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Tackling Election Disinformation in Bangladesh

Building Collective Responses for Electoral Integrity

By Digitally Right Limited | November 2025

Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

Bangladesh's February 2026 parliamentary election is a hinge point for democratic credibility after 15 years of autocratization and three deeply contested national polls (2014, 2018, 2024). The information environment that will shape this vote is fundamentally different from past cycles: social media and communication platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok, now dominate news and politics, while a fragmented post-2024 ecosystem enables many more actors to manufacture and weaponize narratives at speed and scale.

Disinformation is no longer episodic; it is structural, embedded in party strategy, amplified by political and financially motivated actors, and often influenced by cross-border networks. AI-assisted manipulation (deepfakes, synthetic audio) is rising from a low base, while video remains the primary vector. The result is heightened risk to electoral integrity, public trust, and social stability.

The Election Commission's 2025 draft Code modernizes rules but is vague on key definitions, burdens smaller parties, and outstrips current enforcement capacity. At the same time, newsrooms lack verification workflows; observers remain analog; civil society efforts are ad hoc; platform escalation channels are limited; fact-checking remains small, siloed, and under-tooled. Low public confidence and weak coordination undermine credibility of any single actor's interventions.

What's needed now. A systemic, coalition-based response that links regulators, media, fact-checkers, observers, civil society, and platforms, with two tracks:

- Pre-election priorities (next 6–9 months): standing "rapid-response" hubs; shared monitoring dashboards; newsroom verification desks; observer integration of online monitoring; practical EC enforcement focused on the most harmful categories (voter misinformation, violence incitement, coordinated manipulation); platform ad-transparency and escalation protocols; voter and party media-literacy campaigns.
- Longer-term reforms: clarify legal definitions and due-process safeguards; build EC technical capacity; professionalize a fact-checking alliance; invest in digital forensics and AI-detection skills; embed collaboration norms beyond the 2026 cycle.

The 2026 election will test whether Bangladesh can convert a narrow window of political opening into durable integrity in the digital public sphere. Success hinges on coordination and credibility: acting together, early, and at scale.

List of Acronyms

AI – Artificial Intelligence

AL – Awami League

AMSI – Indonesian Cyber Media Association

AJI – Alliance of Independent Journalists (Indonesia)

BNP – Bangladesh Nationalist Party

BEC/EC – Bangladesh Election Commission

CSA – Cyber Security Act (2023)

CSO – Civil Society Organization

DSA – Digital Security Act (2018, repealed in 2023)

EIU – Economist Intelligence Unit (Democracy Index)

FCDO – Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UK)

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

IFCN – International Fact-Checking Network

INGO – International Non-Governmental Organization

KII – Key Informant Interview

MCS – Media and Communication Society (India)

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

NCP – National Citizen's Party

PERI – Promoting Effective, Responsive and Inclusive Governance in Bangladesh (PERI) Program

PIB – Press Institute of Bangladesh

RPO – Representation of the People Order

UK – United Kingdom

UN – United Nations

V-Dem – Varieties of Democracy (Index)

Key Terms and Definitions

Misinformation: False or misleading information that is shared without intent to cause harm. It often spreads through misunderstanding, lack of verification, or poor judgment, but can still distort public perception and influence electoral processes.

Disinformation: False or misleading information that is created, shared, or promoted with deliberate intent to deceive, mislead, or cause harm. In elections, this often takes the form of manipulated narratives, fabricated content, or coordinated campaigns designed to undermine trust in institutions.

Hate Speech: Any expression - spoken, written, or visual - that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language toward a person or group based on attributes such as religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or other identity factors. During elections, hate speech can incite hostility, reinforce polarization, or fuel violence against targeted communities.

Harmful Content: Digital content that, regardless of factual accuracy, poses risks to individuals, communities, or democratic processes. This includes hate speech, incitement to violence, voter intimidation or suppression, and content that targets marginalized groups.

AI-Generated Content: Synthetic media (such as manipulated audio, images, or video) produced using artificial intelligence techniques, often designed to mimic real people or events in deceptive ways. These pose new challenges for verification and electoral integrity.

Fact-Checking: The process of systematically verifying claims, statements, or content to establish accuracy. Fact-checking organizations in Bangladesh are the frontline responders to misinformation and disinformation, though their capacity remains limited.

Information Integrity: The reliability, accuracy, and trustworthiness of information in the public sphere. Safeguarding information integrity during elections requires addressing both false content and manipulative narratives.

Electoral Integrity: The adherence of electoral processes to democratic principles of transparency, fairness, and accountability. It is undermined when disinformation or harmful content influences voter behavior, suppresses participation, or erodes trust in institutions.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is preparing for a national parliamentary election in February 2026, a contest widely regarded as a watershed in the country's political trajectory. The election carries significance not only as a test of electoral legitimacy but also as a potential inflection point in reversing nearly a decade and a half of democratic backsliding. Since 2009, under the uninterrupted rule of the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina, the state has undergone a process of systematic autocratization characterized by the centralization of executive power, the erosion of judicial and media independence, and the shrinking of civic space.[1] The elections of 2014, 2018, and 2024, each marked by opposition boycotts, allegations of widespread vote rigging, and heavy-handed repression, exemplified the progressive hollowing out of electoral competition and the institutional safeguards necessary for democratic accountability.[2]

Elections - and, crucially, the manner in which they have been administered - have emerged as a defining indicator of Bangladesh's democratic regression. Once classified as an electoral democracy in the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) indices in 2010, Bangladesh's standing began to erode markedly after the deeply contested 2014 polls, which were judged significantly less free and competitive. The decline accelerated following the 2018 election, leading V-Dem to reclassify Bangladesh as an "electoral autocracy," a category denoting regimes where elections occur but fail to meet the minimum standards of democratic contestation.[3] By 2024, its scores had deteriorated further, aligning Bangladesh with a broader pattern of entrenched hybrid regimes across South and Southeast Asia. The Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index presents a parallel trajectory:

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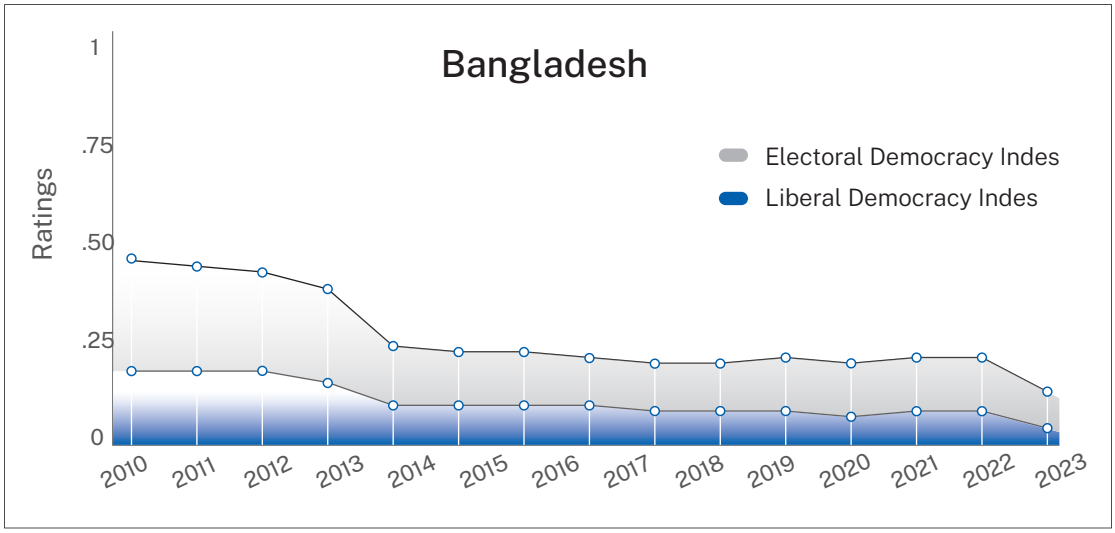
1 Riaz, A. (2023, April 19). Bangladesh's quiet slide into autocracy: the end of a democratic success story. *Foreign Affairs*. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bangladesh/2022-04-29/bangladeshs-quiet-slide-autocracy ; *Bangladesh: Criminalisation of activists and crackdown on protests continue following one-sided elections - Civicus Monitor*. (n.d.-b). Civicus Monitor. https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/bangladesh-criminalisation-of-activists-and-crackdown-on-protests-continue-following-one-sided-elections/

2 Mahmud, F. (2024, January 3). 'Dummy' candidates, coerced voting: Inside Bangladesh's election 'charade.' *Aljazeera*.

3 *Country Graph – V-Dem*. (n.d.). V-Dem. https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/

Bangladesh ranked 83rd in 2010[1] but had slipped to 100th by 2024,[2] underscoring not only a steady erosion of democratic quality but also the consolidation of authoritarian tendencies under the façade of electoralism.



Graph 1: V-Dem democracy index scores for Bangladesh showing a decline from 2014. Source: V-Dem

The 2026 election could prove pivotal in determining whether Bangladesh can arrest and potentially reverse its long trajectory of democratic erosion. For the first time in more than 15 years, the prospect of a genuinely competitive contest appears within reach, presenting a generation of young voters—many of whom have never experienced credible elections in their adult lives—with the opportunity to reshape the country's democratic future. Yet the pathway forward remains fraught with uncertainty and volatility. The interim administration, formed in the aftermath of the 2024 student-led uprising and headed by Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus, has initiated a series of institutional reform processes, ranging from electoral management to parliamentary governance. These initiatives are critical to rebuilding trust in the political system, but they unfold against a backdrop of deep partisan divides[3] and fragile state authority. Contentious debates persist over sequencing - whether elections should be held swiftly to restore political legitimacy or postponed until structural reforms are consolidated.[4] Meanwhile, persistent threats to

1 *Democracy Index 2010 Democracy in retreat: A report from the Economist Intelligence Unit*. (n.d.). The Economist. https://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy_Index_2010_web.pdf

2 Democracy Index 2024: What's wrong with representative democracy? (n.d.). In *The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited*. https://d1qqtien6gys07.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Democracy_INDEX_2024.pdf

3 The battle over electoral reform in Bangladesh. (2025, July 6). *The Diplomat*. https://thediplomat.com/2025/07/the-battle-over-electoral-reform-in-bangladesh/

4 Report, T. (2025, August 5). BNP welcomes govt move to hold elections in Feb, NCP raises doubts over fair polls. *The Business Standard*. https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/politics/bnp-welcomes-govt-move-hold-elections-feb-ncp-voices-concerns-over-fair-polls

democratic consolidation remain visible: recurring attacks on journalists, challenges to law and order, and cycles of mob violence continue to undermine public confidence in the state's capacity to guarantee both stability and rights.[1]

The interim government and the Bangladesh Election Commission have expressed commitment to holding elections in February. A roadmap has been announced;[2] preparations are underway, including new voter registration, amendments to the Representation of People Order (RPO) and related codes of conduct, and consultations with stakeholders including parties and observers.[3]

As the process progresses, a looming challenge is the risk of disinformation, which threatens to undermine electoral integrity, fuel divisions, and deepen distrust.[4]

Over the past decade, Bangladesh experienced a steady erosion of press freedom and freedom of expression, reinforced by the expansion of legal instruments designed to criminalize speech. [5] The Digital Security Act 2018, repealed in 2023 and briefly replaced by the Cyber Security Act, granted the government sweeping and vaguely defined powers to detain individuals for online expression,[6] enabling the Hasina regime to maintain near-monopolistic control over political discourse. Within this environment, disinformation became a strategic tool of electoral authoritarianism: narratives were tightly curated to delegitimize opposition parties, smear independent journalists, and justify state repression, thereby hollowing out the conditions for free and fair competition in the 2014, 2018, and 2024 elections. Despite being non-competitive, in the lead up to the national elections 2024, Bangladeshi fact-checkers observed a sharp spike in political disinformation.[7] For 2026, the risks are anticipated to be even higher.

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1 Ethirajan, A. (2025, August 10). *Jubilant scenes but bumpy road ahead in post-Hasina Bangladesh*. BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c741qken2wvo

2 Staff Correspondent, & Staff Correspondent. (2025, August 28). *Election's roadmap announced, schedule in Dec*. Prothomalo. https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/s8r3z0yhqh

3 Desk, T. (2025, August 11). EC proposes key amendments to RPO, including 'No Vote' option, scrapping of EVMs. *Dhaka Tribune*. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/388751/ec-cancels-voting-using-evms-%E2%80%98no%E2%80%99-vote-provision

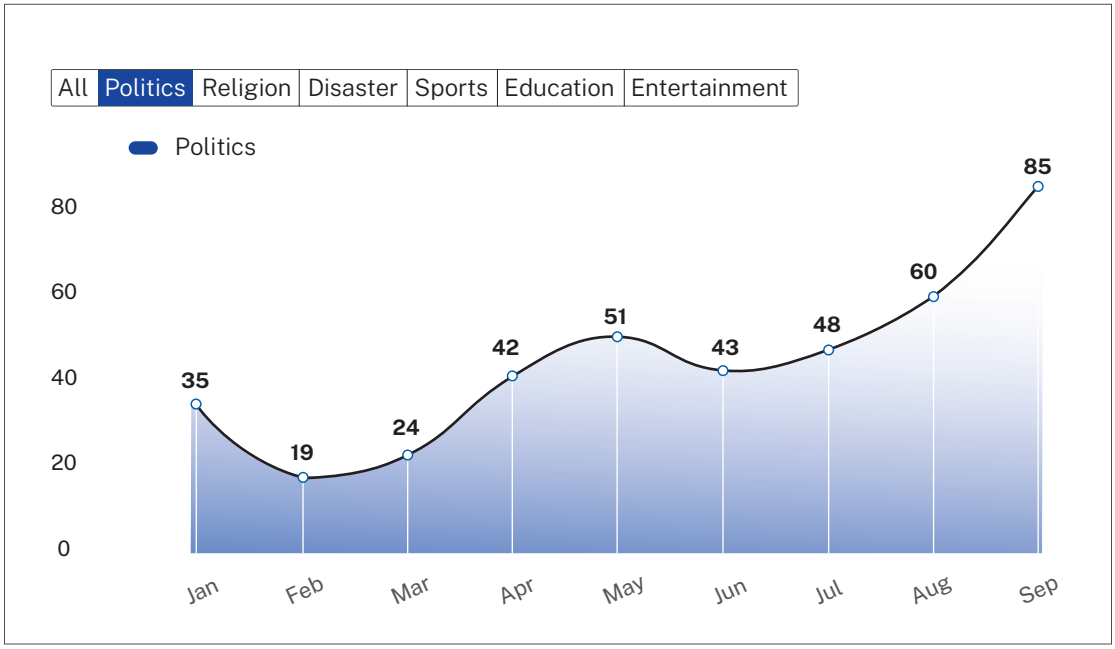
4 *Social media, misinformation top election concern: CEC*. (n.d.). The Daily Observer. https://www.observerbd.com/news/541764

5 Bangladesh: End crackdown against journalists and critics. (2023, May 3). *Human Rights Watch*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/03/bangladesh-end-crackdown-against-journalists-and-critics

6 Amnesty International. (2024, August 12). *Bangladesh: Interim Government must restore freedom of expression in Bangladesh and repeal Cyber Security Act*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/08/bangladesh-interim-government-must-restore-freedom-of-expression-in-bangladesh-and-repeal-cyber-security-act/

7 *Disinformation trends: new narratives, targets, and tactics in the run-Up to national elections*. (2024, October 1). Dismislab. https://en.dismislab.com/disinformation-trends-new-narratives-targets-and-tactics-in-the-run-up-to-national-elections/

Since the regime's fall, the information landscape has fractured. Mainstream political parties, partisan operatives, fringe movements, diaspora influencers, foreign media outlets, and right-wing networks now compete to fill the vacuum, generating a pluralized but volatile information sphere. This fragmentation has heightened uncertainty around the 2026 elections, as competing actors deploy disinformation not only to shape public opinion but also to contest electoral legitimacy itself.[1]



Graph 2: Rise in political misinformation in the run-Up to the 2024 national elections. Source: Dismislab

In Bangladesh, the digital public sphere has rapidly overtaken traditional media as the primary arena where politics, information, and everyday life intersect, making it both the central channel of democratic expression and a frontline of disinformation. As of early 2025, Bangladesh—home to 176 million people—has nearly 185 million mobile phone subscriptions and an estimated 77.7 million internet users. Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok dominate the digital landscape, with Facebook alone reaching more than 67 million users.[2] Most people consume content primarily through Facebook Reels and YouTube videos, which have become the principal gateway for news, entertainment, and political messaging. Yet this rapid digital expansion has not been matched by investments in media literacy, leaving citizens acutely vulnerable to manipulation, particularly during politically charged moments such as elections.

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1 Islam, S. M. (2025, April 24). Can the Election Commission really regulate social media campaigning? *The Business Standard*. https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/can-election-commission-really-regulate-social-media-campaigning-1125131

2 Kemp, S. (2025, March 3). *Digital 2025: Bangladesh — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights*. DataReportal – Global Digital Insights. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-bangladesh

The country's formal defenses against disinformation remain weak. A small and under-resourced fact-checking community has emerged, but its impact is limited: it lacks scale, reach, and independence to counter the volume and velocity of manipulated content.[1] Most mainstream media outlets—owned by business conglomerates with strong political ties[2]—do not maintain dedicated fact-checking desks and often reproduce partisan narratives themselves. This combination of high digital penetration, weak editorial independence, and limited institutional safeguards has allowed disinformation to become a structural feature of Bangladesh's political landscape, used systematically to influence voter perceptions, discredit opponents, and erode trust in electoral institutions. Moreover, there is limited analysis of the structural dimensions of information disorder: the fact that its social and political impacts are not just about false information but about power, elite capture, populism and the political economy of the digital public sphere. As Bangladesh approaches the 2026 parliamentary elections, these dynamics heighten the risk that disinformation will not only distort voter behavior and campaign narratives but also undermine the credibility of the polls themselves—precisely at a moment when restoring electoral legitimacy is most critical.

Tackling election disinformation requires approaches that build on the expertise and insights of the fact-checking community while extending their reach during moments of heightened disruption such as elections. Yet fact-checking alone cannot address the structural drivers of information disorder. Effective responses must move beyond verification to foster broad coalitions that link fact-checkers with newsrooms, civil society, regulators, political actors, and digital platforms in order to confront disinformation as a systemic challenge. Globally, such coalition-based approaches have shown promise. In Mexico's 2018 elections, 90 organizations collaborated in real time to debunk falsehoods;[3] in Indonesia, the CekFakta coalition brought newsrooms and fact-checkers under one umbrella;[4] and in India, the 2024 Shakti Collective connected fact-checkers and media outlets across multiple languages to counter election disinformation at scale.[5]

In contrast, Bangladesh has seen limited efforts to build such collaborative mechanisms and policy frameworks. Against this backdrop, and in advance of the high-stakes 2026 election, this study investigates how Bangladesh can strengthen its response to election

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1 *Misinformation in Bangladesh: A Brief Primer*. (n.d.). LIRNEasia. https://lirneasia.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Misinformation-in-Bangladesh-A-Brief-Primer.pdf

2 Islam, Z. (2025, April 7). How our media got politicised. *The Daily Star*. https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/how-our-media-got-politicised-3865156

3 *How 90 outlets are working together to fight misinformation ahead of Mexico's elections*. (n.d.). https://gijn.org/stories/how-90-outlets-are-working-together-to-fight-misinformation-ahead-of-mexicos-elections/

4 Zain, N. (2024, February 16). *CekFakta.com Coalition Records 56 Hoaxes During Election Day*. Tempo English. https://en.tempo.co/read/1834277/cekfakta-com-coalition-records-56-hoaxes-during-election-day

5 *Shakti – India Election Fact-Checking Collective*. (2024, March 1). https://projectshakti.in/.

disinformation by examining the potential for collaborative initiatives among fact-checkers, media outlets, civil society, political actors, and regulators. Drawing on local stakeholders' perspectives and global experiences, the research seeks to identify what forms of cooperation are feasible in the Bangladeshi context, what barriers stand in the way, and what strategies may help overcome them. While the immediate focus is on the February 2026 election, the study also considers the longer-term implications for sustaining information integrity in subsequent local government elections.

2. Objective and Methodology

This qualitative research examines trends and risks of disinformation affecting electoral integrity ahead of Bangladesh's 2026 national election. It draws on four data sources: (1) 18 semi-structured key informant interviews with representatives from fact-checking organizations, media outlets, political parties, civil society, academia, election watchdogs, and government (April–May 2025); (2) two focus group discussions with fact-checkers, journalists, political leaders, INGO representatives, civil society actors, and Election Commission officials; (3) desk research covering academic studies, policy documents, media reports, and international case studies; and (4) feedback, comments and suggestions from a dialogue with stakeholders to share initial findings. In total, perspectives from around 90 stakeholders were gathered. Interviews and FGDs were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and thematically coded, with findings triangulated across sources to strengthen validity and situate results within regional and global debates on election disinformation.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the current landscape of disinformation and misinformation in Bangladesh in the lead-up to the 2026 election?
2. What are the strengths and limitations of key actors (fact-checkers, the Election Commission, media, civil society, political actors) in addressing disinformation?
3. What collaborative strategies can be developed among stakeholders to counter disinformation more effectively?
4. What lessons and best practices can inform the design and implementation of such strategies?
5. What gaps in capacity, coordination, and resources must be addressed to operationalize these strategies?

3. The Disinformation Ecosystem and Its Impacts

In post-uprising Bangladesh, the 2026 National Election is unfolding within an especially complex environment marked by heightened political competition, deep polarization, and the unprecedented salience of social media in shaping public discourse. Digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp have become the primary gateways for political messaging, reaching tens of millions of citizens daily and often eclipsing traditional media. This shift has amplified concerns that misinformation and disinformation—already a pervasive feature of previous elections—will play an even greater role in distorting narratives, attempting to manipulate voter perceptions, and undermining electoral integrity in 2026. This section examines the likely dimensions of the supply of disinformation in Bangladesh in the run-up to the 2026 polls.

3.1 Actors in the disinformation ecosystem

Following the fall of the Hasina regime, that "single grand narrative has been demolished, and many other narratives have emerged," an academic explained. Since the August 5th uprising, Bangladesh's information environment has become more crowded, competitive, and volatile. Fact-checking organizations report that the volume of misinformation has more than doubled compared to the pre-uprising period, with political content making up the majority. The technological landscape has also shifted: whereas AI-generated content was rare during the 2024 election cycle, fact-checkers now identify "one or two pieces every week." Cheap and widely available AI tools have made manipulations, such as fake videos, doctored audio, fabricated news portals, more sophisticated and harder to detect. As noted by a senior government official, fake news has become a tool to destabilize democratic processes, as international operators and cross-border actors, including outlets from neighboring countries, diaspora networks, and foreign-based media, are increasingly involved in spreading manipulated narratives. Similar patterns have been documented in elections across the region and globally. These actors employ disinformation strategically to create geopolitical leverage. Their calculation is straightforward: by influencing electoral outcomes, they can position themselves to preserve or advance their strategic interests in the country.

Political actors: Political actors remain at the core of Bangladesh's disinformation ecosystem. Interviewees described them as "both vectors and victims." All major parties are investing heavily in shaping public opinion online, often through propaganda cells and affiliated media channels. According to a senior media editor, these operations now

include AI-generated fake videos, bots, and fake news portals employing tactics widely observed across South Asian electoral contexts.

The competition is multi-directional. Initially, after August 5th, disinformation waves were driven largely by the Awami League (AL). But as the election approaches, all major political blocs—the government, BNP, NCP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and even extremist groups—are engaged in what participants described as a "terrible competition" to spread disinformation against one another. Each bloc is building new pages and groups to run coordinated campaigns.[1]

The BNP, Jamaat, and NCP have all significantly expanded their online presence, producing content that appeals to voters while increasingly deploying disinformation or selective narratives to discredit rivals. The AL, although banned from contesting the election for its role in the July 2024 violence, remains a powerful force. Meta previously removed AL-linked networks for coordinated inauthentic behaviour in 2018[2] and 2024,[3] yet its digital infrastructure remains intact. According to fact-checkers, AL-affiliated accounts continue to spread false narratives about its role in the student protests, attack the interim government, and promote conspiracy theories about foreign interference and human rights conditions. This network, interviewees warned, could be a serious threat to social cohesion and electoral credibility.

External actors: External actors across multiple jurisdictions employ strategies to shape electoral narratives. These include: mainstream media outlets with cross-border reach publishing selective content; YouTube channels amplifying sensationalist narratives; coordinated social media networks; websites promoting conspiracy theories; and political rhetoric that exploits communal sensitivities. Interviews documented awareness of these cross-border flows, though attribution to specific governments remains contested.[4] Some observers have pointed to cross-border information flows as reflecting broader South Asian geopolitical competition. However, systematic evidence distinguishing between independent editorial decisions, politically-motivated journalism, and state-coordinated disinformation campaigns remains limited.[5]

Targets of these campaigns often include senior government figures and military leaders,

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1 Abir, T. M. (2025, June 17). *Election integrity at risk: The threat of fabricated political statements*. Rumor Scanner. https://rumorscanner.com/en/fact-file-en/election-five-months-2025/154069

2 Facebook (2021, March 24). Taking down coordinated inauthentic behavior in Bangladesh. *Meta Newsroom*. https://about.fb.com/news/2018/12/take-down-in-bangladesh/#

3 Report, T. (2024, June 1). Facebook removes coordinated fake accounts linked to Awami League. *Dhaka Tribune*. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/348090/cri-slams-meta-for-removing-148-accounts-pages

4 Based on KIIs with journalists, fact checkers, and political actors, April–May 2025.

5 Faridi, R. (2024, December 5). Indian media's misinformation campaign on Bangladesh. The Diplomat. https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/indian-medias-misinformation-campaign-on-bangladesh/.

with personal attacks and conspiracy narratives designed to destabilize politics. Several informants warned that such cross-border operations could escalate during the election period, directly targeting candidates and undermining confidence in the process.

Financially motivated actors: Bangladesh's information ecosystem also includes financially motivated actors. Diaspora influencers, propaganda websites, clickbait YouTube channels, and Facebook pages posing as news outlets flood the digital space with sensationalist content.[1] Fake talk shows splice and edit original videos to push partisan messages, while AI-generated news-style videos attract clicks and advertising revenue.[2]

Participants in focus groups were particularly critical of some mainstream media outlets, which they accused of intentionally amplifying false or misleading narratives through selective framing or misleading headlines. Fact-checkers reported that their corrections are sometimes republished with clickbait titles that further confuse readers. Interviewees expect investment in digital propaganda to intensify ahead of the 2026 election, fueling a disinformation-for-hire industry that operates alongside politically motivated campaigns.

> *"False claims or entirely fabricated details are paired with misleading captions and the logo of various prominent newspaper or television channels, and then circulated widely.*
>
> *A factchecker in an interview*

In sum, Bangladesh's disinformation ecosystem now spans domestic political parties, cross-border actors, and financially motivated entrepreneurs. If left unchecked, this convergence threatens to produce what one focus group participant described as "a complex, multidimensional disinformation war, fueled by cross-border actors, AI-generated deepfakes, hate speech, and weaponized narratives."

3.2 Mechanisms of disinformation

Bangladesh's digital environment—already marked by polarized opinions, low digital literacy, and weak norms of online conduct—provides fertile ground for the spread of disinformation. In the run-up to 2026, actors are using a range of mechanisms to distort public perceptions, discredit opponents, and undermine confidence in democratic processes.

Content manipulation. The most common tactic remains the distortion of otherwise accurate information. As one researcher observed, much of

1 Rajib Ahmed, & Rajib Ahmed. (2024, April 4). *Fake YouTube channels of renowned news media*. Prothomalo. https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/zsdq3vhgp4

2 Toma, T. Y. (2025, April 30). *YouTube fuels fake talk show boom as real voices lose ground*. Dismislab. https://en.dismislab.com/youtube-fuels-fake-talk-show-boom-as-real-voices-lose-ground/ ; Desk, T. &. S. (2025, June 30). AI dominates pre-election campaigns in Bangladesh: Report. *The Daily Star*. https://tds-images.thedailystar.net/tech-startup/news/ai-dominates-pre-election-campaigns-bangladesh-report-3929076

the material circulating is "90 to 95 percent correct," with small alterations used to shift perceptions.[1] Techniques include misleading headlines, fabricated quotes, outdated images presented as current, and doctored photos or videos designed to resemble legitimate news content. These subtle manipulations are effective because they blur the line between fact and falsehood, making them harder to detect.

Bot and trolls. Political and interest groups deploy troll armies and automated bots to flood online discussions with false claims, hate speech, and partisan narratives. Independent monitors had flagged the Awami League's investment in bot networks before the 2024 elections, and since then other actors have adopted similar tactics.[2] Bot-driven opinion polls—designed to inflate one party's popularity or project the inevitable defeat of rivals—have become routine. Fake identities and anonymous accounts are also used for coordinated attacks and character assassination of opponents, a trend expected to intensify ahead of the 2026 polls.

Industrialized propaganda. Disinformation has been systematized through networks of obscure news portals, many operating from abroad, that publish fabricated "leaks" and conspiracy-laden stories. Actors also craft "fake nutshells"—short snippets mimicking news headlines—that spread rapidly across social media. Once such content is seeded, party supporters act as multipliers, ensuring viral circulation long before fact-checkers or journalists can respond. This industrial scale of production makes disinformation a structural, rather than incidental, feature of the information landscape.

AI-generated content. The accessibility of generative AI has added a new layer of sophistication. Fact-checkers now report seeing one or two AI-manipulated items each week, compared to near absence in 2024. Recent cases include an AI-generated image of a child submerged during the 2024 floods that was widely believed to be real, and fabricated images of mob attacks during pro-Palestine protests.[3] More recently, AI-generated images targeting young female leaders of the NCP have circulated, raising concerns about gendered harassment.[4] Multiple interviewees stressed that Bangladeshi fact-checkers lack the costly

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1 Key informant interview, journalist, April 2025.

2 Aman, A., Das, P. P. and Abrar A. Y. (2024, August 29). A coordinated political bot network on Facebook exposed. Dismislab. https://en.dismislab.com/a-coordinated-political-bot-network-on-facebook-exposed/.

3 Dhaka Tribune. (2024, August 25). Fact check: Flood-related fake photos, videos overwhelming social media. *Dhaka Tribune*. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/355984/flood-related-fake-photos-videos-overwhelming-in; Kaler Kantho. (2024, August 22). ভাইরাল হওয়া শিশুর ছবি নিয়ে যা জানা গেল. *Kaler Kantho*. https://www.kalerkantho.com/online/national/2024/08/22/1417613

4 Rumor Scanner. (2025, March 24). তাসনিম জারা ও হান্নান মাসুদের চুম্বনের ভিডিওটি কৃত্রিম বুদ্ধিমত্তা প্রযুক্তির সহায়তায় নির্মিত. Rumor Scanner Bangladesh. https://rumorscanner.com/fact-check/edited-kissing-video-of-tasnim-jara-and-hannan-masud/143957; Abdullah, M. (2025, June 29). নাসির উদ্দিন ও তাসনিম জারার চুম্বনের ভিডিওটি এআই প্রযুক্তিতে তৈরি. Boom. https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.boombd.com/fake-news/nasir-uddin-and-tasnim-zaras-kissing-video-was-created-by-ai-28933&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1755505194052535&usg=AOvVaw0B3v7sxVCL9AYQIPNSaaHX

forensic tools required to detect and debunk deepfakes at scale.

Propaganda posing as news. Perhaps the most difficult form of disinformation to counter comes from outlets that present themselves as legitimate news sources—or even as fact-checkers—while pushing partisan or financially motivated agendas. These pages and groups often gain credibility by imitating the appearance of independent media and can quickly build large followings. Participants in interviews and focus groups feared these pseudo-news outlets would be weaponized as the election approaches, further confusing audiences and eroding trust in genuine verification efforts.

> *Many political parties have their own propaganda cells — none are exceptions, everyone has them. In the past, these groups would mostly rely on face-to-face conversations, and later they manipulated newspapers or media outlets to spread their version of events. Now, seeing that those methods are becoming outdated, they are focusing more on bot comments and AI-generated content. For example, they are producing AI-generated fake audios, fake videos, and then changing voiceovers to create different versions.*
>
> *Digital Editor of a daily newspaper.*

3.3 Consumption and impacts of disinformation

Disinformation in Bangladesh is not simply produced; it is also widely consumed, shared, and acted upon in ways that have significant social and political consequences. A growing body of peer-reviewed research and independent reporting highlights the pathways through which false or misleading information shapes behavior, mobilizes communities, and erodes institutional trust.

Offline harms and violence. Social media–borne rumors have repeatedly spilled into real-world violence. Studies document how false claims circulating on Facebook helped trigger targeted attacks against minorities in Ramu (2012), Pabna (2013), Comilla (2014), Rangpur (2017), Bhola (2019), and Comilla again in 2021.[1] These incidents illustrate the potency of digital rumors in stoking communal tensions and polarizing society, with disinformation acting as a catalyst for mob mobilization.[2]

Case studies further illustrate the ways

1 Naher, J. and Minar, M. R. "Use of Social Media to Instigate Violence: Users' Role and Challenges in Prevention." *Technium Soc. Sci. J.* 51 (2023): 140.

2 Barua, D. "Exploring the Impacts of the Misuse of Social Media Power on Premeditated Tactics: Threats and Strategies in the Bangladesh Context of Communal Violence." *Social Media & Social Order International Conference*. Oslo, Norway, 2017.

in which disinformation has been used to inflame religious tensions. Sociological analyses emphasize how platform affordances—such as algorithmic amplification of sensational content—allow these narratives to spread quickly, degrading social cohesion and trust across communities.[1]

Targeted disinformation against women and minority groups: Disinformation campaigns consistently target women politicians and minorities,[2] a pattern observed in previous national elections,[3] as well as the recent Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) elections.[4] These attacks are often gender specific, weaponizing sexuality, and leveraging targeted cyberbullying to discredit female candidates.[5] Similar patterns have started to emerge in relation to politicians hoping to contest the 2026 national election.[6] Disinformation actors also exploited false narratives about the Women's Affairs Reform Commission, which had put forward vital recommendations to strengthen women's representation in politics.[7]

The intersectionality of attacks on women as well as minority groups indicates a deliberate strategy of exclusion in online political spaces by the disinformation actors. Disinformation targeting minority communities has been weaponized to stoke communal violence and serve political interests, endangering vulnerable groups.[8] With the election approaching, the threat of a wider, more coordinated campaign looms large.

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1 Ahmed, M. (2025) "Social Media Platform Facebook Has Become a Tool for Media Trials: A Study on Recent Mob Violence Against Citizens of Bangladesh." https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5325284. p 8

2 Zarif Faiaz. (2025, February 2025) Disinformation campaigns target women and minorities in Bangladesh: Study. *The Daily Star.* https://www.thedailystar.net/tech-startup/news/disinformation-campaigns-target-women-and-minorities-bangladesh-study-3897691

3 Tahmina, Q. (2024, February 11). *Mahiya Mahi's Election and a 'Stripped' Face of the Society*. Dismislab. https://en.dismislab.com/mahiya-mahis-election-and-a-stripped-face-of-the-society/

4 Islam, M. T. and others. (2025, October 28). *How female candidates faced cyberbullying during DUCSU election.* Dismislab. https://en.dismislab.com/how-female-candidates-faced-cyberbullying-during-ducsu-election/

5 Toma, T. Y. (2023, October 29). *Weaponizing gendered attack and sexuality: disinformation in online political campaigns.* Dismislab. https://en.dismislab.com/weaponizing-gendered-attack-and-sexuality-disinformation-in-online-political-campaigns/

6 Tabassum, F. (2025, September 30). *From sexualized posts to fake drug ads: A case study of online abuse targeting Tasnim Jara.* Dismislab. https://en.dismislab.com/online-bullying-tasnim-jara/

7 The Business Standard. (2025, April 19). Commission proposes 300 reserved seats for women with direct polls. The Business Standard. https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/commission-proposes-doubling-parliamentary-seats-600-increase-womens-representation.

8 Toma, T. Y. & Raso, T. I. (2024, September 29). *From four to a hundred: The politics of disinformation in the Hill Tracts conflict*. Dismislab. https://en.dismislab.com/from-four-to-a-hundred-the-politics-of-disinformation-in-the-hill-tracts-conflict/.

> *Particularly during the election, disinformation actors target minorities. Targeting religious, sexual or ethnic minorities, is the most dominant and effective strategy for them. Because only by targeting them, disinformation actors will be able to create chaos, so that they can raise the narrative which they want to raise.*
>
> *A representative of the fact checking community during the dialogue and initial findings sharing*

Distrust in media and civil society: Disinformation disseminated through social media in the name of traditional media seriously undermines their credibility. Disinformation actors 'sell out traditional media' by using their names, logos and photocards to mislead audiences and damage public trust.[1] The resulting atmosphere of distrust also affects civil society, as disinformation actors often misuse their names to make false claims, leading to their being labeled as "part of the deep state" or "agents of foreign governments."[2]

Election-related impacts. Independent assessments of the 2014, 2018, and 2024 elections consistently link information disorder to intimidation, harassment of journalists, and diminished public confidence in electoral credibility. A 2024 NDI/IRI technical assessment underscored how these dynamics occurred during the 2024 National Election.[3] While rigorous quantitative evidence on vote-choice effects remains limited, converging studies demonstrate that disinformation in Bangladesh exacerbates polarization, intimidates journalists and activists, and undermines confidence in institutions such as the Election Commission and judiciary.

Disinformation in Bangladesh is consumed through everyday digital practices—scrolling Facebook Reels, sharing YouTube clips, forwarding WhatsApp videos—that carry profound consequences for politics and society. Its impacts are tangible: distorting electoral competition, weakening media freedom, corroding public trust and at times resulting in violence.

> *The disinformation threat is expansive — we can't address it all at once. We must set specific targets based on the potential for harm. We need to prioritize and define which kinds of political misinformation warrant our attention.*
>
> — *An academic in a focus group discussion*

1 Dialogue and Findings Sharing, Journalist, November 2025

2 Dialogue and Findings Sharing, CSO Representative, November 2025

3 International Republican Institute (2020) *Technical Assessment Mission Releases Final Report on the 2024 Bangladesh Elections* <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI-IRI%20Joint%20Technical%20Assessment%20Mission%20Report.pdf>.

Disinformation and hate speech are emerging as major threats ahead of Bangladesh's 2026 elections. As the campaign period approaches, "competing narratives and conflicting values are expected to intensify"[1], posing risks to democratic norms and social cohesion. False and inflammatory content "continues to disrupt communal harmony, with "thousands of pages and groups spreading negative narratives and using misleading images to instill fear."[2] Disinformation has also become "a weapon to destabilize the country," fueling a growing "competition of falsehoods" as political and cross-border actors expand their online campaigns.[3]

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1 Key informant interview, academic, April 2025.

2 Key informant interview, journalist, April 2025.

3 Key informant interview, fact checker, April 2025.

4. Lessons from Elsewhere

As Bangladesh heads toward a high-stakes election, the challenges posed by disinformation require a layered response. International experience shows that no single intervention, whether legal, regulatory, or civic, can succeed on its own. Governments and election authorities have attempted to address the problem through policy and regulatory frameworks, while civil society and media actors have experimented with collaborative models of fact-checking. Each approach offers lessons that could inform Bangladesh's own path forward.

4.1 Policy and regulatory responses

Several countries have used electoral law, regulation, and institutional innovation to limit the spread of disinformation during election cycles.

In Brazil, the Superior Electoral Court strengthened electoral authorities by creating a rapid-response "fake news task force" ahead of the 2022 elections, monitoring online narratives and coordinating with fact-checkers and platforms.[1] In Kenya, the electoral commission partnered with civil society to track false claims during the 2017 and 2022 polls.[2] These cases show how electoral bodies can act not just as referees of voting but also as guardians of information integrity.

Governments in Indonesia[3] and the Philippines[4] have pursued platform accountability, signing agreements with social media companies during elections to ensure faster removal of coordinated disinformation and greater transparency in political advertising. The EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation, while outside the Global South, offers another model of co-regulation, requiring platforms to publish ad libraries and regular reports.[5] Major

1 *Regattieri, L., Salles, D. (2024, February 27). Election manipulation in Brazil's 2022 General Elections: The role of WhatsApp and Telegram on the attacks against electoral integrity and the threats to democracy. Mozilla Foundation. https://www.mozillafoundation.org/en/research/library/global-elections-casebook/brazil-case-study//*

2 United Nations. (2023, October 1). Tackling fake news in Kenya: A UN Resident Coordinator blog. UN News. https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1140862.

3 *Cekfakta.com*. (2021b, February 12). Cek Fakta. https://cekfakta.com/playbook/en

4 *Quitzon, J. (2021, November 22). Social Media Misinformation and the 2022 Philippine Elections. Center for Strategic & International Studies.* https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/social-media-misinformation-and-2022-philippine-elections.

5 *European Commission. (2022, June 16). The 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation. European Commission. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation.*

platforms such as Meta and TikTok also have internal policies banning false information about voting logistics, candidate status, and content inciting violence.[1]

However, enforcement is uneven and largely reactive. In Bangladesh's 2018 and 2024 elections, disinformation networks targeting candidates, parties, and voter eligibility often remained active for weeks before takedowns.[2] Fact-checkers noted that while blatant falsehoods about voting procedures are removed, more subtle manipulations—selectively edited videos, AI-generated content, and coordinated smear campaigns—circulate unchecked. As a result, disinformation frequently shapes public debate long before corrective action is taken, raising doubts about the adequacy of voluntary self-regulation in high-stakes elections.

Mexico's National Electoral Institute (INE) tackled the issue of transparency in political advertising by requiring platforms to disclose digital ad spending and archive political ads in searchable databases.[3] Similar rules in the Philippines made it easier for watchdogs to trace the flow of "dark ads."[4]

In relation to the consumption of disinformation and its impacts, South Africa has provided grants to strengthen investigative journalism during elections, while the African Union's iVerify program supports fact-checking desks in member states.[5] In Finland[6] and the Philippines[7], media literacy has been integrated into civic education, empowering citizens to identify and resist false claims.

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1 States United Democracy Center. (2025, February 27). *Social media policies: Mis/Disinformation, threats, and Harassment*. https://statesunited.org/resources/social-media-policies/

2 Aman, A., Das, P. P. and Abrar A. Y. (2024, August 29). A coordinated political bot network on Facebook exposed. Dismislab. https://en.dismislab.com/a-coordinated-political-bot-network-on-facebook-exposed/; The Daily Star. (2018, December 20). Facebook shuts down fake Bangladeshi news sites ahead of vote. The Daily Star. https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh-national-election-2018/facebook-shuts-down-fake-bangladeshi-news-sites-ahead-bangladesh-election-vote-1676464.

3 *Political Finance in the Digital Age: Towards Evidence-Based Reforms | International IDEA*. (n.d.). https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/html/political-finance-digital-age-towards-evidence-based-reforms

4 Gracelm. (2022, April 7). How Meta is Preparing for the Philippines' 2022 General Election. *Meta Newsroom*. https://about.fb.com/news/2022/04/philippines-2022-general-election/

5 *iVerify: UNDP's Tool for Fact-Checking and Information Integrity*. (n.d.). UNDP. https://www.undp.org/latin-america/digitalhub4/projects/iverify-undps-tool-fact-checking-and-information-integrity

6 Fesin. (2025, March 10). Media Literacy in Finland: A Model for Raising an Informed Society - FESIN - Finnish Education System. *FESIN - Finnish Education System Institute*. https://www.fesin.fi/media-literacy-in-finland-a-model-for-raising-an-informed-society/

7 Far Eastern University. (2023, April 3). *Teaching Media and Information Literacy in Philippine Senior High Schools: Strategies used and challenges faced by selected teachers • Far Eastern University*. https://www.feu.edu.ph/asian-journal-on-perspectives-in-education/ajpe-volume-2-issue-1/teaching-media-and-information-literacy-in-philippine-senior-high-schools-strategies-used-and-challenges-faced-by-selected-teachers/

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has adopted some of the most explicit prohibitions in the region. It bars parties and candidates from spreading false or misleading information, impersonating individuals or political parties, or disseminating synthetically generated content intended to deceive.[1] The ECI also restricts material that is derogatory towards women, involves children in political campaigning, or depicts violence and harm to people or animals. To operationalize these rules, the Commission issues proactive, legally binding directives requiring AI-generated content to be labeled and mandating the rapid removal of prohibited material from platforms.[2]

Yet such prohibitions, while well-intentioned, carry risks in democratic environments. If applied too broadly or without clear safeguards, they can blur the line between protecting electoral integrity and curbing legitimate political speech. Overzealous enforcement may be weaponized by incumbents to silence dissent, shield ruling parties from criticism, or criminalize satire and artistic expression. This tension underscores a core challenge for Bangladesh and other democracies: how to design prohibitions that effectively curb harmful disinformation while preserving the space for robust debate, pluralism, and free expression.

These examples suggest that effective legal and regulatory approaches balance institutional monitoring, platform responsibility, advertising transparency, and long-term investment in civic resilience. For Bangladesh, they highlight the need for the Election Commission to adopt a more proactive stance, for laws to focus on specific abuses rather than broad speech

> *This is a debate happening across the world – to what extent can you actually regulate? No one is saying that things should remain totally unregulated. But regulation must be designed in such a way that it does not infringe on freedom of expression. It's about balance — finding the balance. For that, the government first needs to have a proper cyber policy. Such a policy should create mechanisms for regulation without infringing on freedom of speech. Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, what we see is that regulations are often taken literally and turned into criminal offenses. Preventive measures remain very limited.*
>
> *A politician interviewed.*

1 *ECI directs responsible and ethical use of social media platforms by political parties and their representatives*. (n.d.). https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetailm.aspx?PRID=2019760

2 *ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA*. (n.d.). https://elections24.eci.gov.in/docs/5ylWJLjQBX.pdf

restrictions, and for resources to be directed toward empowering independent media and fact-checkers.

4.2 Civil society and collective responses

However, policy and regulatory interventions alone cannot stem the tide of disinformation, especially in contexts like Bangladesh, where state institutions themselves are often politicized and public trust is low. In such environments, credibility frequently rests with independent actors. This has led a number of countries, including India, Indonesia, and Mexico, to experiment with collaborative fact-checking initiatives during election periods. These temporary but high-impact alliances brought together newsrooms, fact-checkers, civic tech groups, and digital rights organizations to counter disinformation at scale. While none were flawless, they demonstrate how coordination, speed, and shared visibility can meaningfully disrupt false narratives in the heat of electoral competition.

Shakti collective – India. Launched ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, India's Shakti Collective is one of the most ambitious fact-checking alliances to date. Coordinated by DataLEADS with support from the Google News Initiative, it brought together over 50 partners: independent media outlets, civic tech groups, digital rights NGOs, social media monitors, and grassroots volunteers.[1]

Shakti's innovation lay in its modular collaboration model. Different groups handled specific tasks: verification, translation into regional languages, visual/video explainers, or distribution. This decentralized approach enabled scalability despite early coordination hurdles. Within weeks, Shakti moved from slow alignment to rapid joint outputs, aided by weekly virtual meetings and a shared backend dashboard that ensured no viral claim went unchecked.

The coalition also excelled in video-based debunking, a gap in Bangladesh where fact-checkers still rely heavily on text.[2] Shakti's short, platform-tailored videos circulated on WhatsApp and YouTube, often reaching audiences in the millions. Civic tech groups tracked bot networks and hashtag manipulation, while the Media and Communication Society established a deepfake detection unit, a function still absent in Bangladesh.

Despite successes, challenges remained. Google's algorithms initially suppressed co-published stories as duplicates, and IFCN rules excluded political parties from participation, limiting buy-in across the political spectrum.[3] Still, Shakti went beyond reactive debunks:

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1 *Shakti – India Election Fact-Checking Collective*. (2024b, March 1). https://projectshakti.in/

2 *Nazakat, S. (2024, June 12). Lessons Learned from the Fact-Checking Collective That Covered India's National Elections. Global Investigative Journalism Network. https://gijn.org/stories/lessons-learned-india-fact-checking-collective/.* ; Nyariki, E. (2024, August 20). *Q&A: How India's Shakti project fact-checked the largest election in history at scale - OW DataLEADS*. DataLEADS. https://dataleads.co.in/press-release/qa-how-indias-shakti-project-fact-checked-the-largest-election-in-history-at-scale/

3 Nyariki, E. (2024, August 20). *Q&A: How India's Shakti project fact-checked the largest election in history at scale - OW DataLEADS*. DataLEADS. https://dataleads.co.in/press-release/qa-how-indias-shakti-project-fact-checked-the-largest-election-in-history-at-scale/

it produced pre-bunking guides, ran digital literacy webinars, and engaged influencers in public campaigns. While dissolved after the election, Shakti left behind a template for collaborative verification now being adapted for future Indian elections.

> *The fact checking organizations in India are pretty small…when lots of Loksabha elections happened, claims were coming in from all over. So finding out these claims and also being able to assess those claims was a little difficult and technologically challenging for us.*
>
> *A member of the Shakti Collective in India interviewed*

CekFakta – Indonesia. Indonesia's CekFakta, launched in 2018 and revived for the 2019 presidential elections, offers another instructive model.[1] Spearheaded by the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI), the Indonesian Cyber Media Association (AMSI), and anti-hoax NGO Mafindo, it united more than 20 newsrooms under a single banner, again with support from the Google News Initiative.

CekFakta centralized its work through a shared newsroom, public dashboard, and co-branded microsite. Debunks submitted by partner outlets were reviewed, cross-validated, and then amplified via WhatsApp tiplines, live fact-checking events, and short video explainers. More than 800 journalists were trained, helping to build verification capacity across a fragmented media ecosystem.

The initiative's main contribution was editorial standardization. Despite initial resistance to shared bylines and centralized editorial oversight, partners aligned around style guides, accuracy protocols, and coordinated distribution strategies. CekFakta showed that unity among competitors is possible when supported by shared branding and structured training.

Challenges persisted: disparities in resources limited consistent participation, and sensitive topics (especially religion-related misinformation) remained under-addressed due to editorial risk aversion. Sustaining momentum beyond the election also proved difficult. Still, CekFakta demonstrated that structured collaboration can generate trust, strengthen journalistic capacity, and build public visibility for credible verification.

> *Media that had not yet joined the coalition were questioning what they get from becoming a member of the coalition… We are a nonprofit Coalition that benefits financially by getting together, and checking facts together.*
>
> *A member of the Shakti Collective in India interviewed*

1 Cekfakta.com. (2021, February 12). Cek Fakta. https://cekfakta.com/playbook/en/1.

Verificado 2018 – Mexico. Mexico's Verificado 2018 remains one of the most influential collaborative disinformation initiatives globally.[1] Established ahead of the 2018 presidential elections, it united over 90 partners, including Animal Político, AJ+ Español, NGOs, universities, and regional broadcasters.

Verificado's strength was decentralized participation. Local newsrooms contributed region-specific fact-checks that were elevated nationally, ensuring reach beyond the capital. Its outputs were tailored to platform-specific audiences: meme cards for Instagram, explainer threads on Twitter, and shareable audio clips for rural radio. Citizens submitted thousands of tips through WhatsApp, triaged by a central editorial team that prioritized claims based on virality and harm.

The project mobilized student volunteers, design collectives, and media professionals to produce infographics and daily explainers, ensuring broad penetration into diverse demographics. Transparency and openness—clear methodologies, community participation, and strong storytelling—were crucial to building trust. Even as a temporary initiative, Verificado succeeded in shaping national discourse, inspiring similar collaborations across Latin America.

From these cases, several lessons emerge that are directly relevant for Bangladesh:

- **Coalition-building matters**. Temporary alliances among fact-checkers, media outlets, and civic groups can counterbalance partisan narratives, provided they are well-structured and inclusive.
- **Speed and scale are critical.** Viral content spreads in minutes; collaborations like Shakti and Verificado demonstrate the importance of shared dashboards, content pooling, and rapid response systems.
- **Format and reach must adapt to user behavior**. Short videos, memes, and WhatsApp explainers outperformed text-heavy debunks. Bangladesh's fact-checking community remains overly reliant on static posts.
- **Capacity gaps require investment**. Deepfake detection, translation into local languages, and regional distribution were strengths in India and Mexico but remain underdeveloped in Bangladesh.
- **Sustainability is fragile**. These initiatives were temporary, yet their legacy endures where they built capacity and normalized collaborative fact-checking. Bangladesh must plan beyond 2026 if it hopes to build durable resilience.

1 Arce Terceros, B. (2018, October 30). Ahead of Mexico's largest election, Verificado 2018 sets an example for collaborative journalism. International Journalists' Network. https://ijnet.org/en/story/ahead-mexico%E2%80%99s-largest-election-verificado-2018-sets-example-collaborative-journalism](https://ijnet.org/en/story/ahead-mexico%E2%80%99s-largest-election-verificado-2018-sets-example-collaborative-journalism.

5. Gaps in Bangladesh's response system

5.1 Regulatory and enforcement gaps

Bangladesh's regulatory environment has been slow to adapt to the realities of digital campaigning and disinformation. For years, provisions on social media were minimal and enforcement powers remained weak. The Election Commission's new draft Code of Conduct for Political Parties and Candidates (2025) is the first attempt at a comprehensive framework to regulate online campaigning. It requires candidates to register their social media accounts, prohibits hate speech and fabricated election content, bans foreign financing of digital campaigns, mandates disclosure of online advertising expenses, and extends the 48-hour "silence period" into the digital domain.

Electoral Campaigning on Social Media (Draft Code of Conduct)

(a) General rules: Any candidate, their electoral agent, or any other individual may conduct election campaigning using social media. However, before initiating such campaigning, the candidate, their electoral agent, or the concerned individual must submit the name of the social media platform, account ID, email ID, and other identifying information to the Returning Officer.

(b) Prohibition of harmful content: The creation and dissemination of any type of harmful content, including hate speech, false information, and fabricated election-related data, are prohibited. Specifically:

- Hate speech, personal attacks, or provocative language targeting opponents, minorities, or any other community is forbidden.
- It is prohibited to misuse religious or ethnic sentiments to gain electoral advantage**.**

(c) False and misleading information: All election-related content shared and published on social media must be fact-checked for accuracy before sharing; and creating biased content designed to mislead voters, such as edited videos or fabricated news, is prohibited.

(d) Ban on foreign funding: No digital campaign may accept or use foreign financing. Paid boosts, sponsored ads, or influencer promotions funded from abroad are disallowed.

(e) Expense disclosure: All spending on digital campaigning — including Facebook boosts, YouTube ads, sponsored posts, or influencer marketing — must be declared in the candidate's official expense reports and count toward legal campaign spending limits.

(f) Election Silence Period: Online campaigning of all types must cease 48 hours prior to the election as per the instructions set by the Bangladesh Election Commission

On paper, these provisions mark a significant step forward. Yet their effectiveness is undermined by vague definitions and unrealistic requirements. Terms such as “hate speech,” “provocative language,” or “fabricated news” remain undefined, creating scope for arbitrary enforcement and political misuse. A sharp critique of an opponent, for example, could be treated as a “personal attack.” Likewise, the blanket requirement that candidates fact-check all online content before sharing is practically impossible in real time, encouraging self-censorship rather than accountability.

These ambiguities are compounded by severe capacity gaps. A Commission representative admitted that they “lack the infrastructure and expertise to monitor online content effectively”. Oversight is limited to a narrow election window, while enforcement is delegated to hundreds of returning officers with no training in identifying manipulated images, AI-generated deepfakes, or coordinated digital influence campaigns. Without escalation protocols with platforms such as Meta, TikTok, or Google, harmful content often circulates unchecked.

Credibility is another critical weakness, as highlighted by one participant. “Content flagged by the EC may be distrusted” by segments of the public, particularly in polarized contexts.[1] In the absence of validation mechanisms through neutral fact-checkers or civil society organizations, enforcement risks being dismissed as partisan. This deficit is exacerbated by the lack of structured engagement between the Commission and independent stakeholders, unlike in other democracies where election authorities maintain joint escalation channels with technology companies and watchdogs.

Finally, training and awareness remain underdeveloped across the ecosystem. Political parties and candidates are often unaware of their obligations under the draft code, while journalists and fact-checkers report little understanding of how global platform policies work or how election rules could strengthen coverage. Civic educators and campaign staff are rarely included in systematic digital literacy or resilience programs.

Taken together, these gaps highlight a regulatory regime that is ambitious in design but weak in execution. The draft code introduces important new rules for the digital age, but without clearer definitions, stronger institutional capacity, and trusted partnerships, enforcement risks being simultaneously overbroad in scope and underpowered in practice. Bangladesh thus enters the 2026 election cycle with a regulatory framework that could both suppress legitimate expression and fail to curb disinformation.

Comparative experience underscores these risks. Brazil’s electoral court, India’s Election Commission, and Mexico’s National Electoral Institute have all experimented with digital codes, platform engagement, and rapid-response mechanisms. Their mixed results demonstrate that regulatory frameworks alone cannot safeguard information integrity without operational capacity, clarity, and credibility. Bangladesh begins this experiment from a weaker institutional base and lower levels of public trust—making the stakes in 2026 particularly high.

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1 Key informant interview, senior government official, April 2025.

5.2 Role of stakeholders and gaps in response

The regulatory shortcomings in Bangladesh place greater pressure on non-state actors to safeguard information integrity. Yet here too, the response remains fragmented, under-resourced, and uncoordinated. Across media, fact-checkers, election observers, civil society, and technology platforms, the lack of collaboration and capacity has left Bangladesh ill-prepared to manage the scale of disinformation expected ahead of the 2026 elections.

Media. News outlets once played a critical role in informing voters, but today most are structurally unprepared to counter disinformation. Few have verification desks, and social media content is still treated as peripheral rather than central to election coverage. The rise of technically complex disinformation (e.g. deepfakes) has left many mainstream media outlets unable to verify it, often leading them to avoid such stories. Journalists interviewed expressed uncertainty about what kinds of false content should be prioritized, underscoring the absence of shared frameworks to guide newsroom responses.

> *In other countries, increasingly, newspapers are taking on this role [fact checking]. Large newspapers, with massive operations — even though other sections may be shrinking, they are keeping their fact-checking units big. They see that in this post-truth era, they can't even rely on their president's speech as being entirely truthful. That's why — whether it's The Washington Post, The New York Times, or other major institutions — they have strong fact-checking in place. And by doing this, they are ultimately helping the entire population. In our country, that hasn't happened.*
>
> *A top government official in an interview*

Fact-checkers. Bangladesh's independent fact-checking community has grown in visibility but remains small, fragmented, and under-resourced. Only a handful of groups—Factwatch, Rumor Scanner, Dismislab, Boom, Newschecker, AFP Fact Check, and a few smaller outlets—operate consistently, employing an estimated 40–50 full-time fact-checkers in a country of over 175 million. They face multiple constraints: limited funding, lack of advanced forensic tools, weak monitoring capacity since the closure of CrowdTangle, and heavy reliance on manual, actor-based monitoring. Technical expertise in detecting AI-generated video or audio remains especially scarce.

Fact-checkers also struggle to build cohesion as a professional community. Lack of regular interaction and siloed operations often result in duplication of effort, while collaboration with mainstream media is limited by skepticism and mistrust. Meanwhile, political parties and even state-linked groups have begun to run their own "fact-checking" pages, distorting the concept of verification and eroding public trust in independent fact-checkers. While fact-checkers collectively published

nearly 5000 reports in 2024,[1] their capacity to match the scale, speed, and sophistication of disinformation remains limited.

Election observers. Observation missions continue to focus on polling stations and procedures, with little engagement in monitoring digital information flows. While some recognize the need to adapt, observers tend to lack both tools and expertise to track online campaigns. Without collaboration pathways with fact-checkers or technologists, their contribution to countering digital manipulation remains minimal. Yet capacity-building for this shift has barely begun.

Civil society. NGOs and youth organizations run media literacy workshops and voter awareness campaigns, but these efforts are largely ad hoc, donor-dependent, and reliant on a small pool of external trainers. Few can scale rapidly during election periods, and universities, which are potential sources of analytical depth, are rarely engaged. Youth networks, while active, lack access to verification tools and technical expertise to detect harmful digital content. An international NGO representative noted the absence of "digital literacy campaigns for both voters and political party actors," highlighting that both citizens and political elites remain poorly equipped to navigate a polluted information environment.

Platforms. Engagement with technology companies remains virtually absent. Only a handful of partners have direct access to platform escalation channels, leaving most fact-checkers and civil society organizations unable to report harmful or borderline content. As one fact-checker observed, "there's no clear process for what we do when it's not fact-checkable." Without structured protocols for coordination, platforms remain largely insulated from accountability, and harmful narratives often circulate unchecked.

Cross-cutting gaps. These weaknesses point to strategic vulnerabilities in Bangladesh's disinformation response. Regulatory frameworks are under-defined and weakly enforced; media and fact-checkers lack trust and coordination; civil society efforts are fragmented; observers remain analog in a digital age; and engagement with platforms is nearly absent. Training and awareness are minimal across the ecosystem. Political parties and candidates are often unaware of their obligations under the new code of conduct, while journalists, educators, and campaign staff receive little systematic preparation. Even within major newsrooms, understanding of global platform policies or online moderation practices remains low.

Taken together, these gaps underscore that Bangladesh's disinformation response is not just operationally weak, it is strategically fragmented. Without a coordinated framework linking regulators, media, fact-checkers, observers, civil society, and platforms, the country faces the 2026 elections with a response infrastructure ill-equipped to safeguard information integrity or the resilience of democratic institutions.

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1 Das, P. P. and Raso, T. I. (2025, January 21). Misinformation trends and narratives in Bangladesh's tumultuous 2024. Dismislab. https://en.dismislab.com/misinformation-trends-and-narratives-in-bangladeshs-tumultuous-2024/.

6. Recommendations

Bangladesh faces the 2026 election with an information environment marked by fragmentation, polarization, and growing technological threats. Addressing these risks requires a multi-pronged approach: building collective alliances, strengthening capacity and awareness across stakeholders, and reforming policy and enforcement frameworks. The recommendations below suggest multiple entry points for a comprehensive response in preparation for the upcoming polls with longer-term reforms to safeguard information integrity.

6.1 Pathways for a collective response

Build a fact-checking alliance as the backbone of collaboration. Bangladesh's fact-checking community is small and fragmented, but the 2026 election offers an opportunity to form a professional alliance. Such a body would serve three purposes:

- Safety – a collective voice can protect individuals or groups from being singled out for harassment.
- Shared resources – pooled access to verification tools, monitoring systems, and debunking infrastructure.
- Professionalization – over time, the alliance can set ethical standards, build technical capacity, and become an industry association.

This alliance should not stand alone but operate as the hub of a wider coalition, linking fact-checkers with media, election observers, civil society, and technologists.

Broaden collaboration beyond fact-checkers. An effective election response requires media, civil society, observers, and platforms working in tandem. Fact-checkers detect and verify harmful content, but media outlets, with their reach into millions of households, can amplify corrections and give them legitimacy. Election observers can integrate disinformation monitoring into their observation mandates, while civil society organizations can escalate hate speech or targeted disinformation against marginalized communities. Joint efforts can also educate political parties about responsible online conduct, reducing the risks of campaigns themselves becoming vectors of disinformation.

> *In 2022, I remember Mohammad Zubair from AltNews in India was arrested and Indian factcheckers raised their voice in support. But what if a factchecker gets arrested in Bangladesh? Who speaks for us? Journalists have their professional community, but do we?*
>
> *A factchecker in a focus group discussion*

> *You don't necessarily have to collaborate only with fact-checkers. If all the civil society organizations, political party wings, youth groups – if everyone comes together, it creates a larger pressure group. Then what do political parties do? Political parties actually try to understand the pulse of society, don't they? When they see that a major collaboration is taking place, they also try to get involved. That is why such collaboration would be very useful. And I believe the right time to do this is now. Because once the election draws nearer, we'll miss the train – the train will leave the station.*
>
> *A politician in an interview*

Expand the pool of trained fact-checkers. With only 30–40 full-time fact-checkers nationwide, Bangladesh cannot meet the scale of election disinformation. A goal would be to double this pool before 2026, combining experienced editors with technically skilled volunteers capable of verifying images, videos, and AI-generated content. This requires structured training, helpdesks for newsrooms, regional outreach to local journalists, and a pipeline of new entrants through universities. Fact-checking must become a shared public service rather than the burden of a few under-resourced organizations.

6.2 Building capacity and awareness

Strengthen institutional capacity across stakeholders. The capacity needs differ across actors. Fact-checkers require training in digital forensics, AI detection, and advanced verification tools. Media must integrate fact-checking into daily workflows and establish verification desks. Observers need to adapt mandates to monitor online campaigning and develop pathways to escalate harmful content. Election officials require practical awareness of what constitutes disinformation, voter suppression, or harmful content, and how to respond proportionately. Civil society needs stronger institutional awareness of information integrity and protocols to escalate online hate targeting vulnerable groups.

> *If you look closely, who is actually providing training to fact-checkers in Bangladesh? No one. Every fact-checker here is learning on their own, by themselves. When I see that Dismislab is doing good work, or Rumor Scanner is doing good work, or Boom is doing good work, I learn from them. There is a kind of peer-to-peer learning among us. But beyond that, think about it, we don't really have any formal training opportunities.*
>
> *A factchecker*

Mainstream media literacy into election preparedness. For the first time in 15 years, Bangladeshis are likely to face a competitive election—millions of them young, first-time voters. Voter education should include digital literacy to help citizens recognize disinformation. This requires a coordinated campaign—through schools, universities, celebrities/influencers, and religious leaders—ideally beginning six months before polls. Crucially, political parties themselves must also be brought into this culture shift. Digital literacy programs should hold candidates and campaign teams accountable for the content they share, positioning them as part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

6.3 Addressing policy and enforcement gaps

Define online threats clearly and proportionately. Bangladesh's draft Code of Conduct is ambitious but vague. Undefined terms such as "hate speech," "provocative language," and "fabricated news" risk arbitrary enforcement and chilling legitimate criticism. To be effective and rights-respecting, the Election Commission (EC) should:

- Specify clearly which types of content directly harm electoral integrity (e.g., false voting information, incitement to violence, coordinated manipulation).
- Establish transparent criteria and an appeals process to avoid partisan misuse.
- Protect legitimate political speech and ensure proportionality in enforcement.

Level the playing field. Poorly designed regulations risk burdening small parties and independents disproportionately. For example, requiring all campaign content to be pre-fact-checked is impractical and favors larger, well-resourced parties. Similarly, blanket bans on AI-generated content could unintentionally stifle innovation while failing to target genuinely harmful uses. Regulations must balance oversight with fair participation.

Ensure meaningful consultation. Policy reform must be co-created through consultation with political parties, human rights lawyers, journalists, civil society, and platforms. Without this, regulations risk being weaponized as tools of control. Consultations should focus on feasible transparency measures, realistic enforcement, and safeguards against overreach.

Engage platforms on transparency and enforcement. Social media companies should be pressed to ensure transparent political ad archives, proactive enforcement against coordinated disinformation, and responsiveness to election authorities. Current gaps are stark: Meta's ad library misses disclosures, YouTube lacks Bangladesh-specific ad data, and TikTok bans political ads but provides no transparency. The EC, together with civil society, should establish structured escalation channels with platforms and insist on consistent disclosure.

Focus on practical enforcement and capacity-sharing. The EC lacks technical expertise and cannot realistically monitor millions of posts. Rather than attempting to control all content, it should focus on proportionate enforcement, relying on partnerships with fact-checkers, civil society, platforms, and law enforcement. Shared "rapid-response-room" style hubs—tested in India and Indonesia—offer models for quick, coordinated responses that combine monitoring, verification, and communication.

> *Campaigning – whether I do it in person, by traveling around in cars, through social media, or through other media – it is all campaigning. And I think bringing all of it under the law is a timely step. But the question is whether the Election Commission has the capacity to implement this, or whether we as a state have that capacity, that is what we need to examine. For that, I think the Election Commission's efficiency and scope must be expanded and strengthened.*
>
> *A senior politician in interview*

Experiences from India, Indonesia, and Mexico show that collaborative frameworks are possible even in polarized environments. The Shakti Collective's decentralized model in India, CekFakta's newsroom-based system in Indonesia, and Verificado's civic-media alliance in Mexico demonstrate the value of trust-building, shared infrastructure, and proactive strategies. The key lesson for Bangladesh is not to replicate these models wholesale, but to adapt them: build alliances that are inclusive, agile, and prepared to act strategically during disinformation surges.

The path forward requires pragmatism, patience and coordination. No single actor can manage the disinformation threat alone. Fact-checkers can detect, but media must amplify; observers can document, but platforms must enforce; the EC can regulate, but only with clarity and consultation. If Bangladesh can use the 2026 election as a catalyst to build trust, strengthen capacity, and reform its public information ecosystem, it can begin to move from fragmented reactions toward a sustainable, systemic response to disinformation.

6.4 Actionable Recommendations for Key Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Action recommended
Election Commission	(i) Revise relevant provisions in the proposed Code of Conduct for Political Parties and Candidates, 2025 to clearly define and identify the types of online content that may be categorized as 'harmful content', 'hate speech', 'false or fabricated information', 'incitement to violence' and 'coordinated manipulation', and include clear definitions for any other content that can directly harm electoral integrity.
	(ii) Revise the proposed Code of Conduct to outline a clear and transparent mechanism for monitoring complaints and addressing online conduct that is in violation of the Code, including transparent criteria and safeguards to protect legitimate political speech, reporting channels, an appeals process to ensure affected parties have a chance to respond to complaints, and enforcement measures that are proportionate to the severity of the violation.
	(iii) Revisit the Representation of People (Amendment) Ordinance 2025, gazetted 10 November 2025, to clarify relevant provisions on the use of social media to run election campaigns [in particular Section 16 (f)] in order to ensure that the rights of political party candidates and representatives to exercise freedom of expression and engage in public and political participation are not undermined, and to make sure that relevant provisions of the proposed Code and the Ordinance are aligned.
	(iii) Revise the Commission's mandate to include online monitoring of election disinformation by dedicated monitoring committees set up in collaboration with key stakeholders working to combat disinformation.
	(iv) Collaborate with fact-checkers, platforms, civil society actors, and law enforcement agencies to set up and deliver a multi-sectoral, coordinated response (e.g. through a 'rapid response hub') to election disinformation that combines shared monitoring, verification, communication and the application of proportionate enforcement measures.
	(v) Organise training for relevant election officials to build and increase digital literacy, including on the detection of misinformation and disinformation, and any other harmful content and/or behaviour, including on social media and digital platforms, that constitutes voter suppression and/or undermines electoral integrity.
	(vi) Conduct digital and media literacy campaigns in collaboration with platforms (where possible), media agencies, media literacy experts and digital rights and security experts, and through engaging a wide range of stakeholders, including schools, universities, celebrities, social media influencers, religious leaders, and political parties and their campaign teams, to educate voters on recognising election disinformation and critically engaging with political and election-related content on digital platforms, and to hold political parties and their representatives accountable for sharing any information that prevents voters from making informed choices in election participation.

Stakeholder	Action recommended
	(vii) Partner with platforms (e.g. Meta), fact-checkers, and civil society networks to set up clear escalation channels that allow for the detection, reporting and removal of election-related disinformation and other harmful content on social media and digital platforms.
	(viii) Engage with platforms (e.g. Meta, TikTok, YouTube) to ensure transparency and disclosure in relation to political ads and other election-related content and proactive response to the spread of disinformation and other harmful content via platforms.
Media Agencies	(i) Train and engage local level correspondents and local newsrooms to undertake in-person, real-time and context-specific verification of information shared by fact-checkers.
	(ii) Set up fact-checking and verification desks in newsrooms to incorporate fact-checking into the regular workflow of media houses.
Fact-checkers	(i) Organise independent fact-checking communities under a professional alliance of fact-checkers operating at the national level, which will collaborate with media, election observers, civil society, and technical experts to combat disinformation, including in the context of elections.
	(ii) Conduct a collaborative mapping of existing capacities within the fact-checking community and an assessment of training needs and gaps in knowledge and access to specialised equipment.
	(iii) Collaborate with media agencies, media and digital literacy experts, digital and cyber security experts, and civil society networks to receive training on advanced digital forensic tools and detection and verification of AI-generated content.
Civil society	(i) Work with platforms and law enforcement agencies to establish clear protocols to escalate online hate and harmful content targeting vulnerable communities and content that can potentially incite violence or result in offline harm.
	(ii) Work with information, digital and cyber security experts to provide training on advanced digital forensics, disinformation and AI verification tools to fact-checkers and relevant personnel from media agencies.

7. Conclusion

Bangladesh's 2026 national election will be a defining test of whether the country can rebuild democratic credibility after years of erosion. Electoral disinformation has become a structural feature of its politics threatening not only the credibility of the polls but the stability of Bangladesh's fragile democratic transition.

The national response is fragmented. Fact-checkers are small and under-resourced, media outlets lack verification capacity, the Election Commission is still ill-equipped for digital oversight, and platforms operate with little accountability to local stakeholders. Without external support, these gaps will leave Bangladesh vulnerable to manipulation in 2026.

Global lessons show that effective responses require coalition-building: alliances between fact-checkers, media, civil society, election observers, regulators, and platforms. Donors can play a catalytic role in these efforts by:

- Convening and supporting collaborative infrastructures;
- Investing in specialized capacity (digital forensics, AI deepfake detection, and election-period monitoring units).
- Supporting the Election Commission to clarify and implement its new Code of Conduct.
- Pressing platforms to ensure transparency, ad disclosure, and responsive escalation channels in Bangladesh, as they have been required to do in other democracies.
- Scaling media and voter literacy programs that prepare both citizens and political actors to navigate an increasingly polluted information space.

The coming months present a rare window: Bangladesh's political transition and the 2026 election have created space for reform that did not exist under the previous regime. Donor engagement can help turn that opening into lasting resilience.