

Bangladeshi Political Cartoons as Visual Rhetoric in the Context of Anti-Free Speech Laws

Aanila Kishwar Tarannum

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In

Communication

Natalia Mielczarek, Chair

John C. Tedesco

Cayce Myers

April 24, 2023

Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Editorial Cartoons, Free Speech, Visual Rhetoric, Bangladesh

Bangladeshi Political Cartoons as Visual Rhetoric in the Context of Anti-Free Speech Laws

Aanila Kishwar Tarannum

ABSTRACT

Guided by Sonja Foss' (2005) theory of visual rhetoric, this thesis is an exploration of political cartoons from Bangladesh, published between October 2016 - October 2020. The study is framed by the Digital Security Act (DSA), an anti-freedom of speech law enacted by the ruling Awami League government in October 2018. The cartoons analyzed in this study are divided into two sets – 16 published in a two-year period prior to the enactment of the DSA, and 16 published within two years after the enactment of the law. A criterion-based sampling technique was used to select cartoons published online by two Bangladeshi cartoonists' – Mehedi Haque and Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil. A thematic analysis of the cartoons revealed that corruption and threats to freedom of expression are recurring themes in both sets of data, while cartoons published pre-DSA also contain commentary on the prime minister and the government's feelings of contentment. Declining democratic practices is a major theme in cartoons published post-DSA. By utilizing the method of visual rhetorical analysis on six cartoons, the study delved deeper into the cartoons' construction of visual arguments for each theme. Finally, a comparative analysis of the themes and visual arguments in cartoons from each data set revealed that cartoons published after October 2018 are differentiated by disappearing characters and storylines, the use of indirect language, and implicit visual arguments, as well as increased usage of metaphors. Cartoons published post-DSA also have a sharper focus on specific news events as indicators of national issues. This study contributes to a growing body of research on the DSA, highlights how a specific medium of expression can be affected by anti-freedom of speech laws, and provides implications for media industries facing legal challenges.

Bangladeshi Political Cartoons as Visual Rhetoric in the Context of Anti-Free Speech Laws

Aanila Kishwar Tarannum

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Bangladesh, a country in South Asia, is currently following a democratic parliamentary system where Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina is the leader of the government. Her party, Awami League (AL) has been in power since 2008. Since AL's enactment of the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) in October 2018, a culture of fear has persisted within the country's media industry as well as the public, as the law's vague wording allows people to be charged for the mildest criticism of the government and the PM. Guided by the theory of visual rhetoric (Foss, 2005), this study is framed by the DSA in its analysis of editorial cartoons published online by cartoonists Mehedi Haque and Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil between October 2016 – October 2020. A thematic analysis of cartoons published before and after the enactment of the law shows the major topics that emerge from Bangladeshi political cartoons, such as corruption, threats to freedom of expression, contentment of the government, and declining democratic practices. Visual rhetorical analysis performed on one cartoon that best represents each theme explains in detail how the cartoons use visual arguments to convey their message. Finally, a comparison between the pre- and post-DSA data sets shows that cartoons published after October 2018 are marked by disappearing characters and storylines, the use of indirect language, and implicit visual arguments, as well as increased usage of metaphors. Cartoons published post-DSA also have a sharper focus on specific news events as indicators of national issues. This study adds to developing scholarship on the DSA, highlights how editorial cartoons are affected by anti-free speech laws, and offers insights on the media sector encountering legal challenges.

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Overview of Bangladesh’s Political System.....	4
Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act: The Crackdown Begins	7
Digital Security Act: Another Nail in the Coffin of Free Speech.....	10
Digital Security Act as a Tool for Silencing Citizens.....	12
Editorial Cartoons as a Mass Medium.....	14
Cartoons as Visual Political Communication	16
Cartoons as Political Visual Rhetoric	19
Cartoons as Visual Tools of Political Symbolic Resistance	22
Theoretical Framework.....	25
Methodology	28
Data Collection	31
Results.....	32
Themes in Cartoons Published between October 2016 - September 2018.....	33
Contentment of the Prime Minister and the Government.....	33
Freedom of Expression Under Threat.....	34
Corruption.....	36
Themes in Cartoons Published Between October 2018 - October 2020	39

Declining State of Democracy	39
Corruption	42
Freedom of Expression Under Threat.....	44
Visual Representation of Themes in Cartoons Published Pre-DSA.....	45
Contentment of the Prime Minister and the Government.....	46
Freedom of Expression Under Threat Pre-DSA	48
Corruption Pre-DSA	50
Visual Representation of Themes in Cartoons Published Post-DSA.....	51
Declining State of Democracy	53
Freedom of Expression Under Threat Post-DSA.....	55
Corruption Post-DSA.....	55
Comparative Analysis of Editorial Cartoons Published Pre- and Post-DSA.....	56
Mehedi Haque’s Depiction of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.....	57
Explicit vs. Implicit Visual Arguments	60
Democracy as a Focal Point.....	65
Discussion and Conclusions	69
References.....	80
Appendix A.....	96

Introduction

On the evening of May 2, 2020, at the height of the pandemic in Dhaka, Bangladesh, cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore was picked up by plain-clothed Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) officers. Before getting handcuffed, muzzled with a monkey cap, and forced into a grey car, the last thing he saw was his house getting ransacked by the government's elite law enforcement agency (Islam, 2021).

Kishore was one of 11 people charged with "spreading rumors and carrying out anti-government activities" on May 6, 2020 (Islam & Saad, 2020). This group of eleven also included Kishore's friend Mushtaq Ahmed, a writer who died in custody in February 2021. Ahmed was severely tortured in jail and was denied bail six times (Manik & Mashal, 2021). According to the first information report filed upon their arrest, their crime was "knowingly posting rumors against the Father of the Nation, the Liberation War, and the coronavirus pandemic to negatively affect the nation's image and to create confusion among the public through social media and cause the law-and-order situation to deteriorate." (Islam & Saad, 2020). The cause behind Kishore's arrest was a series of editorial cartoons that criticized the Bangladeshi government's response during the Covid-19 pandemic.

These vaguely worded concepts of tarnishing the nation's image, deteriorating law and order, and spreading rumors against the long-deceased Father of The Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman are taken from the Digital Security Act (DSA) of 2018. The preamble of the DSA stipulates that the objective of the law is to "ensure National Digital Security and enact laws regarding Digital Crime Identification, Prevention, Suppression, Trial." (Digital Security Act, 2018) Although the ruling Awami League (AL) government claims that this law's purpose is battling cybercrimes, the DSA has been used to arrest 173 journalists between January 2020 and

October 2021 (Riaz, 2021). The editorial cartoons that led to Kishore's arrest were part of a series called "Life in the Time of Corona," wherein he depicted issues of national importance, criticized the government's (mis)handling of the coronavirus pandemic, and spoke up against the enforced disappearance of fellow journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol (Bergman, 2020). According to Bergman (2020), there was nothing in those cartoons that falls within the offenses for which the cartoonist was prosecuted.

While Kishore's case is one of the most recent and prominent instances of policing the medium of cartoons, Bangladeshi governments have been going after cartoonists since before the Digital Security Act was passed. In 2007, the interim government of Bangladesh ordered the arrest of Arifur Rahman for a cartoon published in *Prothom Alo* newspaper's satire magazine *Alpin*. *Prothom Alo* was and remains one of the most popular Bangla dailies in the nation – still, it faced severe backlash from the country's majority Muslim population for the publication of Rahman's cartoon, which was considered "blasphemous" for using the Prophet Muhammad's name in a joke ("Arrest Warrant against Cartoonist in Bangladesh," 2007). Rahman spent six months in jail under a criminal case, and he now lives in Norway under political asylum after receiving severe threats from religious extremists upon his release (ICORN, 2010).

These acts of suppression have been documented, protested, and criticized by Ahmed Kabir Kishore and his peers through cartoons, a unique form of political commentary. Cartoonists craft political realities through their creation of a political world occupied by "the imagined words and actions of real people and representative characters, and these commentators invite us to participate in the thinkability of their tableaux" (Edwards & Ware, 2005, p. 469). An analysis of cartoons through the lens of visual rhetorical theory can provide a summary of meaning that emerges from real-world observations and news accounts that allude to citizens'

perceptions of the government and its handling of national issues (Edwards & Ware, 2005). The popularity of research on editorial cartoons, at least in the Western-oriented body of scholarship, has largely mirrored the trajectory of the viability of editorial cartoons as a medium produced by staff cartoonists hired by daily newspapers. As their numbers has dwindled starting in the 1940s, so has the scholarship on the topic. However, editorial cartoons have seen a renaissance of sort with the advent of the internet and still remain on the fringes of political and visual communication research. The aim of this thesis is to bring them more into the mainstream. What is more, a thorough literature search shows that there have been no studies that analyze Bangladeshi cartoons in the context of the country's draconian Digital Security Act. Considering the growing number of DSA cases against cartoonists and journalists, it is important to dig deeper into how editorial cartoons operate within the Bangladeshi mediascape and what themes they represent to trigger such extreme measures from the government.

Guided by Sonja Foss' (2005) theory of visual rhetoric, this study aims to explore the visual themes that emerge in Bangladeshi editorial cartoons, particularly those posted on social media, both before and after the enactment of the DSA. More specifically, the study will take a closer look at the themes present in editorial cartoonists' visual depiction of the government, and compare those themes between cartoons published pre- and post-DSA. Using the methods of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and visual rhetorical analysis, this research will be done on two sets of editorial cartoons – 16 published online between October 2016 and September 2018, and 16 published between October 2018 and October 2020. The dates bookmark the passage of the law and other developments relevant to repression of journalists and editorial cartoon artists in Bangladesh.

The global rise in authoritarianism is characterized by a limiting of citizens' freedom of speech (Riaz & Zaman, 2022). Operating within a tumultuous media landscape, Bangladeshi cartoonists occupy an important discursive space wherein they use different metaphors, caricatures and visual signifiers to editorialize stories on the government (Eko, 2010). This study contributes to a growing body of literature concerning the Digital Security Act of 2018, but none with editorial cartoons in mind. While scholars have researched on the legal implications of the DSA, its effects on journalists and its impact on the way the media operates in the country remain grossly understudied. As the ruling Awami League cracks down on cartoonists in an attempt to muzzle their right to criticize the government – a right spelled out in the Bangladeshi constitution – this study documents and analyzes the themes and visual portrayal of the Bangladeshi government within editorial cartoons to provide deeper insights into the medium as a vibrant voice within the country's public discourse.

Overview of Bangladesh's Political System

Bangladesh, a low-lying, riverine country located in South Asia within the Indian subcontinent, celebrated its 50th year of independence in December 2021. The country gained its independence from Pakistan in 1971, although it has existed for centuries – as a part of the Mughal Empire, as a British colony, and then as the eastern province of Pakistan between the years of 1947-1971 (Riaz & Rahman, 2016). The country covers an area of 147,570 square kilometers, making it about as big as the U. S. state of Georgia. Bangladesh shares almost all of its borders with India, except for a short south-eastern frontier with Myanmar and a southern coastline on the Bay of Bengal. With an estimated population of about 165 million, Bangladesh is the most densely populated country globally, excluding city-states such as Singapore, Bahrain, and the Vatican (Riaz & Rahman, 2016).

Bangladesh is also one of the largest media markets in Asia (International Media Support, 2021). In 2020, the country operated 45 private TV channels, 28 FM radio stations, 1,248 daily newspapers and hundreds of online news sites. But despite such a rich media landscape, according to a report by International Media Support, a non-profit journalism and media freedom advocacy and support group based in Denmark, “people remained far from reaping the benefits of such a robust media presence due to eroding civic space, political control over media ownership and licensing, and a light level of self-censorship (2021). Television remains the most frequently used news source in Bangladesh, with 84% of women and 65% of men saying it has become their main source of news (The News Media (and) Development Network, 2020). Close to 10% of respondents said they relied on Facebook as their go-to news source, compared with 8.4% naming newspapers and 5% news portals as their source for information. Almost a third of respondents said they used news media for more than an hour a day (The News Media (and) Development Network, 2020). The New Media (and) Development Network’s report echoes the findings by the Danish advocacy group above, showing that close to 80% of Bangladeshis have a low news literacy rate, meaning, they are not very familiar with the country’s media industries, systems and effects.

Bangladesh has witnessed a range of political systems, including a one-party system, a military dictatorship, an electoral democracy, and a caretaker government system (Ullah and Huque, 2020). In 1971, the country was established with the promise of being a liberal democracy – its founding leaders “endeavored to establish a society based on democratic values, such as respect for the rule of law, fundamental human rights, and the dignity and the worth of individuals” (Bari & Dey, 2019, p. 597). This vision was concretized through the incorporation of eighteen fundamental rights in Part III of the country’s 1972 constitution, which included “the

right of every citizen to freedom of speech and expression" and "freedom of the press" (Bari & Dey, 2019). However, 50 years down the line, the state has not been able to deliver its promise of freedom of speech to its citizens. The ideal society, as described in the 1972 constitution, "has been drastically weakened through the enactment of legislation for allegedly preventing cybercrimes" (Bari & Dey, 2019, p. 598).

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and members of her cabinet have repeatedly claimed that the country's journalists enjoy utmost freedom to criticize the government (BSS, 2018; BSS, 2019; UNB, 2022). However, the country's ranking in Reporters Without Borders' press freedom index indicates otherwise. Bangladesh ranks 162 out of 180 countries surveyed in the 2022 index, and the country saw a 10-point drop in its ranking since 2021 (*RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index*, 2022). According to Riaz and Zaman (2022), Bangladesh has moved toward a "hybrid regime" of democracy and authoritarianism since 2008. This has resulted in the judiciary system losing its independence and acting in concert with the administration. The two institutions most severely affected by this erosion of democracy are the electoral system and the media (*Democracy in Retreat*, 2019).

The crackdown on free speech in cyberspace and the limiting of citizen expression through the visual medium of cartoons is contextualized by Awami League's chokehold on the Bangladeshi electoral system. Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Bangladesh's founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has been in power since 2008. Under Bangladesh's "prime ministerial system," the PM remains beyond any scrutiny and accountability as she holds several offices (Riaz, 2020). She is the PM, the leader of the House, the leader of the parliamentary majority, and the chief of the party. According to Riaz (2020, p. 5), "The concentration of power in one office created the opportunity for the emergence of a

constitutionally allowed authoritarian leader.” Awami League saw landslide victories in the 2013 and 2018 elections, the latter of which was dubbed “farcical” by the *New York Times* (2019), while *The Economist* (2019) published an obituary for Bangladesh’s democracy, calling the electoral process “transparently fraudulent.” Following these allegations, Bangladeshi authorities chose to crack down on dissent instead of investigating irregularities in the election. On January 1, 2019, police arrested Hedait Hossain Molla, a journalist at the English-language daily Dhaka Tribune, who had reported that the total number of votes in his constituency was higher than the total number of eligible voters. Molla was remanded for three days under the Digital Security Act (“Dhaka Tribune Journalist Arrested,” 2019).

The DSA was enacted by Awami League in 2018, but the attempt to limit freedom of speech by passing draconian laws was not novel in the history of the country. Since the 2000s, the Bangladeshi state has made multiple efforts to use the law in order to police the press and citizens’ speech. The Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) enacted the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act in 2006, which acted as a predecessor to the DSA. Although BNP and AL claimed that these laws are meant to prevent cybercrimes, both regimes abused certain provisions of the laws to silence anti-government protesters, activists, cartoonists, journalists and citizens from exercising their right to freedom of speech.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act: The Crackdown Begins

On October 8, 2006, towards the end of BNP’s five-year tenure, the government used its majority in the Parliament to pass the ICT Act. The aim of the act was to legally recognize and ensure the security of information and communication technology (ICT Act, 2006). The majority of provisions in this law address various forms of cybercrimes, such as hacking, interference with computer systems or networks, and tampering with computer source code (ICT Act, 2006;

Bari & Dey, 2019). However, the provision that is of particular importance in the context of freedom of speech is section 57 of the ICT Act, which criminalized the publication and transmission of certain types of material via digital media (ICT Act, 2006). This law still remains active for preventing cybercrimes, but Section 57 was repealed in October 2018 once the Digital Security Act was passed (“Digital Security Act Draft Approved, Section 57 Repealed,” 2018).

Section 57 of the ICT Act authorizes the prosecution of any person who publishes, in electronic form, material that is fake and obscene; defamatory; “tends to deprave and corrupt” its audience; causes, or may cause, “deterioration in law and order;” prejudices the image of the state or a person; or “causes or may cause hurt to religious belief.” (ICT Act, 2006) Due to the vague, broad, and sweeping wording of section 57, the Act created a ripe opportunity for misuse of the law by distinct authorities (Rahman, 2014; Bergman, 2018). Seven years after the enactment of the ICT Act, this section was amended on October 6, 2013, by the current AL government to increase the maximum jail term for the offenses from 10 years to 14 years while the maximum financial penalty was increased from Tk. one crore to 10 crores (approximately USD 11,920,400). (Rahman, 2014; Bari & Dey, 2019)

Initially, the operation of section 57 was limited by the ICT Act to prevent its misuse. The Act required a warrant to make an arrest. Only 426 complaints were filed under section 57 from October 8, 2006, to October 5, 2013, and just a handful resulted in arrest or prosecution, report Bari & Dey (2019, p. 605). However, the 2013 amendment, in addition to increasing the punishment for offenses under section 57, removed the warrant requirement and made the offenses non-bailable, thereby removing the checks that were in place to prevent the abuse of this law (Bari & Dey, 2019). Between October 6, 2013, and September 20, 2018, Bangladeshi police filed nearly 1,300 charges under the ICT Act (Bari & Dey, 2019; Riaz, 2021).

Since the enactment of the ICT Act, a total of 152 people, including several journalists, have been arrested under section 57 for criticizing the government, political leaders, and others (Statistics on Arrest under Information and Communication Technology Act, 2021). Bangladeshi citizens have been arrested for criticizing the prime minister's clothes, her foreign policy, her party, or the actions of her cabinet colleagues ("Bangladesh: Protect Freedom of Expression," 2018).

Section 57 was consistently used by the Awami League government to violently put down its critics. Consequently, the opposition political parties, civil society activists, and national and international human rights organizations repeatedly called on the government of Bangladesh to repeal Section 57 (Bari & Dey, 2019). Ultimately, on September 19, 2018, Section 57 was repealed through the enactment of the DSA (Haque, 2018). However, the ICT Act still remains active without Section 57. The DSA, like the ICT Act, has been enacted for combating digital crimes.

Just a couple of months before the enactment of the Digital Security Act, one of the most prominent cases under the ICT Act was filed against globally renowned photographer Shahidul Alam (Anam, 2018; Lacy & Mookherjee, 2020). In early August of 2018, there were nationwide protests by students demanding road safety, which Alam had been covering in Dhaka. He was detained by plainclothed law enforcement officers on August 5, 2018, for criticizing the government and PM Sheikh Hasina in an interview with Al Jazeera (Safi, 2018). Alam was tortured in jail and denied bail five times. Upon mounting pressure from national and international rights organizations, journalists and intellectuals, he was finally released on bail after 107 days in jail. Shahidul Alam, a Time magazine person of the year for 2018, now faces up to 14 years in prison under the ICT Act (Eli Meixler, 2018; Gonzalez, 2019).

Digital Security Act: Another Nail in the Coffin of Free Speech

Since Awami League came into power in 2008, the party and its leader Sheikh Hasina has taken multiple steps to ensure that their regime lasts a long time and faces little opposition from all parties, including their political opposition and the media. In 2011, the party successfully managed to abolish the caretaker government system, which was a non-partisan government system that would organize the parliamentary elections to ensure a free and fair democratic system (Shehabuddin, 2016). Ironically, this is the same party that had fought tooth and nail to include this mechanism in the constitution (Shehabuddin, 2016). AL again saw a landslide victory in the national elections of 2013, when their primary opposition, BNP had boycotted the polls (Riaz, 2021). Leading up to the 2018 election, the government largely barred access to internationally recognized election monitors and foreign journalists who wanted to observe the polls (“Bangladesh’s Restriction on Observers,” 2018). Following the above-mentioned allegations, Bangladesh authorities chose to crack down on dissent using the newly enacted DSA instead of investigating irregularities in the election.

Theoretically, the DSA criminalizes a number of cybercrimes, including illegally entering information infrastructure; unlawfully accessing or damaging computers, computer systems, or computer networks; destroying or alternating of computer source code used on computer programs, systems, or networks; digital or electronic forgery and fraud; identity fraud, cyber terrorism, and hacking – but, as mentioned, the AL government has also used it as a tool of censorship. The DSA seeks to address a wider range of cybercrimes than its predecessor, but similar to the ICT Act, the DSA also penalizes the dissemination of various types of information online, which, according to Bari and Dey (2019, p. 613), “limits the enjoyment of the fundamental rights to speech, expression, and the press.”

Section 21 criminalizes “any propaganda or campaign” against the “spirit of the liberation war, the father of the nation [who also happens to be the father of the current prime minister], the national anthem, or the national flag” and carries a sentence of up to life in prison. Section 25 criminalizes publishing “offensive or fear-inducing” information or any content “tarnishing the image of the nation,” carrying a sentence of up to 5 years in prison. Section 28 and 31 criminalize publishing any content that disrupts “communal harmony” or “deteriorates law and order,” carrying a punishment of up to 10 years. (“Bangladesh: Mass Arrests,” 2020) Moreover, sections 8(1) and 8(2) give the Director-General of the country’s Digital Security Agency full power to put in motion the removal of any information published or disseminated through digital media that constitutes a threat to the digital security of the nation. Law enforcement can go through the Digital Security Agency to request the removal or blocking of any information published or disseminated through digital media on various grounds, such as disruption of the unity in the country, disruption of its economic activity, its security, defense, or public order, or causing racial hatred and hurting religious sentiments. (Digital Security Act, 2018) Thus, these two sections of DSA have created room for authorities to remove content from digital platforms on vague and nebulous grounds (Bari, 2019).

Phrases such as “spirit of the Liberation War,” “annoying, insulting and humiliating a person,” “tarnishing the nation’s image,” are vaguely defined in the law, with no examples of the types of information that could be considered offensive under the DSA (Article 19, 2019). Under this law, any sort of criticism of the government can be construed as propaganda, or misinformation. A strong argument could be made that any academic work that critically explores the human rights violations perpetrated by the AL regime could be considered as “tarnishing the image of the state.” The law also does not provide any precise definition for the

words “deteriorates law and order,” which allows the government to silence legitimate dissent on the ground that its dissemination negatively affected the law-and-order situation of the country.

(Bari & Dey, 2019)

Section 32 of the DSA particularly targets investigative journalism, as this genre of journalism relies heavily on secretly recording evidence using digital devices for exposing government corruption. This section prescribes a maximum jail term of fourteen years or a maximum fine of Tk. 25 lakhs (approximately USD 29,783.75) or both for the commission or assisting the commission of an offense under the Official Secrets Act (Digital Security Act, 2018). The Official Secrets Act – which is based on the colonial-era legislation of the same name – is aimed at protecting state secrets, using a computer, digital device, computer network, or digital network (Official Secrets Act, 1923). Under the guise of protecting state secrets through the DSA, the AL government is attempting to create legal grounds for punishing investigative journalists and safeguarding itself from scrutiny (Bari & Dey, 2019; Rashid, 2020). Finally, similar to its predecessor, Section 43 of the DSA empowers law enforcement agencies to search, seize, and arrest without seeking warrants from courts (Digital Security Act, 2018).

Digital Security Act as a Tool for Silencing Citizens

As many as 1,134 cases were lodged in 2021 against journalists and alleged government critics under the DSA, according to the legal aid nonprofit Ain-O-Salish Kendra. By comparison, 130 cases were filed in 2020 and 63 cases in 2019 (*South Asia Press Freedom Report*, 2022).

Ten newspaper editors faced legal charges under the act for critical reporting on leaders of the ruling Awami League party in 2020 (Islam, 2021). In an analysis of 890 cases filed between January 2020 to February 2022, Bangladeshi think tank Centre for Governance Studies found

that 207 journalists were accused and at least 31 were arrested between January 2020 to March 2021 (Riaz, 2021; “Unending Nightmare,” 2022).

Editors and journalists in the country had voiced their concerns about the law prior to its passage, and after it was enacted on October 8, 2018, there was widespread criticism and protests from both national and international media as well as human rights organizations. In a call to abolish the anti-freedom of speech provisions of the law, editors of national newspapers criticized the DSA for leaving a chilling effect on press freedom (Mahmud, 2018). Bangladeshi think tank, Centre for Governance Studies termed the DSA an “unending nightmare” that is causing a culture of fear and self-censorship to take hold over citizens (“Unending Nightmare,” 2022). In an interview with Reuters, newspaper editor Matiur Rahman Chowdhury said that he has had to make the tough decision of “killing reports” because publishing certain news would put reporters at risk (Paul et al., 2018). The DSA has severely affected the morale of Bangladeshi people – Ullah and Huque (2020) found that people are demoralized and want to migrate from the country because of the shrinking space for expressing discontent and dissent towards the government.

Satire writer Mushtaq Ahmed, who was arrested alongside cartoonist Kishore in May 2020, died in custody on February 25, 2021 (Manik & Mashal, 2021). Ahmed was denied bail six times. According to Kishore, Ahmed was severely tortured, even electrocuted, in jail (Islam, 2021). Ahmed had been arrested by the elite force RAB for his Facebook posts where he compared the Bangladeshi health minister to a cockroach. In another post he wrote, “When a society laments the loss of an economy more than the loss of human life, it doesn’t need a virus, it’s already sick” (Manik & Mashal, 2021). Protests against the DSA erupted in Bangladesh after Ahmed’s death (Mahmud, 2021), and Kishore was released about a week after Ahmed passed

(Islam, 2021). Kishore came out of jail with a multitude of health issues – he suffered an infection on his leg and in his ear after being severely beaten in custody (Feinstein, 2021). Despite the glaring injustices against journalists, cartoonists, and bloggers, PM Sheikh Hasina continues to defend the act, claiming that “journalists who do not provide false news need not be worried” (Blair, 2020, p. 144). However, Anis (2018, p. 911) writes that fake news is hardly a concern in the current Bangladeshi media landscape, and “in the wider context of free media versus government control, fake news is just one of the more visible tools to silence or really drown out legitimate media.”

The Bangladeshi government’s crackdown on people such as Kishore further attests to cartoonists’ ability to undermine the legitimacy of rulers and leave an indelible stain on their public image, which remains one of the most potent and feared attributes of the editorial cartoon (Danjoux, 2007, p. 247). While the Bangladeshi state has imposed censorship on traditional media since the country’s independence in the 1970s (Mohaiemen, 2013), the internet has democratized the media landscape for cartoonists — they are no longer bound by the editorial guidelines of traditional media (Danjoux, 2007). With the DSA, the government is now targeting free expression of cartoonists over the internet. In the next section, I take a closer look into the medium of editorial cartoons, expanding upon its role in political communication.

Editorial Cartoons as a Mass Medium

The bulk of the scholarship on editorial cartoons dates back to the 1980s, when some of the foundational works on cartoons were published. However, the existing scholarship on the topic tends to have a heavy focus on western cartoons. Since American newspapers increasingly began relying on syndication to source editorial cartoons, there has been much debate about the future of the medium, with many commenting that editorial cartoons are on the path to extinction

(Marlette, 2004; Danjoux, 2007; Edwards, 2007; Baumgartner, 2008). According to the latest data, there are about 30 staff cartoonists employed at newspapers across the United States (Tornoe, 2020). This is a stark contrast from the numbers at the beginning of the twentieth century, when about 2,000 people were employed as editorial cartoonists at U.S. newspapers (*The Golden Age for Editorial Cartoonists at the Nation's Newspapers Is Over*, 2011). However, despite such dramatically shrinking numbers, scores of editorial cartoonists now publish online through digital syndicates.

Danjoux (2007) argues that cartoons, as a medium, are not dying out, but rather getting reinvented within the democratized communicative landscape of the internet. While there has been a decline in the literature on American editorial cartoons, more and more scholars are analyzing the medium in countries such as Kuwait, Nigeria, South Africa, and Pakistan, that have previously had little representation in the field (Dodds, 2010; Eko, 2010; Ashfaq & Bin Hussein, 2013; Udayi Agba, 2013; Alkazemi & Wanta, 2015; Ashfaq, 2019). This thesis adds to the growing body of work on editorial cartoons from Asia, particularly South Asia, and explores cartoons within the new media landscape.

Although cartoons are closely associated with caricatures, the two are not the same (Dewey, 2008). “The term “caricature” is often used to label a cartoonist’s mode of expression rather than the cartoons themselves,” write Chen et al. (2013, p. 132) Caricatures can be considered an expression by means of “deviation,” according to art theorist Rudolf Arnheim (1983), or an “anti-portrait” of an identifiable person (Kotzé, 1988). This deviation is most commonly physiognomic, thus caricatures, as a form of visual satire, are defined by the ludicrous exaggeration of peculiarities or defects in persons or things (Bal et al., 2009, p. 231). “The function of physiognomic caricature is not to construct new realities but to amplify and repeat

existing characteristics to the point where signs cease to function in a purely iconic manner and begin to take on symbolic significance,” write Medhurst and DeSousa (1981, p. 216). Caricature can be considered an essential stylistic element of cartooning, along with the following elements:

line and form to create tone and mood; the relative size of objects within the frame; placement within the frame; relation of text, both caption and balloon, to visual imagery; and rhythmic montage within the frame which arises from the interaction of the rhetorical concepts of invention, disposition, and stylistic elements. (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981, p. 212)

According to Kotzé (1988), editorial cartoons are expressions of criticism or social protest in the form of drawings supplemented by text and dialogue. Some scholars hold the opinion that political cartoons are a subset of editorialized illustrations, as the broader genre of editorial cartoons encompasses both social and political commentary (Treanor & Mateus, 2009). Several other scholars use the terms “political cartoon” and “editorial cartoon” interchangeably, and this paper will be taking the same approach (Connors, 2005; Edwards & Ware, 2005; Mateus, 2016). Political cartoons do not follow the objectivity of news, rather they take an editorial stance on an issue (Connors, 2005; Treanor & Mateus, 2009). “In practice, political cartoons serve to offer a summary of a news story and judgment about it all in one,” write Treanor and Mateus (2009, p. 2).

Cartoons as Visual Political Communication

The satirization of politics through cartoons began as early as 1360 BC in Egypt, where an unidentified artist had ridiculed Ikhnaton, the unpopular father-in-law of Tutankhamen (Danjoux, 2007). As the world progressed from the printing press to digitized printing, the popularity of editorial cartoons kept growing, as the medium proved to be an easily understood,

accessible, and highly entertaining form of political analysis (Danjoux, 2007). Medhurst and DeSousa (1981, p. 39) write that the cartoon itself is a sort of gesture, “an editorial nod made at a particular point in space and time for the purpose of drawing attention to an idea.” Editorial cartoons freeze, or condense a whole sphere of reference into a singular depiction through the use of two-dimensional imagery and text (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981; Kotzé, 1988). These cartoons clarify a larger body of thought that appears in the written editorial, and in such cases “the cartoon may point to, exemplify, or grow out of the written text.” (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981, p. 39) Even if the cartoon has little or no connection to written text, the illustrations still function as a gesture as they “point to an idea and the cultural memories associated with that idea,” write Medhurst and Desousa (1981, p. 39).

Political cartoons are intended to transform complex and opaque events and situations into quick, accessible depictions that facilitate understanding, and in this process, cartoons “present society with visually palpable and hyper-ritualized depictions (selectively exaggerated portions of ‘reality’) that attempt to reveal the essence and meaning of social events” (Abraham, 2009, p. 119). Caswell (2004, p. 14) writes that political cartoons are considered both “opinion-molding and opinion-reflecting.” This is why they have been considered by some scholars as mini narratives that tell stories through the development of narrative arcs contained in single panels through the use of plot, characters, settings and a narrator (Edwards, 1997). The idea of cartoon narrativity is relevant to this project as it helps to position themes and the visual portrayals contained within them as stories told about the Bangladeshi government through the medium of editorial cartoons.

While Bal et al. (2009) consider cartoons as a form of satire, Kotzé (1988) writes the satirization and humor are not prerequisites for cartooning, adding that a successful cartoon can

very well be serious and solemn in tone. Bal et al. (2009) use a theory of caricature to analyze and explain political cartoons, proposing three necessary conditions for a cartoon to work – sympathy (the audience must identify with the satirical target), gap (a perceivable gap between image and reality that the audience must fill) and differentiation (where caricatures must possess unique physical or ideological attributes). In the rhetorical approach, cartoonists have four key resources available to create their content – political commonplaces; literary or cultural allusions; personal character traits; and idiosyncratic and transient situations (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982; Chen et al., 2017).

Cartoons are uniquely visual forms of communication (Connors, 2005; Edwards & Ware, 2005; Abraham, 2009), and they constitute “a largely visual symbol system” (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982, p. 96) that is differentiated from oratorical and written rhetoric (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981, p. 197). Emmison and Smith (2000) and Emmison et al. (2012) “conceptualize cartoons as part of two-dimensional (as opposed to three-dimensional) visual data, as well as lived and living forms of visual data” (Chen et al., 2017, p. 131). However, cartoonists have both image and text at their disposal (Abraham, 2009), and the texts of political cartoons function simultaneously as commentary, explanation, and revelation (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981).

Dewey (2008) in his book *The Art of Ill Will* outlines five major themes present in American editorial cartoons – presidents; wars and foreign relations; ethnic, racial and religious issues; local and domestic politics, and business and labor. Such themes are not exclusive to the American cartoon landscape, as multiple studies have found similar themes in cartoons published in countries such as Japan, Nigeria, South Africa, Kuwait and Pakistan (Feldman, 1995; Dodds, 2010; Eko, 2010; Ashfaq & Bin Hussein, 2013; Udayi Agba, 2013; Alkazemi & Wanta, 2015; Ashfaq, 2019). In an analysis of 153 political cartoons published in Nigerian newspapers, Udayi

Agba (2013, p. 4) found the following recurring themes: corruption, electoral malpractices, human right issues, squandering of public funds and misdeeds of politicians. In the process of visually depicting these themes, cartoons rely upon certain generic characteristics, such as condensation, repetition, dramatization, exaggeration and the caricature of leading personalities (Dodds, 2010, p. 118). These personalities can include religious figures, such as the Prophet Muhammad's controversial caricaturization in French weekly *Charlie Hebdo* and Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten* (Levey & Modood, 2009; Khan et al., 2021). But caricatures of political figures are perhaps the most commonly occurring trope within editorial cartoons. On the topic of cartooning political figures, Danjoux (2007) writes that political leaders are on the receiving end of the full force of cartoonist attacks. From Bangladeshi politicians' disproportionate reactions to being ridiculed to former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's cancellation of the newspaper *Davar*, it is evident that political cartoons wield the power to irk people in powerful positions. "The attention leaders pay to political cartoons may stem from their well documented association with political turmoil and revolution," writes Danjoux (2007, p. 247).

Cartoons affect on the image of politicians in readers' mind, and this impact can be favorable just as well as it can be unfavorable to the political figures (Ashfaq, 2008). As the medium simplifies complex political issues to reduce a politician, such as Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, to a caricature, theme, or object, the repetition of this practice only makes cartoons a more effective as a tool for political communication (Dodds, 2010).

Cartoons as Political Visual Rhetoric

DeSousa and Medhurst (1982) proposed four core functions of the political cartoon. Firstly, the entertainment function explains the ability of political cartoons to make readers laugh at specific situations and individuals. This is perhaps one of the most appealing aspects the

political cartoon – through a seemingly innocent, often subtle and refined humor, these cartoons are able to convey a message that is easily understood (Mateus, 2016). It has been argued that the entertainment function of the cartoon allows it to be embraced by readers quickly, without much reflection or critical resistance (Walker, 2003). However, this function has also caused political cartoons to be dismissed by some scholars as a medium that offers only a passing chuckle, and has little political significance (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982; Mateus, 2016). But the accessible, clearly understandable nature of editorial cartoons is what makes the medium a salient form of political commentary, and the way it presents a deconstruction of incidents can leave a serious impact on the public understanding of social and political issues (Mateus, 2016). From the Charlie Hebdo incident to the Bangladeshi state’s crackdown on cartoonists, it is clear that cartoons can be a polarizing medium and a powerful tool for social and political commentary that may incite reactions from religious groups and governments. Besides the use of humorous caricature, often directed at the powerful, cartoonists can “employ metaphors, narratives, and other devices to create imagined worlds inhabited by other characters in the political scene” (Edwards & Ware, 2005, p. 468). These imagined worlds go beyond the function of entertainment, “tapping into the process of creating a national imaginary, or fantasia, that substitutes ‘thinkability’ for reason in peoples’ means of organizing information” (Edwards & Ware, 2005, p. 468).

The second function of political cartoons, as proposed by DeSousa and Medhurst (1982), is aggression reduction. Through this function, political cartoons provide readers a sense of catharsis and an avenue to let out their frustration and irritation at certain events. According to Kuipers (2011, p. 70), humor aims for emotional and cognitive responses, thus cartoons can incite amusement and aesthetic pleasure as well as less lofty emotions of pride, aggression and

disdain, glee or scorn. Kuipers (2011, p. 70) calls cartoons “fundamentally ambiguous” because humor is inherently open to interpretation. Contrary to DeSousa and Medhurst’s (1982) assertion that political cartoons can deescalate conflict through their aggression reduction function, Kuipers (2011, p. 70) claims that cartoons are particularly effective in causing controversies because “disputes about the meaning of humor can never be settled.” “Humor aims for emotional as well as cognitive responses: amusement and aesthetic pleasure, but also less lofty emotions such as pride, aggression, disdain, glee or scorn,” writes Kuipers (2011, p. 70). Kuipers’ claims can be explained using the third function of political cartoons – agenda setting (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982). Similar to the agenda-setting effects of mass media, cartoons can assign significance to certain details through timely, up-to-the-minute editorializing of current events (DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982). Finally, political cartoons can function as framing by providing specific frames about certain issues within a limited space. Mateus (2016, p. 200) considers frames the second level of agenda setting, writing that “political cartoons put events within a field of meaning.” Frames can guide readers towards a specific interpretation. “Political cartoons offer frameworks under which readers can examine, approach and evaluate the political life of a society,” writes Mateus (2016, p. 200). In their review of 144 studies on political cartoons, Chen et al. (2017) found that this view of political cartoons as “cultural mirrors” is present in 44 percent of the literature. Through the functions discussed above, editorial cartoons become a “formidable force, and could serve as mirrors of the society depending on the circumstances and the issue involved,” writes Udayi Agba (2013, p. 1). Bangladeshi cartoons act as a cultural mirror that depict the political reality of the country in real time. Through the use of caricatures and humor, cartoonists in Bangladesh are able to editorialize news in an entertaining, accessible manner. Moreover, the topics that cartoonists choose to focus on, such as the government’s

response to the pandemic, serve the agenda-setting and framing functions of editorial cartoons by emphasizing certain issues to the public.

In the field of political communication, Diamond (2002) locates editorial cartoons within the subclass of political symbols. As political symbols, these cartoons use a range of potential rhetorical tools to delineate actors and processes of political and social culture (Edwards & Ware, 2005). Moreover, the fact that cartoonists can present their points through a “visually apprehended and quickly transmitted” medium, “cartoons have a distinct persuasive dimension contributing to the emergence and development of political themes or cultural topics,” writes Mateus (2016, p. 198). Cartoons on political events such as presidential events may be more memorable than other forms of media due to their instantaneous nature, use of metaphors and humorous commentary (Conners, 2014).

Like old photographs or newsreels, cartoons reveal a side of political culture not found in official memoranda, public speeches and newspaper editorials, theoretical tracts, and ideological pamphlets. (...) Cartoons thus constitute a vast archive that reveals not only fundamental shifts in political consciousness but also the ebb and flow of political sentiments among the thousands and millions who read them – sentiments left unvoiced by the silence of other texts and other archives. (Duus, 2001, p. 995)

Cartoons as Visual Tools of Political Symbolic Resistance

The political cartoon can be “informative, persuasive, and draw upon the commonsense understandings of a shared readership community in order to convey a particular interpretation and desire for action” (Dodds, 2010, p. 119). Such cartoons have the ability to undermine the legitimacy of rulers, and they can leave a lasting stain on politicians’ public image. This is one of

the most “potent and feared attributes” of editorial cartoons (Danjoux, 2007, p. 247). For as long as political caricaturization has been a practice within the media industry, “politicians have feared for their public image,” writes Buell (1988, p. 847). Most leaders consider cartoons’ power to delegitimize political figures a genuine threat, writes Danjoux (2007, p. 247), adding that “the history of the political cartoon is shadowed by attempts to silence their artists.” This is evident from the AL regime’s treatment of Bangladeshi journalists and cartoonists. However, the true power of journalism is often harnessed during such challenging times.

“Part of the power of journalism is its ability to assume a didactic posture when journalistic ideologies and paradigms come under attack,” writes Eko (2010, p. 6). Violent reactions against cartoons – as displayed by the Awami League government’s use of the Digital Security Act to crack down on cartoonists – pose existential threats to cartoons as a journalistic endeavor (Eko, 2010). According to Berkowitz and Eko (2007), journalists and cartoonists hold the view that in such dire circumstances, reporting and cartooning within the journalistic paradigm is “considered a sacred right.” Eko (2010, p. 24), in an analysis of African cartoons published in the post-Cold War era, found that during the national struggle against authoritarian abuse of power, the media was often “at the forefront of journalistic resistance against abuse of power and violations of human rights in Africa.” Cartoons were used a tool for resisting repressive regimes, they acted as symbolic demands for respect of the universal journalistic paradigm and the freedom of expression that is its lifeblood” (Eko, 2010, p. 24). Udayi Agba (2013, p. 1) writes that Nigerians, too scared to speak openly during a time when their freedom of expression was under attack, utilized “metaphors shrouded in innuendos presented in pictures, drawings, gestures, etc. to express their feelings and opinions.” Bangladeshi publisher Mahrukh Mohiuddin, when asked about media censorship, said that wit, satire, and subtlety are three

major tools used by writers to speak their minds during a time when draconian laws are challenging their freedom of speech (Saaz, 2017). Political cartoons have the power to positively or negatively shape public opinions (Udayi Agba, 2013). Cartoons, as a form of satirized political communication, occupies an important space in civil society and, “if applied strategically, can be an antidote to social and political challenges and to economic malaise.” (Khan et al., 2021, p. 459).

Such exercise of free speech in Bangladesh, as already noted, has been met with censorship and persecution by the authoritarian government. In his detailed exploration of the history of censorship in Bangladesh since the country’s independence in 1971, Mohiemen (2013) outlines that cartoons, movies, news reports, books, photographs, and even certain words have been subjected to censorship from the government. Shahidul Alam, a revered photographer and activist who was arrested under the ICT Act in 2018 and subsequently tortured in jail, had a photography exhibition titled “Crossfire” which was forcefully closed down by the government. The exhibition depicted extrajudicial killings by the government’s elite law enforcement agency, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). As the state moved on to censoring speech on the internet, the same elite agency arrested Ahmed Kabir Kishore in 2020 for his cartoons criticizing the government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Islam, 2021).

These challenges of censorship facing editorial cartoons are not new, but today, the medium for delivery of these cartoons has changed. Legacy media such as newspapers previously constituted the most effective way to reach the masses, but now, this reality has been altered with the rapid popularization of internet communication (Danjoux, 2007). The quickly transmissible nature of political cartoons is particularly suited for communication over the internet, which allows Bangladeshi cartoonists to publish their work instantaneously and without

being subjected to the editorial guidelines of traditional media. However, censorship laws have caught up to this, and the government has begun its crackdown on free expression over the internet. As the new media landscape gets subjected to censorship, cartoons, as an under-utilized focus in research on political communication, deserves further exploration and interrogation, especially in the context of academically underrepresented countries such as Bangladesh.

Rooted in the literature on the narrativity and cultural resonance of editorial cartoons as well as their political functions and guided by the political context of their production and dissemination in Bangladesh, this thesis aims to explore the following research questions:

RQ1. What themes emerge in Bangladeshi editorial cartoons of interest published online, before and within two years of the passage of Digital Security Act in 2018?

RQ2. How do the themes present in both sets of editorial cartoons visually represent the Bangladeshi government, its officials, as well as their policies and actions?

RQ3. How do the visual representations of the Bangladeshi government in both sets of the cartoons differ?

Theoretical Framework

Although rhetoric is an ancient discipline, it did not start incorporating the study of the visual medium until the later decades of the 20th century. Since then, there have been numerous studies that explored editorial cartoons from the rhetorical perspective, paying particular attention to the communication process of all types of images and their visual arguments (Medhurst & Desousa, 1981; DeSousa & Medhurst, 1982; Morris, 1993; Edwards, 2001; Treanor & Mateas, 2009). This thesis is guided by the theory of visual rhetoric as proposed by Sonja Foss (2005), acknowledging that the study of visual rhetoric encompasses a variety of approaches. What makes Foss's conceptualization of visual rhetoric of particular relevance here is her

emphasis on the symbolic signification powers of images. Editorial cartoons, as noted earlier, ultimately communicate their meanings in the symbolic realm through the use of visual rhetorical devices such as visual metaphor, hyperbole, and analogy.

In Foss's theory, the term visual rhetoric denotes both a visual object or artifact and a perspective on the study of visual data. In the first sense, visual rhetoric is created by individuals through the use of visual symbols for purposeful communication. In the second, it is a perspective that scholars apply to hone in on "the symbolic processes by which images perform communication," writes Foss (2005, p. 143).

As a communicative artifact, visual rhetoric is the actual image, which in this study, is the editorial cartoon, that is generated by rhetors, or in this case, cartoonists, when they use a combination of denotative and connotative elements to create visual symbols to communicate. These artifacts are tangible evidence, or products of the creative act and include a wide range of two- and three-dimensional materials such as paintings, photographs, sculpture, architecture and even furniture Foss (2005). This view of visual rhetoric has been used to study presidential candidates' activity on social media (Page & Duffy, 2018); monuments (Sheppard, 2020); advertising campaigns (Brunner, 2017); internet memes (Mielczarek, 2018); paintings (Kopper, 2014); movies (Chi, 2013); photographs (Holiday et al., 2016) and social movements such as Black Lives Matter (Cappelli, 2020). However, not every visual object qualifies as visual rhetoric within Foss's typology. Foss proposes three characteristics that turn a visual object into a communicative artifact of visual rhetoric.

The first of these characteristics is symbolic action. According to Foss (2005), visual rhetoric is a system of signs that guide interpretation from what we see to what we conjure up within our cultural repertoire of symbols and connotations – what Roland Barthes calls myth

(Barthes, 1977). When viewers can infer a meaning that is indirectly connected to what they see, then that object has the quality of being symbolic because it transcends the manifest into the latent. For example, Bangladesh's ruling party Awami League uses a boat as its logo. If a cartoonist depicts a sinking boat in their work, the reader can immediately connect the symbol of a boat to Awami League, and a sinking boat may be interpreted as a metaphor for the downfall of the political party. Such a depiction makes the boat, as well as the cartoon, an artifact of visual rhetoric.

The second characteristic of a visual rhetorical artifact is human intervention. According to Foss, humans must be involved in the generation of visual rhetoric as they deliberately and consciously make certain choices such as the selection of color and medium, to communicate through a visual artifact (Foss, 2005). Cartoonists make a host of choices on the stylistic elements of their work when drawing editorial cartoons – they choose color, form, size, and they come up with unique styles of caricature. Medhurst and DeSousa (1981) call the interaction of these stylistic elements a “rhythmic montage.” Human intervention in visual rhetoric also includes the process of interpretation by others. To continue with the earlier boat example, a drawn boat itself may not necessarily be a rhetorical artifact, but when it is used on the ballot, it is likely to be interpreted as a political symbol that connotes values associated with Awami League that uses it as its logo. In short, “Visual rhetoric, then, requires human action either in the process of creation or in the process of interpretation” (Foss, 2005, p. 144).

The final characteristic of visual rhetoric is the presence of a real or imagined audience at whom a piece of visual rhetoric is directed (Foss, 2005). A cartoonist is not editorializing political events solely for self-expression, although Foss (2005) acknowledges that self-expression can be a major motive. Political cartoons are being primarily created for

communicating with an audience. Foss (2005) sums up these characteristics in the following manner:

Visual rhetoric as artifact, then, is the purposive production or arrangement of colors, forms, and other elements to communicate with an audience. It is symbolic action in that the relationship it designates between image and referent is arbitrary, it involves human action in some part of the visual communication process, and it is communicative in its address to an audience. As a tangible artistic product, such a visual artifact can be received by viewers and studied by scholars as a communicative message (p. 145).

Methodology

This study utilizes the methods of thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013) and visual rhetorical analysis (Foss, 2005) in tandem to examine the themes and visual representations of the government and its officials and actions that emerge in selected cartoonists. Thematic analysis is a commonly used qualitative method in communication studies for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns [themes] within data. This method organizes and describes the data set in rich detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77). The researcher plays an active role in identifying patterns/themes and reporting them to readers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is done in six steps – firstly, the researcher should immerse themselves in the data set so that they become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. Secondly, the data should be coded in a systematic fashion so that the interesting and common features of each cartoon are revealed. In steps one and two of my thematic analysis, I gave complete and equal attention to each cartoon in my data set, coding them for visual and textual elements that

construct the portrait of the Bangladeshi government, its officials, and its actions. For example, codes included the color scheme, facial expressions, symbols, activities, clothing and other visual signifiers that constructed the visual representation of government officials, their policies and actions. I went through each cartoon sequentially and began noting the features and content of the images. I approached the coding process in a theory-driven manner, keeping the research questions in mind. I kept track of these codes by writing them down in a notebook and then typing them into a Microsoft Word document (see Appendix A).

In the third step of thematic analysis, which calls for merging codes into themes, I collated the emerging codes into potential themes. At this stage, I analyzed the codes to check how different codes can come together to form an overarching theme. For example, the repeated visual portrayal of the prime minister as a physically large, smiling presence with an exaggeratedly big nose and a smirk on her face, eventually lead to the identification of one of the dominant themes, namely the contentment of the prime minister theme. This phase ended with a “collection of candidate themes, and sub-themes, and all extracts of data that have been coded in relation to them” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 90). In the fourth stage, I continued my analysis to refine the details of each theme, and gradually formed the story that emerged from the themes about the Bangladeshi government, its officials, and its actions. Part of that process also included the decision to incorporate a few potential sub-themes into the main themes, given their almost identical visual arguments as those suggested in the dominant themes. In other words, I decided to let the few sub-themes be subsumed by the dominant themes to avoid repetition and false theme identification. I also considered the validity of each theme in relation to the data set by having my professor vet the codes, and checked whether the thematic map is an accurate reflection of the data set, depending on the theoretical framework that is guiding the analysis. In

the fifth stage, the names and definitions of each theme were finalized. I conducted and wrote a detailed analysis of each theme, identifying the story that is depicted by each theme by once again considering the visual elements and signifiers that constructed each topic. This process also helped in ensuring that each theme contributes to the overall narrative that is depicted across the entire data set without much overlap – a master narrative about the Bangladeshi government, its officials, policies, and actions. In the sixth and final step of thematic analysis, which calls for a formal report, I produced a detailed report of the findings that reflect the validity and merits of the analysis as a whole.

The thematic analysis method has been used to answer all three research questions, while visual rhetorical analysis supplements TA in exploring the second research question on the visual portrayal of themes. More specifically, TA helps to establish the broad narratives or themes that the cartoons engage when talking about the Bangladeshi government officials and their actions before and after the passage of DSA. I then relied on visual rhetorical analysis to distill the themes by pulling exemplars from the identified themes to discuss in more detail how the cartoons visually portray the government and related political issues they address.

Moving on to visual rhetorical analysis, Foss provides three aspects to explore in this process. Firstly, the nature of the image must be distinguished. According to Foss (2005, p. 146), “description of the nature of the visual rhetoric involves attention to two components — presented elements and suggested elements.” Presented elements of an image involve naming the major physical features that are present, such as space, size, shapes, and forms. Identifying the suggested elements involves delineating the concepts, ideas, themes, and allusions – Barthes’ (1997) myth – that the reader is likely to interpret from the presented elements. Combined, the presented and suggested elements produce the symbolic action of a piece of visual rhetoric.

The next aspect of visual rhetorical analysis is the image's function. Foss (2005) proposes that rhetorical scholars analyze the action that an image communicates without considering the creator's intentions and motivations for that image. For example, the function of Kishore's cartoons during the pandemic was to both criticize and memorialize the Bangladeshi government's mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic. The final aspect of rhetorical analysis of visual artifacts is the evaluation of the image's functions: how well it serves the functions of its audiences. My thesis is mainly concerned with the meanings and functions of the selected cartoons and therefore the analysis is focused on the first two steps of the method.

Data Collection

For this study, I collected the work of two Bangladeshi cartoonists – Mehedi Haque and Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil – active between 2016-2020. Both of them have documented their work on their Facebook pages and in online archives of the daily newspapers where their cartoons were published. Haque is employed as the staff cartoonist of the English daily *New Age*, while Amil worked as the staff cartoonist at the English newspaper *The Daily Star* between March 2010 and June 2019. *The Daily Star* is the highest-circulating English newspaper in the country and the newspaper's website claims that it is committed to covering issues regarding freedom of the press (*About Us*, 2014). I utilized a criterion sampling technique (Creswell, 1998), wherein the cartoons must meet specific criteria in order to be in the data set. The criteria for this study are: 1) the cartoons must be available online; 2) the cartoons must address government-related issues broadly conceived such as policies, responses to crises, actions of government officials, etc.; and 3) the cartoons must be published between October 2016 and October 2020.

According to Braun and Clarke (2013), medium size projects such as a master's thesis require a sample size of 1-200 when using secondary data sources such as online materials. For

this study, I looked at 16 cartoons – eight from each artist – published between October 2016 and September 2018 to make sure that the data set is robust enough to yield themes but confined enough to be manageable in scope. The beginning of this time period is marked by the Bangladeshi parliament’s passage of a controversial law called the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Law. According to Riaz (2021), this law was passed “to weaken civil society organizations, and ramped up cases against opposition activists.” Two years after the enactment of this law, in October 2018, the government passed the Digital Security Act. Therefore, the first set of data contains 16 cartoons published prior to the enactment of the DSA. The second set of data will contain 16 cartoons – eight from each artist – published between the two-year period of October 2018 and October 2020. The beginning of this time period is marked by the passage of the DSA. In order to maintain symmetry between the two data sets, this second time period is also of two years, therefore it ends in October 2020. The themes from each two-year period were compared to examine whether cartoonists’ depiction of the government has changed after the enactment of the Digital Security Act.

For the coding process, each cartoon was treated as an individual unit of analysis, with specific research questions and theoretical framework in mind. Each cartoon was analyzed and reanalyzed multiple times, and as I moved through the data set, multiple cartoons yielded similar codes. The first set of data, which consists of cartoons published between October 2016 and September 2018, yielded a total of 73 codes. The second set of data, which contains cartoons from October 2018 to October 2020, yielded a total of 64 codes. Three themes emerged from each set of data.

Results

RQI sought to determine what themes were represented in Bangladeshi editorial cartoons of interest. In order to answer this question, a thematic analysis was conducted on a total of 32 cartoons published between October 2016 and October 2020. The cartoons were broken up into two sets of data containing 16 cartoons each. The key themes identified in each set are discussed below.

Themes in Cartoons Published between October 2016 - September 2018

Three key themes were identified from the first set of data consisting of 16 cartoons published online between October 2016 and September 2018 (see Appendix A). These themes include: contentment of the prime minister and the government; freedom of expression under threat; and corruption. Taken as a whole, these three themes represent cartoonists Mehedi Haque and Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil's depiction of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, her cabinet, and the ruling party Awami League, as well as government-related issues broadly conceived such as policies, responses to crises, and actions of government officials and opposition parties. Each theme derived from the first set of data is examined in detail in the following sections.

Contentment of the Prime Minister and the Government

Seven cartoons from the first set of data depicts Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and various members of her cabinet with calm and happy expressions on their faces. Their caricatures are seen smiling, laughing, relaxing, and expressing satisfaction about the country's political climate, economy and economic development, policies introduced by the Awami League government, and the government's handling of public issues. Such depictions are frequently juxtaposed with scenarios of public suffering. For example, Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil draws a caricature of Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan as a towering figure with a toothy smile, showing a thumbs up while a road accident and criminal activities take place on the ground in a

cartoon published on July 31, 2018. In Mehedi Haque's cartoon from March 31, 2017, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is seen flying through a blue, cloudy sky with a serene, closed-eyed smile on her face while holding a cage that has the word "independence" inside of it. This implies that the PM is free and content while she plays an active role in the declining independence of citizens. Cartoonists' depiction of general satisfaction, contentment, and feelings of relaxation among the prime minister and members of her cabinet is contrasted with citizens' suffering due to lack of freedom, lack of food safety, unsafe roads, financial scams, and crime. In a cartoon published on July 13, 2017, Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil caricaturizes Food Minister Qamrul Islam as napping peacefully, with empty sacks of rice around him as there was a food crisis ongoing at the time. These depictions imply that the higher-ups within the Bangladeshi government remain indifferent to, or ignorant of the issues that are plaguing citizens, and therefore they are content with the progress of their work.

Freedom of Expression Under Threat

Six cartoons within the 16 cartoons published before the enactment of the DSA paint a grim picture regarding freedom of expression in Bangladesh. The cartoonists use both caricatures and captions in these cartoons. These cartoons depict the public and journalists as being in fear of mass surveillance, harassment, intimidation, torture, and persecution. Meanwhile, the prime minister, law enforcement officers, Awami League, and the party's student wing are shown to be playing an active role in muzzling free speech. There is a use of metaphors in these cartoons. For example, a CCTV camera located right behind a broadcast journalist signifies government surveillance of reporters in Haque's cartoon from April 2, 2017, while a pen, camera, and notebook are metaphors for free thought and expression in Amil's work from August 6, 2018.

In Mehedi Haque's cartoon from March 31, 2017, as discussed in the previous section, he directly shows that the concept of "independence" has been caged by the government. In another cartoon from August 4, 2018, Haque shows that protesters are being silenced through violent intimidation by law enforcers and Awami League's student wing – Bangladesh Student League (BSL). These depictions indicate that people's right to free expression is being challenged under Awami League's rule. These cartoons imply that Bangladeshi citizens are facing a lack of political freedom, lack of journalistic freedom, and surveillance, while a culture of fear reigns over the nation.

Haque's cartoon published on December 31, 2016, shows Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina gleefully welcoming the new year, again with a look of contentment on her face, while opposition leader Khaleda Zia is seen with a tired, distraught, disheveled look behind her. Zia is seen keeping a tally on the wall, which is a nod to the trope of prisoners using a tally system to keep track of their time in jail. This cartoon implies that Zia is counting the days until her political freedom is reinstated. Similarly, Amil depicts Zia as having taken the stand for trial at a courthouse in his cartoon published on January 31, 2018. Amil's depiction of Zia has a tired frown on her face, while two of her allies are standing beside her trying to weather a storm with a small umbrella. The same cartoon contrasts the opposition party's situation with Sheikh Hasina and two Awami League members appearing happy and content as they read out an absurdly long list of developments done by the ruling party. Such depictions indicate that the opposition party's political freedom is being suppressed while the ruling party is thriving.

In a cartoon published on August 6, 2018, Amil shows a camera, a pen, and a notebook being crushed by stick and sword-wielding creatures who have helmets for heads. The helmet-wearing creatures signify AL's student wing, BSL, who have a reputation for intimidating people

by showing up in helmets on motorcycles in large numbers. The camera, pen, and notebook depict the public's typical modes of expression, while also acting as metaphors for the concept of free speech. A cartoon by Haque, published on April 2, 2017, shows a broadcast journalist with a video camera. He appears anxious as there is a CCTV camera right behind him, monitoring his activities. These cartoons register a perceived lack of journalistic freedom and a trend of surveilling journalists and the public by the Bangladeshi government. The anxiety of the broadcast journalist, as well as the frightened look on the protesting children's faces in Haque's cartoon published on August 4, 2018, show that a culture of fear persists within the public.

Cartoonists also depict the public's negative sentiments over the diminishing space for free expression and protest. For example, in a cartoon published on May 8, 2018, Mehedi Haque draws a smiling Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina sitting on a throne with a pair of scissors, with a look of satisfaction on her face. She is seen cutting the cord off of a bomb that is buried underground. The bomb is labeled "Quota Reform Movement," which was a public movement for removing unfair quotas for freedom fighters' children in civil service jobs. Although the cord has been cut above ground, Haque shows that the bomb is still active, and once the cord burns out, the movement will resurface. This indicates that despite the government's efforts to squash protests, people are discontent, and dissent is brewing within.

Corruption

Seven cartoons within this data set depict government corruption. In this case, corruption encompasses financial and political corruption as well as moral and ethical corruption of the government, the prime minister, members of her cabinet, and law enforcement agencies. Cartoonists use scenarios and incidents such as price hikes of everyday goods, financial scams, displacement of poor people, enactment of policies that particularly favor government officials,

ministers enabling criminals and violence, and intentional bureaucratic delays to depict the perceived corrupted nature of the Awami League government. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and members of her cabinet, as well as law enforcement officers, are shown lying, enabling crime, sanctioning violence, abusing their power, and refusing accountability to the public. These portrayals of corruption are often juxtaposed with depictions of public suffering and public discontent.

In a cartoon by Mehedi Haque from January 13, 2018, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is seen speaking to the press with a joyful expression as she explains, using an upward-facing line graph, how Bangladesh is well on its way to becoming a developed country. However, in the background, Haque draws a downward-facing line graph that shows how incidents such as extrajudicial killings, price hikes of everyday goods, corruption, and enforced disappearances are contributing to the perceived decay of the state. Another cartoon by Haque, published on March 23, 2018, depicts the displacement of poor people from their homes as the government touts that the area will be “developed.” These depictions imply that the government is presenting doctored statistics and using “development” as an eyewash to distract people. Amil’s cartoon from February 6, 2018, depicts a scenario where a traffic lane is separated for VIP movement. In Bangladesh, the president and prime minister, as well as high-level government officials such as ministers qualify as VIPs, and traffic is frequently halted on the roads of the capital city Dhaka to ensure the safe movement of VIPs. Amil uses chess pieces to depict the different groups. The VIPs – the king, queen, and rook – are seen zooming through an empty lane, while the public – the pawns – are stuck in dense traffic, toppling over each other. Such depictions imply that the government is willing to abuse its power to enact policies that particularly benefit them and carry

out development projects while remaining ignorant of the public suffering caused by such policies and projects.

In a cartoon from July 31, 2018, Amil depicts Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan as a towering figure, who sports a thumbs-up and a toothy smile as a bus unlawfully crashes into a car and then attempts to flee. The cartoon shows law enforcement officers taking bribes from the bus driver as they allow him to escape. The victims of the road accident remain unattended. Another cartoon by Amil, published on July 18, 2017, shows how members of the Bangladesh Student League, the student wing of Awami League, are learning tactics for corruption and violence while they sit in a room filled with money, implying that they are sponsored by the ruling party to carry out violence. These cartoons imply that the government, its ministers, and the ruling political party actively backs criminals.

Multiple cartoons by both artists depict the incompetence of public officials in addressing political, social, and economic issues. For example, a cartoon published on August 19, 2018, shows Road, Transport, and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader leaning backward to dodge arrows, bricks, and dirt thrown at him while he stands on a stack of files that contain matters regarding the deteriorating road safety situation in the country. Quader is seen wearing a red cape, eyes closed with a peaceful smile on his face. Amil's cartoon from July 13, 2017, shows that Food Minister Qamrul Islam is napping during an ongoing food crisis. His blanket quotes him, saying "I am not an astrologer," as he had uttered these words to avoid any responsibility for public suffering due to the shortage of rice. These cartoons indicate that there is a perceived lack of accountability within the government, as ministers are willing to cause bureaucratic delays in enacting policies demanded by the public and are reluctant to take accountability for any harm caused to the people.

Themes in Cartoons Published Between October 2018 - October 2020

In the second set of data consisting of cartoons published between October 2018 to October 2020, three key themes emerged: declining state of democracy; corruption; and freedom of expression under threat. These themes represent the cartoonists' depiction of the prime minister, her cabinet, ruling party Awami League, government officials and law enforcement agencies, policies, and actions. The themes also represent cartoonists Mehedi Haque and Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil's commentary on the state of the country and its political systems. Each theme derived from the second set of data is examined in detail in the following sections.

Declining State of Democracy

Seven cartoons within this data set show a decline in democratic practices in Bangladesh. Along with the prime minister, members of her cabinet, Awami League leaders, and leaders of other political parties, the election commission and its chief are frequently caricatured in this data set, considering that the time period in which these cartoons were published coincided with national elections. Metaphors are often employed to portray the diminishing democratic space in the country. For example, in a cartoon from December 29, 2018, Mehedi Haque shows lines of white pamphlets hanging over an asphalt road. All the pamphlets belong to Awami League, as there is a black-and-white boat on each paper, which is the symbol of the party. A torn-up, bloody piece of paper that reads "democracy" is seen laying on the road. The cartoon suggests that democracy has been torn to shreds, and there is only one party controlling the entire electoral space.

Multiple cartoons portray the prime minister as controlling the opposition party, in this case, the Jatiya Party (translated as National Party), which is allied with Awami League. In a cartoon from November 14, 2018, Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil caricatures Prime Minister Sheikh

Hasina and Jatiya Party leader Rowshan Ershad as two large, smiling figures cozied up under one umbrella while smaller figures with placards surround them. This cartoon implies that the ruling party and the opposition are essentially operating as one during the election, and they are in alliance with many other smaller parties. In another cartoon published after the election on January 4, 2019, Amil draws Hasina contemplatively looking at a model of the Bangladesh Parliament building, with a thought bubble over her that reads “Opposition?” Two leaders of the Jatiya Party, GM Quader and HM Ershad, are seen crouching under the fabric of her saree, once again implying that the apparent opposition is in cohorts with the ruling Awami League.

Several cartoons portray the election commissioner as incompetent and suggest that the election commission is ineffective in carrying out free and fair elections. These cartoons also suggest that existing political parties and their members are fickle about their alliances. For example, a cartoon from October 18, 2018, shows Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) KM Nurul Huda with a flustered expression on his face while he holds a referee’s whistle in his hand. To his right, there are four mushrooms, each of them labeled as “Alliance-X,” “Alliance-Y” and so on. There are orange, green, and yellow frogs all over these mushrooms. Some of the frogs are seen sitting, lying down, or relaxing on top of a mushroom, while many others are seen jumping between the mushroom caps while money is changing hands. The CEC is seen struggling to control and keep track of these ever-changing alliances between the frogs. This cartoon uses the mushrooms as a metaphor for the burgeoning alliances between political parties prior to the election, while the frogs signify politicians who are willing to shift alliances as long as there is money involved. It implies that politicians are not guided by policy or ideology, rather they are motivated by money. Another cartoon by Amil published on December 25, 2018, shows the CEC in the middle of the frame, shrugging with his eyes taped shut while he proclaims, “Level

playing field all around.” To the left side, there is a man with a megaphone screaming at three regular citizens. The man is seen intimidating them with a sword. On the right side of the cartoon, there are two men with large sticks beating up an election campaigner and stomping on the pamphlets he was holding. This cartoon suggests that voters and campaigners are being intimidated by goons while the CEC remains blissfully unaware.

Through the portrayal of Awami League’s domination of the political space, mushrooming alliances that are formed on the basis of money, voter intimidation, the CEC’s incompetence, and the election commission’s ineffectiveness, cartoonists paint a bleak picture regarding the state of democracy in Bangladesh. Moreover, Amil’s cartoon from March 1, 2019, shows that citizens are relaxing on the day of the election by napping, cooking, playing music, going on a date, and reading books, while an anthropomorphic ballot box begs a street sweeper to vote. The sweeper has a speech bubble over his head that says, “Get lost.” The ballot box is frowning while a rain cloud hangs over its head. A man in the foreground is seen reading a book titled “History,” which contains a picture of a smiling ballot box. In the middle of the cartoon, the CEC peeks his head out from a manhole. He is sweaty and flustered. This cartoon indicates that citizens are reluctant to vote. By drawing a happy ballot box on the cover of a history book and juxtaposing that with a frowning ballot box on election day of the present, the cartoonist suggests that citizens think that the days of fair elections and true democracy are in the past, and therefore they are no longer interested in exercising their right to vote. The cartoons under this theme suggest that the democratic space for citizens is shrinking as Awami League squashes opposition, and politicians of all parties attempt to ally themselves with the ruling party.

Corruption

Six cartoons within this data set portray corruption in the forms of bureaucratic delay and incompetence, ineffective law enforcement, interference with the judiciary system, exploitation of poor people, harboring of criminals, lying to the public, and drug trafficking. The PM is not directly caricatured in these cartoons, however, members of her cabinet, members of parliament, law enforcement officers, and Awami League's student wing are depicted as corrupt. For example, a cartoon by Mehedi Haque published on March 23, 2019, shows a police officer and a policymaker napping behind large stacks of files labeled "plan" and "policy." Right beside them, there is a battered, bloody bus plying the road. The blood spattered on the front of the bus suggests that the vehicle was used to run someone over. The driver flashes a wicked grin as he drives by on the bus which has a "666" license plate – the devil's number. There is a page with tally marks on the dashboard, implying that the driver is keeping track of the number of days he has been driving the unfit bus without any repercussions from the police. This cartoon suggests that law enforcement officers and policymakers are ineffective in implementing the law and enacting policies to keep the roads safe, while criminals freely ply the roads. Corruption within the government regarding the enactment of effective road safety policies is a commonly occurring topic in Bangladeshi editorial cartoons. Amil draws Minister Shajahan Khan and Member of Parliament (MP) Mashiur Rahaman Ranga in a cartoon from February 18, 2019, where the two men are seen grinning smugly as they twist up a thin piece of paper with their fingers. The paper resembles a road with a line dividing two lanes. They share a speech bubble where the paper is laid flat. This implies that the minister and MP claim that they are enacting straightforward policies for road safety when in reality they are complicating the matter to cause bureaucratic delays. Another MP, Abdur Rahman Bodi, is caricatured by Amil in a cartoon from

January 30, 2019. He is seen lying about his involvement in trafficking yaba, a drug concocted of methamphetamine and caffeine. The incompetence of ministers is once again highlighted by Mehedi Haque in a cartoon from April 23, 2020, where he caricatures Health Minister Zahid Maleque as wearing a surgical mask as a blindfold. Published during the Covid-19 pandemic, this cartoon suggests that the health minister is blind to people's suffering, and paints a picture of his incompetence regarding the handling of the pandemic.

Another cartoon by Haque, published on March 14, 2020, suggests that the government is not only indifferent to public suffering, but it is actively benefitting from tragedies affecting the poor. This cartoon shows dense, shanty housing in a slum burning while large clouds of smoke emanate. There is a hand on the right side of the cartoon, holding a piece of sausage on a fork and roasting it over the slum fire. The hand is in a full sleeve shirt and coat, suggesting that it belongs to the powerful group of society. This cartoon shows that there are no efforts from the government to alleviate poor people's suffering, rather tragedies such as slum fires are exploited to benefit the rich and powerful.

Multiple cartoons paint Awami League and its leader as protecting criminals. A cartoon by Haque from December 23, 2019, shows a helmet-wearing man muzzling Lady Justice with red tape. As mentioned previously, the helmet is a common signifier for depicting members of Awami League's student wing. This cartoon suggests that the ruling party interferes with the judiciary system to ensure that those under their patronage are not brought to book for their crimes. While direct caricatures of the prime minister were not found within the cartoons under this theme, Haque draws a saree-clad figure from the knees down in a cartoon published on October 8, 2020. The figure is drawn as the stem of a tree, while its root system spreads well underground. There are leaves sprouting on the topsoil, each labeled "Noakhali," "Feni," and

“MC College.” This cartoon editorializes back-to-back rape cases that shook the nation. The labels on the leaves mark the places and districts where the cases were filed. In all three cases, the accused were Awami League members. By only drawing the lower part of a saree-clad figure as the stem of the tree that shades or protects the sprouting leaves, Haque delivers a rather cryptic message. The cartoon suggests that rapists are protected by the prime minister on account of their loyalty to the ruling Awami League, and crime is growing under her protection.

Freedom of Expression Under Threat

Five cartoons within the second set of 16 cartoons published after the enactment of the DSA suggest that freedom of expression is threatened in Bangladesh. These cartoons depict the shrinking space for political expression, the blockage of legal proceedings, as well as violent silencing of free speech and dissent through the use of direct imagery and metaphors. Mehedi Haque’s cartoon from December 29, 2018, shows rows of election pamphlets with only one symbol on them – a boat. There are no other symbols present in any of the pamphlets, indicating that only Awami League, whose symbol is a boat, is free to campaign during the elections. Amil’s cartoon from December 25, 2018, shows a political campaigner being beaten up by stick-wielding goons, once again alluding that free political thought is under attack.

Two cartoons by Mehedi Haque have a clear focus on the active silencing of speech via violent means. Published on January 15, 2019, Haque’s cartoon shows a man sitting in front of a computer monitor as he attempts to type on the keyboard. His eyes are popping as he winces away from the screen. He is sweating in fear. A hand holding a bloody baseball bat is seen protruding from the monitor, and it is raised to land a hit on the man’s head. The sleeve on the hand is teal green – the color of the uniform worn by Bangladeshi police. This cartoon directly alludes to the Digital Security Act, which criminalizes free speech on the internet. It suggests

that citizens are in fear of violence and legal repercussions for expressing their thoughts via digital mediums. In another cartoon from October 8, 2019, Haque equates the violent silencing of free expression to Nazism. He draws a bloody, broken speech bubble with weapons hovering over it. The weapons are branded with the swastika, the symbol of the Nazi party. The final cartoon within this theme, published on December 23, 2019, shows the muzzling of Lady Justice with red tape by a helmet-wearing man. In this cartoon, Mehedi Haque suggests that legal challenges to Awami League lackeys, such as the helmet-wearing members of the Bangladesh Student League, are also silenced. These cartoons paint a cynical picture regarding legal and political expression as well as citizens' right to free speech in Bangladesh.

Visual Representation of Themes in Cartoons Published Pre-DSA

RQ2 sought to determine how the themes present in cartoons published before and after the enactment of the DSA visually represent the Bangladeshi government and its officials, as well as their policies and actions. The themes of “corruption” and “freedom of expression under threat” were present in cartoons published both before and after the enactment of the DSA. The theme of “contentment of the PM and the government” also emerged from the cartoons published pre-DSA, while the theme “declining state of democracy” was present in cartoons published after the passage of the law. In order to dig deeper into the visual representation of the themes and understand how they were visually constructed through the symbolic action of the denotative and connotative elements, one cartoon that best represents each theme was further examined using the method of visual rhetorical analysis (Foss, 2005).

Contentment of the Prime Minister and the Government

A single-panel cartoon by Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil, published on January 31, 2018 (See Appendix A), shows a total of six people, standing in groups of three. On the left side, there are one woman and two men standing against a yellow wall. The weather appears to be sunny and pleasant, with flowers blooming and butterflies zooming through the air. The setting on the left side is exuding a warm and cheerful aura. To the leftmost side of the cartoon stands an elderly lady in a blue saree. She is wearing a grey shawl, a green sweater, and glasses. Her head is covered with the fabric from her saree. Her nose is exaggerated to look disproportionately large, as are her chin and glasses. She is recognizable as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. With her hands raised in prayer as per Islamic tradition, Hasina looks downwards at her palms while smiling. She appears content and happy, as if she were thanking God for the perceived success of her party and government. She is accompanied by two middle-aged men who are wearing white pants, white *panjabi* (traditional South Asian robe-like garment), black vests, and black shoes – an outfit worn by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding leader of Bangladesh, a founding member of modern-day Awami League, and Sheikh Hasina's father. Rahman's attire of white *panjabi* and black vest is considered a staple outfit, even a uniform for those involved with Awami League politics. One of the men is wearing a white hat, traditionally worn by Muslims for prayer. He is winking as he flashes a toothy smile and flares his nostrils. He is holding one end of a long piece of paper, resembling a receipt, that is marked as the "List of Development." The shorter, bald man has his eyes closed and a relaxed smile on his face while he holds onto the middle of the long document. The men's expressions are smug and content as they seem to be reading out an absurdly long list of successful development initiatives undertaken by the ruling Awami League government. The PM and her men appear to be congratulating themselves on the

perceived success of their party and the government as the ones who care about Bangladeshi people, their prosperity, and their well-being.

Right around the corner from the happy group, three people encounter a very different reality as they stand against a grey wall and appear to be battling a storm. It is raining heavily on the other side of the wall, with leaves and stray pieces of paper caught in the whirlwind of the situation. The grey and brown hues of the building, clothing and the mood indicate a rather subdued, even depressing atmosphere on this side of the political divide. To the rightmost side of the cartoon, there is an elderly lady in a pink saree who stands in what looks like a witness stand, as if she were on trial. Her hair is partially covered with the saree fabric, her big glasses resting above her exaggeratedly large lips. Her eyes are drooping, her mouth shaped into a frown on her face, suggesting a hint of sadness, frustration, and resignation. She is recognizable as Begum Khaleda Zia, former prime minister and the leader of the opposition party, BNP. Zia is accompanied by two men, both cowering, though the danger is not immediately visible or obvious. They have heavy dark circles around their eyes and frowns on their faces, indicating that they are anxious as they attempt to weather the storm with a single striped umbrella. One of the men looks like he is about to slip and slide down on the wet ground as he tries to catch a glimpse of the PM and her men around the corner. His companion, a scrawny man whose black sunglasses have slipped down to his nose, is looking sideways with a frown.

The cartoon shows a striking contrast between the ruling Awami League and the opposition BNP and the types of realities they are interested in and capable of providing to their constituents. While the PM and Awami League appear to be smug and pleased with themselves about the perceived “development,” the opposition looks afraid and anxious as they await the trial of their leader Khaleda Zia. Hasina is seen smiling and praying in satisfaction, while Zia is

frowning with an empty look in her eyes. Such a depiction indicates that Hasina is content with her work, while Zia feels hopeless. This cartoon exposes the PM and her party as braggadocious and self-congratulatory, making a mockery of the fabricated reality they have created for themselves wherein a barrage of development is taking place within the country. It is noticeable that the PM and her allies are so engrossed in the list of development and their prayer that they are not paying a modicum of attention to the reality just around the corner. Considering Awami League's direct hand in squashing opposing political voices (Ganguly, 2022), it can be implied that Zia and her allies' duress is one of the reasons behind the PM's contentment.

The state of Zia and her allies is particularly striking as it highlights the downfall of BNP. From serving as prime minister for two terms to witnessing the rise of Awami League and the slow demise of the opposing BNP, Zia's distress is not just caused by her lack of political freedom, but also by the downward spiral of her political career since Hasina's election in 2008. Since then, Zia has faced a number of legal challenges, including eviction from her home of 38 years in 2009 (Tusher & Azad, 2009), and a five-year prison sentence delivered in 2018 under a corruption case (Osborne, 2018). Therefore, her position in the witness stand both literally and metaphorically allude to her imprisonment and lack of political freedom.

Freedom of Expression Under Threat Pre-DSA

Under this theme, a single-panel cartoon by Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil published on August 6, 2018 (See Appendix A) was analyzed. Set against a bright red background, the cartoon captures the scene of an assault – there are two anthropomorphized helmets holding a machete and a bat as they pin down an ink pen with a camera for its head, resting on what looks like a notebook. The confrontation shows the violent silencing of free speech. The pen is seen pinned to the ground as it leans against a notebook with its right arm. Its left arm is raised, with a finger

pointing upwards at its attackers, in a feeble attempt to defend itself. One of the helmets has the pen pinned to the ground with its foot. The creatures have two hairy arms and legs, no torso, a devil's tail (curved tail with an arrow attached at the end), and helmets in the place of heads. The orange helmet is terrorizing the pen with a large stick. The blue helmet is holding up a sword in its right hand to threaten the pen. It also has a small stick in its left hand. The helmets and weapons suggest that these attackers represent members of the Bangladesh Student League, often dubbed "The Helmet Gang," a group notorious for showing up to public protests in large processions of motorcycles (Shawon, 2022). They have a reputation for attacking anti-government protesters and breaking up public gatherings while concealing their identities with visored helmets ("Bangladesh Student Protests as They Unfolded," 2018). Here, the helmets are fighting the news media represented by a pen, a camera and a reporter's notebook – the very people who are seen as a grave threat to the AL regime.

This cartoon exposes the Bangladesh Student League, the ruling Awami League's student wing, and its uses of violence to silence dissent. It is notable that the ruling party is not engaging in violence itself, rather employing its student wing and grooming the next generation of AL leaders to obey the system. By wearing visored helmets, the attackers conceal their identities, which ensures their anonymity should any of their victims attempt to file a case against them. However, the concealment of their identities also paints them as cowards who are willing to beat people up for exercising their right to free speech, yet too scared of being identified for their crimes.

On the other hand, the pen is not mightier than the sword. It is powerless against the helmets' strength and the physical attacks carried out with bats and swords as its only weapon are words and pictures. The best journalism can do, according to the cartoon, is to attempt to tell

them off. The weakness of the media in the face of attacks on free speech is striking – journalists are outnumbered and ill-equipped to fight against the violent repression, and in most cases they have to admit defeat when faced with such threats. The bright red background incites a feeling of alarm, indicating that the attack on free expression is an urgent, severe issue that directly threatens the longevity of an independent press.

Corruption Pre-DSA

This single-panel cartoon by Mehedi Haque published on January 31, 2018 (See Appendix A), shows a grey-haired, elderly lady in the foreground. She is wearing a blue saree, a string of pearls on her neck and a pair of pearl earrings to match, glasses, and a brooch shaped like a boat. Her hair is partially covered with the fabric of her saree. Her nose and chin are exaggeratedly large, acting as the focal points of her face. She is easily recognizable as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. She is sitting on a chair with four microphones in front of her, indicating she is at a press briefing. There is a boat to her right in the background. Hasina has a smile on her face and her eyebrows are arched as she is speaking jovially to reporters who are not visible in the frame. A text bubble that hovers above her shows that she is describing an ever-upward-facing graph line on the development of Bangladesh, with farsighted plans for more projected success into the year 2041. The light-yellow text bubble mentions “development” in black text four times, indicating that there has been a steady stream of development during Awami League’s decade-long rule. The boat on her brooch as well as the boat in the background is the symbol of her party – the ruling Awami League. Her expression indicates that she is happy and content with the development work done by her government and political party.

But, as the cartoon suggests, reality is quite different from Hasina’s account. Part of the cartoon’s background shows a steep downward-facing line on a less saturated, off-white graph.

The grey text on the background graph contains the following words and phrases: price hike, extrajudicial killing, disappearance, corruption. The cartoon implies that these are the real incidents and issues that have occurred during Awami League's rule, yet the prime minister appears oblivious to them as she presents a very different reality. The cartoon confronts Hasina's version of reality by offering what it holds to be the true state of affairs in the country: a downward-facing graph line that is affected by issues such as price hikes, extrajudicial killings, and so on. The pale color scheme of the downward-facing graph paints a grim picture of AL's supposed successes. This cartoon implies that the prime minister is lying to her fellow Bangladeshis and the world as she uses doctored statistics to paint a positive picture of development and progress in the country. Moreover, she is called out for not only ignoring but also masking the many issues that have arisen during her tenure. By adorning the PM with the symbol of her political party, the cartoon suggests that both Awami League and its leader's corrupt nature are contributing to the issues plaguing the country.

Since Hasina took over as prime minister after the 2008 election, there have been 2,644 extrajudicial killings (Bari, 2022). There have been 600 enforced disappearances since 2019 ("Bangladesh: 86 Victims of Enforced Disappearance Still Missing," 2021). The price of goods has increased by a maximum of 151 percent year-on-year on average (Khan, 2023). However, AL ministers have insisted time and again that there have been no extrajudicial killings or enforced disappearances under the party's decade-long regime (Rahman, 2022). The cartoon, by juxtaposing the two graphs, creates the same sense of dissonance in the reader that these contradictory statistics and remarks from the government incite, exposing the party's lies and disinformation.

Visual Representation of Themes in Cartoons Published Post-DSA

The following themes emerged from the second set of cartoons published between October 2018 and October 2020: declining state of democracy; freedom of expression under threat; and corruption. One cartoon under each of these themes is discussed in detail below to understand how they constructed the themes visually.

Declining State of Democracy

A single-panel cartoon by Mehedi Haque, published on December 29, 2018 (See Appendix A), shows nine rows of what looks like pamphlets hanging on strings that resemble clotheslines strewn from side to side across the drawing. The perspective in the drawing suggests that the rows continue beyond the cartoon's frame. The white pamphlets hang over a grey, asphalt road. At the center of each pamphlet, there is a black-and-white line drawing of a boat, the symbol of Awami League. The entire cartoon is drawn in shades of grey, black, and white, except for a small corner at the bottom right side that contains an off-white sheet of paper with "democracy" written on it in all capital letters. The paper is thrown on the ground as if it were trash. The edges are torn up, with red, blood-like splatters coloring the torn pieces and the road around them.

The lines of pamphlets hanging far into the distance resemble a scene at any typical Bangladeshi road during election season, when thousands of posters are plastered on walls and hung over the road by candidates to publicize themselves (Ahmed, 2019). However, a typical election cycle would have multiple political parties partaking, and the pamphlets that festoon local streets and roads would represent different candidates and party logos. Here, the cartoon implies that there is only one party left in the electoral space, as democracy has been torn to shreds, thrown away and blood-stained in the process. It suggests that there is no room for diverse political thought as competition has been completely eliminated. However, the blood spilled over the paper suggests that the demise of democracy did not take place without a fight. There was resistance to the decline in democratic practices, but it was a losing battle. The black-and-white hues of the cartoon paint a depressing picture of Bangladesh's political landscape for the electorate, suggesting that it has no choice but to vote for Awami League. The two-tonal

color scheme also implies that all color – all life – has been washed out of the country. By only using color in the bloody, torn-up piece of paper that reads “democracy,” the cartoon suggests that democracy could be vibrant, diverse, unlike the many pamphlets from a single political party.

Freedom of Expression Under Threat Post-DSA

A single-panel cartoon by Mehedi Haque, published on October 8, 2019 (See Appendix A), shows a barrage of weapons, namely two hockey sticks, a spear, a wooden stick, and two scythes, suspended over a battered, broken, bloody image of a speech bubble. Instead of appearing in its usual upright position, the speech bubble is lying prostrated in the foreground in a pool of what resembles blood. The hockey sticks and scythes have swastikas on them, a widely recognized Nazi symbol. The weapons are ready for another attack on the mortally wounded speech bubble that symbolizes free expression. This cartoon suggests that free speech in Bangladesh is being muzzled through violent fascism, though the audience does not see who holds the assault weapons. By only showing the weapons and not the assailants, the cartoon suggests that those that are attacking free speech are untouchable by both the media and the law.

Through the use of graphic imagery of blood and Nazi-branded weapons, the cartoon paints a particularly grim picture of the state of free expression in the country. It is noticeable that there is no entity visibly defending it, perhaps because it is impossible to fight against such powerful forces. The situation, in fact, is so dire that the cartoon equates the process of silencing free speech to Nazi policies of mass extermination of those classified as undesirable in society. Here, it is a free press and the news media that are on the receiving end of the brutality. The cartoon suggests that free expression of thought and critical reporting are undesirable acts in the country, and anyone engaging in these activities will be persecuted.

Corruption Post-DSA

Set against a light pink background, a cartoon by Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil from January 30, 2019 (See Appendix A), shows a man sobbing behind a microphone as he exclaims, “Free us from yaba.” Yaba is a drug concocted of methamphetamine and caffeine. Under a red prayer hat,

he has a full head of black-brown hair. His face has a spiky stubble, and exaggeratedly large mouth and cheeks that make his face look puffy. He is squinting his eyes as tears fall down his cheeks. The man is recognizable as Abdur Rahman Bodi, a member of the parliament (MP) representing a seat from the coastal district of Cox's Bazar. As the readers move from the left to the right of the cartoon, they realize that the man behind the microphone is actually the disembodied head of Bodi in the form of a balloon. The real Bodi is holding the balloon in his right hand as he stands to the side, grinning. He is wearing a *lungi* (South Asian men's skirt), a white t-shirt, and black sandals. This outfit is typically worn by streetside sellers who hang their goods in a basket around their necks. Bodi also has a woven basket around his neck, filled with small, red pills. He is flashing a toothy, ear-to-ear smile. The red pills he is trying to market represent the drug yaba. Yaba is peddled into Bangladesh from neighboring Myanmar through the Teknaf sub-district in Cox's Bazar (Saad & Rahaman, 2018). Teknaf falls within Bodi's constituency. The cartoon posits Bodi as a two-faced hypocrite and liar who publicly decries the drug crisis but privately contributes to it. Moreover, the prayer hat on the balloon version of Bodi paints him as a pious man, therefore magnifying his hypocrisy in engaging in the unethical act of drug trafficking. Bodi is accused and exposed of being actively involved in smuggling drugs while shedding crocodile tears to express his concern about the yaba crisis in the country. The cartoon reveals the corrupt, two-faced nature of Bodi, who occupied the Cox's Bazar-4 seat and remained under Awami League's patronage for a decade despite his documented involvement in drug trafficking (Saad & Rahaman, 2018).

Comparative Analysis of Editorial Cartoons Published Pre- and Post-DSA

RQ3 sought to compare the visual representations and themes that emerged from the two sets of cartoons. This study showed that there are three clear differences between cartoons

published before and after the enactment of the Digital Security Act in 2018. These differences highlight the change in cartoon depictions of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, point toward a shift from explicit to implicit visual arguments, and underscore cartoonists' developing commentary on freedom of expression and democracy. These differences are analyzed and discussed below.

Mehedi Haque's Depiction of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

A comparison between visual representations of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in cartoons published before and after the enactment of the DSA reveals a striking phenomenon, wherein cartoonist Mehedi Haque stopped drawing direct caricatures of the PM after October 2018.

In the set of cartoons published before the enactment of the DSA, four cartoons by Mehedi Haque that deploy Hasina's likeness show her face and body and make her immediately recognizable as the Bangladeshi prime minister. For example, in a cartoon from December 31, 2016, Hasina is seen with a toothy smile as she ushers in the new year, while the opposition leader Khaleda Zia is seen leaning on her knees as she draws tally marks on the wall with a distressed look on her face. A cartoon from March 31, 2017, depicts Hasina with wings as she peacefully flies through the sky holding a cage with the word "independence" inside it. Another cartoon from January 13, 2018, shows Hasina with a smiling, happy expression as she tells the press about the barrage of development that has happened in Bangladesh under her administration.

What is more, the depictions of the PM in cartoons published before the enactment of the DSA paint Hasina in a negative light. By juxtaposing her caricatured body and self-inflated ego with imagery of the opposition's perceived lack of political freedom, and the citizens' lack of independence, as well as by implying that she is presenting doctored statistics on Bangladesh's

development to the press and muzzling protesters, Haque's drawings offer direct and scathing criticism of her actions. The cartoons do not hold back. By distorting Hasina's face, body and reputation, the cartoons dispense harsh criticism of the head of state seemingly without hesitation.

That trend, however, changes after the passage of the DSA. In the second set of cartoons published between October 2018 and October 2020, Haque's cartoons do not use Hasina's caricature simply because they do not present her likeness except for one instance. There was only one cartoon in the first data set where Haque used a similar strategy. In that cartoon from August 4, 2018, the bust of a blue-saree-clad figure wearing a brooch with a smiley face is visible, but her head is not in the frame. Her hand is the central focus in the frame, rendering her a largely disembodied presence. The index and middle fingers are replaced with a police officer and a goateed man, with a baseball bat and a hammer in their hands. They are using the artifacts as weapons to intimidate a group of protesters in school uniforms. The police officer and the goateed goon are akin to finger puppets who move according to their master. The cartoon implies that PM Hasina is the puppeteer who controls law enforcement agencies and enables goons to violently squash public protests. Here, the prime minister is only alluded to through the use of visual elements that define her, but the audience members must know them to recognize the mystical hand.

Similarly, Haque's cartoon from October 8, 2020, draws a saree-clad figure, this time from the knee down, once again relying on the audience's imagination and familiarity with Hasina to complete the rest of the picture. In this rendition, she is wearing a green saree with a blue border. The cartoon draws her as the stem of a deeply rooted tree that is sheltering sprouting leaves on the topsoil. The leaves are labeled "Noakhali," "Feni," and "MC College" – all three

are locations where Awami League members were accused of raping women. The cartoon implies, or even accuses the PM of harboring rapists as long as they are Awami League members, allowing criminal activities to flourish under her protection. Apart from this cartoon from October 2020, Haque did not depict the prime minister in any way, shape, or form in the cartoons within the post-DSA data set.

The noticeable absence of the PM from most of Haque's cartoons signals a clear shift in the commentary regarding the PM and her policies. In cartoons published before October 2018, her caricature was frequently used in cartoons that editorialized issues regarding corruption, freedom of speech, oppression of the opposition, and squashing of protests. However, cartoons published after October 2018 do not show her face or body, even if they tackle the same issues. Between October 2018 and August 2022, 140 cases were filed against journalists, writers, opposing politicians and everyday citizens by ruling party members for allegedly defaming Sheikh Hasina ("Cases Under DSA," 2022). Of the 1,109 cases filed under the DSA during this time period, at least 280 cases were filed against journalists ("Cases Under DSA," 2022). The vague wording of the law, which uses phrases such as "tarnishing the image of the state," and "annoying, insulting and humiliating a person," to describe offences, makes cartoonists particularly vulnerable to being charged under the DSA due to their reliance on caricature, humor, and satire to editorialize national issues and mockingly criticize government officials and their policies. Perhaps it was in Haque's best interest to steer clear from using direct caricatures of the prime minister, considering the number of cases filed for allegedly defaming her. Haque's tactic to largely exclude the prime minister from his post-DSA cartoons coincides with the passage of the law, and the cartoonist's tendency to resort to more cryptic, covert, and indirect

depictions of Hasina alludes to the next point in this discussion, wherein cartoons drawn by both artists opted for more implicit rather than explicit visual arguments in their drawings after 2018.

Explicit vs. Implicit Visual Arguments

A comparison between the visual arguments made about the Bangladeshi government, its officials, and their policies and actions show that cartoons published prior to the enactment of the DSA contain more explicit depictions of issues such as financial and ethical corruption, violence, as well as a more direct criticism of the government's policies and (in)action. Cartoons published after October 2018, on the other hand, offer implicit visual arguments that are often cryptic and more metaphorical and symbolic in nature. For the most part, the cartoons still comment on issues such as corruption, freedom of speech, violence, national elections etc. but they take a more subtle route after the passage of the Digital Security Act.

As noted, the absence of PM Sheikh Hasina in Mehedi Haque's cartoons published after the passage of the DSA is an example of the cartoons resorting to indirect, implicit visual arguments that require a heightened level of cultural awareness and in-depth reading of the cartoons in order to recognize the caricatures and the commentary they are presenting. In Haque's cartoons published during the September 2016 - October 2018 timeline, he explicitly lampoons the PM's and cabinet members' contentment regarding the state of the country and juxtaposes that with public suffering and corruption. The cartoons make a rather bold and direct argument that powerful figures within the government can remain content as they are out of touch with the reality and/or intentionally ignorant of the issues that plague the public. For example, by showing the PM holding a cage with the word "independence" inside of it, Haque's cartoon from March 31, 2017, accuses Hasina of being directly responsible for the decline in the public's freedom to express themselves. Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil's work published prior to the

enactment of the DSA shows a similar trend. In a cartoon from July 13, 2017, he shows the food minister napping during a severe food crisis caused by price hikes. In a cartoon from July 31, 2018, Amil depicts Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan as a smiling figure that towers over a road where multiple criminal activities including a hit-and-run and bribery are taking place. Meanwhile, Road, Transport, and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader is seen as avoiding his responsibility of enacting effective road safety policies in a cartoon from August 19, 2018. All of these cartoons use direct caricatures without shrouding the characters in any mystery or metaphor, offering explicit criticism of the prime minister and her cabinet members' obliviousness to public suffering as well as implying that they directly have a hand in enabling crime and corruption. The messages conveyed by these cartoons are immediately decipherable to the reader.

On the contrary, the suggested messages and meanings in cartoons published after the enactment of the DSA are indirect and implicit. Although not indecipherable, these cartoons require the reader to rely on cultural associations, knowledge of current events, and familiar metaphors to understand the cartoons' visual arguments. In addition to only using a faceless partial likeness of the PM in one cartoon, Haque rarely draws other cabinet members, aside from one cartoon from April 23, 2020, where he shows Health Minister Zahid Maleque wearing a face mask as a blindfold. The cartoon contains no captions and no other elements in the frame beside the portrait of Maleque. With the cartoon providing no additional context to help with interpretation, the reader has to ponder on the meaning of what initially seems like a rather abstract drawing. The cartoon indicates that ministers are indifferent to public suffering and display ignorance when handling crises. Maleque, who here represents the Bangladeshi

government, is a prime example as he not only wears the mask inappropriately, but also uses it to shield himself from his constituents' plight.

Instead of depicting specific Bangladeshi politicians such as the PM and her cabinet members as directly responsible for crime and corruption, Haque's cartoons in the second set of data favor specific scenarios of exploitation, corruption, and muzzling of free speech with little to no use of caricatures. For example, a cartoon from December 23, 2019, shows the back of a helmet-wearing figure who is putting red tape on the mouth of a large, blindfolded statue. The visual argument in this cartoon is not clear at first glance due to the heavily zoomed-in framing and absence of front-facing human characters.

A closer reading of the cartoon allows one to see that the statue is of Lady Justice, who is often depicted with a blindfold to signify the judiciary's impartiality. The helmet-wearing figure signifies the Bangladesh Student League, the ruling party's youth wing. The implicit message of this cartoon is that the justice system is being muzzled when it comes to punishing criminal activities carried out by those affiliated with the ruling Awami League. Another cartoon by Haque published on March 14, 2020, shows large clouds of smoke emanating from a fire that broke out in dense, shanty housing in a slum. A hand on the right side of the cartoon is holding a sausage on a fork and roasting it over the fire. The hand, seen wearing a full sleeve shirt and coat, indicates that it belongs to the rich and powerful, while slums are populated by people living in poverty. Data suggest that at least 174 fires occurred in slums across Bangladesh in 2019, while 31 such incidents were reported in Dhaka alone in 2020 (Kamruzzaman, 2021). A deeper reading of the cartoon, paired with the context of frequently occurring slum fires allows the reader to understand that it is depicting a scenario in which the powerful groups of society, including the government and big businesses, are profiting off of the suffering of poor people –

they literally roast the poor to be able to feed themselves. Such noticeable absence of the prime minister, the lack of caricatures of other government officials, and the focus on often abstract scenarios to illustrate the point, make Haque's cartoons from the post-DSA timeframe markedly different from the work he published prior to the passage of the law, perhaps suggesting some hesitancy to engage once popular visual elements to criticize the government after the passage of the DSA. It is not to say that Haque stopped holding the Bangladeshi government to account for perceived corruption and other violations. Rather, the visual arguments became less obvious and direct, as if making them more difficult to be accused of violating DSA.

Amil, on the other hand, continued drawing full caricatures of the prime minister and other government officials in cartoons published after October 2018. But the contexts and scenarios in those cartoons shifted. His cartoons published before the enactment of the DSA contained direct commentary on broader social and political issues, such as corruption, violence, freedom of speech, road safety, and the government's inaction regarding the matter. Cartoons published after October 2018, however, have transitioned to commentary on specific news events that illustrate those broader issues. Moreover, the cartoons shift from direct and explicit commentary to more metaphorical and less obvious visual arguments. In a cartoon from October 18, 2018, Amil shows a flustered Chief Election Commissioner attempting to maintain control over a large number of frogs that are jumping in between mushrooms. Instead of directly conveying the message that politicians are fickle when it comes to alliances and willing to switch parties for money, Amil uses frogs as a metaphor. Moreover, the mushrooms symbolize the burgeoning alliances between political parties prior to the election that are devoid of ideological foundations. In another cartoon from February 18, 2019, Amil caricaturizes Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan and MP Mashiur Rahaman Ranga with toothy smiles as they hold up a thin strip

of crumpled-up paper. The paper has a dotted line through it, similar to the lane divider markings on a road. The thought bubble over their heads shows a smooth piece of the same paper. The cartoon contains no captions. The Bangladesh Road Safety Foundation reports that over 6,000 people died and more than 7,000 were injured in road accidents in 2021 (Seema, 2022). Following the death of two teenagers in Dhaka after a speeding bus hit them, there were nationwide protests across the country in August 2018. Since then, the government has failed time and again to enact policies to ensure safe roads, and officials such as Khan and Ranga who are in charge of overseeing these policy changes cause bureaucratic delays due to their vested interests. Amil's cartoon editorializes this particular phenomenon, with the thin piece of paper symbolizing a road.

Amil's cartoons published before 2018 accuse the food minister of being incompetent and ignorant while framing him under the broader issue of price hikes. Instead of using a thin piece of paper that symbolizes a road, a cartoon places a smiling shipping minister at the scene of a road accident, framing him as responsible for the deteriorating road safety situation of the country. Following the passage of the DSA in October 2018, the cartoons continue to highlight incidents of corruption, violence, political freedom, and undemocratic practices, but they resort to commenting on specific news to encapsulate these broader issues, and focus more on suggested elements instead of using presented elements for direct criticism. This is also demonstrated by Amil's increased focus on the election as a major event in the news cycle.

The shift from commentary and criticism on broader social and political issues to a micro-focus on specific news stories, along with a tendency to use more metaphors as a visual rhetorical device sets apart Amil's cartoons published after the enactment of the DSA from those published before the passage of the law. Considering the continued persecution of journalists and

cartoonists under the vague provisions of the DSA, it is perhaps in cartoonists' best interests to be less direct in their work in order to ensure plausible deniability in case they are accused of "tarnishing the nation's image" or "annoying, insulting and humiliating a person." By isolating specific incidents in cartoons, veering away from accusing the government of being responsible for broader political and social issues and refraining from caricaturing recognizable people's faces and bodies, the cartoonists are perhaps shielding themselves from accusations of defamation.

Democracy as a Focal Point

A major difference between cartoons published before and after the enactment of the DSA is the emergence of the theme "declining state of democracy" in the post-DSA data set. This phenomenon coincides with the 2018 national elections, which explains the heightened awareness in the cartoons regarding the country's political system. Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil's work in the post-DSA timeframe was almost entirely about this issue. Six out of eight cartoons drawn by Amil in the second set of data are concerned with the election, specifically the incompetence of the Election Commission, the bizarre alliances between the ruling party and the supposed opposition, irregularities in the election, and the public's indifference to exercising their voting rights. A striking difference in Amil's work published after October 2018 is his silence on issues of free speech. Mehedi Haque continues his commentary on freedom of speech post-DSA, but his concerns broaden to include commentary on democracy.

Multiple cartoons by Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil published before the enactment of the DSA touch specifically on issues of journalistic and political freedom. For example, a cartoon from January 31, 2018, depicts Hasina as happy and content, while opposition leader Khaleda Zia appears distressed inside a witness stand, weathering a storm. Another cartoon by Amil from

June 8, 2018, shows then-Finance Minister AMA Muhith holding up his index finger to his lips, shushing concerns about bank reforms, good governance, and corruption, implying that valid concerns of the public regarding the economy are being silenced. Finally, a cartoon from August 6, 2018, depicts two helmet-wearing creatures threatening a pen, camera, and notebook with violence, implying that Awami League's student wing plays an active role in violently silencing free expression. Cartoons on the topic of free speech published before the enactment of the DSA depict violence, silencing of public concerns, and a culture of fear persisting among journalists, politicians, and the public.

Following the enactment of the DSA, Amil goes completely silent on the repression of free speech. He produced no cartoons that directly refer to the perceived lack of political and journalistic freedom, nor did he make any commentary on the DSA in his cartoons. Considering that the timeline of the second set of data (October 2018 - October 2020) lines up with the 2018 national elections, Amil's work was deeply concerned with the state of democracy. Aside from pointing out the ridiculousness of huge alliances forming before the election and the election commissioner failing to keep track of them in cartoons from October 16, 2018, and October 18, 2018, Amil caricatures Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina alongside the supposed opposition, Jatiya Party in cartoons published on November 14, 2018, and January 4, 2019. The cartoon from November 2018 shows Hasina and Jatiya Party leader Rowshan Ershad cozied up under one umbrella with wide smiles on their faces, while smaller, smiling figures holding placards surround them. This cartoon implies that although Jatiya Party is touted as the parliamentary opposition, they are allied with the ruling party.

The cartoon published in January 2019, soon after the elections were held, shows Hasina contemplating as she looks at a miniature model of the Bangladesh Parliament building. A

thought bubble over her head reads, “Opposition?” To the right of the frame, there are two men, both Jatiya Party politicians, hiding under the fabric of Hasina’s saree. Once again, this cartoon implies that in essence, there is no opposition party in the Bangladeshi parliament. Amil’s cartoons on the election also depict the Chief Election Commissioner as oblivious to irregularities, voter intimidation, and violence against opposing politicians in a cartoon from December 25, 2018.

About a year later on March 1, 2019, Amil published a cartoon editorializing the mayoral elections in the capital city of Dhaka, where citizens are seen relaxing and enjoying the day as they remain uninterested in voting. A sad-faced ballot box with a rain cloud over it is seen begging a street sweeper to vote as the man tells the anthropomorphic box to “get lost.” A confused Chief Election Commissioner is seen at the center of the frame, peeking out of a pothole on the road, while a man in the foreground reads a history book with a picture of a happy ballot box on the cover. This cartoon implies that the golden days of democracy are in the past, and citizens remain uninterested in voting due to consistent irregularities in elections. The 2018 national elections in Bangladesh, which Awami League won by a landslide, were heavily disputed with serious allegations of voter fraud, intimidation of voters and opposition polling agents, as well as ballot stuffing (Manik & Abi-Habib, 2018; “Bangladesh Election,” 2018).

Mehedi Haque’s cartoons, on the other hand, depict issues of free speech both before and after the enactment of the DSA. In a cartoon from January 15, 2019, he draws a bespectacled man sitting in front of a computer screen with his hands placed over the keyboard. The man is flinching away from the screen as a hand with a baseball bat comes out of it, about to land a blow on him. The hand is seen in a teal green colored sleeve, which is the color of the Bangladesh Police uniform. Another cartoon from October 8, 2019, shows a battered speech

bubble lying in what appears to be a pool of blood, while weapons branded with the Nazi swastika symbol hover over it. The first cartoon is a direct commentary on the Digital Security Act as the law seeks to police speech on the internet. It indicates that the public is afraid to express themselves via the internet as it might result in being violently punished by the police. The second cartoon shows no subtlety in equating the silencing of free expression with Nazism and fascist governance, with the bloody speech bubble indicating that free speech is a dying concept.

But the cartoons do not stop there as they seem to expand their grievances about the state of democracy in Bangladesh by addressing other related issues. Haque's drawings make similar commentary as they move on to the topic of democracy. In a cartoon from December 29, 2018, for example, he draws lines of black-and-white pamphlets hanging over a road, each of them with Awami League's boat symbol on it. Meanwhile, there is an off-white piece of paper with the word "democracy" on it, lying in the bottom-right corner of the frame. The off-white paper appears battered and torn up, with red spatters on the corners. Without using any caricatures or captions, the cartoon subtly conveys the message that democracy is under threat as only one party dominates the entire country's political space, once again demonstrating the cartoons' transition to more implicit commentary published after the enactment of the law.

Whereas Haque's cartoons posit free speech as a central issue in commenting on democracy, Amil chooses to entirely shift his focus on issues regarding the election. This phenomenon might be explained in part by the fact that Amil's cartoons were made for *The Daily Star*, the highest-circulating English daily in Bangladesh, and one that has been subjected to multiple concerted attacks from the government. In 2016, the newspaper's editor, Mahfuz Anam, spoke about his regret over publishing uncorroborated corruption allegations against

Sheikh Hasina. Following his admission, Bangladesh's military intelligence agency ordered some of the largest telecom and consumer goods companies in the country to stop advertising in *The Daily Star*, causing the newspaper to take a huge hit on its revenue (Sattar, 2016; Rowlett, 2016). Anam was accused of defamation and sedition in a total of 79 cases (Sattar, 2016).

Since then, *The Daily Star* has faced threats from the government time and again. After breaking the news about an extrajudicial killing on June 1, 2018, the newspaper's website was blocked by the country's telecommunication regulatory authorities ("Star Blocked, Unblocked," 2018). As an employee of the newspaper, Amil's work was also under heavy scrutiny, and he quit his job at the newspaper to join academia in June 2019. Besides the cartoons analyzed in this study, most of his published work was not political in nature, indicating that following the enactment of the DSA, he was purposefully avoiding making any commentary on the PM, the government, its officials, and their policies. Amil also stopped posting his political cartoons on Facebook.

Ultimately, both Amil and Haque's cartoons serve as a mirror of the political scenario of Bangladesh at the time, and the increasing focus on the state of democracy indicates a growing concern about the decline in democratic practices in the country. One of the most striking features of their commentary is a feeling of hopelessness – visually constructed through depictions of voters' indifference to go to the polls, a sad ballot box of the present contrasted with a happy ballot box on the cover of a history book, a bloody and torn-up paper that reads "democracy," and a supposed opposition party cowering under the current government's rule.

Discussion and Conclusions

I started this thesis with the aim of exploring a niche medium of visual communication – political cartoons – from an understudied region of the world where the media and the public's

freedom of expression are under threat. Bangladesh's draconian Digital Security Act poses an existential threat to the country's media, enabling the government to charge writers, journalists, and cartoonists for the mildest criticism of the prime minister, her cabinet members, and their policies and actions. Considering the persecution of Ahmed Kabir Kishore, a cartoonist who was jailed and tortured after criticizing the government's (mis)handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, I was specifically interested in examining whether and how the medium of political cartoons has evolved before and after the passage of the DSA in October 2018. This study used thematic analysis to examine a total of 32 cartoons, published online on social media or in newspaper archives, by two prominent artists – Mehedi Haque and Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil. The data set was broken up to mark two separate timeframes – the pre-DSA set of data contained 16 cartoons, eight by each artist, published between October 2016 and September 2018. The post-DSA set of data contained the same number of cartoons, published between October 2018 and October 2020. The questions that was proposed in this study were concerned with the themes that are present in these cartoons, how these themes were visually constructed, and how visual representations of the government, its officials, and their policies and actions differ in the two sets of data. The Digital Security Act frames this analysis as a major threat to free expression in Bangladesh. While drawing any specific causations or correlations between the law and the contents of the cartoons is beyond the scope of this study, certain findings lead me to believe that the law had a clear effect on cartoonists' approach to editorializing political affairs and caricaturing certain political figures.

The key findings of this study and their contribution to the literature at a glance:

1. The analysis shows a marked difference in how the prime minister is being portrayed, if at all, in the pre- and post-DSA cartoons. While she appears in most drawings by Mehedi

Haque before the passage of the law, he references her only once after 2018, limiting her portrayal to a single visual signifier of the lower part of her saree. The study registers a concerted effort in the cartoons to disappear certain political figures from most of cartoons after the enactment of the law.

2. The thesis also demonstrates a significant shift in the construction of visual arguments in terms of their direct and explicit nature. Those published before DSA make bold, direct and often inflammatory claims in the form of indictments, attacks and accusations against the prime minister and other government officials and their actions, leaving very little room for guessing of their suggested premises. The post-DSA cartoons, on the other hand, engage more esoteric arguments they build from the use of symbols and metaphors. Readers are asked much more to rely on cultural connotations to decode them.
3. These changes point to a potential shift in the rhetorical work of editorial cartoons in Bangladesh, one that seems threatening to their long-standing role in society as vocal and often uncomfortable voices of government critique and accountability.

What follows is a more nuanced interpretation of the findings and their implications for the cartoonists, the cartoons and their readers in Bangladesh.

The cartoons analyzed in this study had a few obvious visual characteristics. All of them were single panel editorial cartoons, typically containing bright colors. There was heavy use of caricature in depicting known political figures such as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan, and Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda. While some of the cartoons contained textual elements in the frame, none of them were captioned. Through the use of caricature, text, humor, and irony, cartoons craft narratives that reconstruct, reimagine, and retell specific slices of Bangladesh's political reality during the four-year period of October

2016-October 2020. A prominent theme in cartoons published in the pre-DSA cartoons was “contentment of the prime minister and the government.” The cartoons frequently caricatured Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as a smiling, relaxed figure who is deeply content with the country’s development despite the public’s lack of freedom, the distress of her political opposition, nationwide protests, and issues such as extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Her cabinet members are depicted in a same manner as they are seen napping during a food crisis, ignoring complaints about unsafe roads, and avoiding accountability, appearing relaxed and smiling through it all. The cartoons suggest that those who hold the most powerful positions within the government can deliberately remain oblivious to the misfortunes of others as they sit in an ivory tower, self-congratulating themselves for the perceived successes of the Awami League.

The themes of “corruption” and “freedom of expression under threat” were present in both the pre-DSA and post-DSA sets of data. Bangladesh currently ranks 147 out of 180 countries in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (“Bangladesh Ranks 147th,” 2023). Within South Asia, only the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan’s public sector is more corrupt than Bangladesh (“Bangladesh Ranks 147th,” 2023). The country has consistently maintained low scores in this index since 2012 (*2022 Corruption Perceptions Index*, 2023). Therefore, it is not surprising that corruption remained a major concern in cartoons published both before and after the enactment of the DSA, wherein the artists accused the prime minister, her cabinet members, members of the parliament, the ruling party and its student wing, and the police of moral, ethical, and financial corruption. The cartoons also framed them as enabling crime, accepting bribes, presenting doctored statistics, lying to the press and the public, and causing deliberate bureaucratic delays.

However, considering the fact that the DSA was enacted in 2018, it might be surprising that threats to freedom of expression was a prominent theme prior to the passage of the law as well. It is important to note here that censorship of the media is not a novel phenomenon in Bangladesh. The ICT Act of 2006, enacted by BNP, already contained provisions that allowed censorship of communication via digital mediums. One of the most prominent instances of targeting journalists for free expression was a case filed against globally renowned photojournalist Shahidul Alam in August 2018 under the ICT Act. A total of 152 arrests have been made under the ICT Act since it was passed. Journalists and everyday citizens have been arrested for their criticisms of the government, politicians, the prime minister, her policies etc. Hence, it makes perfect sense for cartoons published before October 2018 to already be concerned about the threats to free speech. These concerns continued into the cartoons published following the passage of the DSA. Cartoons regarding the issue of free speech contain depictions of digital and physical surveillance by the government, violent attacks on journalists and protesters by the police and Awami League's student wing, repression of opposing political voices by the ruling party, and the PM's efforts of squashing nationwide protests.

Interestingly, one of the artists whose work I studied, went completely silent on issues of free speech after October 2018. Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil's work in the post-DSA data set was entirely concerned with the elections, the structure of political parties and the parliament, and the democratic system of the country. Considering these topics, a central theme that emerged from the cartoons published after the enactment of the DSA was "declining state of democracy." By depicting scenarios of voter intimidation, public's indifference to go to the polls, the incompetence of the election commission, fickle political alliances, and declining space for opposing political voices, the cartoons paint a depressing picture of democracy in Bangladesh.

According to The Economist Intelligent Unit's 2022 democracy index, Bangladesh ranks 73rd among 167 countries, and the country is classified as a hybrid regime of authoritarianism and democracy (Mahadi, 2023). The cartoons reflect the real-world scenarios of declining democratic practices that not only move the country towards authoritarian ruling by one political party, but also turn away citizens from exercising their voting rights due to feelings of hopelessness.

Cartoonists themselves are not spared from such feelings. Amil, whose work was produced as staff cartoonist for the national newspaper, *The Daily Star*, barely published any political cartoons after October 2018. From then till he quit his job in June 2019 to pursue a career in academia, most of his cartoons in the newspaper were concerned with financial and social issues that made no political commentary. As a former employee of the same newspaper, I have experienced firsthand the careful consideration that every single story and illustration receives in order to ensure that editors, reporters, and cartoonists do not get charged under the DSA. During the initial stages of my research when I was attempting to find credible sources of data, I had emailed another prominent cartoonist to ask if he had an online archive of his political cartoons. He replied with intentions of cooperating and sent me a few links of curated cartoons. When I let him know that I would need access to the full archive to maintain the integrity of my sample, he replied that he couldn't fulfil my request. He said, "In the last 6 years a lot has changed. Many cartoons done by me are not online anymore. Many newspapers/agencies have self-censored themselves and many have lost their online archives." (Syed Rashad Imam Tanmoy, personal communication, October 6, 2022) This small correspondence says a lot about the dire situation that cartoonists face, having to remove online archives of their work and refraining from explicit criticism of the government in order to ensure their own safety.

Despite such challenges, my project shows that cartoonists continue to find ways to get their message through to the public, shifting their commentary from explicit visual arguments to more implicit, coded commentary. This approach requires the reader to work a little harder and draw upon cultural associations, often esoteric metaphors, and knowledge of current events to understand a cartoon. Mehedi Haque adapted to the threat of defamation cases by refraining from caricaturing Sheikh Hasina in his cartoons. He also switched to editorializing specific news events that illustrate broader issues such as corruption and threats to freedom of speech instead of making overarching commentary on these topics through explicit references to Hasina and other members of her administration. Such measures are necessary for ensuring their own safety while continuing to pursue their craft.

The themes I found within both sets of data point out, criticize, and often shame elected officials for severe flaws within the Bangladeshi government, its policies, and the broader political system of the country. While a larger set of data from a longer time period would provide a more holistic picture of the themes that are present in Bangladeshi political cartoons, the findings of this study still manage to capture a fairly comprehensive snapshot of the prevailing opinions and sentiments during the time periods of interest. The method of thematic analysis was particularly useful in this study as it allowed me to zoom out from the details in each cartoon and view them as a coherent set of narratives that register the political, social, and cultural climate of particular moments in time. The method of visual rhetorical analysis, on the other hand, allowed me to zoom in to specific cartoons that represent each theme, and describe in detail the construction of visual arguments through both presented and suggested elements. Through the use of visual metaphors, such as a bloody speech bubble that symbolizes free speech; hyperboles, such as anthropomorphized, monstrous, and hairy creatures with helmets for

heads that present an imagined, exaggerated version of violent members of Bangladesh Student League; and analogies, such as a thin piece of paper that resembles a road, the cartoons exist as visual rhetorical devices that communicate their meaning symbolically.

The visual representations of the government, its officials, their policies, and actions contain familiar symbols that help the reader to understand the latent meanings of the cartoons. For example, Hasina wearing a boat-shaped broach while she speaks to the press represents her loyalty to Awami League, and allows the reader to infer that her views are not just her own, rather echoed by the rest of her party. Similarly, a violent creature with a helmet for its head compels the reader to draw upon familiar cultural connotations to infer that it is a depiction of Bangladesh Student League's attacks on protesters and journalists. Such qualities of symbolic action, paired with the fact that it was the cartoonists' conscious choice to draw a boat on Hasina's saree and a helmet on a monstrous creature's head, allow these cartoons to flourish as artifacts of visual rhetoric, even under the strict surveillance of the DSA. As proposed by Bal et al. (2009), the cartoons met the conditions of sympathy as the reader is able to identify with the satirical messaging in the images, and they are able to fill in the gap between the reality and the images using their cultural and political knowledge. The characters in the cartoons present unique physical attributes, allowing the readers to differentiate and identify each caricature. Thus, according to Bal et al. (2009), the cartoons are able to reach their intended function through the use of caricature and satire. The cartoonists whose work was analyzed in this study also make use of four key resources available to them according to DeSousa and Medhurst (1982). As rhetorical devices, the cartoons make use of political commonplaces, such as the widespread pamphleteering during elections; literary or cultural allusions, such as the swastika, a

Nazi symbol; personal character traits, such as Sheikh Hasina's affinity for blue sarees; and idiosyncratic and transient situations, such as fickle alliances during elections.

As cartoons have done for centuries, here too they serve as a barometer of people's sentiments about their government. A comparative analysis of cartoons published before and after the enactment of the Digital Security Act shows how a law can affect these sentiments. Disappearing characters, disappearing storylines, and the use of indirect, implicit language and increased usage of metaphors set apart the cartoons published after October 2018. Mehedi Haque stopped drawing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's face and body in his work, while Amil stopped any commentary on freedom of speech. Both artists increased their use of metaphors, coded their messages, and focused on specific news events instead of providing any sweeping criticisms of broader issues. Such measures by the artists act as an example of what can happen to a specific medium when anti-freedom of speech laws are enacted and enforced. Due to the intentionally vague wording of the law, journalists, writers, and cartoonists have to react accordingly to avoid charges.

These adaptations, however creative and necessary in the current political climate in Bangladesh, may also be a source of concern. The harsh law and its implementation in the country have forced cartoonists to tone down their opinions, potentially weakening the cartoons' editorial powers to hold the powerful accountable on behalf of the readers. If cartoons can no longer call government officials out on their perceived corruption and ineffectiveness, what functions do they serve in a society? Given the low media literacy in Bangladesh, the less explicit and more encrypted cartoons in the post-DSA era may be lost on the majority of the population, making them not as useful and relevant as in the years past.

In conclusion, Bangladeshi editorial cartoons serve their intended functions as cultural artifacts that reflect the sentiment of the time, but their potential for hard-hitting political commentary is limited by issues of censorship, surveillance, and threats to cartoonists' safety. The disappearance of Sheikh Hasina from Mehedi Haque's work, the silence on freedom of speech in Amil's cartoons as well as his increased focus on democratic practices, the cartoons' shift from explicit to implicit criticism and increased focus on singular news events as indicators of broader issues are all changes that are marked by the passage of the Digital Security Act in October 2018. While I cannot claim that the passage of the law and the shifting trends within editorial cartoons have a causal or correlational relationship, it is safe to assume that the law has left a permanent mark on the medium, especially considering the arrest statistics, cartoonists' sentiments, and the growing fear among the media and the public regarding the DSA. By examining the rhetorical power of cartoons in a political climate where cartoonists' safety is threatened, this study contributes to the scholarship on both editorial cartoons and free speech. It shows how the passage of an anti-free speech law can leave a clear effect on a specific form of political communication.

This study was limited in its scope, sample size, and timeframe, considering it was carried out for a master's thesis done over about a year. I used a criterion-based sampling technique instead of analyzing a full archive of cartoons by specific artists. Future research on the topic can work with larger data sets to allow for the discovery of additional themes. Moreover, other forms of media such as satire, investigative reporting, and even internet memes on politics can be analyzed using the methods utilized in this study. Research on the topic can be further enriched through in-depth interviews with cartoonists, journalists, and editors who are currently working in the Bangladeshi media industry. Freedom of expression is a basic human

right, and laws such as the Digital Security Act pose an existential threat to the media and the public. This study adds to a growing body of research on the DSA by offering insights into how a specific medium is affected by the law. There are many other regions of the world where people's right to free speech is threatened by government surveillance and draconian laws, and future research can examine such laws' effect on the media and the public from a cross-cultural lens to compare how media industries in different countries react to legal pressure.

References

- 2022 *Corruption Perceptions Index: Explore the results*. (2023, January 31). Transparency.Org. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>
- Abraham, L. (2009). Effectiveness of Cartoons as a Uniquely Visual Medium for Orienting Social Issues. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 11(2), 117–165. <https://doi.org/10.1177/152263790901100202>
- Ahmed, N. (2019, February 3). Politics of posters. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/chintito-1995/news/politics-posters-1696435>
- Ahmed, K. A. (2018). In Bangladesh: Direct Control of Media Trumps Fake News. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 77(4), 909–922. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911818002516>
- Alkazemi, M. F., & Wanta, W. (2015). Kuwaiti political cartoons during the Arab Spring: Agenda setting and self-censorship. *Journalism*, 16(5), 630–653. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884914533072>
- Anam, M. (2018, August 8). *Justice for Shahidul Alam*. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/frontpage/justice-shahidul-alam-1617550>
- Arnheim, R. (1983). The rationale of deformation. *Art Journal*, 43(4), 319-324.
- Ashfaq, A. (2019). Representation of the United States through political cartoons of Pakistan: Pre & Post 9/11 Image Construction. *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 56(2).
- Ashfaq, A., & Bin Hussein, A. (2013). Political Cartoonists versus Readers: Role of political cartoonists in Building Public Opinion and Readers' Expectations towards Print Media Cartoons in Pakistan. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2013.v4n3p265>

Bal, A. S., Pitt, L., Berthon, P., & DesAutels, P. (2009). Caricatures, cartoons, spoofs and satires: Political brands as butts. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 9(4), 229–237.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.334>

Bangladesh: Digital Security Act 2018. (2019). [Legal Analysis]. Article 19.

<https://www.article19.org/resources/bangladesh-analysis-of-the-digital-security-act/>

Bangladesh: 86 Victims of Enforced Disappearance Still Missing. (2021, August 16).

Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/16/bangladesh-86-victims-enforced-disappearance-still-missing>

Bangladesh election: PM Sheikh Hasina wins landslide in disputed vote. (2018, December 30). *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46718393>

Bangladesh ex-PM Khaleda Zia jailed amid clashes. (2018, February 8). *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42987765>

Bangladesh former Prime Minister guilty of corruption. (2018, February 8). *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/khaleda-zia-bangladesh-prime-minister-found-guilty-corruption-guilty-opposition-protests-dhaka-a8200121.html>

Bangladesh ranks 147th on Transparency International corruption index. (2023, January 31). *Bdnews24.Com*. <https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/7sjv3npl50>

Bangladesh student protests as they unfolded: “Helmet-wearing” men beat schoolchildren as cops stood and watched, say protesters-World News , Firstpost. (2018, August 6). *Firstpost*. <https://www.firstpost.com/world/bangladesh-student-protests-as-they-unfolded-helmet-wearing-men-beat-schoolchildren-as-cops-stood-and-watched-say-protesters-4900991.html>

Bangladesh's Brutal Crackdown on Political Opposition. (2022, December 9). *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/09/bangladeshs-brutal-crackdown-political-opposition>

Bangladesh: Mass Arrests Over Cartoons, Posts. (2020, May 7). *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/07/bangladesh-mass-arrests-over-cartoons-posts>

Bangladesh: Protect Freedom of Expression. (2018, May 9). *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/09/bangladesh-protect-freedom-expression>

Bangladesh's Restriction on Observers and Media Raises Concerns Before Elections. (2018, December 28). *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/south-asia/bangladesh-elections-restrictions-media-observers>

Bangladesh: Writer Dies After 9 Months in Custody. (2021, February 26). *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/26/bangladesh-writer-dies-after-9-months-custody>

Bari, M. E., & Dey, P. (2019). The Enactment of Digital Security Laws in Bangladesh: No Place for Dissent. *George Washington International Law Review*, 51(4), 595–632.

Bari, M. E. (2022). Extrajudicial Killings in Bangladesh: Exploring the Phenomenon of Human Rights Violations As a Means of Maintaining Power. *EMORY INTERNATIONAL LAW REVIEW*, 36.

Baumgartner, J. C. (2008). Polls and Elections: Editorial Cartoons 2.0: The Effects of Digital Political Satire on Presidential Candidate Evaluations. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 38(4), 735–758. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2008.02675.x>

Berkowitz, D., & Eko, L. (2007). Blasphemy as Sacred Rite/Right. *Journalism Studies*, 8(5), 779–797. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700701504757>

Bhagwat, A. (2015). Free Speech Without Democracy. *U.C. Davis Law Review*, 49(1), 59–122.

Blair, H. (2020). The Bangladesh Paradox. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(4), 138–150.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0061>

Bradley, G. E. (2011). The Evolution of the Editorial Cartoon Industry: A Content Analysis of Editorial Cartoons by Staff Cartoonists. University of Memphis.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Brunner, E. A., & DeLuca, K. M. (2016). The argumentative force of image networks: Greenpeace's panmediated global detox campaign. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 52(4), 281-299.

Buell, E. H., & Maus, M. (1988). Is the Pen Mightier Than the Word? Editorial Cartoons and 1988 Presidential Nominating Politics. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 21(4), 847–858.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/420024>

Cappelli, M. L. (2020). Black Lives Matter: The emotional and racial dynamics of the George Floyd protest graffiti. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 9(10), 323.

Cases Under DSA: Almost all accused kept hanging | CGS. (2022, August). *Centre for Governance Studies*. <https://cgs-bd.com/article/11256/Cases-Under-DSA--Almost-all-accused-kept-hanging>

Caswell, L. S. (2004). Drawing swords: War in American editorial cartoons. *American Journalism*, 21(2), 13-45.

Chen, K. W., Phiddian, R., & Stewart, R. (2017). Towards a Discipline of Political Cartoon Studies: Mapping the Field. In J. Milner Davis (Ed.), *Satire and Politics* (pp. 125–162). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56774-7_5

Chi, N.-J. (2013). A rhetorical analysis of Crouching tiger, hidden dragon [Master's thesis].

California State University, Sacramento. <https://csu-csus.esploro.exlibrisgroup.com/esploro/outputs/graduate/A-rhetorical-anaylsis-of-Crouching-tiger/99257831149101671>

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*.

Collins, K. M. T., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Jiao, Q. G. (2007). A Mixed Methods Investigation of Mixed Methods Sampling Designs in Social and Health Science Research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(3), 267–294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689807299526>

Conners, J. L. (2005). Visual Representations of the 2004 Presidential Campaign: Political Cartoons and Popular Culture References. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(3), 479–487. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205280920>

Conners, J. L. (2014). “Binders of Bayonets for Big Bird”: Analysis of Political Cartoon Images of the 2012 Presidential Debates. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 58(9), 1144–1156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213506203>

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2023). *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*. John Wiley & Sons.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Crouch, E. (2021, February 25). Bangladeshi writer Mushtaq Ahmed dies in jail; cartoonist Kabir Kishore allegedly abused in custody. *Committee to Protect Journalists*.

<https://cpj.org/2021/02/bangladeshi-writer-mushtaq-ahmed-dies-in-jail-cartoonist-kabir-kishore-allegedly-abused-in-custody/>

Danjoux, I. (n.d.). *Reconsidering the Decline of the Editorial Cartoon*. Retrieved October 25, 2022, from

https://www.academia.edu/3212522/Reconsidering_the_Decline_of_the_Editorial_Cartoon

David Bergman. (2018). *No Place for Criticism: Bangladesh Crackdown on Social Media Commentary*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/05/09/no-place-criticism/bangladesh-crackdown-social-media-commentary>

Democracy in Retreat (No. 13). (2019). Freedom House.

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/democracy-retreat>

DeSousa, M. A., & Medhurst, M. J. (1982a). Political Cartoons and American Culture: Significant Symbols of Campaign 1980*. *Studies in Visual Communication*, 8(1), 84–98.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2326-8492.1982.tb00061.x>

DeSousa, M. A., & Medhurst, M. J. (1982b). The Editorial Cartoon as Visual Rhetoric: Rethinking Boss Tweed. *Journal of Visual Verbal Languaging*, 2(2), 43–52.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23796529.1982.11674355>

Dhaka Tribune journalist arrested under Digital Security Act. (2019, January 1). *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2019/01/01/dhaka-tribune-journalist-arrested-under-digital-security-act>

Diamond, M. (2002). No Laughing Matter: Post-September 11 Political Cartoons in Arab/Muslim Newspapers. *Political Communication*, 19(2), 251–272.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600252907470>

Digital Security Act draft approved, Section 57 repealed. (2018, January 29). *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/law-rights/2018/01/29/digital-draft-cabinet-approval>

Dodds, K. (2010). Popular Geopolitics and Cartoons: Representing Power Relations, repetition and Resistance. *Critical African Studies*, 2(4), 113–131.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/20407211.2010.10530760>

Duus, P. (2001). Presidential Address: Weapons of the Weak, Weapons of the Strong-The Development of the Japanese Political Cartoon. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 60(4), 965–997. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700017>

Edwards, J. L. (2001). Running in the Shadows in Campaign 2000: Candidate Metaphors in Editorial Cartoons. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 44(12), 2140–2151.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00027640121958249>

Edwards, J. L. (2007). Media History and Marginalized Form: The Editorial Cartoon Profession Considered. *Review of Communication*, 7(1), 127–130.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15358590701211407>

Edwards, J. L., & Ware, L. (2005). Representing the Public in Campaign Media: A Political Cartoon Perspective. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(3), 466–478.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205279416>

Eko, L. (2010). The Art of Criticism: How African Cartoons Discursively Constructed African Media Realities in the Post-Cold War Era. *Critical African Studies*, 2.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/20407211.2010.10530758>

Eli Meixler. (2018, December 11). Inside a Bangladeshi Journalist's Journey from Photographer to Prisoner. *Time*. <https://time.com/5475494/shahidul-alam-bangladesh-journalist-person-of-the-year-2018/>

Feinstein, A. (2021, October 5). Despite detention and torture, Bangladeshi cartoonist Kishore continues to use his art to speak truth to power. *The Globe and Mail*.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-despite-detention-and-torture-bangladeshi-cartoonist-kishore-continues/>

Feldman, O. (1995). Political Reality and Editorial Cartoons in Japan: How the National Dailies Illustrate the Japanese Prime Minister. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 72(3), 571–580. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909507200308>

Gorokhovskaia, Y., Shahbaz, A., & Slipowitz, A. (2023). *Bangladesh: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report*. Freedom House.

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/bangladesh/freedom-world/2023>

Gonzalez, D. (2019, April 9). Despite Prison and Torture, Shahidul Alam Refuses to Stay Quiet. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/09/lens/shahidul-alam-prison-photo.html>

Haque, S. (2018, September 19). *Bangladesh passes Digital Security Act ignoring concerns it will muffle media* / *bdnews24.com* [News]. Bdnews24.Com.

<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/09/19/bangladesh-passes-digital-security-act-ignoring-concerns-it-will-muffle-media>

Holiday, S., Lewis, M. J., Nielsen, R., Anderson, H. D., & Elinzano, M. (2016). The selfie study: Archetypes and motivations in modern self-photography. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 23(3), 175-187.

Human Rights Report 2021 Bangladesh (No. 18; p. 60). (2022). Odhikar.

Islam, A. (2021, March 3). How is Bangladesh's Digital Security Act muzzling free speech? *DW.COM*. <https://www.dw.com/en/how-is-bangladeshs-digital-security-act-muzzling-free-speech/a-56762799>

Islam, Z. (2021a, March 5). *Scars of torture all over him*. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/scars-torture-all-over-him-2055265>

Islam, Z. (2021b, March 5). *Scars of torture all over him*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/scars-torture-all-over-him-2055265>

Islam, Z., & Saad, M. (2020, May 7). *Digital Security Act: 11 sued, two sent to jail*. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/digital-security-act-11-sued-two-sent-jail-1900228>

Kamruzzaman, Md. (2021, July 6). "Nothing left": Bangladesh slum inferno leaves thousands homeless. *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/nothing-left-bangladesh-slum-inferno-leaves-thousands-homeless/2266225>

Khaleda Zia freed, gets back home. (2020, March 26). *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/khaleda-zia-released-six-months-1885888>

Khan, M. R. (2023, February 5). Price hike of essentials: The poor have their back against the wall. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/health/food/price-essentials/news/price-hike-essentials-the-poor-have-their-back-against-the-wall-3239096>

Khan, M. K., Wu, F., Pratt, C. B., & Akhtar, N. (2021). Satires, narratives and journalistic divides: Discourses on free speech in Western and Islamic news media. *The Social Science Journal*, 58(4), 458–476. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2019.05.012>

Kopper, A. (2014). Why Guernica became a globally used icon of political protest? Analysis of its visual rhetoric and capacity to link distinct events of protests into a grand narrative. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 27(4), 443–457.

Kotzé, D. (1988). Cartoons as a medium of political communication. *Communicatio*, 14(2), 60–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02500168808537742>

Kuipers, G. (2011). The politics of humour in the public sphere: Cartoons, power and modernity in the first transnational humour scandal. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(1), 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549410370072>

Lacy, M., & Mookherjee, N. (2020). ‘Firing cannons to kill mosquitoes’: Controlling ‘virtual streets’ and the ‘image of the state’ in Bangladesh. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 54(2), 280–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0069966720917923>

Murthy, L. (Ed.). (2022). *South Asia Press Freedom Report*. International Federation of Journalists. <https://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR21-22/bangladesh/>

Mahmud, F. (2018, October 16). Bangladesh editors protest ‘chilling’ digital law. *Aljazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/10/16/bangladesh-editors-protest-chilling-digital-security-act>

Mahadi, S. S. (2023, February 2). Bangladesh moves two notches up on democracy index. *The Business Standard*. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-moves-two-notches-democracy-index-579002>

Mahmud, F. (2021, February 26). Anger in Bangladesh over dissident writer's death in prison. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/26/anger-in-bangladesh-over-prominent-writers-death-in-prison>

Manik, J. A., & Abi-Habib, M. (2018, December 31). Bangladesh's Leader Wins a Third Term but Opposition Contests Results. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/31/world/asia/bangladesh-election-sheikh-hasina-contested.html>

Manik, J. A., & Mashal, M. (2021, February 26). Bangladeshi Writer, Detained Over Social Media Posts, Dies in Jail. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/world/asia/bangladesh-mushtaq-ahmed-dead.html>

Marlette, D. (2004). *Freedom of Speech and the Editorial Cartoon*. Nieman Foundation.
<https://nieman.harvard.edu/articles/freedom-of-speech-and-the-editorial-cartoon/>

Mateus, S. (2016). Political Cartoons as communicative weapons – the hypothesis of the “Double Standard Thesis” in three Portuguese cartoons. *Estudos Em Comunicação*, 23, 195–221.
<https://doi.org/10.20287/ec.n23.a09>

Medhurst, M. J., & Desousa, M. A. (1981). Political cartoons as rhetorical form: A taxonomy of graphic discourse. *Communication Monographs*, 48(3), 197–236.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758109376059>

Media in Bangladesh enjoys total freedom: Info minister. (2022, June 28). *The Business Standard*. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/media-bangladesh-enjoys-total-freedom-info-minister-448994>

Media in Bangladesh free to criticise my government: PM Hasina. (2022, September 28). *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/media-bangladesh-free-criticise-my-government-pm-hasina-3130151>

Mielczarek, N. (2018). The “pepper-spraying cop” icon and its internet memes: Social justice and public shaming through rhetorical transformation in digital culture. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 25(2), 67-81.

Mohaiemen, N. (2013, April 1). *We wish to inform you: A history of censorship in Bangladesh (1972-2012)*. <https://blogs.cuit.columbia.edu/nm2678/2013/04/01/censorship-1972-2012/>

Morris, R. (1993). Visual Rhetoric in Political Cartoons: A Structuralist Approach. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 8(3), 195–210. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327868ms0803_5

Navasky, V. S. (2013). *The Art of Controversy: Political Cartoons and Their Enduring Power*. Alfred A. Knop.

Obituary of a democracy: Bangladesh. (2019, January 29). *The Economist*. <https://espresso.economist.com/0390aff9c68eeb7b64fbebe21c878de3>

Page, J. T., & Duffy, M. E. (2018). What does credibility look like? Tweets and walls in US presidential candidates’ visual storytelling. *Journal of political Marketing*, 17(1), 3-31.

Paul, R., Quadir, S., & Siddiqui, Z. (2018, December 13). In fear of the state: Bangladeshi journalists self-censor as election approaches. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-bangladesh-election-media-insig-idCAKBN1OC08Q-OCATP>

Perera, S., & Pathak, D. N. (2021). *Humour and the Performance of Power in South Asia: Anxiety, Laughter and Politics in Unstable Times* (1st ed.). Routledge India.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003097549>

Perlmutter, D. D. (1994a). Visual Historical Methods: Problems, Prospects, Applications. *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History*, 27(4), 167–184.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01615440.1994.10594231>

Rahman, M. A., & Rashid, H. O. (2020). Digital Security Act and Investigative Journalism in Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis. *CenRaPS Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(2), Article 2. <https://doi.org/10.46291/cenraps.v2i2.32>

Rahman, M. H. (2014). *Freedom of Speech & Expression in Bangladesh in the Context of ICT Act 2006*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3840306>

Rahman, S. A. (2022, August 17). No Extrajudicial Killings, Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh, Bachelet Is Told. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/a/no-extrajudicial-killing-enforced-disappearance-in-bangladesh-bachelet-is-told-/6704801.html>

Repucci, S., & Slipowitz, A. (2022). *The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>

Riaz, A. (2021a). *How Bangladesh's Digital Security Act Is Creating a Culture of Fear*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved May 13, 2022, from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/09/how-bangladesh-s-digital-security-act-is-creating-culture-of-fear-pub-85951>

Riaz, A. (2021b). The pathway of democratic backsliding in Bangladesh. *Democratization*, 28(1), 179–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1818069>

Riaz, A. (2021c). Digital Security Act, 2018: How Is It Being Enforced. Centre for Governance Studies.

Riaz, A., & Zaman, F. (2022). Working Under the “Sword of Damocles”: Experiences of Journalists in a Hybrid Regime. In A. E. Ruud & M. Hasan (Eds.), *Masks of Authoritarianism: Hegemony, Power and Public Life in Bangladesh* (pp. 37–55). Springer Singapore.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-4314-9>

Road Accident: A Major Concern of Bangladesh | CGS. (2022, May 18). *Centre for Governance Studies*. <https://cgs-bd.com/article/9009/Road-Accident--A-Major-Concern-of-Bangladesh>

RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index: A new era of polarisation. (2022). Reporters Without Borders. <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-s-2022-world-press-freedom-index-new-era-polarisation>

Paul, R., Das, K. N., & Siddiqui, Z. (2018, December 29). For Bangladesh PM, authoritarian tag is “badge of honor”, son says on poll eve. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bangladesh-election-exclusive-idUSKCN1OS0HA>

Saad, M., & Rahaman, F. M. (2018, June 3). Bangladeshi Yaba Godfather Abdur Rahman Bodi now out of Teknaf | undefined. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/yaba-godfathers-out-teknaf-safety-1585462>

Saaz, S. (2017). Dying to tell a story: The list of what Bangladeshi writers cannot talk about is getting longer, but that isn't stopping some from writing. *Index on Censorship*, 46(1), 34–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306422017703608>

Safi, M. (2018, August 6). Photographer charged as police crackdown in Bangladesh intensifies. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/06/famed-bangladeshi-photographer-held-over-road-protest-comments>

Sattar, M. (2016, March 28). Bangladesh Editor Faces 79 Court Cases After an Unusual Confession. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/28/world/asia/bangladesh-editor-faces-79-court-cases-after-saying-he-regrets-articles.html>

Shehabuddin, Sarah Tasnim, "Bangladeshi politics since independence", in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh* ed. Ali Riaz and Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman (Abingdon: Routledge, 11 Feb 2016), accessed 05 May 2023, Routledge Handbooks Online.

Sheppard, J. (2020). *Analyzing Visual and Multimodal Rhetorics in Monuments and Memorials*. <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:30933/>

Star blocked, unblocked. (2018, June 3). *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/star-blocked-unblocked-1585441>

Rahman, S. (2016, November 25). *Bangladesh: Controversial New Law Regulating Work and Activities of Foreign NGOs* [Web page]. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2016-11-25/bangladesh-controversial-new-law-regulating-work-and-activities-of-foreign-ngos/>

Statistics on Arrest under Information and Communication Technology Act. (2021). Odhikar.

The Editorial Board. (2019, January 15). Opinion | Bangladesh's Farcical Vote. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/opinion/editorials/bangladesh-election-sheikh-hasina.html>

The rise of the infamous Helmet Bahini. (2022, April 30). *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2022/04/30/the-rise-of-the-infamous-helmet-bahini-1>

Treanor, M., & Mateas, M. (2009). *Newsgames: Procedural Rhetoric meets Political Cartoons*. 8.

Tusher, H. J., & Azad, M. A. K. (2009, April 9). Govt cancels lease of Khaleda's Cantt house. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-83375>

Udayi Agba, J. (2013). The Search for New Roles for Cartoon Art: Promoting Democracy in Nigeria through Innuendos of Political Communication. *Journal of Mass Communication & Journalism*, 04(02). <https://doi.org/10.4172/2165-7912.1000176>

Ullah, A. A., & Huque, A. S. (2020). Demoralization-led migration in Bangladesh: A sense of insecurity-based decision-making model. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 5(4), 351–370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891119867140>

Unending Nightmare: Impacts of Bangladesh's Digital Security Act 2018 | CGS. (2022, May 2). *Centre for Governance Studies*. <https://cgs-bd.com/article/8971/Unending-Nightmare--Impacts-of-Bangladesh%E2%80%99s-Digital-Security-Act-2018>

Vanaik, A., Jengelle, D., & Peterson, R. (2018). Reframing racism: Political cartoons in the era of Black Lives Matter. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 6(4), 838–851. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1523060>

Walker, R. (2003). Political cartoons: now you see them. *Canadian parliamentary review*, 26(1), 16-21.

We believe in full freedom of the media: Prime Minister. (2018, September 20). *The Daily Star Bangla*. <https://bangla.thedailystar.net/node/98353>

Appendix A

Codes and Themes

Cartoon	Codes	Themes
Mehedi Haque (October 2016 – September 2018)		
<p>December 31, 2016</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PM is content 2. Opposition under distress 3. Opposition counting days until political freedom 		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contentment of the PM and the government 2. Corruption 3. Freedom of expression under threat
<p>March 31, 2017</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PM is content 2. PM is unbothered 3. PM is “free”/has the wings of freedom 4. Freedom is caged for others 		
<p>April 2, 2017</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Press under threat 2. Press under surveillance 3. Journalists scared/anxious 4. Press activities monitored 		
<p>June 17, 2017</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Finance minister content 2. Tax money misused 3. Govt enabling financial scams 4. Tax money fed to corruption 5. Goons taking advantages of public funds 		
<p>January, 13 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PM is content 2. PM lying/PM lying to press 3. PM looking forward to the future/convinced of future growth 4. Country actually in decay 		
<p>March 23, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Poor people displaced from homes 2. Development at the cost of human lives and livelihoods 		

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Poor people lied to 4. Development as an eyewash 	
<p>May 8, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PM content 2. PM on throne, like a monarch 3. PM cutting off head to cure headache/did not solve problems or meet movement's demands 4. Public movement buried 5. Public dissatisfaction brewing 6. Revolution is a ticking time bomb 	
<p>August 4, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PM as puppeteer, enabling violence 2. PM wearing a smiley face to indicate her friendly demeanor 3. Law enforcement and AL student wing as PM's puppets/lackeys 4. Law enforcement violent/intimidating 5. AL student wing as violent goons 6. Protesting children are frightened 7. Protest disrupted 	
<p>Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil (October 2016 – September 2018)</p>	
<p>July 13, 2017</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Food minister incompetent 2. Administration ignorant of/indifferent to people's suffering 3. Food minister avoiding responsibility 4. Food crisis ongoing 	
<p>July 18, 2017</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. AL student wing training to be violent 2. AL student wing above the law 3. AL supports violence 4. AL pays its student wing 	
<p>January 31, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PM content 2. PM praying for the future 3. AL officials reading long list of "development" 4. PM convinced of country's development 5. Opposition in the witness box 6. Opposition persecuted 	

<p>7. Opposition in distress/anxious</p>	
<p>February 6, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. VIPs (Govt high-ups) as kings 2. Public as pawns 3. Govt indifferent to public suffering 4. Govt high-ups deserve special treatment 5. Public suffering due to traffic jam 	
<p>June 8, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Finance minister incompetent 2. Finance minister silencing concerns 3. Govt inaction in dealing with public concerns 	
<p>July 31, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Minister of shipping complicit in crime & corruption in transportation sector 2. Minister is happy & content 3. Law enforcement bribed by criminals 4. Law enforcement incompetent 5. Criminals getting away 6. Victims left unattended 7. No rule of law 	
<p>August 6, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Journalism/free speech under threat 2. Muzzling public expression 3. Violent silencing of dissent by AL lackeys 4. Culture of fear 	
<p>August 19, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Road, Transport & Bridges Minister incompetent 2. Minister avoiding responsibility 3. Bureaucratic delay 	
<p>Mehedi Haque (October 2018 – October 2020)</p>	
<p>December 29, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. AL dominating election campaigns 2. No opposition presence 3. Democracy under threat/democracy destroyed 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Declining state of democracy 2. Corruption 3. Freedom of expression under threat

<p>4. AL as the only option for voters</p>	
<p><u>January 15, 2019</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Digital surveillance 2. Violent suppression of free speech 3. Citizens terrified 	
<p><u>March 23, 2019</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Govt agencies & law enforcement ineffective 2. Plans & policies not executed in bureaucratic hell 3. Roads remain unsafe 4. Unfit buses ply the road 5. Bus drivers & companies remain unaccountable 	
<p><u>October 8, 2019</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Violent suppression of free speech 2. Fascist intolerance of free expression 3. Death of free speech 	
<p><u>December 23, 2019</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The law not enforced 2. Judiciary ineffective 3. AL lackeys above the law 4. Judiciary muzzled by ruling party 	
<p><u>March 14, 2020</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Slum fire 2. Poor people suffering 3. People in power/rich people taking advantage of poor people's suffering 4. No police protection for the poor 	
<p><u>April 23, 2020</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Health minister ignorant 2. Health minister blind to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic 3. Health minister incompetent in handling pandemic 	
<p><u>October 8, 2020</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PM/AL as a tree that shelters rapists 	

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. PM/AL at the root of the problem 3. PM/AL harboring criminals 	
<p>Sadatuddin Ahmed Amil (October 2018 – October 2020)</p>	
<p>October 16, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Both parties in large alliances 2. Other parties have no distinct identity 3. Large alliance of unknown parties 4. Politics lacking in substance 5. Democracy reliant on large alliances 6. Farcical democracy 	
<p>October 18, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Election commissioner incompetent 2. EC can't keep track of political parties & alliances 3. Political parties & alliances unstable 4. Alliances constantly shifting, with money as an incentive 	
<p>November 14, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. PM content 2. PM in alliance w/ "opposition" 3. All parties under one umbrella, no opposition 	
<p>December 26, 2018</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. EC blind to the real situation concerning elections 2. EC ignorant/incompetent 3. Voter intimidation 4. Squashing opposition 	
<p>January 4, 2019</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Opposition not found 2. PM controls parliament 3. "Opposition" sheltered by Hasina 	
<p>January 30, 2019</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. MP Bodi lying 2. MP involved in illegal drug trade (meth) 3. MP showing fake emotions 4. MP content with drug trade 	
<p>February 18, 2019</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Minister Shajahan & MP Ranga incompetent 	

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Minister and MP creating unnecessary complications 3. Road safety policies still not enacted 4. MP & Minister content with their work 	
<p><u>March 1, 2019</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. EC concerned by low voter turnout 2. Dark cloud over ballot box (bad day for democracy) 3. Citizens no longer interested in exercising voting rights 4. Ballot box was happy in the past/golden days of democracy now only in history book 	