TECHGLOBAL INSTITUTE

The Anatomy of Disinformation on X

Foreign Information Manipulation amid Bangladesh's Political Transition

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Introduction

Bangladesh's political landscape has shifted dramatically following the fall of the Awami League led government in August 2024. The ousting of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina amid widespread protests was followed and preceded by a surge in disinformation, largely driven on social media platforms like X, Facebook, and YouTube. These platforms have become instruments for state and adversarial non-state actors to facilitate suspected foreign interference, political polarization, and social unrest.

This study investigates disinformation campaigns on X that exploit communal tensions in Bangladesh, while cross-posting on YouTube and Facebook to reach a wider audience. It uncovers the tactics, patterns, and key actors—especially suspected foreign networks—exploiting local narratives to destabilize and exacerbate longstanding societal tensions. Findings reveal coordinated efforts to weaponize social media through culturally charged narratives and historical revisionism, among other tactics, and resulting in incitement of fear and communal conflict.

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Methodology

We sourced over a thousand pieces of content using random sampling, predominantly on X, that reflect key content trends salient to Bangladesh's political context. We used keyword-based search to source content posted between July 26 and November 26 of the current year. We then cross-referenced the substantive narrative or claims in the content with reports from credible mainstream media and fact-checking organizations, and narrowed it down to content most likely to be deemed mis- and disinformation using purposive sampling. We conducted further analysis and provided our assessment of its veracity, coupled with existing debunked information from fact-checking organizations in India and Bangladesh, based on fact-checking principles instituted by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Our final dataset consisted of 100 pieces of unique content, comprising of those assessed to be disinformation that pose considerable risks of political and societal instability.
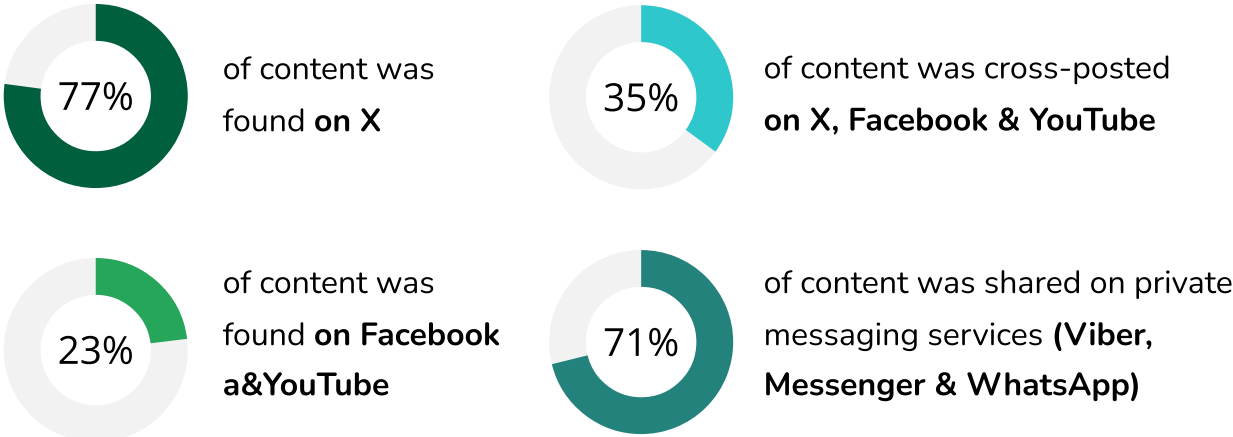
We applied Meta's third-party fact-check ratings framework to the dataset. Although Meta's categorization may not be consistently applicable to X or YouTube, we determined it to be approachable given its prevalent use among researchers and journalists in Bangladesh. However, we find that the framework is not sufficiently comprehensive or nuanced, and have introduced two additional categories to capture the various types of mis- and disinformation in our dataset.

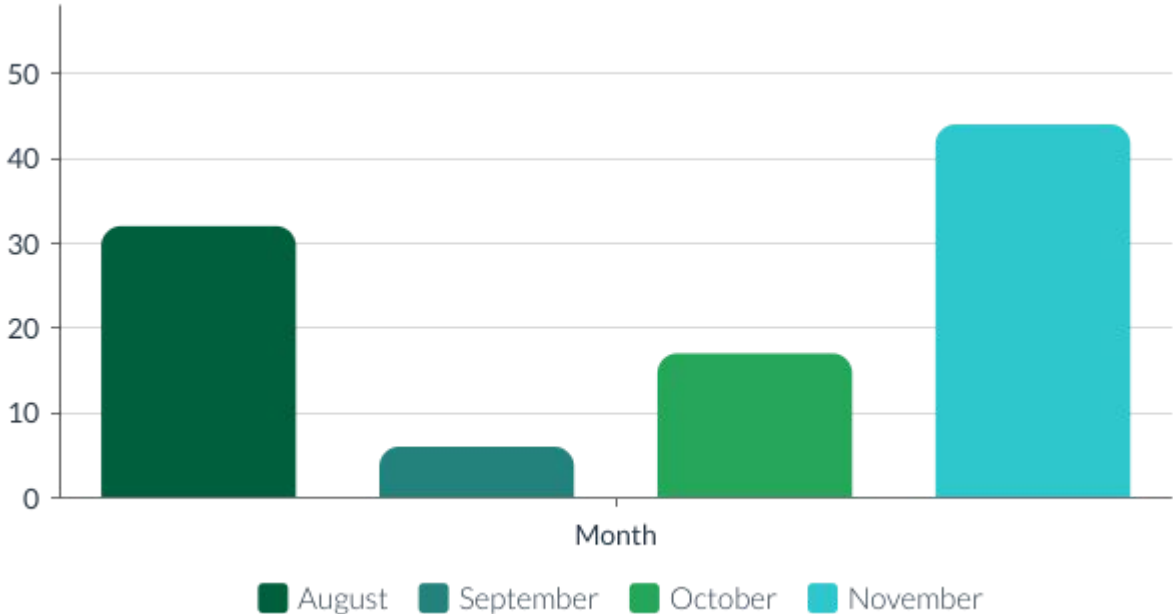*See Appendix for additional details.*

Key Findings
How Disinformation Campaigns Spread

Distribution across major social media platforms

77% of content was found **on X**

35% of content was cross-posted **on X, Facebook & YouTube**

23% of content was found **on Facebook a&YouTube**

71% of content was shared on private messaging services **(Viber, Messenger & WhatsApp)**

Distribution over time

Month

■ August ■ September ■ October ■ November

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Coordinated malign information campaigns are distributed through new accounts on X, often bearing paid verified checkmarks and misleading audiences about authenticity of the account and authoritativeness of the information

Between August and November this year, we find that spread in disinformation is associated with a spike in creation new accounts on X. We see the volume of new accounts increasing over time (as shown below) with **a 214% surge in new accounts between October and November alone**. Many of these accounts are verified (with a blue checkmark) due to X's recent verification sales policy. These accounts tend to share the same hashtags and repost content from each other within a short span of time, and were identified as users with a history of repeated violations within the scope of this report and analysis of debunking articles from credible fact-checking organizations. The activity of these accounts were somewhat limited outside of repeatedly sharing, re-sharing and commenting on content rated as as false or inflammatory in this report, particularly content from another. A combination of these signals suggest—with some degree of confidence—that they form a coordinated network to amplify disinformation on X.

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Patterns and Tactics

Majority of claims were rated to be false or deliberately omitting critical context to mislead audiences

False 74%
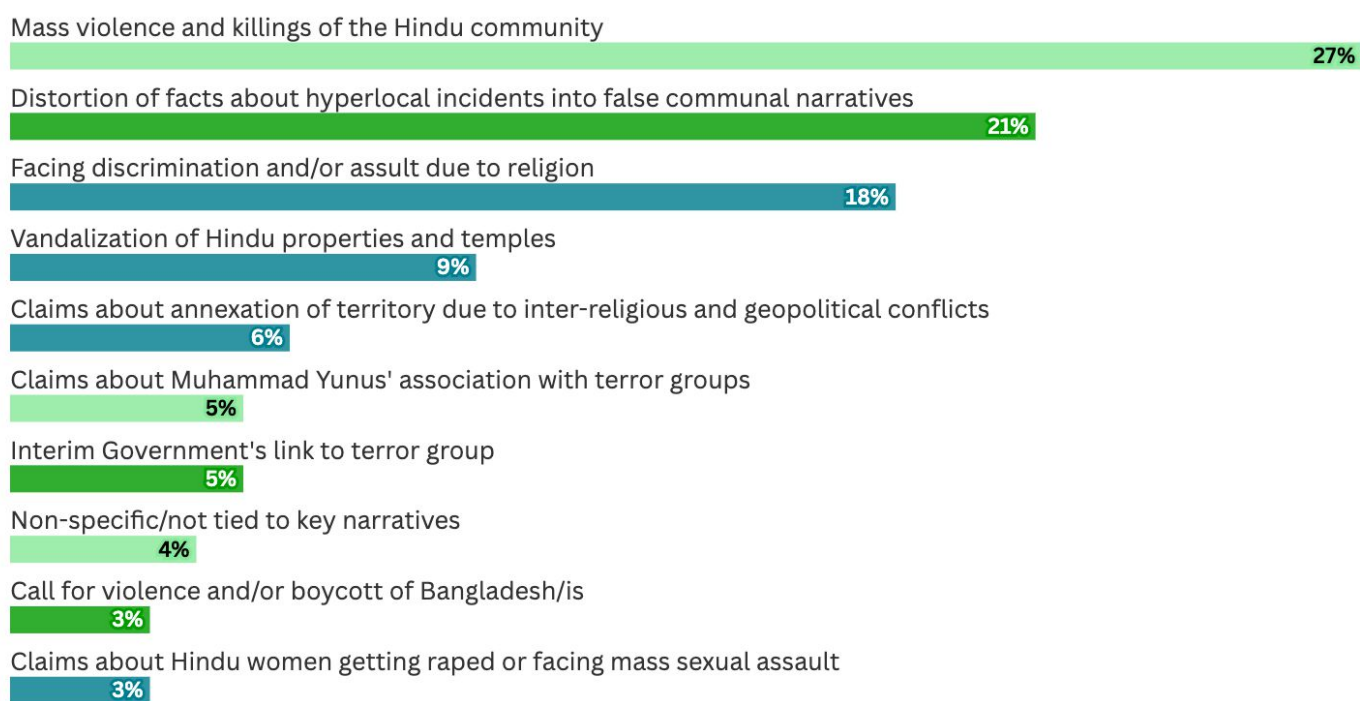Missing Context 24%
Altered 1%
Call to Violence 1%
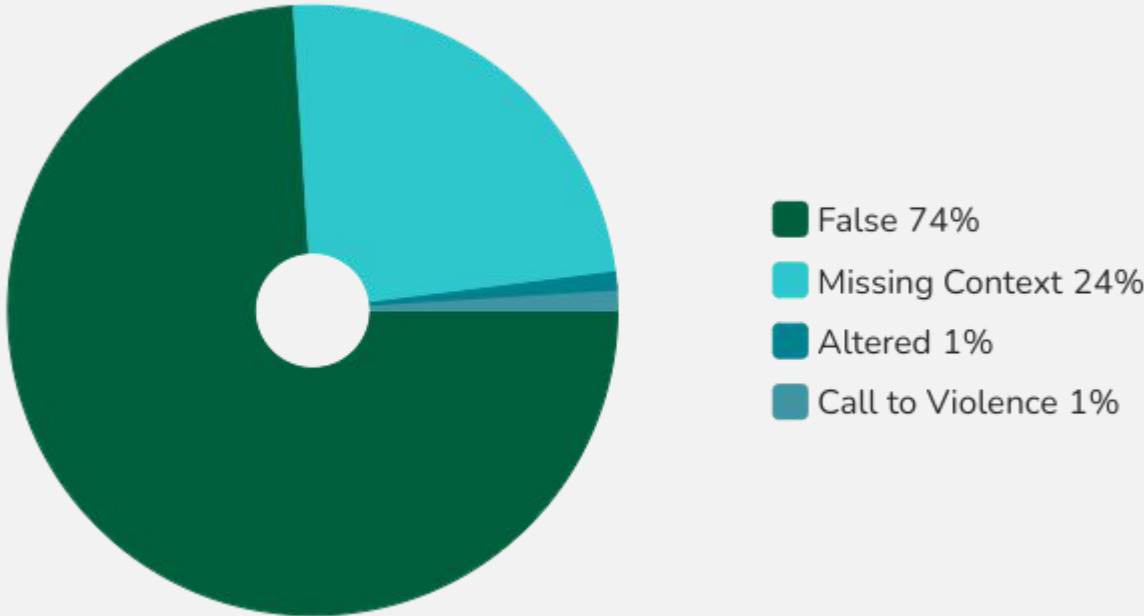
Among the top 20 hashtags on X, #savehindusinbangladesh and #bangladeshhindusgenocide were most prevalent and associated with content rated to be false.

helpbangladeshihindus
bangladeshhindugenocide
savebangladeshihindus   islamicterrorism   hindusunderattack
hindusarenotsafeinbangladesh   hindugenocideinbangladesh   boycottbangladesh
radicalislam   jihadistargetinghindus
savehindusinbangladesh
hindulivesmatter   hindusunderattackinbangladesh   stophindupersecution
armykillingbangladeshihindus
alleyesonbangladeshihindus   sanctionbangladesharmy
bangladeshviolence   yunusthemurdererofhindus
yunusthebutcherofbangladesh

A handful of key narratives dominated disinformation campaigns

Our analysis found that coordinated disinformation on X was tied to a handful of key narratives around mass killing of Hindus in Bangladesh (27% of analyzed content) and repetitive attempts to present unrelated hyperlocal events with an inter-religious or communal undertone, often distorting facts (21% of analyzed content). Claims about Hindus facing abject discrimination or attacks *because* of their religion was also extensively found. The figure below shows distribution of key disinformation narratives on X.

While inter-religious tensions are a longstanding societal concern in Bangladesh, and there has been reportedly some isolated attacks, the scale at which it is portrayed through X accounts is highly exaggerated and distorted, and implies a malicious intent to spread disinformation about the safety of minority groups in Bangladesh to non-Bangladeshi audiences.

Mass violence and killings of the Hindu community
27%

Distortion of facts about hyperlocal incidents into false communal narratives
21%

Facing discrimination and/or assult due to religion
18%

Vandalization of Hindu properties and temples
9%

Claims about annexation of territory due to inter-religious and geopolitical conflicts
6%

Claims about Muhammad Yunus' association with terror groups
5%

Interim Government's link to terror group
5%

Non-specific/not tied to key narratives
4%

Call for violence and/or boycott of Bangladesh/is
3%

Claims about Hindu women getting raped or facing mass sexual assault
3%

Accounts are targeting Indian audience and right-wing ultra-nationalist groups following the same tactics as Russia and China

We analyze numerous signals to understand the origin of accounts spreading disinformation on X and their operating model. We used a combination of signals to ascertain with a some confidence that these accounts are likely operating out of India or their content coincide with Indian ultranationalist groups, and meant to influence both audiences in India and those outside of India. Some of the signals include: (a) a persistent focus on narratives that align with Indian right-wing or ultra-nationalist ideologies, (b) sharing, directly quoting or referencing content from right-wing media outlets in India, such as, Republic Bangla, or OpIndia (c) using Hindi as the primary language, including in profile names and/or in posts and comments, (d) the high frequency of tagging prominent Indian political figures, (e) patterns of coordinated engagement in amplifying certain posts through retweets and comments, (f) use of the same or similar hashtags, (g) specific linguistic nuances in the posts, typical of cultural vernacular in India, and (h) a focus on Indian ultra-nationalist politics and its relevance in Bangladesh's political transition in Bangladesh.

These accounts explicitly target India-based or Indian-origin users, as well as non-Indian groups of geopolitical relevant to South Asia, evident through tagging Indian influencers and Indian / non-Indian prominent accounts through their re-sharing, replies, and direct interactions. It is important to note that attribution with certainty is inherently extremely complex without access to a number of personal and location-based data, which risks violating user privacy. Our analysis relied on publicly available data to determine patterns and signals that can ascertain how, for whom, and the motivations underpinning disinformation campaigns.

Moreover, these accounts collectively disseminate a coordinated disinformation campaign following tactics similar to those used by troll farms and "keyboard armies" from Russia, Israel and China. In the next section, we uncover common tactics used by disinformation networks exploiting communal tensions in Bangladesh.

Tactic #1: Distorting facts about hyperlocal events to spread violent communal claims

In our analysis, we observe a repetitive pattern of distortion of local incidents into false and violent communal narratives. One such attempt involved a video from Sir Salimullah Medical College, depicting a man wielding a stick in a classroom shared on X by Megh Updates on October 27 with the caption indicating Shariah law has officially been announced in Bangladesh and implying that a violent "Islamist" has entered the classroom to bully students. We see the same content and narrative being amplified by the X user, Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, who is a self-proclaimed journalist and counterterrorism specialist, who assessed this incident as "Talibanization of Bangladesh!", and claimed that the individual seen in the video is a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is a proscribed group in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi fact checkers have determined this claim to be false. The individual in the video was identified as Jubair Ali, a mentally ill patient, according to his family. There is no evidence that Ali is a member of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, nor did the group claim him to be one. Bangladeshi authorities arrested the individual shortly afterwards. The incident, originally recorded by students and shared on social media, was widely disseminated on X using inflammatory phrases and keywords such as *Talibanization of Bangladesh* to paint a distorted narrative of a takeover by extremist elements.
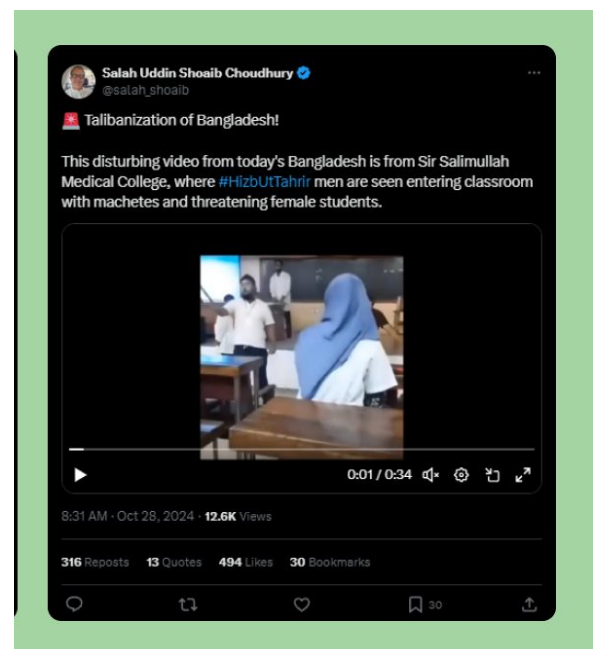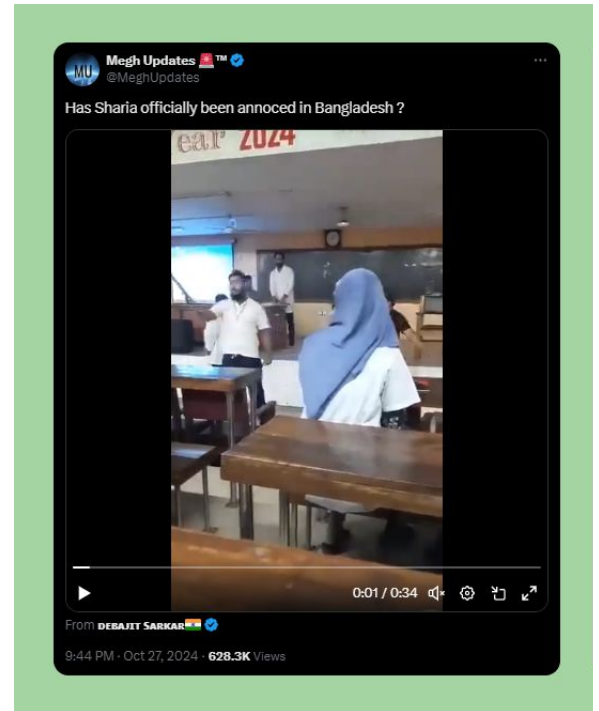
Similarly, on October 13, a post by the X user, *Radharaman Das*, claimed that two Hindu women were brutally murdered while returning home after celebrating Vijay Dashami. The post alleged that the motive for murder is anti-Hindu sentiment, and criticized the interim government of Bangladesh for failing to protect minorities. Another X account, *Voice of Bangladeshi Hindus*, that fact-checkers have repeatedly flagged to be associated with mis- and disinformation, shared the same image with an identical claim. Collectively, these content received over 550,000 views and 27,000 engagements, including reposts, quotes, likes, and bookmarks.

However, news published by credible mainstream media in Bangladesh revealed that the two students, Pooja Biswas and Ratna Saha, are from Faridpur and had died from toxins after returning from a *puja* festival. A more detailed explanation about their death is not yet available. Claims on X deliberately distorted the facts of the incident, and presented it as a case of violence against Hindus.

On October 2, 2024, a video shared by the X account, *Baba Banaras*—also flagged by fact-checkers for spreading disinformation—claimed that a Hindu man was brutally murdered at the Eidgah gate of Kauria Para in Narsingdi, a district in the northeast of Bangladesh's capital. The Press Trust of India and Boom India, both known as credible fact-checking organizations, debunked the claim, and confirmed that the deceased is a Muslim man named Hanif Mia, who was killed by his cousins over an internal family dispute. The debunking report traced back to video footage published on *Sorejomin Barta*, a local vernacular, and provided visual and contextual evidence that this, in fact, was an inter-family dispute.

Tactic #2: Exaggerating claims about killings and mass violence against Hindus using the same tactic as Russian troll farms

On November 5, 2024, OpIndia, a right-wing Indian media outlet known for its divisive content on Hindu-Muslim relations, claimed a targeted attack on Hindus in Hazari Goli, Chattogram, allegedly orchestrated by law enforcement and military officials. On November 6, the X account, *Baba Banaras*, shared a series of videos claiming that over 50 Hindus were killed or injured in a joint attack by the Bangladeshi Army and Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist political party, in Chattogram, the southern district of Bangladesh. The post further alleged that six Hindu women and girls were abducted by radical Islamists using hashtags such as #SaveBangladeshiHindus aimed to amplify communal tensions. Other accounts on X, such as Hindu Voice, that was previously flagged by fact-checkers for spreading disinformation, also shared the same videos and claimed Hindu minorities are being brutally attacked and abducted in Bangladesh.
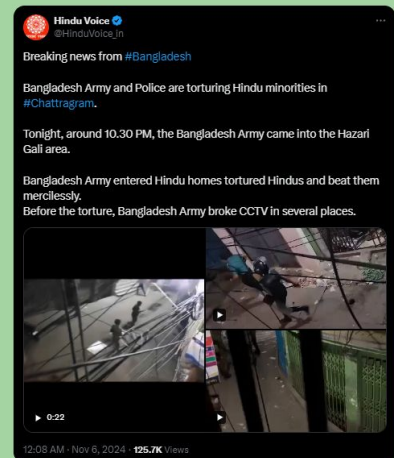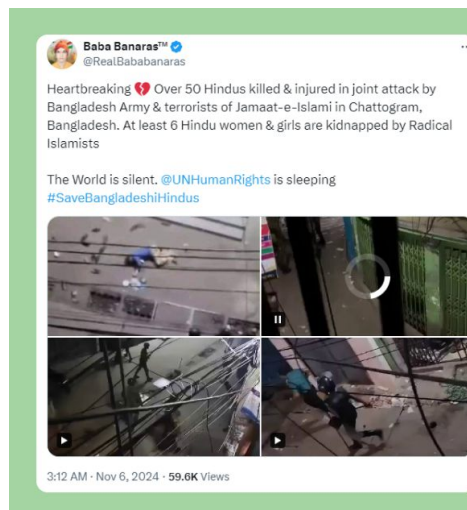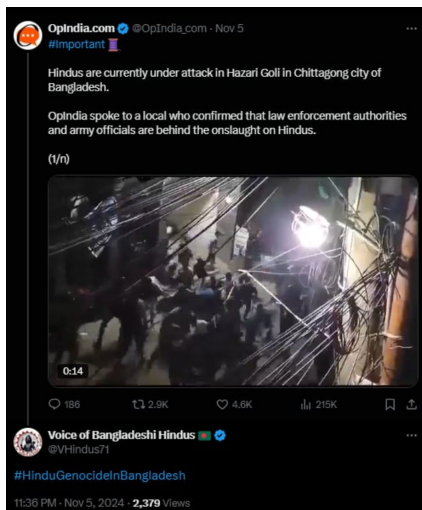
Bangladeshi fact-checking organization, Rumor Scanner, debunked the claim, and confirmed that there was a protest in Chattogram that resulted in injuries but no deaths or abductions.

Similarly, on November 11, 2024, *Akshit Singh*, a user on X, posted images claiming that the Bangladesh Army has deliberately killed 27,000 Hindus within three months since the ouster of the country's former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina. The post compared the alleged mass killing

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of Hindus in 2024 with the crackdown and killings by the Pakistani Army during the country's liberation war in 1971. Hashtags such as #HinduGenocide and #SaveBangladeshiHindus were used in reposts and comments accompanying this post to amplify the claim. However, local fact-checkers determined this claim to be fabricated as there was no evidence of mass killings in the months following regime change. X users, *The Jaipur Dialogues* and *Radharaman Das राधारमण दास*, shared another video on September 30 claiming that Muslims in Bangladesh have issued a seven-day ultimatum to Hindus to leave the country, or be killed. The users similarly drew parallels with targeted killings of Bengali Muslims and Hindus in East Pakistan before and during 1971. This claim was subsequently debunked by Bangladeshi fact-checking organizations.

In a follow up investigation by Netra News, a Sweden-based independent news entity, the claim of nine Hindu men as part a wave of anti-Hindu "communal atrocity" made by the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council was found to be lacking in evidence. The men were killed in family disputes, political retaliation or criminal homicides, and their deaths have no relationship with anti-Hindu, communal or sectarian violence.

This pattern of drawing parallels with historical events, while renegotiating facts of the past, are a combination of 'whataboutism' and historical revisionism, evident in disinformation tactics employed by the former Soviet Union and Russian troll farms. The tactic involves coupling substantive criticisms about the interim government's actions with fabricated data, and presenting a narrative rooted in falsehoods and spurious equivalencies.

Tactic #3: Discrediting strategy often involves deepfakes to spread claims about the interim government's ties to terrorist groups

On August 7, 2024, two India-based news portals, *Ei Muhurte* and *Zee 24 Hours*, published articles claiming that the new government of Bangladesh had lifted the ban on several militant organizations, including Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B). At the time, the Joint Secretary of the country's Home Affairs Ministry confirmed to fact-checkers that "no such decision has been taken."

Two and a half months later, exiled Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin wrote on X: "He [Professor Yunus] has lifted the ban on Islamic terrorist organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir and Ansarullah Bangla Team." However, no evidence has been found to support this claim, nor has any such information been verified by government officials or the press.

Meanwhile, allegations against advisors of the interim government surfaced on X and in several India-based news outlets about their ties to terror groups. Some examples include:

- Nahid Islam (Information and Broadcasting Adviser to the interim government) is alleged to have been a Pakistani militant and a former member of Hizb ut-Tahrir at Dhaka University.
- The interim government has faced criticism for appointing three advisors—businessman Sheikh Bashir Uddin, filmmaker Mostofa Sarwar Farooki, and Mahfuz Alam (adviser and special assistant to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus)—allegedly linked to extremist groups.
- Claims about Mahfuz Alam being arrested several years ago for being an active member of the proscribed group, Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Bangladeshi fact-checkers determined that the leader of the banned organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, who was arrested in 2019, was Abdullah Al Mahfuz, not the same person as Mahfuz Alam, an adviser to the interim government). By verifying details such as photographs, districts, and ages, investigators and journalists confirmed that the two individuals are entirely different. The confusion appears to stem from their similar names, which appears to have been deliberately misrepresented. Additionally, no evidence has been found to support the other allegations.
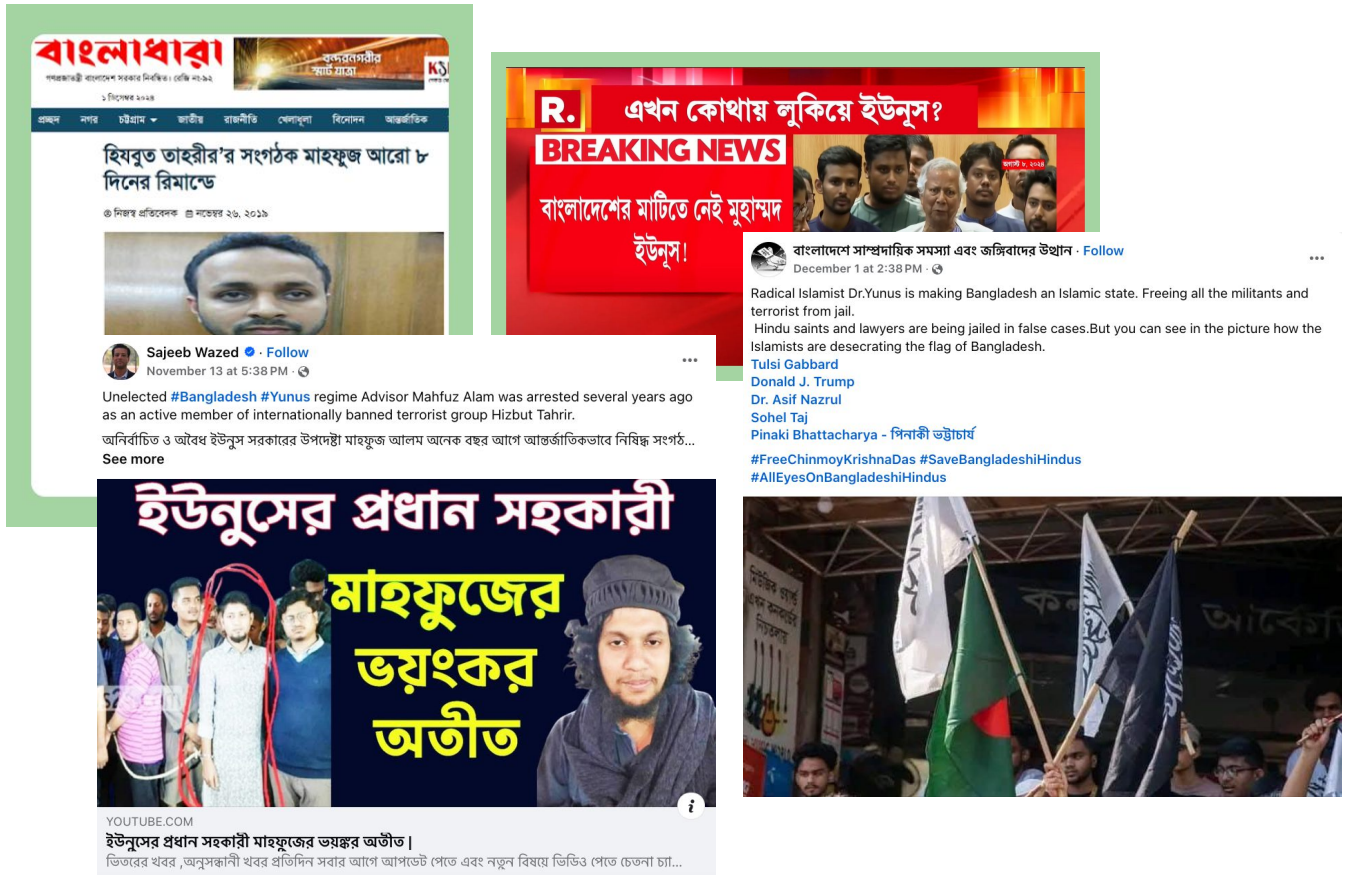
Discrediting is one of the oldest tactics used by disinformation networks in countries like Iran, Armenia, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Syria to target anti-establishment actors. Our previous research on Iran uncovered credibility-attacking tweets systematically smearing journalists and critics by labeling them as mouthpieces, apologists, or puppets of the establishment. Similarly, ahead of Bangladesh's 2024 general election, we observe likely Awami League-affiliated accounts on Facebook, YouTube, and X employing similar tactics to discredit government critics. By singling out individuals and spreading partial truths or false information about their past, these efforts aim to create widespread distrust, particularly among foreign interlocutors and policymakers.

We observed the use of deepfakes and cheapfakes to incriminate members of the interim government. Initially created for satirical purposes, much of this content was taken out of context and weaponized by accounts on X to intensify efforts to discredit the government. These narratives align with the Awami League's longstanding rhetoric as custodians of secularism, which instead deepened societal polarization and legitimized their actions.

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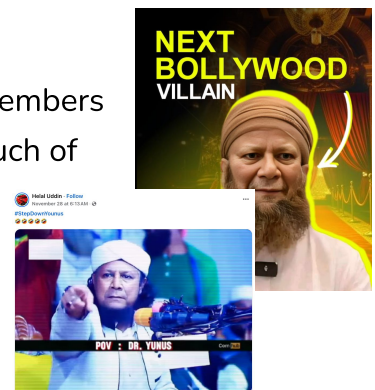
Tactic #4: Creating the mirage of grassroots support through minority rights campaign and monitoring, or astroturfing

In August 2024, reports emerged from various districts across Bangladesh regarding teachers and officials at educational institutions being pressured to resign from their positions. These resignations were primarily linked to their associations with the previous government, and allegations of irregularities and corruption. These incidents were shared on numerous X accounts —that previously have shared content coinciding with Indian ultranationalist views—through the frame of a communal narrative, alleging discrimination against Hindus in Bangladesh.
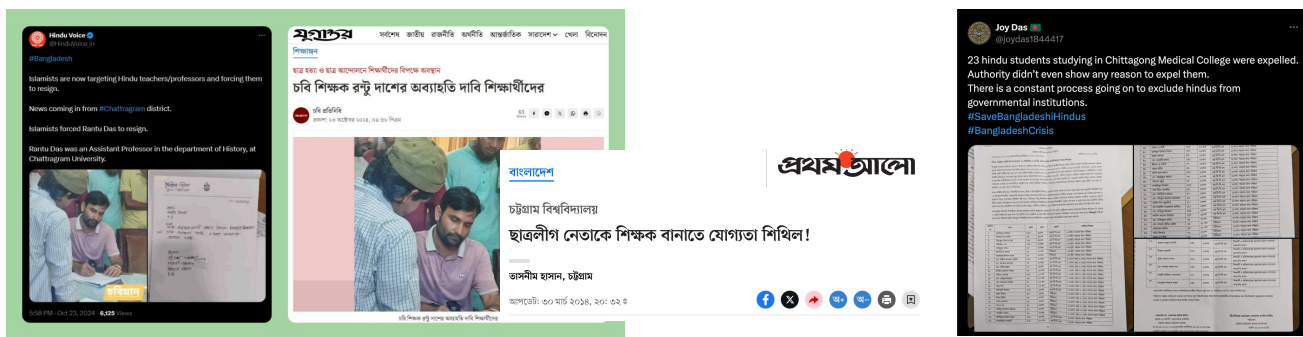
On November 13, 2024, the X user, *Voice of Bangladeshi Hindus* shared a video claiming that "radical" students at Naogaon Medical College were protesting to oust a Hindu teacher, Dr. Kanta Rani Roy. However, media reports indicated that students were demanding her removal due to allegations of irregularities and corruption, citing her dismissal from two previous medical colleges. Similarly, another X user, *Hindu Voice*, alleged that Islamists forced a Hindu teacher, Rantu Das, to resign from Chittagong University. Contrarily, media reports stated that students called for his resignation because he was likely implicated in the deaths of two students in 2012. In 2011, he had also been arrested under the Arms Act, and in 2014, the Department of History at Chittagong University had relaxed qualifications to appoint Rantu Das, who was a leader of the Chhatra League, according to *Prothom Alo*, the country's largest national daily. Another user on X alleged that 23 Hindu students were expelled from Chittagong Medical College as part of an effort to exclude Hindus from government institutions. However, the list accompanying this claim included names of both Muslim and Hindu students who were expelled for disciplinary violations, and does not demonstrate any deliberate attempts to discriminate against Hindu students.

Astroturfing is the practice of creating fake grassroots movements to manipulate public opinion and give the appearance of widespread support for a particular agenda. Chinese disinformation networks often use astroturfing by manufacturing online support through fake social media accounts, fake petitions, and coordinated campaigns to promote narratives favorable to Chinese interests, especially in regions like Taiwan and Hong Kong. In this case, astroturfing was used to demonstrate widespread awareness towards minority rights in Bangladesh and grassroots reporting of discrimination against Hindu minorities.

Tactic #5: Leveraging mainstream media to exploit communal tensions and legitimize disinformation

On September 2, 2024, a Facebook post labeling Bangladesh's Rangpur and Chittagong divisions as "Hindudesh," a separate Hindu territory, gained traction amid political unrest following Sheikh Hasina's ousting. Indian media, including Republic Bangla and Hindustan Times, amplified the narrative with unverified claims of violence against Hindus and speculations about Chittagong's strategic value as a separate state.

Disinformation escalated on November 13, when a Pakistani cargo ship docked at Chittagong port for the first time since Bangladesh's independence. Indian outlets alleged it carried weapons and linked it to secret nuclear deals with Pakistan, despite no evidence. Sensationalist reporting framed Bangladesh as hostile to minorities and in turmoil, relying on exaggerated claims that fueled communal tensions and misrepresented geopolitical realities. In response to sensationalist reporting, on December 2, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee urged the Indian government to push for UN peacekeepers in Bangladesh to protect minorities and stabilize the situation. During the analysis period, additional unsubstantiated claims have made headlines on numerous Indian ultranationalist media, including:

- **Military mutiny**: Claims of an imminent mutiny in Bangladesh, allegedly led by Jamaat-e-Islami (Calcutta News; OpIndia)
- **Surgical strikes**: Reports suggest India is preparing for surgical strikes and "tough action" in Bangladesh (Calcutta News)

- **Airbase construction**: Allegations that Bangladesh is building an airbase near the Siliguri Corridor to station 50 fighter jets (Calcutta News)
- **Missile positioning**: Claims that Indian missiles along the border are aimed at Bangladesh (Calcutta News)
- **Tank movements**: Reports of Bangladeshi tanks heading toward the Indian border (Calcutta News)

The arrest of Chinmoy Krishna Das, a former ISKCON leader, followed by clashes between his followers and security forces leading to the death of Saiful Islam Alif, a lawyer, triggered a series of false reporting. Republic Bangla claimed Alif was a Muslim lawyer defending Das, with outlets like Hindustan Times, FirstPost and OpIndia amplifying the narrative. This claim was determined to be false by both independent fact-checkers and the government; the investigation clarified that Saiful Islam Alif was not defending Chinmoy Krishna Das, but was a general practicing lawyer unrelated to his case. The defense lawyer for Das was Subasish Sharma, according to official court records.

The false narrative swiftly spread on X, with consistent phrasing, visuals, and hashtags framing Alif's death as a targeted communal killing while defending Das. A pattern emerged, with previously flagged disinformation accounts repeatedly sharing posts quoting or referencing the initial Republic Bangla broadcast, amplifying the narrative in an echo chamber.

These posts often included graphic images or videos of the deceased and dramatic language, such as claims that Bangladesh was worse than Pakistan and that Hindus were defenseless. Emotionally charged hashtags like #SaveBangladeshiHindus and #HindusUnderAttackinBangladesh further fueled the message. Many posts tagged political figures, religious groups, and international organizations like @UN, @CNN, @BBC, @VivekGRamaswamy and @DonaldTrump, appealing for attention to what was framed as a communal crisis. This coordinated messaging aimed to manipulate social media algorithms to consistently rank these content higher on feeds, giving the impression of a widespread attack on minorities in Bangladesh.

Policy Analysis

In recent years, much of the pedagogy on addressing disinformation has been defined through the lens of platform determinism, particularly in Global South or Global Majority countries like Bangladesh. This approach often limits researchers and investigators to interventions such as fact-checking and the removal of coordinated networks, including fake and bot accounts. While these measures are important, there is a need for a broader range of platform-agnostic strategies to effectively tackle information disorder. Research has shown that investments in independent media and public education programs have a significant positive impact on information environments (Bateman and Jackson, 2024).

Historically, in Bangladesh, efforts to counter mis- and disinformation have been funded and mainstreamed by technology companies, leading to an over-reliance on their rating systems and debunking frameworks. While bilateral and philanthropic funding for strengthening information integrity has increased in recent years, these approaches fall short in addressing issues such as platform design, algorithmic ranking and amplification, and business models. Additionally, most initiatives have focused on uncovering and addressing state-sanctioned disinformation campaigns under the previous Awami League regime, with limited attention and resources devoted to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).

The recent surge in disinformation, allegedly linked to foreign actors, has raised significant concern among Bangladeshis. Many commentators and policymakers argue that disinformation targeting Bangladesh is operating at "an industrial scale." While there is evidence of

coordination and amplification, the scale of disinformation remains relatively small compared to the large-scale foreign influence campaigns typically run by countries like China, Iran, Russia, and India. To effectively address the current information disorder, more urgent attention is needed on the underlying issues of national security and foreign policy in the context of a shifting geopolitical landscape.

Some experts have suggested implementing stricter laws to combat "fake news," but global experience indicates that such laws are often ill-suited to address the rapidly evolving dynamics of information. These laws are frequently misused to enable censorship. Mis- and disinformation thrives in environments where public trust in institutions and media is in decline. Research consistently shows that people exposed to debunked information often continue to believe falsehoods, driven by confirmation bias, the need to align information with pre-existing beliefs, and lack of trust in established media. Therefore, addressing the root causes of disinformation requires an overhaul media ownership norms to reduce monopolies and increase diversity of perspectives, as well as to rebuild trust in public institutions and governance. Strengthening these foundational elements will help build resilience against the spread of false information, fostering a more informed and critically engaged public.

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Appendix

We used random sampling method on X to source content related to a specific hashtag, topic, or user activity within the set time frame of July and November. Once a large pool of over 1,000 content was created, we defined and used the purpose-specific filters to extract contents from particular accounts, groups, or content types, based on relevance to the research. The final dataset included 100 pieces of content that we determined represents sufficient diversity of patterns, tactics and users to inform the analysis. X's recent researcher data access policies made it extremely expensive and cumbersome to generate a larger dataset.

Given its prevalence among information research organizations in Bangladesh, we relied on Meta's fact-checking classifications to rate content in our dataset. We assessed each content based on a set of pre-defined criteria, including whether the information is false, misleading, or partially true, and considered the source, context, and any additional evidence, such as mainstream media reporting. We defined 'call to violence' as misleading content with explicit call to act violently and target religious or minority establishments.

While we found some evidence of foreign interference, we framed our findings within the context of foreign information manipulation targeting non-Bangladeshi users. Attributing accounts to specific geographies, actors, or institutions is difficult due to the use of proxy servers, anonymization techniques, automation, and decentralized operations. Accurately identifying the responsible actors or regions would require access to sensitive personal data, which is beyond the scope of our code of conduct and research ethics.