

## Influence of Social Media on the Political Behaviour in Bangladesh: Facilitating Political Engagement & Democracy?

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Billions of people worldwide use different social media to stay connected with friends and family. Gradually these platforms have gained greater role in achieving other aims.<sup>2</sup> With the development of information and technology, greater opportunities have been created for bigger public engagement and civil society activities worldwide. They are now used for a broad range of activities. These social media platforms have an impact on the political engagement of the people.

Social media has a broad scope and includes different activities of life. It is no longer used only for personal communication. Rather it is now used for diverse purposes like- business, politics, sports, entertainment, mass mobilization, creation of awareness, spreading the news, and many other activities.<sup>3</sup> It plays an

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<sup>2</sup> Claudia Astarita, *Routledge Handbook of Civil Society in Asia* ed. Akihiro Ogawa (Routledge, 2018), 420-431.

<sup>3</sup> Astarita, *Routledge Handbook of Civil Society in Asia*, 420-431.

important role in political engagement in modern politics. Social media can facilitate social movements and social revolutions. It helps in the promotion and dissemination of political issues. It can be used to encourage people to vote. People can use social media to express their political ideas or repost ideas that match their political beliefs. It can also create political awareness and motivate people to be more politically active.<sup>4</sup> Political news, stories, and agenda can be spread with the help of social media. It provides opportunities to follow different politicians and their activities. Different social media groups are also formed based on certain political ideologies.

Social media is the latest addition to the mass media, which has increased the scope of civic engagements. Increased political awareness leads to increased political engagement, essential in a democratic country. Social media can be used to promote democracy. With increased digitalization in the last decade in Bangladesh, analyzing the influence of social media on political engagement can help us understand the impact of these platforms in creating political awareness, engagement, and promotion of democracy.

The increased flow of political information in social media increases citizens' political knowledge, which can lead to increased political engagement.<sup>5</sup> Since the traditional institutional public spaces often serve the interest of the elite groups, people have found a new space on the internet. These spaces create a new collective identity through information sharing and provide space for deliberations. Different social media platforms, especially Facebook, have been used highly for political discussion and greater political engagement in Bangladesh. That is why it is important to understand how social media promotes political engagement in Bangladesh.

### **Relationship between Social media and Political engagement:**

There is a positive relationship between internet use and political engagement.<sup>6</sup> Social media has an impact on political engagement. It has opened new spaces for political engagement. People can express and share their political views and interest there. It can provide inspiration and resources for political engagement. Here, familiarity and using time are important factors. Social media has reduced the cost of gaining political information, facilitating further political engagement.

People interested in politics in their personal life also share their political beliefs on social media platforms. Young social media users tend to share their political ideas online or support certain political ideologies. Social media is used to promote political ideas and issues. It is used to encourage people to practice

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<sup>4</sup> Astarita, *Routledge Handbook of Civil Society in Asia*, 420-431.

<sup>5</sup> Md Sayeed Al-Zaman, 'Digital Media and Political Communication in Bangladesh: A New Wave of Democratic and Pluralistic Politics?', *Artha-Journal of Social Sciences* 19, no. 2 (April 2020): 1-19

<sup>6</sup> Eva Anduiza, Michael J. Jensen and Laia Jorba, *Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1-15.

democratic values. People post their thoughts on certain political issues or share posts they support or agree with. It is also used to encourage political action. Different groups are formed based on political ideologies where people sharing the same ideology can socialize. It is also an important tool for election campaigns.

Social Media is being used by politicians worldwide to spread their views and political ideologies. Facebook comments have an impact on the attitude of the viewers. Social media can create the scope for political socialization and be more powerful than traditional media. Expressing political opinion online and receiving political news can enhance the social-political system through nationalism. Public inclusion in social media can legitimize the government and stabilize in the system.

Social media has increased the circulation of news, which has led to increased political knowledge. The introduction of social media has increased the capacity of networked facilities to have an impact on politics. Increasing political knowledge through social media increases political engagement. It influences shaping politics. It strengthens the relationship between individuals and political institutions. It provides the people with the opportunity to take part in political debates. The use of social media has democratized the news-making process.

The use of social media increases consciousness of political activities. The role of social media platforms like Facebook in political involvement must be addressed. The use of Facebook increases consciousness and knowledge about political activities. Social media has created a political space where public opinion can be built, and political participation can be increased.

People who are not interested in politics get gradually involved in political behaviours by viewing political content and comments through social media. This participation can be considered easy political behaviour where they only like or comment online on political issues. But this easy political behaviour can also lead to political engagement offline.

### **Social Media and Political Engagement in Bangladesh:**

Communication among diverse people and political groups helps to build a democratic country. Traditional media failed to bridge the gap between the policymakers and the common people. Social media has filled that gap by allowing people to be involved in political communication. It is now an important means of political communication. Social media now has an important influence on political events in many countries, including Bangladesh. It creates scope for increased participation, thus increasing plurality and democracy in politics.

Social Media have expanded the spectrum of participation and engagement in public and political debates. It allows more people to access information and actively participate in political activities. It is a field that

is constantly evolving and providing more opportunities.<sup>7</sup> Social media has made it easier to choose the information that citizens want to receive and filter out the information they do not want to receive. It offers the common people a platform to express their own opinion. It supports networking, gathering information, and active interaction.<sup>8</sup> These activities are considered part of online civic engagement. Social media facilitates civic engagement and connectivity.

Citizen participation is reinvigorated when access to political information becomes easier. Easy access can improve political knowledge and initiate political discussion. Social media provides a new space for political expression. It also helps to engage the previously disengaged citizens in politics. According to a study, traditional news sources are followed by approximately half of Facebook users, and 75% are exposed to this news through their ties to social media.<sup>9</sup> A suitable democratic environment is created when large and diverse people engage in political matters.

In Bangladesh, traditional media like- newspapers, radio, and television were the main sources of political communication and inspiring political engagement from the 1970s to early 2000. For example, during the Liberation war in 1971, a radio channel called the Swadhin Bangla Betar inspired many around the country to participate in the war. But due to the different limitations of the traditional media, political engagement in Bangladesh during the earlier days was confined to only a limited number of people. Traditional media could not connect the common public and the political authorities.

Social media started to play an increasing role in the politics of Bangladesh in 2010.<sup>10</sup> One of the reasons behind the shift from traditional to social media is the failure of traditional media to fulfil the public interest of Bangladesh. Social media has helped to increase political communication and knowledge in Bangladesh, which has, in turn, inspired increased political engagement. Political engagement in social media has also led to social movements and mobilizations in the country. For instance, the Shahbagh Movement was the first social media movement in Bangladesh that had massive participation.

There were about 50.3 million active social media users in Bangladesh every month in 2022, with an annual growth rate of 10.1 % in 2021-22.<sup>11</sup> Facebook, YouTube, Messenger, and IMO are the leading social media platforms in Bangladesh. According to data, approximately 50 million people, or 29% of the population,

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<sup>7</sup> Astarita, *Routledge Handbook of Civil Society in Asia*, 420-431.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Al-Zaman, 'Digital Media and Political Communication in Bangladesh: A New Wave of Democratic and Pluralistic Politics?'

<sup>11</sup> "Social Media in Bangladesh - 2023 Stats & Platform Trends", OOSGA, January 14, 2023, <https://oosga.com/social-media/bgd>.

are active Facebook users.<sup>12</sup> YouTube had 34.50 million users, and Messenger reached 21.45 million users in Bangladesh in early 2022.<sup>13</sup>

Increased exposure to political information does have a positive impact on political engagement in Bangladesh. The circulation of knowledge powered by Social Media has energized political engagement in the last decade. Social media has changed political engagement in Bangladesh by increasing the circulation of political information and shifting the role of citizens from being passive receivers of information to being active participants in political discussions, voting choices, online political campaigns, spreading political information, forming groups, and mobilizing.

### **Facilitation of political engagement and democracy through the use of social media:**

Social media has changed political engagement and facilitated democracy in Bangladesh in the following ways-

- i. Inclusive political communication and discussion-** Social media provides opportunities for the people of Bangladesh to participate in political communication, debate and criticism. It makes political engagement multidimensional. It has allowed marginalized communities and groups to share their views and ideas. Citizens can express their views on political issues on social media platforms like Facebook & Twitter. Political communication in social media now has an impact on the political events of Bangladesh.  
Different social media platforms, especially Facebook, have a crucial impact on politics and politicians. It is a democratic and convenient space for political communication and discussion. These platforms are used for generating and sharing political content like news, posts, texts, images, and videos. Social media creates a scope for political communication between the government and the people. Hence, interactive political engagement increases.  
Bangladeshi politicians are increasingly using Facebook to reach their constituents. They are also using it to learn about public opinion and unfiltered views. It helps them to understand the mindset of the public. Political campaigns are also frequently launched by politicians on social media. It is the easiest route to reach the common people. Their Facebook posts are mainly about political issues. This benefits both politicians and common people.
- ii. Access to political information and acquiring political knowledge-** Social media has made it easy to access political information, which has created enthusiasm in citizens to engage in

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<sup>12</sup> OOSGA, “Social Media in Bangladesh - 2023 Stats & Platform Trends.”

<sup>13</sup> “DIGITAL 2022: BANGLADESH”, DATAREPORTAL, February 15, 2022, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-bangladesh>.

- politics. It is used to share political news and information and follow politicians in Bangladesh. Social media has reduced the information cost and has enhanced people's efficacy. It has facilitated this by increasing interaction. People who are already interested in political affairs can access more information. And at the same time, people who were less interested in political issues experienced the occasional or accidental exposure to political news and thus slowly became engaged. Facebook facilitates political information dissemination in Bangladesh.
- iii. **Social movements and mobilizations-** Social media-led mobilization and movements have become a key feature in the politics of Bangladesh. For example- The Shahbagh Movement, the Road Safety Movement, and the Quota Reform Movement were coordinated using social media. Social media has become a space for view mobilization. Different groups are formed based on different political issues. These groups arrange political human chains, rallies, meetings, etc., against social injustice, inequality, extra-judicial crimes, and violation of human rights etc. These activities also increase political engagement.
  - iv. **The transition from passive to active participation in politics-** Social Media has created a scope for disengaged, marginalized, and inactive people and groups to express their opinions and views on political issues in Bangladesh. Increased circulation of political information, higher visibility, and scope to express opinion helped to transform silent and marginalized people into active politically engaged people.
  - v. **Changing the voting behavior of citizens-** Social media plays an efficient role in creating voting awareness among citizens in Bangladesh. It makes people aware of their voting rights. It inspires citizens to practice their voting rights. Politicians use these platforms to spread their political agenda and conduct political and voting campaigns. The citizen also knows about them and their activities through social media, which creates a relationship between the citizen and the politicians. This often shapes the voting choice of the citizens. It provides the citizen with the chance to evaluate their candidates. It increases voters' political knowledge. Thus, it can change voting behavior.

### **Conclusion:**

In a democratic country, mass political engagement is important. Social media has increased the scope of political engagement in Bangladesh. Increased connectivity has led to the circulation of more political information, which has political implications. Social media helps to increase political knowledge, which leads to political awareness and engagement. In Bangladesh, the participation of common people has become more active than before. People participate in political discussions and communicate actively. They can easily gain political information from the platforms, and political parties also use these for their political

campaigns. Social mobilizations created from online platforms have also become issues in the politics of Bangladesh. Social media has made the citizens of Bangladesh aware of their democratic rights, especially their voting rights. Increased political engagement will help foster democracy in Bangladesh.