

Understanding Harmful Digital Narratives and Behaviors Ahead of the 2026 Bangladesh Elections

Baseline Analysis Report | August to October 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary report presents key findings from a baseline social media analysis examining how online narratives are shaping political discourse and civic integrity in Bangladesh leading up to the next national elections and July Charter referendum in February 2026. Drawing on data collected from Facebook, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) between August and October 2025, the analysis focuses on harmful digital topics and narratives, including mis- and disinformation, hate speech, and incitement to violence, alongside constructive narratives that promote de-escalation and democratic norms. The findings show that social media has become a central arena for contesting Bangladesh's political transition and electoral integrity. While much of the online discussion focuses on routine electoral issues and debates, a significant proportion of content contributes to polarization and digital harm. Harmful narratives are amplified not only by fringe actors but also by political parties, influential commentators, and media-adjacent accounts, increasing the risk of offline tensions and undermining trust in democratic processes. At the same time, the analysis identifies meaningful countervailing dynamics: calls for calm, religious tolerance, and public awareness of disinformation, suggesting opportunities for resilience and constructive intervention. Overall, the baseline highlights a volatile and contested information environment in which digital narratives are playing a critical role in shaping civic integrity, public trust, and social cohesion in the months ahead.

INTRODUCTION

This baseline analysis was conducted to support understanding of digital harms in the lead-up to Bangladesh's 2026 elections, with a focus on:

1. Identifying predominant online narratives related to the elections
2. Assessing how these narratives shape public perception and engagement, and
3. Mapping the prevalence and characteristics of mis- and disinformation, hate speech

The report is intended as a practical resource for civil society organisations (CSOs), media actors, policymakers, and international partners working to safeguard civic space, information integrity and governance during a critical electoral period.

The baseline report provides the foundation for ongoing analysis that will continue throughout the election period and to the end of March 2026.

Political Transition and the Digital Environment

Bangladesh's current political landscape is shaped by a long history of contested elections, political violence, and concentration of power. After the student-led uprising in July 2024, a State crackdown and excessive force led to a wider political shift. According to [UN figures](#), 1,400 people died and thousands were injured. These events resulted in Sheikh Hasina's resignation and departure, with Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus forming an interim government.

The interim government has committed to institutional reforms and accountability, including the proposed July Charter, while preparing for national elections and a referendum. These processes have intensified political competition and narrative contestation. Social media platforms have become key spaces where actors interpret the meaning of the July uprising, debate legitimacy of the current

administration, mobilize supporters, and discredit opponents.

In this environment, online narratives are closely intertwined with offline dynamics, including protest activity, communal tensions, electoral integrity, and perceptions of foreign influence. Understanding how these narratives circulate and evolve is therefore essential for anticipating risks and identifying entry points for mitigation.

Methodology

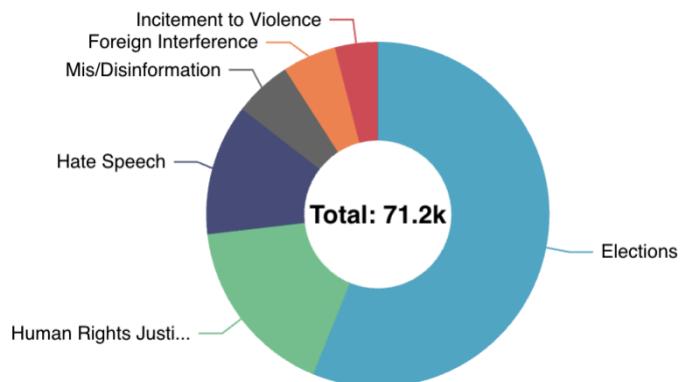
The baseline analysis used targeted social media analysis to examine election-related discourse across Facebook, TikTok, and X. Data collection was guided by a curated list of keywords and accounts in Bangla, English, and transliteration, covering:

- General election-related terms (e.g. voting, polling, campaigns, election results)
- Bangladesh-specific political language and commonly used phrases
- Prominent slogans associated with political parties, movements, and the July protests
- References to key political issues (e.g. justice for July, the July Charter, interim government, quota movement)
- Names of major political parties, leaders, institutions, and other influential actors

In total, 199k pieces of content were collected from Facebook, TikTok and X, of which 71.2k were classified for the purposes of this analysis

Content was collected from open sources using Build Up's social media analysis platform, [Phoenix](#). Posts were classified into six topic areas:

1. Elections
2. Human Rights / Justice / Accountability
3. Foreign Interference
4. Mis- and Disinformation
5. Hate Speech
6. Incitement to Violence



KEY FINDINGS

Platform Usage and Trends

Facebook

Facebook is the most popular and used social media platform in Bangladesh among all demographics. Content production is highly concentrated, with a small number of political party pages and prominent actors responsible for a large share of posts, underscoring Facebook's role in both sustained political messaging and mobilization.

- 24.9k posts collected from 9.92k unique authors generated 40.5 million likes, 7.94 million shares and 1.06 million comments
- Posting volume increased steadily from August through October, with clear upward trajectory as elections approach
- Content characterized by long-form political commentary and event coverage

- Small cluster of party pages and high-profile influencers produce roughly 25% of all posts

TikTok

TikTok plays a growing role in political communication through short-form, emotionally charged videos. It shows particularly high engagement levels and a higher prevalence of AI-generated or manipulated content.

- 7.93k videos from 5.71k unique authors, generating 98.1 million likes, 9.59 million shares and 3.56 million comments
- Despite lower volume than Facebook, engagement per post is significantly higher
- Content dominated by fan-style edits, emotional retellings of July uprising, quick clips about elections
- Misinformation more implicit through strategic clipping and editing disguised as news

X (formerly Twitter)

X (Twitter) hosts a large volume of elite-driven and geopolitical commentary, including significant participation from non-Bangladeshi accounts. Discussions on foreign interference and communal issues are especially prominent here.

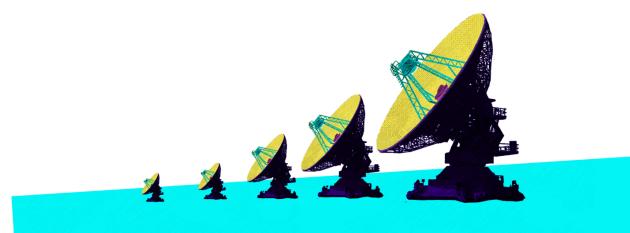
- 117k posts from 50.5k unique authors, with roughly 1.36 million likes, 358.5k retweets and 79k replies & quotes.
- Significant spike between September 8 and 15, with consistent engagement and event-driven peaks
- Used primarily for live commentary, geopolitical discussions, and foreign interference narratives
- Amplifies attacks on minorities, often from non-local, non-Bangladeshi accounts

Harmful Digital Content & Behaviors

Hate Speech (8.13k posts)

Hate speech is deeply embedded in political discourse, often targeting political opponents and, in some cases, religious or communal groups. Historically loaded slurs and dehumanizing language are frequently used to delegitimize rivals and target opponents/groups. While some content condemns hate speech, the overall discursive space remains saturated with targeted language.

- Politicized hate speech: Opponents labeled as "terrorists," "রাজাকার" (collaborators), traitors
- Religious/communal hostility and exclusion: Content ridiculing or delegitimizing minorities, especially around Hindu festivals
- Mixed and ambiguous cases: There are a small subset of posts that condemn hate speech or describe it as a problem
- Higher percentage observed on X, but intense engagement comes from Facebook and TikTok
- Some posts explicitly target political leaders, using direct dehumanization



Incitement to Violence (2.46k posts)

Although smaller in volume, incitement to violence represents the most acute risk. Some high-reach posts explicitly call for physical attacks on political opponents or encourage street violence as resistance. Other content normalises mob justice by emotionally narrating killings or portraying violence as patriotic or necessary.

- Direct calls to physically attack political opponents ("no-mercy" street resistance)
- Normalization of mob justice ("গণধোলাই") as patriotic response
- Posts urging supporters to organize "আওয়ামী প্রতিরোধ বাহিনী" (Awami resistance forces)
- Frames international human rights presence as threats to sovereignty and religious values and asking people to "act"



Mis/Disinformation (2.23k posts)

Mis- and disinformation narratives often portray the interim government, accountability processes, or civil society actors as foreign-backed conspirators. These narratives mix partial truths with false claims, erode trust in institutions, and interact with hate speech and incitement to violence, amplifying overall harm.

- Portrays "Yunus government," UN mechanisms, and minority activists as foreign-backed conspirators
- Reframes protest violence through emotionally charged terms: "genocide," "terrorists," "information war"
- Mixes partial truths with unverified claims, presenting speculation as fact
- Erodes trust in institutions and independent information sources

Harmful Narratives

Three harmful narrative clusters are particularly salient ahead of the elections:

1. Posts Claiming Delegitimization of Interim Government (5.41k posts)

Posts across the political spectrum question the legality, mandate, or independence of the interim administration, often using highly emotive language. While [public opinion surveys show](#) significant support for the interim government, online discourse is dominated by elite and party-driven attacks that undermine institutional trust.

- Generated 33.1m likes and 1.3k shares
- Content from across political spectrum questions legitimacy, mandate, or independence of interim administration
- Dominated by Awami League (AL)-aligned accounts and their affiliates, more so than general citizens
- Uses terms like "illegal Yunus government" and "fascist Yunus"

2. Posts Claiming July Revolution as Propaganda (2.32k posts)

Competing actors accuse each other of fabricating or manipulating the meaning of the July 2024 uprising. This framing blurs the line between legitimate critique and mis-disinformation and encourages audiences to dismiss unfavourable reporting as inherently false.

- Contests the reality of July 2024 revolution and political transition
- Opposing camps accuse each other of "propaganda" and "oprochar"
- Deepens mistrust of media, civil society, and political opponents
- Creates polarized information environment where citizens cannot agree on basic facts

3. Posts Claiming Foreign Interference (2.13k posts)

Narratives attribute the July protests and political transition to foreign intelligence agencies or Western “regime change” agendas rather than domestic grievances. These claims contribute to digital harm by normalising conspiracy theories, provides rhetorical cover for repression “against foreign agents”, and deepens online and offline polarization between communities who see the transition as a popular demand for change and those convinced it is an externally engineered plot.

- Reframes July protests as outcome of US “regime change” tactics, Indian/Pakistani intelligence operations
- Links Bangladesh to protests in Nepal and Sri Lanka as part of broader Western conspiracy
- Erodes trust in civic mobilization by casting protesters as foreign puppets
- Fuels xenophobic and anti-neighbor hostility
- A significant portion of this content was observed to originate from X, linked to accounts primarily based in India

Constructive Narratives

Despite the prevalence of harmful content, the analysis identifies strong constructive dynamics:

1. Posts calling for de-escalation of violent rhetoric and peace (7.7k posts)

- Largest volume of constructive content
- Generated 123m likes and 6m shares

- Influential voices across political spectrum pushing back against polarization
- Framing vision in terms of shared responsibility rather than revenge
- Represents a significant shift in Bangladesh's political environment
- Whether this change is genuine or simply a strategic move to make various political parties more appealing to the public and youth remains an interesting question to watch after the elections

2. Posts claiming the spread of mis- and disinformation by others (3.23k posts)

- Generated 19.5m likes and 909k shares
- Content cautioning others about rumors, providing corrections, making accusations of propaganda
- Highlights ongoing battle over narrative control
- Suggests widespread awareness of false information flow

These narratives suggest that digital spaces also offer opportunities for resilience-building, counter-speech, and public education.



CONCLUSION

This baseline analysis demonstrates that social media is a central battleground in Bangladesh's political transition and the lead-up to the 2026 elections. Digital harms are not peripheral but are deeply entangled with historical grievances, power struggles, and contested visions of state legitimacy. Harmful narratives are amplified by influential actors and interact with real-world events in ways that risk undermining civic integrity and social cohesion.

At the same time, the presence of widely shared constructive narratives indicates that the direction of online discourse is not fixed. Targeted, coordinated interventions can help reduce harm, strengthen resilience, and support a more informed and peaceful electoral process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support coordinated monitoring and mitigation of digital harms by civil society and media

Encourage collaboration and shared analysis among civil society organisations, media actors, and fact-checking initiatives to improve early detection of harmful narratives, mis- and disinformation, and hate speech, and to enable more coordinated, context-sensitive responses to mitigate their spread and offline impact during the election period.

2. Strengthen regulatory and platform engagement through inclusive consultation

Regulators should develop clearer and more consistent approaches to digital harms through meaningful consultation with civil society and experts. Parallel engagement with social media platforms is needed to improve content moderation, transparency, and accountability during the electoral period, in line with international human rights standards.

3. Invest in capacity building and public education

Equip civil society with tools for social media and data analysis, while promoting digital literacy and awareness among the public to reduce the spread of harmful content and promote responsible communications.

*This report was authored by Allan Cheboi, Nabila Ferdous and Megan Grazier from Build Up.
For the full report, questions or to request support please contact team@howtobuildup.org.*

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