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# Bangladesh's Digital Diplomacy Disconnect

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the longest-serving female head of a government in the world, seeks to transform Bangladesh into a technologically advanced “smart’ country” by 2041 and is spearheading the “Digital Bangladesh” campaign. The campaign aims to promote technology to the citizens of Bangladesh in an effort to improve their lives. Hasina's son, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, a computer engineering graduate of The University of Texas, is advising her on information and communication technology matters.

Access to the internet in Bangladesh has leapt from 4.8% in 2013 to 38.1% in 2022. However, despite the government's agenda to expand the digital public infrastructure, its utilization of social media for digital diplomacy has been scant.

Unlike Hasina's counterparts worldwide, she has no presence on any social media platform, nor does her Prime Minister's office.

Bangladesh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) owns a Facebook account with 330,000 followers, and an X (formerly Twitter) account, with 33,500 followers. Preliminary research by the author revealed that the MFA's Facebook page, created in October 2017, is more active than the X account, created in April 2021.

X tends to be diplomats' most preferred social media network worldwide. Foreign ministries follow their peers on X to learn about the policies of other countries, and in turn, they are often followed back.

Bangladesh's MFA lacks a clear social media strategy. It follows certain accounts on X while ignoring others without any set criteria. For example, it follows only three other foreign ministries on X: Russia, India and South Africa. It follows the personal X accounts of John Kerry, the US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate; Fumio Kishida, Prime Minister of Japan; and Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

However, barring the official account of the Uzbekistan Foreign Minister, none of the foreign ministries follows Bangladeshi MFA on X. It highlights Bangladeshi MFA's limited engagement and visibility on social media.

Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud has unverified accounts on X (@DrHasanMahmud62, 1,863 followers, as of 1 February 2024) and Facebook (@run.by.team.of.dr.hasan.mahmud.fans, 379,000 followers). Mahmud's accounts are not tagged in any posts by Bangladesh's MFA. It raises questions about the coherence and effectiveness of Bangladesh's digital diplomacy strategy.

Mahmud's predecessor, Abul Kalam Abdul Momen, who served the office from 2019 to 2024, did not have verified accounts on social media.

An analysis of the posts by the Bangladeshi MFA on Facebook and X for six months, from

July 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup> 2023 by the author revealed that the ministry does not engage in dialogic communication with its followers.

The Bangladeshi Government led by the Awami League is mired in several challenges. The country is rife with rumours that the Indian Government influences Dhaka's foreign policies. The opposition parties accused New Delhi of helping Prime Minister Hasina remain in power.

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## ***Social media allows diplomats and government officials to engage with the public directly and vice versa, transforming traditional one-way public diplomacy into two-way digital diplomacy.***

Soon after Hasina took the helm for the fourth consecutive term in January 2024, members of the opposition parties launched the #BoycottIndianProducts trend on social media, accusing New Delhi of interfering with Bangladesh's 2024 domestic elections and ensuring Hasina's victory.

The ruling party has not yet reacted to the opposition's social media campaign. Bangladeshi Government could leverage social media accounts and engage in domestic digital diplomacy to garner public support for its foreign policies.

Bangladesh is set to graduate from a least developed country (LDC) to a developing country in 2026, and thus, it will lose the international support it currently receives as an LDC. Post-graduation, Dhaka will face the challenge of competing with foreign businesses and must look for additional foreign direct investment agreements. Consequently, Bangladesh needs to strengthen its economic diplomacy and hone its global image. Leveraging digital diplomacy can be instrumental in doing so.


### **The power of digital diplomacy**

Technological advancements have resulted in a fundamental shift in diplomatic practices. In recent years, states have leveraged social media to disseminate information and engage with world leaders and foreign publics.

Social media allows diplomats and government officials to engage with the public directly and vice versa, transforming traditional one-way public diplomacy into two-way digital diplomacy. Gosling (2021) argued that digital diplomacy has become an important tool in the "creation and application" of a country's soft power.

Joseph Nye (1990) referred to "soft power" as a country's ability to influence others through culture, diplomacy and ideology rather than military might and economic prowess, which are considered "hard power." Social media platforms pave the way for a country to promote its culture across the globe and launch campaigns to build a national reputation overseas.

Digital diplomacy is also known as e-diplomacy. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are the most widely used e-tools for public diplomacy.

Hanson (2012) defined e-diplomacy as the "use of the internet and new Information Communications Technologies " to achieve diplomatic objectives and resolve foreign policy issues. 

The importance of digital diplomacy has gained momentum following the outbreak of COVID-19. The pandemic brought the world to a standstill and defenestrated the physical mode of communication. At that time, world leaders availed themselves of the benefits of information and communication technologies to reach out to the diaspora and hold meetings with their counterparts.

The origin of digital diplomacy has been sometimes placed at 2007, when Sweden established the first-ever virtual embassy in Second Life. In 2011, the U.S. opened a virtual embassy in Iran. The U.S. also runs a virtual embassy in San Marino, an independent state near Italy. Israel reactivated its virtual embassy in the Gulf in 2019 after launching it in 2013 and suspending it in 2014 to promote dialogue.

Several foreign ministries, embassies and government agencies have embraced social media for digital diplomacy. Nowadays, it is common for heads of states and government officials to congratulate foreign leaders on social media on their domestic election victories, birthdays and achievements.

Manor and Segev (2020) argued that the countries with less hard power could use Facebook and Twitter to become "supermodes" in online diplomatic circles.

All signs point to digital diplomacy growing exponentially. The UN Secretary-General stated that "digital transformation will shape the 21st century" and that there is a need to "build digital diplomacy" for "a sustainable and inclusive future."

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