beneficiaries during a pandemic situation.⁴⁵

The Role of the Businesses

The private sector initially suffered due to the coronavirus fallout. However, through successful lobbying, they were able to secure a large portion of the economic bailout from the government. The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, telecom operators, online shopping, e-payment, courier services, and other businesses profited heavily during the pandemic. Although the operating profit of the banking sector was low, they came forward in donating monetary and other types of relief to various organizations.

Summary of Email Interviews with Selected Individuals

An email interview in the form of a questionnaire was sent to 12 selected individuals who represented various stakeholders. Of these individuals, eight⁴⁶ responded within the deadline resulting in a 63% response rate. When questioned on the government's role, the response was equally divided between 'miserably failed' to 'quite successful'. Regarding the role of media, NGOs and businesses, interviewees gave mixed responses: some praised media and NGOs' positive role despite its many constraints, while others felt that media and NGOs played less than an active role.

Results of Analyses

This study found that divergent views exist among various research and analytical studies by national and international researchers and practitioners. Despite various shortcomings in democratic governance, the government exerted sufficient effort to control the spread of the virus and restored economic activities with available resources. As of now, the series of stimulus packages distributed by the government successfully contained economic shock. However, it is also evident that the government's effort to provide social protection support to marginalized communities suffering from the COVID fallout was insufficient. Furthermore, the distribution of both financial and food support was mired by allegations of corruption and mismanagement.

When the local media exposed massive corruption scandals in the health sector, the government acted swiftly to contain public outrage by arresting those responsible. However, this was merely a policy to 'appease the public' in order to avoid public backlash.

⁴⁵ Rezwan-ul-Alam, "Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) COVID-19 learning: An analysis". *Real KM*, 2020 <https://realkm.com/2020/11/13/manusher-jonno-foundation-mjf-covid-19-learning-an-analysis/> (Accessed January 19, 2021).

⁴⁶ One senior official, three journalists, one internationally-reputed scholars, two professors in a private university and another leader of an NGO.

Recommendations

Drawn from research insights, analyses of opinion polls and editorials, and email interviews, this paper recommends the following: facilitating national coordination under a single authority, strengthening public communication, learning lessons from countries that successfully contained the virus, creating a broad-based and multi-stakeholder partnership, ensuring transparency and accountability in pandemic programs, and including the application of a purely scientific approach in dealing with pandemic situations in the future.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic starkly exposed the linkage between public health outcomes and democracy, human rights, and governance in Bangladesh. Although the government should be credited for containing the spread of the virus while maintaining economic activities, the continued nexus of the ‘corruption triangle,’ involving a section of policy-makers, bureaucrats, and businesspeople, eroded the credibility of the official COVID-19 response. The strict measures of the government to silence critics in media and civil society are not only unconstitutional and undemocratic but also violate Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also became evident that mutual mistrust, a serious drawback for democratic governance, exists among the government, non-state actors, and citizens. Creating a more rights-based, effective, and accountable democratic governance in the near future would be possible if the recommendations of this paper (e.g. employment of rightly-skilled professionals and the adoption of corrective policies) are implemented. ■

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