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Beautiful Inside Out?: Cultural Diplomacy Efforts by the People’s Republic of Bangladesh ^[1]

Similar to many recently independent countries, densely populated Bangladesh strives to convey an attractive image to potential partners, seeking to enhance economic growth particularly through tourism. A variety of tools have been used in recent years to brand the nation as deeply rooted in diverse traditions that co-exist peacefully, as well as to emphasize the cultural heritage of different religious and indigenous groups. The online campaign “[Beautiful Bangladesh](#)” by the Bangladesh Tourist Cooperation uses religious festivities, cultural heritage sites and beautiful landscapes—many inhabited by indigenous populations—to attract international tourists.

However, none of these communications clarify that foreign tourists seeking to visit the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) must obtain permission from the district administration. Tourists

must also inform the Home Ministry about their plans. These requirements are officially labeled as a “security measure,” but could also be interpreted as an effort to control the narrative in the region, which is populated by indigenous groups. Even researchers must apply to the Home Ministry for permission, twenty days prior to visiting the Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban districts. Diplomats are required to seek permission from the Foreign Ministry.

In other words, Bangladesh features minorities prominently in their nation branding activities, even as these same minorities remain a subaltern population deprived of rights.

In the 15th Amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh, passed in 2011, indigenous peoples are referred to as “tribes” or “ethnic minorities.” On this basis, the country’s indigenous people are not even counted as “indigenous.” This designation jeopardizes their economic and political rights, as well as the land rights of approximately fifty groups comprising up to 5 million people, according to some estimates. They live in areas like Sylhet, Mymensingh, the CHT and North Bengal, and speak at least 35 languages. Protests by indigenous groups, scholars, journalist and activists are mostly ignored or branded “Christian games” – a phrase used by the government in a 2009 circular designed to spark unrest in the region. This attitude toward Bangladesh’s diverse population contrasts sharply with what the Tourism Board of the predominantly Muslim country strives to convey.

In addition to the situation of indigenous people, many people in the Global North—the target group for the image campaign—might also object to how freedom of expression is repressed in Bangladesh, leading to violent incidents and forced migration, particularly among religious minorities, bloggers who criticize the government and non-binary people. Radio and television are state-controlled, which is acknowledged even on the Beautiful Bangladesh website.

Other acts (Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act and the Digital Security Act, for instance) have enabled surveillance of digital social media platforms. One result is self-censorship among social media users. Another is migration of individuals who—because of their critiques of the government—fear for their safety. Furthermore, freedom of sexual expression, especially among individuals with non-binary genders and sexual orientation, has also been denied.

In short, there are dangers to cultural diplomacy campaigns that promote a “beautiful” image of a country with a repressive authoritarian system.

In November 2013, the government of Bangladesh officially recognized the *hijra* (transgender individuals) as a *‘hijra sex’* alongside male and female. However, the new legal category identifies the *hijra* as people who have problems with sex; in other words, as sexually impaired or deviant. The newly recognized *‘hijra sex’* also does not address any of the socioeconomic or political inequalities facing *hijras*. While they are now free to choose a new label, they are not afforded any practical safeguard from discrimination or violence. If anything, the new designation buttresses the idea that *hijras* are different — hence “atypical” — because there is no complementary information campaign stating otherwise. What consequences ensue when a country does not accept anything outside the binary categories

of sexual orientation? Individuals with different sexual identities are deprived of their fundamental rights and become victims of social prejudices and discrimination.

Bangladeshi law does not recognize same-sex relationships, civil unions, or any kind of domestic partnership for couples of the same sex. In 2016, Bangladeshi LGBTQIA+ activists Xulhaz Mannan and Tonoy Mahbub were found stabbed to death in Dhaka. Sexual and gender minorities remain under constant pressure and threat in Bangladesh because the government takes no action against violence carried out by Islamic fundamentalist groups and homophobic individuals. Bangladesh remains one of 69 countries where homosexuality is still illegal. According to section 377 of the Bangladesh Penal Code, sexual activity between same sex, whether consensual or not, is illegal. If convicted, individuals can be sentenced to life in prison.

In short, there are dangers to cultural diplomacy campaigns that promote a “beautiful” image of a country with a repressive authoritarian system. The rise of tourism and foreign investments can further strengthen an authoritarian government, help sustain its regime, and allow deprivation of human rights. It is incumbent on those of us working in cultural diplomacy research to shine a spotlight on contradictions in cultural diplomacy messaging.

Furthermore, resources and support are urgently needed for colleagues, academics, journalists, artists and activists who dare to speak up in a country like Bangladesh. The consequences for them can be devastating. Currently, this support is close to non-existent in Bangladesh, even from international organizations such as UNESCO, Helsinki Citizens’ Committees, Pen International, etc.
