Social Media Outrage against Fake COVID Tests: Decoding an Instance of *Flash Activism* in Bangladesh

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Published: July 24, 2023

Abstract

In this paper, we attempt to outline and to discuss how social media platforms provide the public a space, albeit unsafe, in quasi-authoritarian contexts to share their opinions and grievances on contentious issues. We focus on the case study of a short-lived yet intense wave of social media outrage against a corrupt actor, Shahed, in Bangladesh, who was accused of selling fake Covid-19 tests to the public. Identifying it as an instance of *flash activism* in the digitally-networked media arena, the paper brings out some of the characteristics that define this act of public outrage under increasing government surveillance, such as the brief duration of the protests, the public indignation that resulted in the online expressions of the outrage and users' strategies such as employing humour and satire to express indignation and avoid being persecuted by the regime. Our aim with this short paper is to understand how the internet challenges authoritarian governments insofar as it gives voice to citizens to express grievance, how governments transform their legal repertoire to gag their population from voicing opinions, and how people still find new, innovative ways to express themselves under such regimes.

Keywords: Social media; flash activism; Bangladesh; Covid-19; corruption; authoritarianism.

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1   Introduction

In early July 2020, Mohammed Shahed, an industrialist and the owner of Regent Hospital in Dhaka, Bangladesh, with strong connections with the political establishment was implicated in a case of issuing fake Covid-19 tests. The incident garnered international attention and sparked outrage on social media platforms, especially as it concerned the sensitive issue of public health and safety during a pandemic. People voicing their disappointment through Facebook and other social media platforms, pointed out that Shahed was well connected with the political top brass. Government agencies such as the Anti-Corruption Commission promised action against these irregularities soon (Abdullah, 2020). By the third week of July 2020, Shahed was intercepted and sent to prison, and the intensity of the debate on social media platforms regarding this specific topic had reduced. In this paper, we investigate this brief, yet fervent mobilisation that occurred through social media platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh, a country which has witnessed a sharp descent into authoritarianism (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Prothom Alo, 2022) and where corruption-enabling scenarios rose rapidly exposing the vulnerabilities of an inadequate healthcare system during the global crisis.

Activism that develops online through social media platforms in less democratic spaces in Asia has continued to receive less academic attention (Sinpeng, 2021). Extant scholarship on this topic focusing broadly on countries of the Global South show that social media can provide a space in their societies to spread information that is contentious in nature. Examples include civil disobedience movements against governments such as in Tahrir Square in Egypt in 2011 and Gezi Park in Turkey in 2013; demonstrations against sexual harassments in New Delhi in 2012–2013 and Shahbag protests in 2013 to prosecute war criminals in Dhaka (see for example, Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Sorour & Dey, 2014). Turning our gaze towards the last example, Bangladesh, we found that there are relatively few academic outputs on the issue of contentious politics and social media, with majority of studies focusing on the Shahbag movement (Zamir, 2014; Sorour & Dey, 2014; Roy, 2019), which is considered a watershed event in terms of social media aiding social movements in the country (Sabur, 2013).

Such acts of resistance are, however, increasingly becoming difficult to perform; and yet, we see such mobilisations happen as evinced by the brief yet powerful spurt of online outrage against Shahed. Borrowing from Earl and Kimport (2011), Earl et al. (2014) and Earl (2016), we identify the case study investigated in this paper as an instance of *flash activism*. Flash activism — as defined by Earl and Kimport — is about the "effectiveness of overwhelming, rapid but short-lived contention" (2011, p. 184). Earl (2016), commenting on how early social movement scholars such as Tarrow (1994) located power and agency in sustained movements, noted that flash-based mechanisms offer new ways of understanding power in social movements. She further credited this flash activism model as the source of power for multiple online forms of protests and engagement. Thus, the concept can be considered an important tool to recognise power dynamics in protest contexts. In this short piece, we will identify some of the characteristic features that define this specific instance of *flash activism* in a quasi-authoritarian context. To our knowledge, studies focusing on social media activism on the topic of corruption in South Asia are few and far between with notable exceptions including outputs on social media usage in the India Against Corruption movement (Lal, 2017; Harindranath & Khorana, 2014) and use of Facebook by Indian civil society collectives and organisations to appraise anti-corruption policies of the union government (Chakraborty & Mattoni, in press). These works, evidently, speak of the Indian context. This article aims to be an addition to this literature while also expanding the geographical limits to include Bangladesh to speak about one specific exam-

ple that exhibits the dynamics of *flash activism*.

The rest of the paper is as follows. In the next section, we outline the academic and grey literature that undergird the key argument of the paper: social media and collective action in the context of Bangladesh and how *flash activism* can help make sense of the power dynamics of online mobilisations in the country. In the following section, we briefly present our methods of data gathering and analysis. Following that, we present our findings where we focus on the three main themes that emerged from the case study: the brief period of outrage on fake Covid tests and the possible reasons behind it; public indignation against Shahed, the businessman, and his powerful network of political patrons; and finally, the strategic use of humour, sarcasm and even trolling by social media users to vent their frustration against endemic corruption in an increasingly difficult context of government surveillance. Drawing from the country context, we reiterate in the concluding remarks how the internet challenges authoritarian governments insofar as it gives voice to citizens to express grievance, how governments transform their legal repertoire to gag their population, and how people still find new, innovative ways to express themselves under such regimes. We end the paper urging the need for further research to understand *flash activism* in similar country contexts and draw upon the learnings from the Shahed case.

2 Social Media and Collective Action: Why *Flash Activism* Can Help Make Sense of Protests in Bangladesh

In social movements literature, increasingly, scholars have addressed the growing role of digital and social media in various types of collective actions. Earl and Kimport (2011) and Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have set the tone of these conversations stressing how digitally networked action broadly favours personalised communication and individual expressions and how various personal communication technologies, such as social media, enable the diffusion of a large variety of themes. Earl et al. (2013) specifically speaking about authoritarian countries and their unresponsive governments to citizens' concerns argue that social media platforms, even in such contexts, can be influential in garnering public and international attention on issues of public interest. They explicitly use the metaphor of flash floods to this end as such natural phenomena, even while lasting for a brief while, can wreak havoc in their wake.

While usually *flash activism* has been analysed and discussed with reference to cases located in democratic regimes, we claim that it acquires a specific relevance and a different role in hybrid regimes and authoritarian contexts as well, where even signing a petition might put a protest participant in danger. Thus, there is a great personal cost to participate in protests in such contexts. Online mobilisations generally leading to ephemeral engagements (Earl, 2016) can be a different model of collective action, which is quick and also less risky, at least in terms of the potential of online spaces and digital technologies to give voice to large numbers of people. Earl further mentioned that the phenomenon of *flash activism* can account for the participation of those sections of the population who would not otherwise engage if the movements were to only happen offline (*Ibidem*). While chilling effects in authoritarian contexts are the difficult reality, the fact that flash-protest type outbursts happen when several voices are raised at an accelerated rate over a short period of time, also emboldens others to speak up. Those who are participating are not expected to sustain this mobilisation, but a substantial number of people mobilising at the same time is also important (Taylor & Van dyke, 2004) as it can build pressure on authorities to act as well as lead to traditional media picking up the story. Earl (2016) also

noted this specific aspect of online mobilisations helping set the news agenda for mainstream media on issues of public interest.

Recent international indices show that in Bangladesh, it has become increasingly tough to sustain long-term mobilisations. Freedom House (2019a) observed that online activism has become progressively difficult in Bangladesh as government authorities have gagged public voices in recent years, leading to the unfortunate trend of decline in individual freedom of expression. Increased surveillance of social media and fear of harassment have led to people avoiding open discussions on sensitive religious and political issues. While internet freedom is heavily curtailed, the number of internet users in the country has continued to grow at a remarkable rate (Freedom House, 2019b). According to publicly available data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), internet penetration in Bangladesh was 15% at the end of 2017, while government estimates of internet penetration were significantly higher in March 2019, at 55% (*Ibidem*). During the Covid-19 pandemic, freedom on the net had been further curtailed with the government cracking down on dissenters unhappy with the management of the pandemic (Freedom House, 2020). The space for civil society to speak up and to dissent has shrunk steadily over the last years with the pandemic being used as an alibi to further curtail freedom of expression. The most recent 2022 "Freedom on the Net" report shows further deterioration in the country in terms of privacy of social media users as security agencies are investing heavily in surveillance equipment to increase their technological repertoire to censor online content (Freedom House, 2022).

From these data points, we can see that the optimism that marked the initial years of the internet espousing its potential to democratise speech needs serious interrogation. During its early growth and expansion, the internet was hailed for its potential to revolutionise political activities in more profound ways than previous media such as radio and television (Ferdinand, 2000; Breindl, 2010), allowing new forms of political participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) which would broadly have positive impact on democratic processes (Noam, 2005). Both Breindl (2010) and Noam (2005) have, however, also discussed how these normative ideals and positive assumptions regarding the internet's power to enforce democratic principles need to be unpacked significantly. Breindl (2010) discusses how potentialities of internet should be seen not in binary terms of good and bad but in continuum: for example, the same technology that allows harnessing of huge amounts of data can be used to spread disinformation.

In the same vein, even though governments accelerate their regulations to dilute the power of social media to provide a diversity of voices on various issues online, citizens find new, creative strategies to exploit the functionalities of social platforms for their protests. Following these discussions, the remainder of the paper rests on three specific research objectives. Firstly, we interrogate the characteristics of *flash activism* in the Bangladeshi context. Second, we identify the strategies which help translate this form of collective action from democratic contexts in which it is primarily studied to a new, less conducive, context. Finally, we reflect on how studying quasi-authoritarian contexts can enrich the current understanding(s) of *flash activism*.

3   Data Gathering and Analysis

The research presented in this paper is part of a larger project that studies anti-corruption initiatives from the grassroots using digital media. Data gathering started in July 2020 through a preliminary round of desk research that we conducted online on multiple media sources. In the first two weeks of July 2020, the search terms "#Shahed" and "#Regent Hospital" (in the Bengali language) were extremely popular. We created a corpus of 198 Facebook posts using

these terms. Facebook was chosen as the site of inquiry as it was the most popular social media platform in terms of number of users (We are Social & Hootsuite, 2019).

To understand better the phenomenon in a regime which is fast approaching authoritarianism, we also carried out five interviews with corruption and social media experts from Bangladesh. Respondents were identified through personal networks established during data gathering, and five of them accepted our invitation. There were relatively low number of participants willing to respond to our questions as by the time the interviews were being carried out, the second wave of the pandemic had hit Bangladesh. This exacerbated the problem of data gathering in an already difficult country context.

While it was not by design, each of our expert interviewees possesses unique characteristics in terms of their involvement within the digital and social media arena. Respondent 1 is a well-renowned blogger who comments on important issues of society and polity. Respondent 2 is a media entrepreneur who runs a company that is involved with fact checking and busting fake news/misinformation. Respondent 3 is an academic specialising in the media environment in the country; while Respondent 4 is a journalist who has major social media following through his satirical posts on problems of the country. Respondent 5 is a social media influencer spreading information and critical takes on societal concerns through memes. It is also to be noted here that out of the five respondents only the last one is a woman. While searching for respondents through the snowball sampling technique, almost all the names suggested by our informants were of male influencers, experts, and activists. This is not surprising, since data from the country about digital gendered gap shows a stark contrast between female and male internet users. A UNDP article, quoting a 2020 report, says that, in Bangladesh, women are 29% less likely than men to own a mobile phone and 52% less likely to use mobile internet when compared to their male counterparts. These figures are important in a country where the overwhelming majority access the internet through mobile devices (Liller, 2023).

We performed thematic analysis on our entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to identify and interpret key themes that characterised the online backlash against Shahed. Recognising the sensitivity of the gathered data, we decided to anonymise the respondents and to not share any of the Facebook posts as they depict powerful people and level strong allegations against those in important positions of power. The coding process happened in two-steps and was carried out by the first author. As a first step, line by line coding was performed staying close to the testimonies. As a second step, the emerging coding scheme was revised through the merging of similar codes, the deletion of marginal codes, and the grouping of similar and relevant codes in broader categories.[1] After these stages, the two authors engaged in a further work of interpretation of the qualitative data, developing three general themes inductively starting from the emerging coding scheme.

4   Findings and Analysis

Three major themes emerged from the analysis referring to three of the main characteristics of *flash activism* in the context of Bangladesh: a) the type of protest, its duration and strength; b) the indignation that motivated collective mobilization; and c) humour and sarcasm as strategies employed by protest participants. We discuss each of them in detail in the following paragraphs of this section.

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1.   While we have not included the resulting coding scheme, interested readers can contact the authors to receive details on it.

a. Intense, Short-lived and Limited Online Dissent in the Face of New Restrictive Laws

The case of Mohammed Shahed selling fake Covid-19 certificates to Bangladeshi citizens is one among many in a country where corruption is endemic (Rahman, 2019). Maswood (2020) observed that the Covid-19 crisis exposed the fault lines in the health sector with rampant corruption and inefficient management with little monitoring and accountability. While the pandemic finally made the government take notice of the sector and increase public spending in it, rampant corruption continued to ensure that the money was misused (*Ibidem*), with many such cases seen in the health sector (Al-Zaman, 2020). Amongst others, in the Shahed case, the Anti-Corruption Commission of Bangladesh investigated the Regent Hospital and its owner, Mohammed Shahed, who deceived and extorted money from the public by providing them with Covid-19 certificates without conducting any tests (Abdullah, 2020). By the third week of July 2020, Shahed was sent to prison (*The Daily Star*, 2020, July 16).

Before that, a quick wave of protests related to the Shahed case developed, with the public reacting indignantly to this matter and making the issue trend for a brief while with it subsiding after Shahed's arrest. Google searches on Shahed and fake Covid tests intensified in the second week of July 2020, specifically between the 12th and 18th. Terms like "Shahed," "Regent Hospital," "Covid Test," "Corruption" were the frequently used keywords on the search engine. While the spike was observed in that week, interest in this matter sustained through the next months as shown in the snapshot. The search term "corruption" (represented on the graph in purple) was the second most searched after Shahed (two different spellings of the name depicted in red and in aquamarine blue on the graph) in relation to the case, and it showed a continued presence on the graph for multiple months indicating public interest. To identify what type of social media activity was happening on this topic, the first two search terms were used as inputs into the Facebook search box controlling for the period in which Shahed was trending on Google (see Image 1), and 198 posts were obtained.
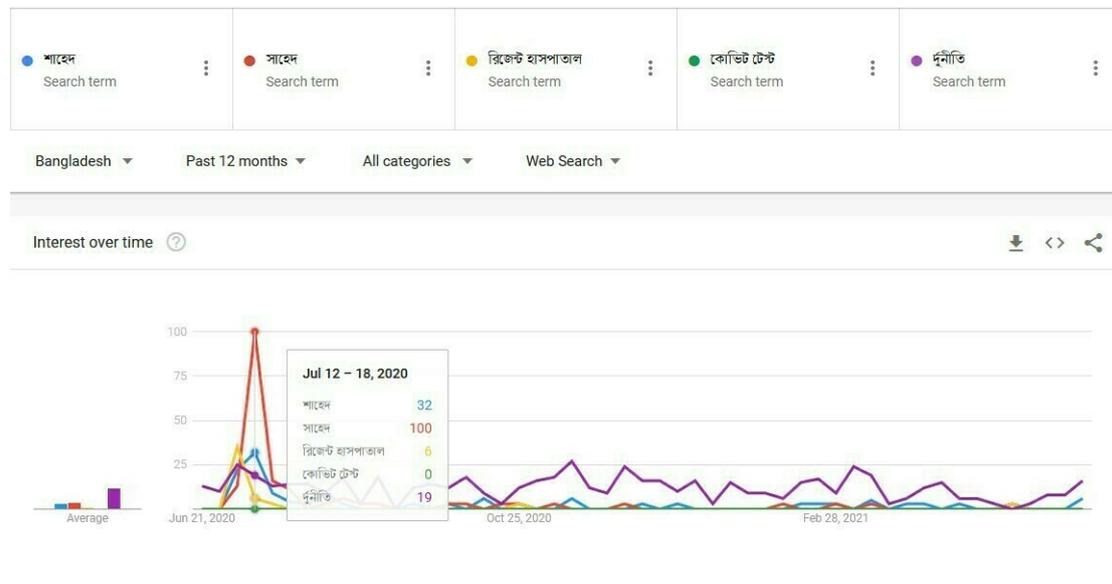

Image 1: Google Trends on Shahed

Two important aspects could be discerned from the gathered data: on the one hand, that

people were using social media to speak up about corruption even in an increasingly authoritarian context; on the other hand, the number of posts when compared to the public interest seen through Google trends and to the overall number of social media users in the country were significantly low. To make sense of these aspects, we now turn to the testimonies of our interviewees.

All respondents voiced in unison that social media platforms have become key avenues for raising individual voices against injustice, including on issues related to corruption. Respondent 1 expressed strongly that he utilises social media to highlight instances of corruption whenever such situations arise. In his opinion, social media provides more space than traditional media as the latter is mostly owned by big corporates and therefore such media actors find themselves in a bind as they must obey the diktats of their owners and benefactors. Respondent 3, an expert on media, invoked the tendency of Bengali people to speak up on various issues, especially when they sense wrongdoing. The same respondent also pointed out that social media has become an extremely relevant platform "*through which initiation, beginning a program's distribution, promotion, live broadcast, photo sharing, text updating are being done. It has been a general issue that social media is being used as an essential tool in political movements.*" At the same time, he raised an important concern about government surveillance of social media platforms and the possession of its own machinery to counter narratives critical of its action: "*On the other side of the coin, powerful people work as great actors on social media to disrupt the political movement. [...] the government also has some machinery like surveillance tools, their own media or the power of controlling social media.*"

The issue of surveillance was shared as a concern by all five respondents as they noted the continuously increasing restrictions in online spaces. The overall perception of the role of social media arising from the testimonies was that platforms like Facebook and Twitter are not conducive spaces for citizens to fight corruption or to speak truth to power. Respondent 2 spoke about the harm to freedom of speech caused by legal measures, mentioning that especially with the promulgation of the Digital Security Act of 2018, activists, journalists and opinion leaders have been increasingly taken into custody, harassed, jailed, tortured and even killed. The alleged crime can be as innocuous as mentioning some political actor's name on social media that can lead to detainment. Therefore, he categorically stated that: "*Because if we just refer back to the Digital Security Act, which actually made it in that way. So, it happens. Now print media, newspapers, and televisions are much safer than social media.*" Explaining further, Respondent 2 expressed a sense of fatigue and hopelessness when talking about the power of social media in a regime like Bangladesh, saying that in a country where corruption is endemic and people's powers are progressively curtailed, social media ends up being a bane for the society as it invites new forms of trouble, explicitly talking about increased government surveillance in the context of greater use of Facebook and Twitter. Surveillance concerns of users can be further understood considering the central government's orders to public employees to refrain from sharing any social media posts that criticised its handling of the pandemic (Al-Zaman, 2020). Putting together these various voices, it is comprehensible why ordinary citizens would hesitate to speak up on social media.

b. Indignant Public Voices Online Exposing Corrupt Nexus of Politics and Business

Despite government surveillance having chilling effects on free speech as ordinary citizens are routinely harassed and even arrested for speaking up, we saw that in the Shahed case, even if relatively few people spoke, they did not hold back their anger and discontent. The content of the

posts showed that people were particularly enraged by the fact that Shahed was well-connected to the ruling as well as the opposition parties. A clear majority of posts (close to two-third) depicted Shahed with different politicians and bureaucrats, evincing the strong nexus between businesspeople, industrialists, people in high administrative positions and top politicians (both from the government and in the opposition). The idea behind these posts was to show the hold of crony capitalism on key areas of public interest enabled by the country's political establishment. People expressed their anger against the impunity with which industrialists like Shahed could continue their operations. In many of these posts, Shahed was seen standing close to, shaking hands with or accepting some documents from these people in positions of power signifying their close connections. A couple of these photos also showed him in huge feasts with powerful people. These were shared and interpreted by those who were posting about the issue as examples of the wastefulness and luxurious lifestyles of the rich and corrupt. The fact that such a scandal erupted in the healthcare sector during a global pandemic when the population was already vulnerable intensified this feeling of outrage. The words of Respondent 2, perhaps, come close to capturing the voice of the public: "*Even they did not spare the purchase of the corona testing kits and the hospitals and we have seen evidence published in the newspaper that corruption was going on. Even the DG of health — the top executive body, top institute of the country. The Director General of health service had signed an agreement with a fake hospital for testing corona. And later it was found that the hospital was serving false reports.*"

This lack of political will to fight corruption seems to have permeated to the level of ordinary citizens as well. Respondent 2, lamenting about endemic corruption, pointed out how people might not be willing to fight corruption because they are used to it. Quoting the respondent: "*If you ask about the economic corruption, definitely this is something that we are habituated... every night and day. It is a 24/7 experience for people like us. Yes, corruption is everywhere. So, there is corruption at the micro-level, corruption at the macro level. We are coping in between, so we don't deny corruption, we live with corruption, we adapt ourselves to the epidemic of corruption. Big corruption invites medium and small corruption. So, this is the regime of the third world, wherever you see, corruption is everywhere.*" In these words, we see both a scathing indictment of the society as well as a strong sense of despair regarding the situation in the country vis-a-vis corruption. Overall, the respondents did not only blame politicians for this; rather they saw corruption as a system in which every citizen is guilty and hence there is a severe lack of will to fight it. As described by Bauhr and Grimes (2013), in countries with endemic corruption, citizens can feel indignation at the system whereby they attempt to take action, or in severe cases, even resignation, where they feel that no action on their part can result in their intended outcomes.

c. The Use of Humour and Sarcasm as a Strategy to Avoid Surveillance

A third theme that emerged from our data was the ample use of humour and sarcasm by social media users as a mechanism to escape easy detection of government surveillance. For example, in the online engagement on the Shahed case, two specific Facebook posts used the title of the Hollywood movie *Catch Me If You Can* to depict Shahed as a fugitive who can never be caught because of his personal connections that protect him from the police and the judiciary. There was also heavy, even merciless, trolling of Shahed online; posts such as these were laden with dark humour about the country's persistent corruption problems. About 10% of the gathered posts showed photoshopped versions of Shahed as a woman, with women's clothing and feminine features. Here we see a form of resistance from the public, which is problematic as it

reveals the highly misogynistic, patriarchal norms prevalent in the country which perceive a man in woman's clothing as a high form of insult. It is supposed to indicate a weak man or an inferior man, or someone who is to be laughed at. There were also several posts (about 10%) which specifically targeted Sabrina, who was supposed to be Shahed's accomplice in the fake Covid tests. Pictures of her in western clothing, or in non-traditional outfits were shared, depicting the straying away from morals. While these depictions can draw condemnation from multiple quarters (and rightly so), it must be borne in mind that humour is subjective and draws strongly from the cultural context in which it thrives. As explained in Section 3 on data gathering, digital divide on gender lines is stark in Bangladesh, leading to social media being a hyper-masculine space. Respondent 5, a female social influencer who uses humour and satire to make memes about major public interest issues, is a welcome change in such a societal context.

Respondent 4 explained how the use of humour and sarcasm is a safety mechanism to talk about issues that are difficult to address online. Like other respondents, they also mentioned how the Digital Security Act is being used to intimidate people and how organisations like theirs are trying to develop new strategies to avoid easy detection of critical voices. In their words: "*In our country, there are a lot of laws like the DSA which are used to penalise journalists. Although while making these laws, the government said these were made to protect the people. But we realise this was used to attack the people. [...] We try to teach people how to speak up by using a satirical tone. Those who cannot speak up, either use violence or curses.*"

From this above quote, it can be understood that even in a context of increased suppression of independent voices, civil society actors who want to spread awareness on contentious issues are working towards reaching out to many people and showing them new ways of expressing themselves online. One such strategy that the respondent described is replacing the word "Bangladesh" with "Uganda" on social media, explaining how when they want to criticise any aspect of their country, they simply use phrases like "*the Government of Uganda is not giving us water*". By eliminating the mention of the country name from the posts, users are less likely to be flagged by authorities as they are removing a direct remark/criticism deemed sensitive in their context. Actors like Respondent 4 are therefore showing their followers that anger against the system can be channelled through more creative and relatively safer ways.

5 *Flash Activism*: Insights from Bangladesh

In this paper, we have attempted to outline and discuss the role of social media in bringing forth voices against corruption in quasi-authoritarian contexts. The specific example presented here is that of a brief and intense period of social media engagement in July 2020 against a corrupt businessman, Shahed, and issuance of fake Covid test reports. We have shown here how it is becoming increasingly difficult to voice dissent against the powerful in the country and to discuss contentious issues online. However, even under such circumstances, activists and social media experts from the country have stressed that they have found new ways to ensure that voices are not completely choked. As per the testimonies of our respondents, there is a constant tussle between government (and the law enforcement agencies acting on its behalf) and the activists and opinion makers who are exploring new strategies to escape surveillance. Yet, these measures are short-term at best. Social media creates ephemeral connections — brief instances of comradeship — where people can come together out of indignation to vent their frustrations. However, even such acts of brief defiance can be misconstrued as activities against the nation.

Nevertheless, *flash activism* can be considered as one of the few viable forms of protests available to people in such contexts and therefore deserves greater academic attention. Looking at the Shahed case, we have argued that its dynamics resemble extant accounts of *flash activism* to a great extent. The outrage on social media was short-lived and intense and at the end of the one-week period, the perpetrator was intercepted by the police and sent to prison. However, there is not enough data to connect this social media attention to the outcome of Shahed being arrested by law enforcement agencies. In fact, the analysis of the Facebook posts showed that the people were not hopeful that such a desired outcome would be achieved. While expressing their frustration at the ruling system, social media users took recourse to a peculiar strategy — humour and sarcasm — as a coping mechanism against the increasing surveillance measures adopted by the government.

The Shahed case throws up yet another peculiarity — the primacy of the issue at hand — which complicates the dynamics of this form of activism which has mostly been constructed as a set of actions. While it is true that in authoritarian and hybrid regimes it is very difficult, if not outright impossible, for ordinary citizens to protest, some topics are easier to address than others. For example, if the public speaks on more structural problems that plague the society it is more likely that they will not be at the receiving end of punitive action. When people speak on deep-rooted social problems instead of naming and shaming only one group of actors (especially powerful political actors), they might be able to do so online with relatively less fear of government surveillance. It would also bring together unlikely allies from the citizenry who want to raise their voices on a wide variety of issues. Almost all the respondents said that they actively engage online on issues such as women's rights, plights of refugees and environmental degradation, which are all related to widespread social problems recognised as such by Bangladeshi intelligentsia and online public. They identified that some discussions are easier to have than others, stating that corruption is one such topic that is heavily politicised and hence likely to be dangerous for online mobilisations. In the Shahed case, the mobilisation took place on the sensitive topic of public health, during the vulnerable period of the global pandemic, which made the government react fast to ensure that the voices die down soon. Thus, the topic of contention — depending on how politicised it is in the country — is likely to affect the power and effectiveness of *flash activism* to shed light on matters of public interest. The Shahed case presents new perspectives to the dynamic nature of *flash activism* which could provide valuable cues when studying such instances in other hybrid and authoritarian regimes.

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