

[Working Paper Series: Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Asia – Part 2]

## **Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Bangladesh: An Analysis**

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### **Introduction**

In spite of several mismanagement cases and challenges to governance<sup>1</sup> in handling the COVID-19 outbreak, the Bangladesh government performed remarkably well in administering the vaccination of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine which began on January 27, 2021. While the government's performance was extraordinary in terms of the early availability and administering of the vaccines,<sup>2</sup> stock shortage of vaccines led the government to temporarily suspend from administering the first dose of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.

This working paper, is the second in the series, highlighting the governance challenges from January to May 30, 2021.

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To examine the role of the government in procuring COVID-19 vaccines in the backdrop of vaccine diplomacy and the role of India and China in particular;
2. To assess the nature of development assistance by both bilateral and multilateral agencies; and
3. Offer recommendations to overcome governance challenges around COVID-19 vaccine issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Uddin, K. Farid, "COVID-19 Pandemic Is About More than Health: A State of Governance Challenges in Bangladesh, Sage Journal, February 26 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0971523121993344> (Accessed on May 15 2021).

<sup>2</sup> BSS, "How did Bangladesh get Covid-19 vaccine so quickly"? Dhaka Tribune, 25 January 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/01/25/how-did-bangladesh-get-covid-19-vaccine-so-quickly>, (Accessed on May 15 2021).

## Methodology

This paper is written through research of secondary material available on the internet. Selected social media posts and comments were analyzed to understand the public perception of the vaccination program of the government. A model developed by the writer is also used to analyze the ongoing governance challenges in Bangladesh centering around the COVID-19 management.

## The governance context

Bangladesh's core governance systems are plagued with serious accountability and transparency deficit. During the COVID-19 period, the linkage between public health outcomes and democracy, human rights, and governance was starkly exposed.<sup>3</sup> However, it should be noted that corruption in the health sector was a regular phenomenon before pre-COVID-19 period. In the 2019 Global Health Security Index that examined six key indicators: prevent, detect, respond, health, norms, and risks, Bangladesh ranked 113 among 195 countries with an overall score of 35.<sup>4</sup>

During the period under review in this paper, the freedom situation on media reporting and freedom of expression further worsened with the mysterious death of the detained writer, Mushtaq Ahmed, in February 2021.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Ahmed was arrested in May 2020 for allegedly criticizing the government's handling of the pandemic situation.<sup>6</sup> Despite national outcries and international condemnation, the authorities claimed to be innocent concerning his death.<sup>7</sup> Another Cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore was also allegedly tortured in custody. Media analysts feared that such blatant attacks on freedom of expression and media freedom are signs of "growing authoritarianism" in the country.<sup>8</sup>

## Relationship among the government, third sector, and citizens

To understand the relationship among the government, the third sector, and the citizens during the pandemic period, this paper has developed the model below. In this model, the repatriate relationships among the government, the third sector, and citizens are expected to have two outcomes: a) positive and b) negative. In the positive outcome, the government representing the supply side will be responsive to public demand of the citizens, articulated and

<sup>3</sup> Alam, Rezwan, Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Bangladesh: An Analysis, ADRN Working Paper, 3 May 2021, [http://www.eai.or.kr/new/ko/pub/view.asp?intSLeq=20493&board=kor\\_workingpaper](http://www.eai.or.kr/new/ko/pub/view.asp?intSLeq=20493&board=kor_workingpaper), (Accessed on May 15 2021).

<sup>4</sup> "Bangladesh, Global Health Security Index", GHSI, <https://www.ghsindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Bangladesh.pdf>, (Accessed on 15 May 2021).

<sup>5</sup> "BANGLADESH: CARTOONIST TORTURED, WRITER DIES IN JAIL: AHMED KABIR KISHORE", Amnesty International, 8 March 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/3800/2021/en/> Accessed on 30 May 2021.

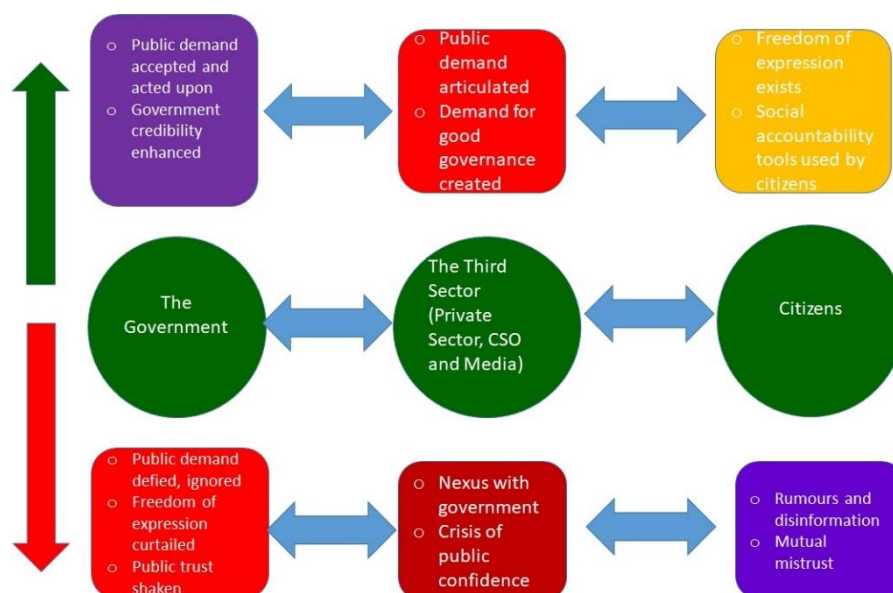
<sup>6</sup> "Bangladeshi writer Mushtaq Ahmed dies in jail; cartoonist Kabir Kishore allegedly abused in custody", Committee to Protect Journalist, 25 February 2021, <https://cpj.org/2021/02/bangladeshi-writer-mushtaq-ahmed-dies-in-jail-cartoonist-kabir-kishore-allegedly-abused-in-custody/> (Accessed on 30 May 2021).

<sup>7</sup> "BANGLADESH: CARTOONIST TORTURED, WRITER DIES IN JAIL: AHMED KABIR KISHORE", Amnesty International, 8 March 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/3800/2021/en/>, (Accessed on 30 May 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Hasan, Zia, "What writer Mushtaq Ahmed's death in jail shows about growing authoritarianism in Bangladesh", Scroll.in, 4 March 2021, <https://scroll.in/article/988495/in-writer-ahmeds-death-in-a-bangladesh-jail-signs-of-awami-leagues-growing-authoritarianism>, (Accessed on 30 May 2021).

facilitated by the third sector [private businesses, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and media]. In the second stream, relationships among three entities will be confrontational, leading to conflicting and negative outcomes, featuring the mutual mistrust among the three entities. In the course of analyses of this working paper, this model will be used to explain the Bangladesh scenarios.

*Tripatriate relationship among the State, third sector and Citizens*



(Source: A model developed by the Author)

## Literature review

Vaccine hesitancy, willingness to receive the vaccine, knowledge gap regarding vaccines and vaccine-related misinformation are the key features of various studies reviewed from January to May 2021. One study identified a high prevalence (32.5%) of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy<sup>9</sup>. A cross-sectional survey found a 41.1% prevalence of vaccine hesitancy.

Men were reported to have less hesitancy than women, and the Muslim population and respondents living in the city corporation areas were reported to have higher hesitancy.<sup>10</sup> A study by Dhaka University's Institute of Health Economics found that some 16% did not want to take the vaccine at all.<sup>11</sup>

A behavioral study conducted by national and international NGOs found that the COVID-19 vaccine

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Ali and Ahmed Hossain, "What is the extent of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in Bangladesh? : A cross-sectional rapid national survey", medRxiv, 17 February 2021, <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2021.02.17.21251917v1> (Accessed on 15 May 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Mohammad Bellal Hossain, Md. Zakiul Alam, Md. Syful Islam, Shafayat Sultan, Md. Mahir Faysal, Sharmin Rima, Md. Anwer Hossain, Abdullah Al Mamun, "COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy among the Adult Population in Bangladesh: A Nationally Representative Cross-sectional Survey", medRxiv, 25 April 2021, <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/medrxiv/early/2021/04/25/2021.04.23.21255844.full.pdf>, (Accessed on 15 May 2021).

<sup>11</sup> SM Najmus Sakib, "Bangladesh launches mass vaccinations amid challenges", Anadolu Agency, 27 January 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/bangladesh-launches-mass-vaccinations-amid-challenges/2124889> (Accessed on 15 May 2021).

acceptors in Dhaka were different from non-acceptors in terms of many of their beliefs and responses.<sup>12</sup>

Another study found that about 61.16% of the respondents were willing to accept/take the COVID-19 vaccine.<sup>13</sup> Although another cross-sectional community survey found that the general public to have a more positive attitude towards the COVID-19 vaccine, it also unearthed that the respondents had inadequate knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

### Bangladesh's vaccine deployment plan

Local media reported that Bangladesh's COVID-19 vaccination plan was first unveiled on the verified Facebook Page of the ruling Awami League.<sup>15</sup> The overall governance of the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan for Covid-19 Vaccines was vested on the Covid-19 Vaccine Task Force. The Minister of Health and Family Welfare was made chief advisor of the task force.<sup>16</sup>

The plan focused on high-risk groups (including health workers directly involved in COVID-19 response, front line workers and immune-compromised patients, etc. and later extended to other groups (including older adults, adults with co-morbidities, education staff, public transport workers, etc.).

The following table summarises the COVID-19 vaccine deployment plan:

*Phases of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout in Bangladesh*

Phase	Stage	Population %	Population number
1	Ia	3%	5,184,282
	Ib	7%	12,096,657
2	II	11-20%	17,280,938
3	III	21-40%	34,561,877

<sup>12</sup> Md Abul Kalam, Thomas P. Davis Jr., Shahanaj Shano, Nasir Uddin, Md. Ariful Islam, Robert Kanwagi, Ariful Islam, Mohammad Mahmudul Hassan, and Heidi J. Larson, "Exploring the Behavioral Determinants of COVID-19 Vaccine Acceptance among an Urban Population in Bangladesh: Implications for Behavior Change Interventions", medRxiv, 25 April 2021, <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/medrxiv/early/2021/04/25/2021.04.23.21255974.full.pdf> (Accessed on 15 May 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Sultan Mahmud; Md. Mohsin; Ijaz Ahmed Khan; Ashraf Uddin Mian; and Miah Akib Zaman, "Acceptance of COVID-19 Vaccine and Its Determinants in Bangladesh", arXiv.org, Cornell University, <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/2103/2103.15206.pdf>, (Accessed on 15 May 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Md. Saiful Islam; Abu Bakkar Siddique; Rejina Akter; Rafia Tasnim; Md. Safaet Hossain Sujan; Paul R Ward; and Md. Tajuddin Sikder, "Knowledge, attitudes and perceptions towards COVID-19 vaccinations: a cross-sectional community survey in Bangladesh", medRxiv, <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2021.02.16.21251802v2> (Accessed on 15 May 2021).

<sup>15</sup> "Bangladesh's vaccination plan unveiled", Dhaka Tribune, 24 January 2021, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/health/coronavirus/2021/01/24/bangladesh-s-vaccination-plan-unveiled>, (Accessed on May 15, 2021).

<sup>16</sup> "Govt forms 26-member COVID-19 vaccine management taskforce", English Prothom Alo, 23 October 2020, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/government/govt-forms-26-member-covid-19-vaccine-management-taskforce>, (Accessed on May 15, 2021).

Source: National Deployment and Vaccination Plan for COVID-19 Vaccines in Bangladesh

## Updates on Covid-19 vaccines in Bangladesh

The COVID-19 vaccination drive in Bangladesh began on January 27, 2021 with the inauguration by the Prime Minister, while country-wide mass vaccination started on 7 February 2021. As of May 15, 2021, against a target of 39,500,000 for 40+ age-group and frontline workers, about 7,151,979 people registered, 18.1 % of the target population. Approximately 9,469,422 received the 1<sup>st</sup> dose, of which 62.88% were male and 37.11% were female.<sup>17</sup> As of May 29, 2021, the number of fully vaccinated was recorded to be about 4.14 million, which covered only 2.5% of the total population.<sup>18</sup> 6.6% of every 100 people in Bangladesh are vaccinated.<sup>19</sup>

## Vaccine diplomacy and Bangladesh

The Bangladesh government deserves credit for planning ahead and procuring 70,00,000 doses to meet initial requirements. The vaccination program enhanced the image of the government dramatically during the initial stage.<sup>20</sup> As opposed to the experience of COVID-19 patient management, the experience of the early vaccine operation was widely lauded by the general public.

However, the procurement of the COVID-19 vaccines from a single source was mired with controversy since the very beginning. Bangladesh procured Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine COVISHIELD vaccines from Serum Institute of India (SII), allegedly at a higher cost,<sup>21</sup> under a tripartite agreement among Beximco Pharmaceuticals Ltd., Serum Institute, and the Bangladesh government. Expressing concern, an anti-corruption watchdog TIB called for the highest possible transparency in the vaccination process to check corruption, confusion, and controversy.<sup>22</sup>

The Private Industry and Investment Affairs Adviser of the Prime Minister and the Beximco Group's vice chairman Salman Rahman, who owns Beximco Pharma,<sup>23</sup> dismissed the criticism saying it invested to become the sole distributor of Serum Institute's Covishield vaccines in Bangladesh. This arrangement received the full

<sup>17</sup> "COVID-19 Vaccination Dashboard, 2021", the Government of Bangladesh, <http://103.247.238.92/webportal/pages/covid19-vaccination.php>

<sup>18</sup> "COVID-19 vaccine Bangladesh", Our World in Data, <https://cutt.ly/0nfD6a3>, (Accessed on May 31, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> "COVID-19 Vaccination Dashboard, 2021", the Government of Bangladesh, 31 May 2021, <http://103.247.238.92/webportal/pages/covid19-vaccination.php>, (Accessed on 31 May 2021).

<sup>20</sup> "An impressive start to Covid vaccination in Bangladesh", the Daily Star, 25 February 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/macro-mirror/news/impressive-start-covid-vaccination-bangladesh-2044789> (Accessed on May 31, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Manzur H Maswood, "Bangladesh pays 47pc more than India for Oxford vaccine", the New Age, 12 January 2021, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/127032/bangladesh-pays-47pc-more-than-india-for-oxford-vaccine>, (Accessed on 31 May 2021).

<sup>22</sup> "TIB calls for ensuring the highest transparency in procuring and distributing Covid-19 vaccines" (from Bangla), Transparency International Bangladesh, 12 January 2021, <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/beta3/index.php/en/media-release/6237-2021-01-12-13-44-12>, (Accessed on 31 May 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Beximco Pharmaceuticals made a profit of around Tk77 per Covid-19 vaccine brought from India after deducting all the related expenses, the Daily Star, 27 December 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/beximco-pharma-shares-perk-vaccine-deal-2017945>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

endorsement of the Prime Minister and the government paid US\$ 60 million as 50% as advance to Serum Institute to secure 30 million doses of vaccines, five million doses each month for six months, beginning January 2021.<sup>24</sup> Of this, Bangladesh received seven million commercial supplies from Serum Institute and 3.3 million doses as a grant from the Indian Government.<sup>25</sup> The vaccination of the first dosage was suspended on April 25, 2021, due to a shortage of supply from India.

It should be mentioned that the Chinese firm, Sinovac Biotech, agreed with the Bangladesh government to begin the trial of its Coronavac vaccine in July 2020. However, the planned trial didn't begin till October 2020 as the Chinese company demanded cost-sharing at the last moment, which was not in the earlier agreement.<sup>26</sup> China stated that India had meddled from behind to halt the trial of the Chinese vaccine.<sup>27</sup> After the Bangladesh government refused to co-finance the trial of the Chinese vaccine,<sup>28</sup> India seized the opportunity and sent two million vaccines as a gift to Bangladesh in January 2021 and thereafter, facilitated the deal with the Serum Institute.<sup>29</sup> As part of its humanitarian initiative, India began an international program called "Vaccine Moitri" to provide COVID-19 vaccines to friendly countries. As the next-door neighbor, Bangladesh was one of the recipient countries under this initiative.<sup>30</sup> During the early stages of the pandemic, India took another initiative to set-up a COVID-19 Emergency Fund under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), in which Bangladesh contributed about US\$ 1.5 million to fight the spread of the virus in the region.<sup>31</sup>

The COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy between India and China put Bangladesh in a difficult situation. Bangladesh's foreign and defense policies are now revolving around a 'fine balancing act' between three actors: India, the USA, and China.<sup>32</sup>

Recently, the vaccine tug-of-war turned into diplomatic 'hiccups' when the Chinese Ambassador warned Bangladesh not to join the "Quad" initiative stating that Bangladesh-China bilateral relations will "substantially get damaged" if Bangladesh chooses to join.<sup>33</sup> Bangladesh's foreign minister described the Chinese Ambassador's

<sup>24</sup> "Salman tells the vaccine purchase story", the Business Standard, 26 January 2021, <https://www.tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/covid-19-bangladesh/salman-attributes-pms-foresightedness-early-vaccine>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Rezaul H Laskar, "Bangladesh seeks speedy delivery of vaccines from India amid domestic demand", the Hindustan Times, 21 April 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/bangladesh-seeks-speedy-delivery-of-vaccines-from-india-amid-domestic-demand-101619021924134.html>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Shishir Gupta, "Chinese vaccine trial in Dhaka fell through. Its state media blames New Delhi", The Hindustan Times, 27 January 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/indian-meddling-torpedoed-china-s-vaccine-trials-in-bangladesh-chinese-media-101611737215412.html>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Leng Shumei, "India meddling behind halt of Sinovac vaccine trials in Bangladesh: source", Global Times, 26 January 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1214041.shtml>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Ruma Paul, "Bangladesh will not co-fund Sinovac's vaccine trial, health minister says", Reuters, 13 October 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-bangladesh-china-idUSKBN26Y265>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Shishir Gupta, "Chinese vaccine trial in Dhaka fell through. Its state media blames New Delhi", The Hindustan Times, 27 January 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/indian-meddling-torpedoed-china-s-vaccine-trials-in-bangladesh-chinese-media-101611737215412.html>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Ministry of External affairs, the Government of India, <https://www.mea.gov.in/vaccine-supply.htm>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>31</sup> Star Online Report, "Bangladesh contributes \$1.5million to Saarc Covid-19 emergency fund", 22 March 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/saarc-covid-19-emergency-fund-bangladesh-contributes-1.5-million-us-dollar-1884301>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>32</sup> "Is Bangladesh falling into a Chinese 'debt trap'?", DW, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-bangladesh-falling-into-a-chinese-debt-trap/a-49556829>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>33</sup> "China urges Bangladesh not to join US-led Quad alliance, warns of 'substantial damage'", BDNEWS24, 10 May



comment as “very unfortunate” and “aggressive.”<sup>34</sup> The USA has taken note of the Chinese diplomat's statement warning Bangladesh against joining the Quad and stated that the USA recognizes and respects Bangladesh's right to make sovereign decisions on foreign policy.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese English online newspaper Global Times defended the Chinese Ambassador's remark and cautioned Bangladesh further: “If the Quad really wants to bring Bangladesh in, then Dhaka has to weigh the damage the joining would cause to its economic development and national security.”<sup>36</sup>

Before this development at the diplomatic front, Bangladesh joined a China-led Emergency Vaccine Storage Facility for Covid-19 for South Asia, to counter vaccine shortages in the region.<sup>37</sup> India's exclusion in this collaborative platform was insignificant as it has the world's largest vaccine-producing facilities. The vaccine shortages forced Bangladesh to buy vaccines from China. This was also a form of a self-correction policy of the government by abandoning the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines from a single source.

It should be noted that China donated Sinopharm Covid-19 vaccines to Bangladesh a week before this official approval for procurement of Chinese vaccine.<sup>38</sup> On May 21, 2021, China announced that it plans to donate another 600,000 doses of Chinese COVID-19 vaccines to Bangladesh as a gift.<sup>39</sup> Bangladesh is also set to procure vaccines from Russia and will also be setting up plants to locally produce both Chinese and Russian vaccines.<sup>40</sup> Bangladesh is also set to receive more than 100,000 Pfizer vaccines by June under the WHO-GAVI alliance, known as COVAX.<sup>41</sup> From the COVAX program, Bangladesh is expected to receive about 127,92,000 vaccines.<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, the Bangladesh government's reluctance to approve the domestically produced COVID-19 vaccine called “Bongavax” developed by Globe Biotech Ltd., a private company, is shrouded with mysteries. After

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2021, <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2021/05/10/china-urges-bangladesh-not-to-join-us-led-quad-alliance-warns-of-substantial-damage>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>34</sup> Pranay Sharma, “Why was Bangladesh ‘warned’ by China against joining the Quad?”, South China Morning Post, 13 May 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3133383/why-was-bangladesh-warned-china-against-joining-quad>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Press Trust of India, “US Took Note Of China's Warning To Bangladesh Against Quad: Official”, NDTV, May 12, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/us-took-note-of-chinas-warning-to-bangladesh-against-quad-official-2439844>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Liu Zongyi, “Wooing Bangladesh to Quad against China not to help Bangladesh devt”, Global Times, May 11, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1223193.shtml>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>37</sup> “Bangladesh to join emergency vaccine platform with China”, the Business Standard, 22 April 2021, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-join-emergency-vaccine-platform-china-235879>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>38</sup> “Bangladesh plane carrying China-donated COVID-19 vaccines arrives in Dhaka”, Xinhua, 12 May 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/12/c\\_139940528.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/12/c_139940528.htm), (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>39</sup> “Sinopharm Vaccine: China to give another six lakh doses as gift”, the Daily Star, 22 May 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/sinopharm-vaccine-china-give-another-six-lakh-doses-gift-2096657>, (Accessed on 22 May 2021).

<sup>40</sup> “Bangladesh OKs local production of Chinese, Russian vaccines”, Anadolu Agency, 29 April 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/bangladesh-oks-local-production-of-chinese-russian-vaccines/2223951>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>41</sup> “Bangladesh to receive 106,000 doses of Pfizer vaccine under COVAX in June”, the Financial Express, May 19, 2021, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/bangladesh-to-receive-106000-doses-of-pfizer-vaccine-under-covax-in-june-1621391131>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>42</sup> “Bangladesh to get 1.28 crore vaccines from the COVAX programme”, the Daily Star, February 3, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/coronavirus-deadly-new-threat/news/bangladesh-get-128-crore-vaccines-the-covax-programme-2038805>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

a successful preliminary animal trial, the company was fully ready for the clinical trial,<sup>43</sup> but the company has yet to receive approval. It is worth mentioning that Globe Biotech's three COVID-19 vaccine candidates have been enlisted by WHO.<sup>44</sup>

During the early stages of COVID-19 in March 2020, a US\$3 Covid-19 rapid testing kit by Bangladesh's leading health center Gonoshasthaya Kendra fell into a bureaucratic quagmire. The official approval was not given citing the reason that it was ineffective to detect coronavirus, although the team leader of the kit innovators claimed it was highly effective to detect the virus.<sup>45</sup>

### Support of bilateral and multilateral agencies to tackle Covid-19 challenges

Several bilateral and multilateral development partners of Bangladesh provided both technical and financial assistance to the government of Bangladesh to tackle various COVID-19 related challenges which included the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines.

On May 21, 2021, The World Bank approved the distribution of US\$600 million to fund two projects in Bangladesh to help over 1.75 million poor and vulnerable people.<sup>46</sup> In early 2021, the World Bank approved US\$ 1.04 billion to respond to Bangladesh's COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>47</sup> The World Bank will provide an additional \$500 million to finance the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan (NDVP). Under the Covid-19 Emergency Response and Pandemic Preparedness Project<sup>48</sup> of the World Bank, Bangladesh will receive additional financing of US\$ 500 million to vaccinate about 54 million people.<sup>49</sup>

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) also approved \$732 million as emergency assistance to Bangladesh to manage COVID-19 challenges.<sup>50</sup> As of now, ADB has approved several credits to Bangladesh, totaling about

<sup>43</sup> Md. Kamruzzaman, "Bangladeshi firm applies for local vaccine human trial", Anadolu Agency, 17 January 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/bangladeshi-firm-applies-for-local-vaccine-human-trial/2112858#>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>44</sup> "Draft landscape and tracker of COVID-19 candidate vaccines", The World Health Organization, 21 May 2021, <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/draft-landscape-of-covid-19-candidate-vaccines?fbclid=IwAR2LJ7n7PTfM9seEMLRmQsUfAvGbKfKfXwDXmyLiK4pIIlilifPeB7tACaqc>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>45</sup> "Gonoshasthaya Kendra kit not effective in Covid-19 testing: BSMU", the Daily Star, 17 June 2020, <https://www.thedailystar.net/gonoshasthaya-kendra-kit-not-effective-covid-19-testing-1915921>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>46</sup> UNB, "World Bank approves \$600 million for vulnerable population in Bangladesh", Dhaka Tribune, 21 May 2021 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/05/21/wb-approves-600m-for-vulnerable-population-in-bangladesh>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>47</sup> "Bangladesh Receives Over \$1 Billion World Bank Financing for Vaccination and Responding to COVID-19 Pandemic", the World Bank, 14 April 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/04/14/bangladesh-receives-over-1-billion-world-bank-financing-for-vaccination-and-responding-to-covid-19-pandemic>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>48</sup> "Bangladesh: COVID-19 Emergency Response and Pandemic Preparedness Project", the World Bank, <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P173757>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>49</sup> "Bangladesh Receives Over \$1 Billion World Bank Financing for Vaccination and Responding to COVID-19 Pandemic", the World Bank, 14 April 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/04/14/bangladesh-receives-over-1-billion-world-bank-financing-for-vaccination-and-responding-to-covid-19-pandemic>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>50</sup> "Helping Bangladesh Recover from COVID-19", International Monetary Fund, 12 June 2020 <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/06/11/na-06122020-helping-bangladesh-recover-from-covid-19>, (Accessed



US\$ 653 million.<sup>51</sup> Last year, AIIB approved a loan of US\$100 million including the co-financing of US\$ 250 million with ADB to support the Bangladesh government's COVID-19 measures.<sup>52</sup>

UNDP Bangladesh estimated some US\$11.5 million to support the Bangladesh government's efforts to control COVID-19.<sup>53</sup> The exact amount of the Australian Government's support to Bangladesh is unknown to the public. However, it will prioritize supporting the enhancement of Bangladesh's health security, stability, and economic recovery, focusing on protecting the most vulnerable, especially women and girls and people with disabilities.<sup>54</sup>

The US government's bilateral COVID-19 support through USAID to Bangladesh stands at US\$ 173 million.<sup>55</sup> UK Government's support to Bangladesh's Covid-19 support in monetary terms is unknown.

It should be mentioned that amid COVID-19, Bangladesh registered 11% disbursement growth in foreign aid, the total number of foreign aid during the 2019-2020 fiscal year stood at US\$ 7.2 billion.<sup>56</sup> However, Bangladesh needs to review how to manage COVID-19 related challenges as Bangladesh's rate of repaying foreign loans including interest has been constantly growing over 8 percent annually.<sup>57</sup>

## Health Ministry corruption

Governance challenges in Bangladesh's health sector are a recurring phenomenon. During the pandemic as more than nine incidents of corruption in the health sector were reported in five months alone beginning from March 2020.<sup>58</sup>

A TIB study on National Household Survey (2012) found that 40.2% of the recipients who sought health services from public institutions experienced irregularities and corruption. According to this survey, the estimated

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on 21 May 2021).

<sup>51</sup> "ADB Approves \$500 Million for Bangladesh's COVID-19 Response", Asian Development Bank, 7 May 2020, <https://www.adb.org/news/adb-approves-500-million-bangladeshs-covid-19-response>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>52</sup> "AIIB Approves USD100-Million Loan to Bangladesh for COVID-19 Response", Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, 28 August 2020, <https://www.aiib.org/en/news-events/news/2020/AIIB-Approves-USD100-Million-Loan-to-Bangladesh-for-Covid-19-Response.html>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>53</sup> "Beyond Recovery: Towards 2030", UNDP Bangladesh, <https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/coronavirus/support-to-national-response.html>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>54</sup> "BANGLADESH COVID-19 DEVELOPMENT RESPONSE PLAN", Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/covid-response-plan-bangladesh.pdf>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>55</sup> "THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT DELIVERS MORE THAN \$173 MILLION IN NEW FUNDING TO SUPPORT BANGLADESH'S COVID-19 RESPONSE EFFORTS AND POST-COVID DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC RECOVERY", USAID Bangladesh, 15 June 2020, <https://www.usaid.gov/bangladesh/press-releases/jun-15-2020-united-states-government-delivers-173-million-new-funding-covid-19-response>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>56</sup> "Foreign aid crosses record \$7B amid Covid-19", the Business Standard, 14 July 2020, <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/foreign-aid-crosses-record-7b-amid-covid-19-106306>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>57</sup> "Foreign aid crosses record \$7B amid Covid-19", the Business Standard, 14 July 2020, <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/foreign-aid-crosses-record-7b-amid-covid-19-106306>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>58</sup> Md. Sayeed Al-Zaman, "Healthcare Crisis in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 Pandemic", The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, Vol: 103, Issue: 4, <https://www.ajtmh.org/view/journals/tpmd/103/4/article-p1357.xml> (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

amount of bribes at the national level in this sector was BDT 703 million.<sup>59</sup> A long institutional inquiry by Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission<sup>60</sup> in 2019 found 11 areas of corruption that included recruitment, promotion, transfer, posting, providing healthcare services, and medicines supply.

Rozina Islam, a senior journalist of the leading Bangla newspaper daily Prothom Alo, recently uncovered four incidents of corruption in the health ministry. Her four investigative reports from April 12 to April 30 exposed the nexus among politicians, bureaucrats, and business people that have been running havoc on the health sector during the pandemic. She revealed cases of corruption and bribery in the recruitment process in a report published on April 12.<sup>61</sup> The day after her story was published, it was revealed that 1200 life-saving oxygen concentrator equipment, procured by were lying at the airport customs for 10 months. This equipment was procured by UNICEF Bangladesh under the World Bank and ADB funds.<sup>62</sup> Her third story centered on the lack of coordination between the DG Health Services and Central Medical Stores Depot (CMSD).<sup>63</sup> Her final story, published on 30 April, revealed that CMSD procured BDT 350 crore worth of medical equipment, without even signing any contracts with vendors.<sup>64</sup>

Recently Rozina Islam was confined by officials for more than five hours inside the ministry when she went to collect information. She was later harged under the Official Secrets Act of 1923, for allegedly attempting to “collect sensitive government documents and taking photos of them” at the health ministry. Rozina was brought before the court, which granted her interim bail three days later.<sup>65</sup>

This incident sparked a countrywide protest by journalists and the editors' community. This unprecedented harassment of female journalists was condemned by all sections in society. National and international human rights and media organizations, even the UN spokesperson, highly criticized the harassment of the journalist. They all demanded her justice and also for her release on bail. At least two full cabinet Ministers publicly expressed frustration about the handling of the Rozina incident by health ministry officials. In an interview with CNN, the Foreign Minister assured that journalist Rozina would receive fair treatment and judgment, emphasizing that Bangladesh's judiciary is very independent.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>59</sup> “Governance Challenges in the Health Sector and the Way Out”, Transparency International Bangladesh, November 2014, [https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/beta3/images/2014/es\\_health\\_11-6-14\\_en.pdf](https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/beta3/images/2014/es_health_11-6-14_en.pdf), (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>60</sup> “ACC finds 11 areas of corruption in health sector”, The Financial Express, 31 January 2019, <https://www.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/health/acc-finds-11-areas-of-corruption-in-health-sector-1548944450>, (Accessed on 21 May 2021).

<sup>61</sup> Rozina Islam, “Will give one crore now, to get more later”, the Daily Prothom Alo, 12 April 2021, <https://cutt.ly/UnhyAIr>, (Accessed on 22 May 2021).

<sup>62</sup> Shishir Moral, Rozina Islam, “Life-saving items are lying idle”, the Daily Prothom Alo, 13 April 2021, <https://cutt.ly/7nhy0b1>, (Accessed on 22 May 2021).

<sup>63</sup> Rozina Islam, “Lack of coordination in emergency procurement”, the Daily Prothom Alo, 20 April 2021, <https://cutt.ly/vnhuyN3>, (Accessed on 22 May 2021).

<sup>64</sup> Rozina Islam, “Irregularities in taka 350 crore emergency procurement”, the Daily Prothom Alo, 30 April 2021, <https://cutt.ly/mnhuvSiA4>, (Accessed on 22 May 2021).

<sup>65</sup> “Rozina Islam get interim bail”, the Daily Star, 23 May 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh/news/rozina-islam-gets-interim-bail-2097249>, (Accessed on 30 May 2021).

<sup>66</sup> “Rozina Islam to get fair judgment: FM Momen tells CNN”, English Prothom Alo, 21 May 2021, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/rozina-islam-to-get-fair-judgement-fm-momen-tells-cnn>, (Accessed on 22 May 2021).

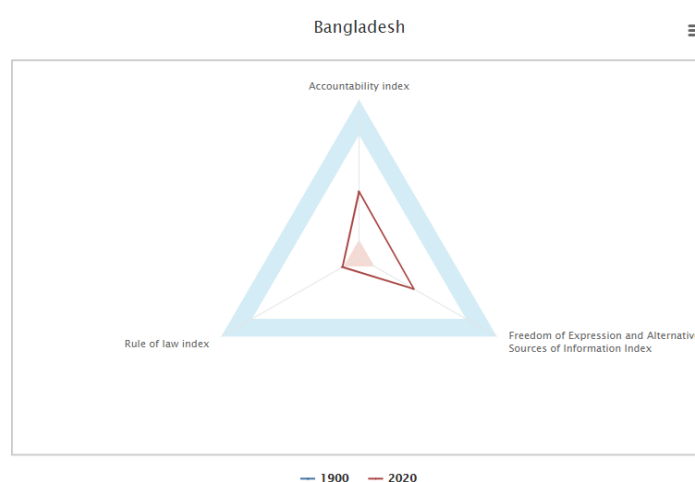
## The public reaction

Although the media highly praised the successful roll-out of the government's vaccine program, the media's enthusiasm soon turned critical when vaccine diplomacy nose-dived. Both political parties and media commentators criticised the government for relying solely on a single source to procure vaccines. The public opinion on issues such as the death of writer Mustaque Ahmed, arrest of a senior woman journalist Rozina Islam, vaccine diplomacy, and corruption scandals in the health ministry was 'fully negative' on both online and social media. The violent demonstration and mayhem by right-wing Hefajat-e-Islam supporters protesting the visit of the Indian Prime Minister during the celebration of the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence was another political event that dominated the public agenda for a long time. The public opinion on social media was divided along with the usual political polarization: secular versus Islamists.

## Analysis

In the light of the model presented in this working paper, it is evident that the tripartite relationship during the period under review among the state, the third sector, and the citizens swung between positive and negative polarities, depending on the government's reactions to public demand. The vaccine rollout was a short-lived success for the government. Although at times it seemed as if the government backed down, the subsequent actions indicate that the authorities made such a decision to buy off time to quell public outcry and soon consolidated its position through aggressive and repressive measures against the opposition. In such a situation, citizens become at a loss of whom to trust.

This line of argument is also supported by the Radar Chart of Varieties of Democracy's (V-Dem) 2020 ranking of Bangladesh. Only taking three key indicators into account, Bangladesh scored 0.11 in Rule of Law, 0.2 in Accountability Index, and 0.45 in Freedom of Information and Alternative Sources of Information index.



This may be reflective of a new brand of democracy which can be called 'Executive Democracy', denoting the overwhelming dominance of the executive branch, by ostracizing both the legislative and judiciary's check-and-

balance role.

In the anti-corruption literature, there is a term called ‘the state capture’ which is a corruption triangle with three axes: political leadership, the bureaucrats and businesspeople influence and capture the state by shaping the policy, legal environment, and economy of a country to their own interests.<sup>67</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed such phenomenon of ‘state capture’ to be fully hyper-active, at least in the health sector in Bangladesh.

## **Conclusion**

In June, Bangladesh will pass its t 2021-22 national budget unveiling new stimulus packages which will test the country’s economic resilience in the face of the second wave of the pandemic. While implementation of fiscal and monetary policies will be challenging in view of the flood situation during the monsoon season, the government’s popularity will also be tested heavily and it may come under severe strains if various democratic governance indicators slide further in the coming months. ■

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