

The "Synthetic Mandate": Generative AI and the Battle for Bangladesh's Gen Z Vote

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Image: bdnews24.com

Introduction

The 2024 Gen Z revolution, or the “July Uprising”, has changed Bangladesh’s socio-political landscape in a way that led the country to hold a National Election after almost 17 years of the dictatorship of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The 13th National Election is poised to be one of the most competitive in decades. At the heart of this election stands the country’s youth.

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Nearly 44 % of registered voters are young people aged between 18 and 37, many of whom belong to Gen Z and participated actively in political movements over the past few years. The concept of a "Synthetic Mandate" reflects a new era in Bangladeshi politics where the digital and physical worlds collide. Gen Z belong to an era when political engagement has gone digital. A new force, Generative AI, has emerged, redefining how information is curated, circulated and perceived. This commentary explores how Generative AI is being used as a tool in the battle for Bangladesh's Gen Z vote and the consequences that could affect democratic integrity, political trust and overall election dynamics.

Gen Z as an emerging political force

In Bangladesh, the Generation Z population is defined as those born from the late 1990s to the early 2010s. They now make up about a quarter of the electorate.² Most of this generation is highly connected to social media platforms. Unlike older cohorts that grew up under periods of acute military rule or prolonged one-party dominance, many Gen Zers came of age in a more globally wired, politicized environment, empowered by mobile data, memes, and protest-oriented hashtags. The Gen Z cohort played a central role in the uprising against Sheikh Hasina's government, helping to break the gridlock created by years of one-party rule. As Bangladesh enters the country's first genuinely competitive election since 2009, Gen Z's staying power as an independent political actor or as a bloc co-opted by existing parties remains as one of the most uncertain variables in the race.

The demographic profile of Gen Z also influences how politicians and campaign-tech operators approach them. Young Bangladeshis tend to split their attention between Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok and other social media platforms. They are attracted to short reel-like videos, sometimes featuring catchy visuals from their favourite content creators. This changed the narrative of election campaigns. Previously, election campaigns were limited to traditional banner ads or TV-centric platforms. As demanded, campaigners began promoting micro-videos, short

² Shawon, Ali Asif. 2026. "Youth Vote Set to Reshape Democracy's Course in Bangladesh." Dhaka Tribune. February 5, 2026. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/402633/youth-vote-set-to-reshape-democracy%E2%80%99s-course-in>.

reels, etc., to attract the new generation. Against this digital backdrop, generative AI started to look less like a science fiction add-on and more like an almost-mandatory toolkit for parties who want to appear relevant, contemporary and crucially, intimate with the youth culture.



Photo Credit: Global Banking & Finance Review

The “Synthetic Mandate”: AI’s Strategic Deployment

With artificial intelligence (AI) consumer products increasingly shaping the production and retrieval of information, policymakers worry about the gathering epistemic storm—where ground truth recedes in a haze of synthetic content.³ The term “Synthetic Mandate” refers to how AI is strategically used by political actors to stimulate public sentiment and influence voter behaviour.

³ Goodman, Ellen P. 2025. “SYMPOSIUM PREVIEW: DEFENDING TOMORROW’S DEMOCRACY -- Synthetic Content: Default to Distrust.” Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. 2025. <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/caselrev/vol75/iss3/6>.

It goes beyond simple marketing strategy; it involves carefully crafted narratives that appear to reflect widespread opinions, endorsements and social trends. The tactic of creating AI-generated videos featuring ordinary Bangladeshi citizens making political declarations often lacks transparency about their origins, making it difficult for viewers to recognize them as synthetic day by day. Even the digitally experienced Gen Z often can't differentiate between fake and real. Other strategies include deploying multiple AI-generated personas to fake like, comment and share specific narratives. It creates a fake but concerning networked consensus on social media. This form of digital information, although unreal, can subtly influence the perception of viewers, even if individuals do not consciously attribute it to political persuasion.



Image Credit: Envato

Moreover, generative AI allows parties to scale narratives quickly and cheaply. A single campaign team can generate thousands of avatars and variations of the same script without relying on real volunteers or professional actors. These clips typically appear in covertly managed pages or from party-linked pages. Some disinformation researchers note that it is difficult to trace the original source nodes or accurately calculate the scale of viewership. Moreover, platforms themselves rarely enforce consistent labelling for “synthetic content,” which creates an illusion of authenticity that can persist long after the AI-crafted images have spread widely.

How generative AI shapes pre-election narratives

In the 2024 national election, Bangladesh saw only a handful of AI-generated disinformation incidents, often including deepfake videos falsely showing candidates withdrawing from the race, fabricated speeches, and misattributed statements. While concerning, such cases were sporadic and much of the disinformation landscape at the time was dominated by manipulated images, misleading videos, and text-based false narratives.⁴ In the run of to the 2026 poll, Bangladesh has witnessed a surge in AI-generated political videos featuring synthetic citizens like: garment workers, day-laborers, rickshaw-pullers, shopkeepers, even Hindu women declaring support for specific parties or coalitions. Since mid-June, dozens of short clips, often no longer than 8-10 seconds have begun appearing across Facebook and Tiktok. For example: one clip shows an unseen interviewer asks a Bangladeshi Hindu woman, “Who are you voting for?”, She replies “I’m voting for Jamaat-e-Islami,” with a confident smile.⁵ Researchers reviewed 70 such AI-generated videos published between 18 and 28 June, collectively amassing over 23 million views and one million interactions on social media platforms. On average, each video received approximately 328,000 views and 17,000 reactions, as per dismislab's findings.⁶ These are not as classic “deep fakes” that alter real politicians, instead they rely on fully synthetic personas, voiced in colloquial Bangla and framed as authentic public opinion. When frame-by-frame forensic analysis is applied, researchers and journalists find no trace of genuine subjects or real settings. What makes these AI generated clips particularly potent that they speak on a candid, emotional tone rather than any real policy issues. For example, an AI-generated young male factory worker blames “corrupt elites” for inflation and joblessness, before aligning himself with a newly-formed

⁴ Abrar Ifaz. 2025. “GenAI Storms Bangladesh’s Pre-Election Campaigns.” Dismislab. June 30, 2025. <https://en.dismislab.com/genai-bangladesh-pre-election-campaigns/>.

⁵ “AI-Generated ‘Voters’ Targeting Social Feeds with Synthetic Emotion.” 2025. The Business Standard. July 2025. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/ai-generated-voters-targeting-social-feeds-synthetic-emotion-1178461>.

⁶ “AI Dominates Pre-Election Campaigns in Bangladesh: Report.” 2025. The Daily Star. 2025. <https://www.thedailystar.net/tech-startup/news/ai-dominates-pre-election-campaigns-bangladesh-report-3929076?>.

youth-led alliance or, housewife in a village explains that decades of “favours to the rich” have left the poor without electricity or clean water, then declares that her support has shifted to a specific Islamist-leaning party. In these narratives, generative AI does not just distribute policy pamphlets; it fabricates mini-communities of ideal supporters whose only reality is algorithmic rendering and human design intent, targeting other parties. Over time, these repeated claims create confusion among the public about real vs fake news.

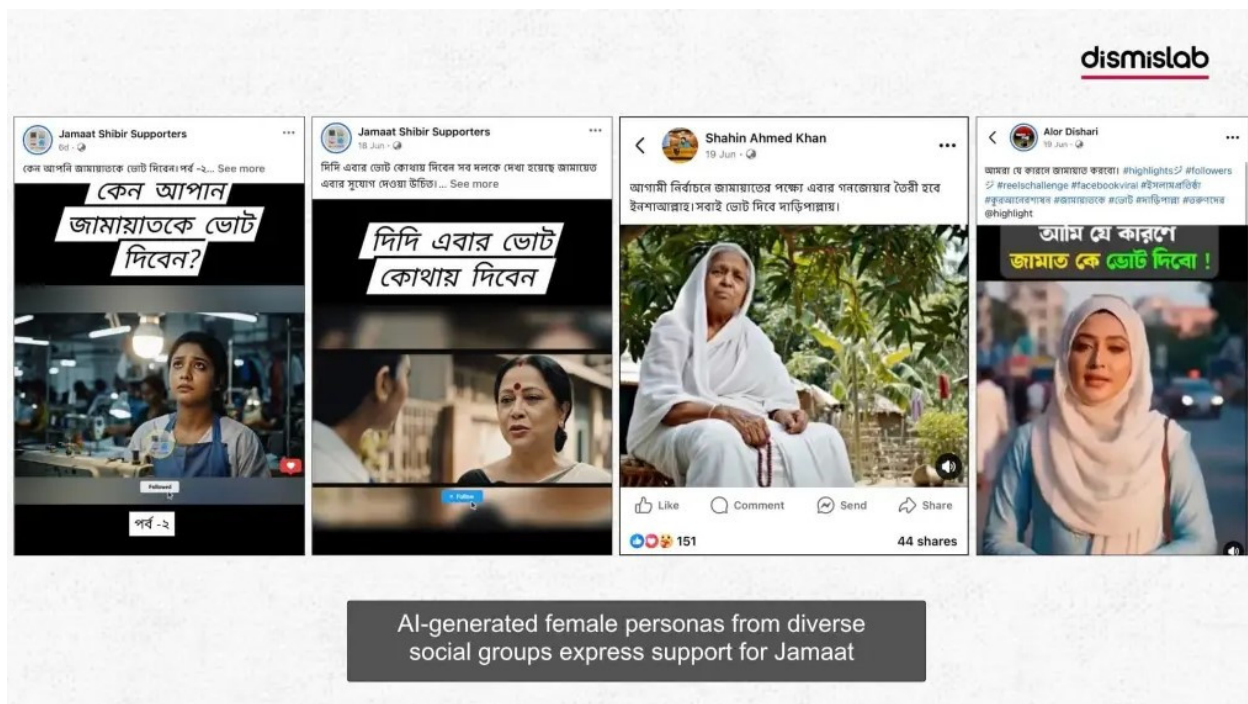


Photo: Dismislab

In Bangladesh, right-wing and Islamist-leaning parties such as Jamaat-e-Islam and its allies appear to be among the earliest and most visible adopters of synthetic-voter-style campaigns. By deploying synthetic fruit-sellers, rickshaw-pullers, and Hindu women alongside urban professionals, these parties attempt to rebrand themselves as cross-class, cross-faith, and universally acceptable, despite their long association with a more conservative, religious base. For the voter scrolling TikTok or Facebook, it is easy to assume these short testimonials are real. But in reality, the Synthetic Mandate functions not as a literal electoral result but as an intended claim of making things look intriguing.

Gen Z's psychological vulnerability and online exposure

Undoubtedly, Bangladesh's Gen Z population is more digitally native than any other previous generation, but that doesn't mean their proficiency cannot automatically translate into immunity from AI generated content manipulation. Many young people in urban and semi-urban areas consume news fragments in the same spaces they reserve for entertainment (e.g. YouTube, Facebook, Instagram). Short-form video platforms are spaces where the context of a content is deliberately minimized. When an AI-crafted individual with a rural backdrop speaks about price hike in his local bazar or shows distress about not finding any job; that narrative seamlessly fits into the broader concern about buzzing issues like inflation, unemployment and other perceived governance failure. The fact that, viewers often overlook synthetic factors of a video while their emotion overpowers on the message with it. Studies on synthetic content and trust suggest that people tend to treat uncanny but coherent visuals as genuine unless they are explicitly told otherwise.⁷ In Bangladesh, where high-quality media-literacy curricula and critical-thinking programs are still unevenly distributed, Gen Z users may be especially vulnerable to AI-curated mini-narratives that mimic their lived frustrations but do not reflect real, traceable communities.⁸

In 2024, when Bangladeshi youth were mobilized against Hasina Regime, they found themselves in a new challenge. Many online news media, political parties or religious-orientated clans are using Generated AI to copy visual language of their protest, fabricating polished propaganda into the real agenda smoothly. In such settings, the “synthetic mandate” is not only a media-phenomenon but also a psychological one: it preys on Gen Z's desire for representation and reframes it as algorithmically satisfied performance.

⁷ Goodman, Ellen P. 2025. “SYMPOSIUM PREVIEW: DEFENDING TOMORROW'S DEMOCRACY -- Synthetic Content: Default to Distrust.” Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. 2025. <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/caselrev/vol75/iss3/6>.

⁸ “Bangladesh's AI Readiness: Perspectives from the Academia, Industry, and Government.” 2026. Arxiv.org. 2026. <https://arxiv.org/html/2601.12934v1>.

Risks to electoral integrity and epistemic trust

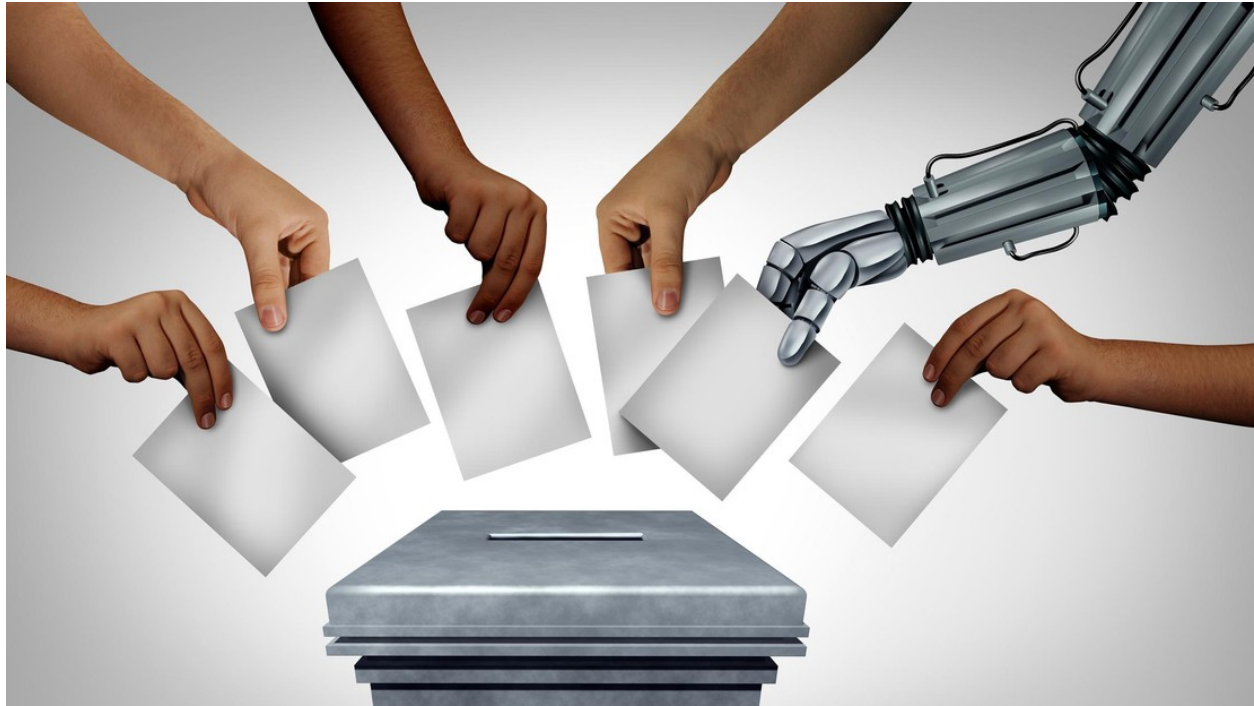


Image Credit: EPFL

AI influences democracy through multiple entry points, including elections, citizen deliberation, government services, and social cohesion, all of which are influenced by geopolitics and security. Democracy advocates warn that AI amplifies existing threats in the digital information environment, including misinformation, polarization, and repression.⁹ The rise of AI-generated voters and “synthetic sentiment” threatens not only individual voters but also the broader epistemic infrastructure of Bangladeshi democracy. When public discussion of “popular opinion” is increasingly shaped by footage of fabricated synthetic citizens, it becomes harder to distinguish genuine grassroots energy from engineered consensus. Anthropologists and media scholars warn that repeated exposure to such synthetic personas can normalize political tribalism: viewers start

⁹ George, Rachel, and Ian Klaus. 2026. “AI and Democracy: Mapping the Intersections.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. January 8, 2026. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/01/ai-and-democracy-mapping-the-intersections>.

to believe that “everyone in my community supports Party X” or that “no one in our area likes Party Y,” even if those claims are algorithmically constructed rather than empirically tested.

Beyond perception, there is also a risk of institutional erosion. Election-monitoring bodies, courts, and civic organizations may find it increasingly difficult to trace coordinated disinformation campaigns rooted in generative tools, because these campaigns leave traces mostly in encrypted social-media groups, private Messenger clusters, and ephemeral-video clouds rather than in formal party manifestos or press conferences. In The 2026 pre-election environment of Bangladesh , AI-made videos appeared almost daily, as they are increasingly sophisticated and cheap.¹⁰ In this way, the synthetic mandate became a parallel voting mechanism: not votes on-paper, but votes of attention, belonging, and emotional reinforcement, each engineered for maximum psychological penetration.

Regulatory gaps and the question of accountability



Photo Credit: AFP Fact Check

¹⁰ Abrar Ifaz. 2025. "GenAI Storms Bangladesh's Pre-Election Campaigns." Dismislab. June 30, 2025. <https://en.dismislab.com/genai-bangladesh-pre-election-campaigns/>.

One of the main challenges in Bangladesh is that the legal and institutional architecture around generative AI remains underdeveloped and ad hoc. Existing information-technology laws and election-campaign regulations were written before the current wave of Gen AI; roughly pre-2021 text-to-image and text-to-video tools which became accessible at mass-scale. Regulatory scholars in South Asia point out that many countries in the region lack clear definitions of “synthetic content,” minimum disclosure requirements for manipulated media, or enforcement mechanisms capable of tracing AI-generated political ads back to party-cells or privately owned content-boots.¹¹

Platforms hosting AI-generated voter testimonials may be under international normative pressure to disclose synthetic origin, but those norms have only weak legal force on the Bangladeshi side; especially when content is uploaded via offshore servers or fragmented social-media channels. At the same time, party officials interviewed by media watchdogs have acknowledged the presence of AI-rich campaigns while claiming that many videos originate from “spontaneous” local media-cells rather than centralized party commands.¹² This makes legal accountability even harder to pin down. Without cross-institutional rules that connect platform-labeling obligations, electoral-commission scrutiny, and digital-forensics teams, the “synthetic mandate” is likely to persist as a semi-legal, semi-informal layer of political influence rather than something that can be effectively regulated or controlled.

Gen Z’s choice: passive consumers vs active citizens

Despite the risks, Generative AI is not a neutral force; it can also empower citizens. Gen Z, who are known as a generation fluent in digital culture, has the potential to use AI tools creatively for political expression, organization, and advocacy. Undermining or reshaping the influence of

¹¹ Mayeesha, Tasmiah Tahsin, Farzana Islam, Shahbaz Ahmed, and Nova Ahmed. 2025. “Navigating the Unknown.” Oxford Intersections: Social Media in Society and Culture, June.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/9780198945253.003.0055>.

¹² Abrar Ifaz. 2025. “GenAI Storms Bangladesh’s Pre-Election Campaigns.” Dismislab. June 30, 2025.
<https://en.dismislab.com/genai-bangladesh-pre-election-campaigns/>.

“synthetic mandates” ultimately depends less on technology-alone and more on how Bangladeshi Gen Z chooses to engage with their digital environment. The same cohort that flooded Dhaka’s streets in 2024 will now face a quieter but equally consequential test: whether they treat social media as a passive entertainment feed or as an active civic arena in which they demand transparency, consistency, and verification. Some Gen-Z circles have already begun informal “fact-checking-push” channels, where volunteers harvest and decommission AI-generated political clips using watermark-detection tools and reverse-image searches.

Conclusion

With Bangladesh's national election now concluded on 13th February 2026, the synthetic mandate's impact on Gen Z voting patterns offers a sobering post-mortem. Preliminary analyses from election observers and digital forensics teams indicate that AI-generated content flooded social feeds in the final weeks. Parties leveraging synthetic testimonials, particularly those with Islamist leanings, saw unexpected gains in youth-heavy constituencies like Dhaka and Chattogram, where micro-targeted AI clips correlating protest-era frustrations with specific policy promises swayed undecided voters. This proves the impact of AI generated content at Elections. The “Synthetic Mandate” reflects more than a technological trend; it reveals how politics, identity, trust, and media consumption are coming together in new and unpredictable ways. The use of AI to generate political content is mostly disruptive and threat towards truth. Understanding and responding to this challenge requires collective efforts from voters, educators, policymakers, platforms, and civil society. Only by strengthening digital literacy, enforcing ethical standards, and building resilient media ecosystems can Bangladesh ensure that its democratic process reflects real voices, real choices, and genuine content; not algorithms.