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# ICTs changing youths' political attitudes and behaviors in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

This article explains political activism among educated youths in Bangladesh and how information and communication technologies (ICTs) change their political attitudes and behaviors. The findings identify motivations and psychological factors that affect patterns of new media use in political participation. Data from 23 interviewees, alongside those of 69 focus group participants, reveal that Bangladeshi youths increasingly favor forward-looking agendas by rejecting traditional ideology-based party politics. They have a passion for shaping their opinions through social networking instead of processions, party meetings, and political violence. This study finds that youth engagement through virtual communication has no direct impact on political decision-making but may play a pivotal role in some policy-making processes in Bangladesh.

## Keywords

Bangladesh, civic engagement, ICTs, political activism, youth

## Introduction

The recent revolutions in Arabian and North African countries made it evident that the democratization of societies is related to the proliferation of ICTs, and that youths are the key influential force in these nations. Studies by different scholars (e.g., Hoffmann and Kornweitz, 2011; Kahn and Kellner, 2004) revealed that ICT-based networking and communication have an immense role in restoring democratic values in different parts of the globe. In spite of this positive turn, however, the relationship between new technologies and

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society still remains complicated in many parts of the world. Countries with emerging democracies, such as Bangladesh (Ullah, 2009) and South Korea (Lee, 2004), manifest an enthusiastic, sometimes violent participation of youth in political activities despite the youths lacking a significant impact on political decision-making for good and accountable governance.

Since Bangladesh began in 1971 its journey as an independent state, the dysfunctioning of various political institutions like parliament and elections, a high level of intolerance, rivalries between or within political parties, corruption in every sphere of political life, and military intervention have annihilated the prospects of democratic institutionalization. Kochanek (2000) pointed out that the problem of governance in Bangladesh is deeply rooted in the country's historical experience, as well as the behaviors and values of the socio-political-military elites. Patrimonial politics and patron-client relationships are among the main elements that deny a fair chance to engage in political activities; this denial engulfed the country in violent<sup>1</sup> political behaviors by youths, mainly college and university students. On the other hand, Bangladeshi history is illuminated by the heroic contribution of its youths, with them driving various movements at critical moments.

In addition to their significant role in politics, educated youths are also among the most enthusiastic towards the Digital Bangladesh plan. This mega plan, in a country plagued by constant political anarchy, inherent poverty, and only a little over 1% of Internet access via computers (BTRC, 2011), was made moot during the national elections of 2008. However, analysts (Anwar, 2011; Taifur and Mridul, 2003) perceive youth engagement through ICTs as much more favorable than the violent political behavior of young activists from different parties across the country who use bitter resentments<sup>2</sup> as an excuse to violently express their political views.

Through seven focus group discussions involving 69 participants in three major cities across Bangladesh and 23 in-depth interviews in the capital of Dhaka, this study explores how ICTs enter the frame of youth engagement in politics as one significant factor, how the youths behave in relation to political issues when they gain access to ICTs, and how they prove themselves different from their predecessors in engaging in political and other socio-civic activities, what the driving forces in their engagement are, and, finally, how their participation promises a change in the political landscape of Bangladesh.

## **Youths' engagement in politics in Bangladesh: A brief account**

According to the National Youth Policy 2003, all Bangladeshi citizens between 18 and 35 years old are treated as youth. They constitute one-third of the country's total population. Bangladeshi history is alight with the heroic contribution of youths, mainly college and university students. The youths of this country played a vital role in the historic language movement of 1952, the mass upsurge of 1969, the liberation war of 1971, and the many spells of crisis in independent Bangladesh, including the successful mass uprising in 1990 that toppled an autocratic regime. While each political party in the country has a youth wing, the student wings are the strongest fronts, bearing the party legacy, but do not have any significant role in influencing party policies and decisions. They are mere followers of party elite's decisions and directions (Islam, 2011).

Bangladesh began its journey as a multi-party democratic nation in 1971, but its democratic progress was quickly curtailed when a trend toward authoritarianism began a one-party rule in 1975, which endured for 16 years through direct intervention from the military. This governance finally ended in 1991, but the road to democracy has been uneven because of the confrontations between the two main rival political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). After the reintroduction of democracy in 1991, the BNP and the AL ruled the country alternatively, with a short break of two years (2007–2008), during which the government was ruled by the military-backed caretaker government.

The Constitution of Bangladesh provides anyone 18 or older the right to vote. A total of nine parliamentary elections were held since independence, with voter turnouts ranging from 72% to 91%, except for the sixth election, held in 1996. The winning party got, on average, between 38% and 45% of the vote. Bangladeshi society is highly polarized because of the populace's strong affiliations with each of the two major political parties. The parliamentary elections of 2008 are widely believed to have attracted around 20 million young voters. Educated youths join party-line campus politics for various reasons, but mainly to curry favor in educational institutions. Uneducated male youths, constituting around 67% of the total youth vote, are engaged in farming, small trade, day labor, and vending, or are simply unemployed. Politics beyond voting is a secondary business for them. For instance, some youths who are active in politics are 'cadre,' and they collect illegal tolls and ransom using the party muscle. Female youths usually get married after secondary school and are mostly outside the purview of government initiatives on youth development. They usually do not participate in politics, but do cast their votes.

The bipartisan and dynastic political culture in the country bears a number of negative characteristics. Kochanek (2000) and Reaz (2005) characterized the political culture of Bangladesh as the politics of intransigence, imperiled democracy, destructive politics, spiraling lawlessness, and a confrontational political culture. Democratic consolidation in Bangladesh has gone off-track, and the political system continues to be illiberal or, at best, quasi-liberal. These negative characteristics are the consequences of the rivalry between the two dominant parties that made the nation witness boycotts of parliament, opposition-initiated general strikes, and brutal suppression of the opposition by the government. These politics of confrontation have grown to a frightening scale and are causing havoc to the nation's quest for democracy and economic advancement.

## ICTs and socio-civic activism

Mobile phones and the Internet arrived quite late in Bangladesh. Access to the Internet increased during the early 1990s, and got a further boost at the beginning of the new century. At present, the IT sector in Bangladesh enjoys a 100% tax-exempt status. Through patronization by the government, IT has become popular in all strata of development activities, mainly in the urban areas. Cyber cafes and computer kiosks are developing quickly, particularly in metropolitan areas. However, computer ownership is still limited at 0.782 per 100 people, and Internet penetration is only 1.1% (1,735,020 users as of June 2011), according to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC, 2011).

Bangladesh entered the age of optical fibers by connecting its Internet network in 2005 to the South-East Asia–Middle East–Western Europe optical submarine telecommunications cable. The government is now implementing a program to bring Internet connectivity to all of the country's 64 districts. Considering the thrust of building Bangladesh as an ICT-driven nation comprising a knowledge-based society, the government adopted the National Information and Communication Technology Policy in 2002. Also, in order to achieve 'Digital Bangladesh' by the year 2021, country-wide ICT infrastructure is being developed. The expansion of ICTs across Bangladesh through the Rural Information Centre is the best example of the initiative. The government has undertaken a Tk719 crore Optical Fiber Connection Project to bring Internet access to 1600 (out of 4500) Union Parishad, the lowest administrative unit in the country. The project will be completed by 2015.

Since the arrival of the mobile phone in 1997, its use and connectivity have increased dramatically. According to the United Nations (2007), the number of cellular subscribers increased from 0.06% of Bangladesh's population in 1998 to 13.25% in 2006. BTRC (2011) recorded 45.21 million (31.18% of the total population) mobile phone subscribers in February 2009, and 60 million (41.37% out of 145 million total people) in June 2010; that number reached 76.434 million (52.47%) in June 2011.

ICT access for youths is supposed to have a significant impact on civic engagement. It is believed that youth can contribute or at least express their opinion – be it grievance or apprehension – through virtual communication. Ullah (2009: 345) describes this pattern in that 'the advent of media and political progress went parallel in Bangladesh.' Opposition opinions are allowed in this multi-party democracy and people can express themselves through joining political debate via social media. The majority of youths, illiterate and residing in rural areas, have no active voice with regard to political issues; they are also beyond the purview of ICTs. Educated urban youths, however, have the scope of using ICTs as alternative avenues to express their concerns. This article is thus motivated to examine why and how educated youths, the most influential youth section in Bangladesh, consider ICTs to be their tools for political engagement, as well as how they counter the contemporary political culture through new ways of communication.

## Method and sample

This study is based on 23 in-depth interviews and seven focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 69 participants. The country-wide participants included 50 males and 42 females. Aged between 18 and 32 ( $M = 23.84$ ) years old, the respondents included college and university students, entrepreneurs, school teachers, bankers, social workers, and some party activists.

The sample reveals that 55.4% of the respondents possess a university education, and the rest have a college education (years of education:  $M = 18.21$ ). The interviewees reported that they are 'somewhat' interested in politics ( $M = 2.68$  on a scale of 1–4), and that they paid 'some' attention ( $M = 3.31$  on a scale of 1–5) to political and government news. Among the respondents, 29.3% viewed TV news seven days a week, and 24.0% viewed it three to four days a week. Only 23.9% tune into radio news for one or two days, and 67.5% spend no time on radio listening. Nearly half (46.7%) read newspapers every day for political news.

Almost all respondents of this study possess at least two active mobile subscriber identity modules (SIM cards), and all have Internet access at home, their educational institutions, business organizations, or workplaces. Only one participant has no Internet access at home or in the workplace, but does use a cyber café once or twice a week. Forty-one percent of the respondents have been using the Internet for two to three years ( $M = 4.29$ ), which indicates that they began Internet use after passing college or just after the end of their teens. Among the respondents, 51.1% surf the Internet two to three times every day, and 31.5% for three to four days a week for news about politics and government.

Interviewees were selected through snow-ball sampling, and focus group participants were selected through network sampling. The interviews were all conducted in the capital city, Dhaka, whereas the FGDs were organized in three cities (Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet) across Bangladesh. Each in-depth interview lasted around an hour, and all FGDs lasted for 2–2.5 hours. Interviews were conducted between January and December 2010, while FGDs were organized between December 2010 and September 2011.

The interviews and FGDs were transcribed and translated word-for-word from audio-recorded files. Additional written records were combined with the transcriptions to cross-check information. The analyses reported here are based on the transcripts, a short questionnaire, and notes taken during research. Different major themes are distinguished through careful reading of the data, and direct quotations are used to support the themes.

## Findings

The study data revealed that almost all participants kept themselves posted on political issues. A number of participants, mainly female youths, seemed to be left out of the mainstream political discourse but were aware of various political issues. They were actively engaged in different social and civic issues (e.g., anti-extrajudicial killings, anti-dowry, anti-eve-teasing [sexual harassment]), and were in favor of trials for those accused of war crimes and the repression of women.

Many participants were actively engaged in party politics, but some expressed a negative attitude toward ongoing party politics due to the chaotic, corrupt, and biased nature of the nation's political culture. Calling party politics a tool for obtaining personal wealth by unfair means, many participants complained that nation-building was not the agenda of politicians. Ironically, all participants believed that only political activism can ultimately bring about any change – at least in the Bangladeshi context. As fresh blood, their activism is intended to do good for the people at large. Their explanations revealed how they perceive and adopt the notion of political activism.

### *Political activism*

Political activism is viewed in two ways by youths in Bangladesh. One is to be engaged in party activities directly and work as per the instructions of party higher-ups, and the other is to have the outlook of a conscious citizen responsive to society and the nation. This party-based activism was explained by Khalil, a third-year law student at Chittagong University and a student leader. He said:

I am involved with a political party. I support any attempts taken by my party high ups – this is political engagement. I also maintain a channel with them and follow their instructions for my regular deeds. Actively participate in party procession, slant slogans against the opponents – something like that.

A similar vision was voiced Sakil, a well-known ruling party activist at the University of Dhaka. According to him:

Every day I gather news and information from my personal sources and different mass media, except at the time of my exams. My daily political activities are to organize students in accordance with the instructions from party leaders. I join meetings, processions, human chains and sometimes picketing too and all are for my party interests.

These observations indicate that political activism among party activists is aimed at executing their parties' agendas, which ultimately is a mechanism for holding power sufficient to rule the community or nation in line with their party ideologies. Such activism is almost mandatory for party activists. Participants also resented the fact that their voices are not always counted in the sphere of mainstream politics due to a lack of democratic practices in the nation's political parties. Over-dependency on party cadres negates the power of youths in political decisions. They lamented the fact that intolerance in practices toward citizens and opponents creates an anarchic political culture in Bangladesh, which is ineffective in reaching the general public. Payel, a third-year biochemistry student at Chittagong University, said:

I think political parties must be open in accepting public criticism. Through this scope I can express my grievance or my support to the steps that are taken by government or political parties. I believe leader centric politics cannot bring any change. We must urge for agenda based politics. In that way the relationship will be revived. Otherwise politics will remain a distant issue for the mass people.

This dissatisfaction with party-centric activism has triggered another train of thought on defining politics. Noyon, the owner of a cyber cafe and computer accessory shop in Chittagong, expanded the definition of politics from parties to interest groups:

To me politics is an interest group activity. I mean any group moving to execute their political agenda is politics. By any means this group needs to attain and hold power and this approach towards power is politics. I mean politics is a mechanism for holding power to rule the nation and community.

This observation offers a different view of political engagement. Bakor, a third-year journalism student at Chittagong University, described party-based politics as a narrowly defined version of politics. In a broader sense, he thought that political activism can be found in the expression of opinions:

Ariyl Beel is a wetland where our country produces most of its food grains. The government planned to construct a new airport in this beel. Thousands of local people were worried

[about] being evicted and demonstrated against the decision even though they were not of [a] political mind. [The] Popular newspaper, *Prothom Alo*, sought people's opinions about the construction of [the] airport in Ariyl Beel and I expressed my opinion negatively. If you consider the issue a political one then my participation is political. In this case my participation by expressing an opinion from a distance is in a sense political. However, as I have no active party affiliation, one might think my participation was a community or social response rather than a political activism.

This observation infers that political activism is observed in different ways by some youths who are not party activists. Social activist Farhana raised the view of talking about politics as activism:

I am not a political activist, but am aware of politics. In my daily activities I remain very modest in expressing political views and have no specific political involvement. But participation in political discussions may be in [the] office or home or even in some adda [a social gathering] . . . all those being informal – cannot be bracketed as beyond political. My discussions are sometimes formal too . . . you see, we are discussing serious issues here at a roundtable, I expect a change in the country. My expected change totally depends on the will of politicians. How can I say that my activities are not political?

More general activities such as voluntarily helping poor people, doing charity work in the community, and participating in social gatherings and meetings, as well as cultural functions, are considered social activism that might have political significance. Nupur, a fourth-semester student at the Institute of Social Welfare and Research of the University of Dhaka, said:

There are some little boys aged between 6 and 10 approximately [who] work in our hall canteen, they look too tiny. They are eager to study but cannot afford [to] due to their poverty. I help them to study, many other students too. My hall mates, who are political activists, don't bother about these children. Sometimes they used these kids for carrying arms even, sorry to say. Last winter I collected warm clothes for the poor, I went from door to door along with some of my friends for collecting clothes and we distributed those clothes among cold hit poor people. Politicians never shoulder this responsibility as charity, they want [a] campaign.

To some social activists, social activism is as critical as party-based activism. Popy, a fifth-semester management student at Chittagong University, said:

[Involvement] in civic events [is] more important than politics. As youth you see we are fresh minded and we are not corrupted like political party cadre. Youths who have direct affiliation to a particular political party or members of [the] student wing of a particular party prefer to involve them[selves] in any action which has political interest, not public interest in general. For example, in spite of my family restriction, I paraded during the anti-fee hike procession, why? Just I have direct interest in this issue. To me if I do not express my dissatisfaction in this regard, my junior students will have to pay more money for their education in public universit[ies], but if you ask me to picket in Hartal [general strike], definitely I will not. Thus, I have no confidence in political parties in my culture, where everybody show[s] their unfair strength in reality.



### *Reasons for engaging in political activism*

Different views of political activism invite a question about the reasons for engagement and non-engagement. It has been found that some youths in Bangladesh build up political understandings under the influence of their parents or elder members of their families. Family influences in favor of joining political activities were given by bank intern Ankhi, of Chittagong. According to her:

My parents have a lot of influence on forming my mindset in participating in politics. They believe that without political participation, one could not survive. . . . My family influenced me to join some non-party politics; I mean social politics – not under any party banner. I voice my opinion against anything unjust and offer support to the activists . . . online.

Though many youths form their political views following family tradition, other reasons for engagement are also present. Sajeda, a journalism student at Chittagong University, cited personal values as one reason:

I don't hesitate to join any activities concerning issues that directly affect me. For example [the] 'Eve Teasing' issue is a major concern for young girls' safety. I participated and even organized my peer group to stage a protest. My parents have no direct influence on this but my values appeal [to] me to join.

Joy, a chemical engineering student at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology in Dhaka, became involved in politics out of a sense of responsibility. According to him:

I join most of the movements relating to national interest, like war criminals trial[s], Tipai Mukh Dam, Ariyal Beel Airport, anti-corruption, Eve teasing, oil and gas protection movement and many other social issues. Joining these movements is a citizen's duty rather than a party activity. I consider the issue like that way. Yes, I join processions, meetings, discussions and human chains. For instance, a few days ago the BSF killed a tiny girl and hung her dead body on [the] Bangladesh and India border fence. I expressed my sharp reaction against the inhuman action by joining the procession and I also paste[d] posters and put my reaction [on] the Facebook wall. I do these from the point of my social responsibility; politics is not necessarily the driving force here.

In addition to personal motivation, circumstantial needs to survive in the city – particularly in colleges, universities, and workplaces – have a direct relationship with engaging in politics. Aziz, a health economics student at the University of Dhaka, who hails from a remote rural area, had to become involved in campus politics for survival. He said:

Now I engage myself in politics because it is a demand of the situation. Perhaps I should say I am a sudden comer in politics. Staying at the students' hostel is difficult without participating in political activities. I am a victim of 'seat politics'.

Reasons for non-engagement include disappointment due to real-life experience, gender discrimination, and a volatile political culture. Subir, youths and disaster coordinator for a local NGO in Chittagong, explained why he abandoned party politics:

I had done politics influenced by my elder brother who had affiliation with a defunct student front of the Communist Party of Bangladesh. I collected fees from fellow students. I dream of an ideal country, where every citizen will have equal opportunities. Books from Progoti Publication[s] influenced me very much and I continued my association with this party during my university life. Later, I lost interest in politics because I have finally recognized that the style of politics of my country could not bring [the] expected changes that I had dreamed of. So I have now widened my landscape to materialize my dreams through social movement. Thus I am a social activist.

Gender discrimination is also a major reason for non-engagement. School teacher Ayeaynu, from the Rangamati hill district, several times joined an election campaign in favor of her father's candidacy, but failed to obtain permission to actively involve herself in politics. She said:

My father is a political activist, so I have some passion for party politics, but I am restricted by my family members, in particular by my mother, from participating; because I am a woman. In her context it is a matter of my safety.

NGO activist Farhana cited her disaffection with the political culture in Bangladesh as the reason for his non-engagement:

Any forward-looking activities by politicians are politics. But politics in Bangladesh cannot be defined in such a way. It is dirty, anarchy, hartal [general strike], rivalry, murder, violence ... what not? There is no respect [of the] opposition's opinion. General people are victims of politics, we are repressed by politicians. These reasons discourage me to join political activities.

### *Comparison between the old and the young*

While exploring reasons for engagement and non-engagement, the study tried to discern the nature of political engagement according to the youths of Bangladesh. A comparison between the younger and older generations can help answer the same question. Participants argued that the older generations were more committed to political activism and even sacrificed their lives for their causes, which is now rare among youths.

Ireen, an IT expert at a corporate house in Dhaka, observed that the older generation had a different life experience. Ireen said:

Older people like my parents have one benefit that they are the eye witnesses of our history, like how Bangladesh was born. I am not like that. I get to know the information through television, internet, etc. These are major differences. Apart from this, the lifestyle also matters. Maybe to some extent the younger generation is too expressive. The older generation is also expressive but we are a bit short tempered.

Tuli, a public administration student at Sylhet Shahajalal University, opined that her father is more enthusiastic about party politics than she is. She explained:

There remains a generation gap between us and in some cases they [older generation] had fewer facilities to exercise and to know. Yet, they are more active and responsible. For

instance, my father was the elected vice-president at his college during student life whereas I'm just an active supporter. I had many options to know the society and I may know more but he had more experience than me at the same age level. My parents cast their votes in national elections, but I refrained from voting because I have little faith in party politics. They voted for a particular party and continue to work for that party; but I feel I need a forward-looking agenda of a candidate [to enlist] my support ... I will not vote for the symbol only.

However, the younger generation did not see itself as inferior to the older generations simply because it is less active in party politics. For instance, Asraf, a communications student at Chittagong University, said:

Compared to my parents I am in the front line. My parents judged everything emotionally, while I consider anything cautiously and impartially. ... my father is a staunch supporter of a particular political party and both of my parents cast [their] vote for the party during elections, but never understand the election manifesto or take part in any political campaign or rally. When I asked them about their belief[s], they just commented, 'our parents voted for the same party for [a] long [time], so do we.' In that way socially they are good citizens, but politically it is difficult to call them the same.

The younger generation in Bangladesh is different from its elders in many ways due to the experiences they gather in daily life. The driving force behind this difference is perhaps embodied in the repressive political culture of the country inherited from the pre-independence period. An absence of democracy, consecutive coups and counter-coups, and deprivation of economic and political rights made the older generation more aggressive in pressing their demands through the street anarchy, violence, and general strikes that have often led to their imprisonment. Party politics influenced the previous generation to organize united movements, and those activities represent the obvious outcome of the hostile situation at the time.

The new generation born in independent Bangladesh has a more optimistic vision of the country since 1991, when the nation moved toward establishing a democratic society. Now, if they need not think about colonial repression and worry about unnecessary intimidation by law enforcement agencies, they can turn to focus more on their career, strive to exercise their rights and living in a harmonious society, and seek good and accountable governance. This generation can challenge the government or any political party by mobilizing public sentiment without even physically bringing out any procession or resorting to violence. Therefore, their activism and outlook are quite different from those of the older generation.

### *The younger generation and its net activities*

The study data revealed that although youths use ICTs predominantly for career, entertainment, and academic purposes, these technologies could also be used for issue-based political activism. Party activists send text messages to campaign for their own or their colleagues' candidacy. Youths generally taking part in sociopolitical and civic activities take advantage of social networking sites such as Facebook to share ideas on different issues. Tanjua, a teacher at the International University of Business Agriculture and Technology of Dhaka, explained how she used the Internet to get information:

I have a Facebook account and I do visit Twitter and also I use Yahoo Messenger. Firstly, I do visit social sites for social networking. Secondly, I use it for publicity or to disseminate my ideas and information [with] like minded people and friends. For example, recently violence took place in the hill tracts. A lot of people talked in favor of the fact and against the fact. Friends exchange their opinion and views and react around one-another. For example, somebody said there was a demonstration at around 4 p.m., so then I could understand his/her stand and later we opened a group-list. After a few days, if we overview it, we may see that it has become an archive of related information.

Artist Sharna, from Dhaka, described how she disseminated her opinions through blogging:

I usually write in the 'somewherein blog,' 'prothom alo blog' and 'amarblog [dot]com.' You know one is free to write about the issues of concern in the blog. I write in blogs as part of sharing my ideas with others and also I want to look into how others think or respond to those issues. It is very interesting. It is very important because only information can make one powerful and influential and, above all, it helps to promote democratic practices. It helps constructive parleys on issues and paves the way to a consensus on certain issues. Mainly I write on current affairs, like environment, disaster, traffic jam[s], power crisis and also about cultural activities. And sure, these issues are related to society, community and politics.

In addition to information exchange, the Internet and other ICTs can also facilitate mobilization. Aziza, a trustee for a business house in Dhaka, said:

In this age of ICTs, it is easier to mobilize and communicate even from a long distance. One of my friends recently organized a campaign for [the safe] movement of women on [the] streets. She mobilized the program easily by using ICTs like Facebook, email and cell phone. I think, had there been some Facebook or other social sites during our liberation war in 1971, mobilizing people's opinion from abroad in favor of Bangladesh could have been much easier. I need not actively join party rallies or processions now to express my concern; I can express my opinion and ensure virtual participation by communicating through ICTs.

Apart from recognizing the contribution of ICTs in information exchange and mobilization, almost all respondents said they were worried about the authenticity of information. Payel, a third-year biochemistry student, said:

During the BDR mutiny, I have seen several hundred posts in Facebook when the rebel shootings were still on. Those posts made me confused. I searched YouTube for live videos posted immediately on the issue. You may ask why did I log on? I get information from various posts, but I don't believe those, as those were confusing me. I understand everyone posted in a biased way.

Disengagement in socio-civic activism was also noted. The youth argued that continuous surfing for online friendships through Facebook or similar applications makes them lazy. Tamanna, a fifth-semester student of the Department of Management, Chittagong University, explained:

Particularly [the] mobile and internet network[s] make me lazy, which in turn reduces the scope of face to face communication. Nowadays I hardly go outside to meet friends personally. I prefer to stay at home and connect to them through mobile SMS and Facebook.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This study found a clear division of vision regarding political activism between party activists and social activists. Social activists are motivated by social issues, whereas party activists are interested in active participation in different party programs. Thus, the role of ICTs is influenced by the people's understanding of activism, which motivates their participation in different activities. It is evident that the difficulty facing young activists in Bangladesh is the contestation regarding activism between party- and non-party-affiliated youths. This contestation is also seen between the older and the younger generations, whereas older citizens still hold party politics at the center of their activism.

The contribution of ICTs is recognized by young activists, as these technologies primarily provide an alternative channel to exchange information that cannot be found in traditional mass media, controlled either by the government or commercial enterprises. The new media also allow the activists to mobilize people to take either virtual or offline actions. However, as anyone can post their content online, accountability becomes a great concern for virtual engagement. For instance, female participants raise the question of privacy, particularly in terms of the unauthorized use of mobile cameras and the unethical uploading of videos to YouTube.

Another major challenge is to translate online activities into offline actions that have real impact on governance and policy-making. Most of the participants opined that their virtual activism is not heeded by the authorities concerned. In contrast, when people's grievances are reported in conventional media, the authorities usually come forward to take action on the issues being discussed.

Young, educated citizens are able to immediately publish their views on the Internet. However, it remains questionable whether this engagement contributes to democratic practices when illiterate youths in rural areas and the older generation in Bangladesh are still beyond the reach of online facilities to express their opinions. This situation is problematic, as the majority of people are offline and the educated youths are online. Therefore, the digital divide between these groups might increase even further.

ICTs' potential for the empowerment of the citizenry has attracted much attention across the globe. Bangladesh is a newly emerging democratic nation, in spite of all its flaws, and it needs to take to the online media playing field to promote its democratic politics in the near future. The interactivity of new media holds the promise of increased engagement and of bringing about a change from mass communication to interaction, from information transmission to dialogue. Having witnessed the power of virtual participation, political leaders must now be proactive in building institutions to take online activities into the decision-making mechanism. Online discussion forums, news blogs, talk shows on television, special features in newspapers, public meetings, and workshops can be organized to involve different stakeholders, including policy-makers, political leaders, journalists, community leaders, local government agencies,

and young citizens, in order to explore institutional arrangements. The proponents of Digital Bangladesh must commit themselves to working toward that vision.

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### Notes

1. Political violence includes street agitation, clashes, and counter-clashes between rival political parties that killed both opponents and activists. Such clashes include hurling bombs at opposition party rallies and attacking opponents and police on the streets during labor strikes. Odhikar, a human rights watchdog NGO, reported that political violence from 2001 to 2011 resulted in 3457 deaths, while 124,252 people sustained injuries. A total of 595 people have been killed and 41,194 injured since the AL assumed power in 2009. For details, see the Human Rights Report, 2011, Odhikar Report on Bangladesh, 7 January 2012, at: [www.odhikar.org/documents/2011/English/Human\\_Rights\\_Report\\_2011.pdf](http://www.odhikar.org/documents/2011/English/Human_Rights_Report_2011.pdf).
2. A sadly common phenomenon in Bangladesh is when two youths from two opposing groups exchange their views in a tea stall and end up quarreling; in most cases this quarrel turns into a fight and even social disorder in the local community.

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