

Media Content Analysis of Political Crisis Communication: In the Context of Bangladesh's Mass Uprising in July-August 2024

A K M Zamir Uddin

The Department of Advertising and Public Relations, University of Georgia
Athens, USA

Abstract: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is applied in this study to examine how two newspapers framed a political crisis that led to the ouster of the authoritarian government in Bangladesh on August 5, 2024. Through a quantitative content analysis, this paper investigates how the then-ruling party in Bangladesh, Bangladesh Awami League (BAL), applied crisis response strategies to handle the political event, which turned into a mass uprising from a student protest over quotas in government jobs. This research analyzes news stories from two Bangladeshi leading newspapers and Facebook posts on the BAL official page. The analysis of newspaper reports shows the government faced both preventable and victim-type crises, with the former dominating. Analysis of the ruling party's Facebook posts indicates that response strategies were mostly aggressive, aligned with the deny strategy, rather than accommodative or defensive, aligned with the rebuild strategy. The findings suggest that the then-ruling party faced crisis response failure due to a mismatch between its strategies and the crisis type, worsening the crisis and contributing to the government's downfall.

Keywords — authoritarian government, Bangladesh Awami League, crisis communication, political crisis communication, SCCT

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INTRODUCTION

On August 5, 2024, Sheik Hasina, the longest-serving prime minister of Bangladesh, fled to India following a mass uprising. The unrest led to over 600 deaths during clashes between protesters, law enforcement, and ruling party activists, alongside a crackdown on student-led demonstrations [1]. With the fall of this authoritarian ruler, the Awami League's 15-year regime came to an end. Although the government faced several political crises during Hasina's tenure, none was as widespread and powerful as the July-August 2024 uprising. Political crises in Bangladesh are not new, as previous governments have been ousted for failing to handle them [2]; however, no prime minister or president has ever been forced to flee from the country following the collapse of their government.

The crisis began in early July 2024 when students protested a court decision reinstating a quota reserving 30 percent of government jobs for descendants of freedom fighters. They demanded the government scrap the decision through either a legislative or executive order, but the government initially did not heed the demands. As a result, the protest transformed into a mass uprising.

From the perspective of crisis communication, the latest Bangladesh uprising is a major development because of the rarity of the crisis's combined features. Concerning the dimension of the crisis, this paper aims to examine the types of crises two Bangladeshi newspapers framed and the crisis response strategies the BAL employed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A crisis happens suddenly, which can be identified as an adverse event for an entity or a person [3]. It can be recognized as an unpredictable incident, creating risks that lessen stakeholders' expectations and are detrimental to organizational performance. It can potentially damage an organization's reputation, as ordinary citizens have a negative view of the impact of a crisis [4]. Coombs [5] included the stakeholder perspective to draw up a definition of crisis, mentioning that a crisis is a kind of realization of an uncertain and adverse event that threatens to reduce the expectancies of stakeholders in different areas, such as health, safety, environment, and economy.

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Reynolds and Seeger [6] stated that the objectives of crisis communication are to explain a specific incident, recognize the probable outcomes, and provide relevant information, helping reduce the harmful effects on the affected communities.

Crisis Communication in Political Contexts

Sometimes, corporate communication and political communication seem almost the same, but they have differences in many cases [7]. The core distinction in the communication strategy between the two is that corporations aim to gain profit, while politicians emphasize power and ideas. So, corporate and political crisis communication can be identified separately [7]. Although crisis management and crisis communication are vital for all entities, the types of crises differ between political and other contexts [8]. There is a core difference in the types of crises encountered in the political settings compared to other contexts. The difference is that both opposition political parties and news media outlets may have a purpose in creating insights into the political crisis to blame some political figures or entities for being responsible. This is why a crisis in a political context is typically identified based on perception in many cases rather than objective circumstances [8].

Crisis communication in authoritarian regimes differs from that in a democratic political system. It is difficult for an authoritarian government to employ effective and time-befitting crisis response strategies as they typically encounter crisis information conundrums [9]. An effective public policy response of a political system can gain more significant support from timely and reliable information. However, such an uninterrupted information flow can weaken the authoritarian regime. Free-flowing information can expose flawed policies of an authoritarian government, leading to public debates and criticism [9]. Authoritarian regimes typically do not accept responsibility for a crisis in their crisis communication strategies, since they dominate public responses. Authoritarian systems even declare an emergency to control the public reaction during a crisis [10].

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Crisis managers should first recognize the nature of the crisis, meaning they should first understand the crisis responsibility and the severity of the issue. Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) defines three distinct types of crises: victim, accidental, and preventable. Each of them is recognized by several categories [4]. Victim crisis occurs when the crisis-hit entity is perceived as a victim of a circumstance. It has four categories: natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence, and product tampering. An accidental crisis emerges when an organization encounters an unexpected situation due to its unintentional action [4]. It has three sub-categories: challenges, technology-related accidents, and recalls due to technological failure. Preventable crises put people in detrimental situations because of a misdeed or intentional law violation by an organization [4]. It has five categories: accidents caused by human mistakes, recalls resulting from human mistakes, organizational misdeeds with no injuries, organizational offenses that injure people, and organizational wrongdoing and managerial misconduct.

If an organization can employ an appropriate response strategy aligning with the crisis type, it will help the entity protect itself from reputational damage [4]. Coombs found four crisis response strategies: deny, diminish, rebuild, and bolster. An organization applies the deny strategy to disconnect the entity from the crisis. This strategy is typically followed when an organization faces a misinformation-related crisis. It has three sub-categories: attack the accuser, denial, and scapegoating. A crisis-hit organization uses a diminish strategy to demonstrate its low responsibility for the crisis, which has two sub-categories: excuse and justification. A rebuild strategy is implemented to restore the image of a crisis-hit organization [4]. It consists of two sub-categories: apology and compensation. Bolstering is a secondary crisis response strategy that should be used independently. It has three sub-categories: reminding, ingratiating, and victimage.

Research Questions

Using the SCCT scale, this study examines the nature of the crisis the ousted Bangladeshi government faced and the AL's response strategies to address the crisis during the July-August 2024 uprising.

RQ1: How did the newspapers frame the types of crises depending on the timing of the crisis?

RQ2: Which crisis response strategies did the AL employ to handle the crisis during the July- August 2024 movement?

RQ3: How did the AL respond depending on the timing of the crisis?

METHODS

This study employed quantitative content analysis of news coverage by newspapers and Facebook posts uploaded on the BAL official page to explore the three research questions.

Sampling and Texts Collection Procedure

Texts were collected from two newspapers – The Daily Star and Samakal – and from Facebook for this study. The two newspapers were selected from the six most popular newspapers in Bangladesh – Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, Samakal, Jugantor, Kaler Kantho, and The Business Standard. I followed a dice-rolling technique to select the two newspapers from the pool of six to ensure a random selection and avoid bias.

The news articles and Facebook posts were published between July 1 and August 5, 2024. The period was preferred as the protests and mass uprising happened during this time. The days of the event were divided into two phases: before and from July 14 onward, a significant date when the crisis started deepening. The total number of news articles and Facebook posts, selected randomly for this study, is 133 ($n = 133$). The unit of analysis was each newspaper story and Facebook post. In the context of this study, articles extracted from newspapers represent seven categories of news stories. The total number of news articles extracted from the newspapers is 77 ($n = 77$). The stories were used to examine which types of crises the newspapers framed during the uprising.

The texts collected from the official Facebook page of the BAL were analyzed to understand which kind of crisis response strategies the political party employed to handle the situation. The total number of posts collected from the AL's official Facebook page is 56 ($n=56$).

Measures and Coding Procedures

This study applied SCCT to measure the types of crises framed by the newspapers and the crisis response strategies employed by the BAL. Based on the crisis types and crisis response strategies of SCCT, I prepared a series of coding criteria for this study, which followed a deductive approach, rationalizing their application to news articles and Facebook posts. The evaluation of intercoder reliability for the news articles was based on the co-coding of 16 articles, which were selected randomly from a data pool of 77 newspaper stories (20.7 percent of the total number of news articles sampled). For this category, the Cohen kappa is 0.70 ($\kappa = 0.70$). The intercoder reliability for the Facebook posts was determined by the co-coding of 13, which were selected randomly within a data pool of 56 Facebook posts (23 percent of the total collected data samples). The Cohen Kappa for this segment is 0.74 ($\kappa = 0.74$).

RESULTS

RQ1 examined how the newspapers framed the types of crises, depending on the timing of the crisis. A chi-square test of independence was conducted on the total articles sampled for this study to answer this research question. Of the 77 newspaper stories, 25 articles used victim frame, and 52 used preventable crises. The findings did not show any evidence of an accidental cluster. The results suggested that this difference was not significant across the phases of the crisis ($\chi^2 (1) = 2.218, p > .05$).

RQ2 asked which crisis response strategies the BAL employed to handle the situation during the 2024 uprising. Five strategies were identified: attack the accuser, denial, excuse, compensation, and supporting students' demand. There were 36 instances of the attack the accuser strategy, four cases of the denial strategy, 13 instances of the excuse strategy, and one instance of the compensation strategy. The fifth crisis response strategy was supporting the students' demand, found with a frequency of two, which did not relate to the SCCT. At one point during the protest, the student wing of the AL organized rallies expressing support for the students' demands. This appears to represent a crisis response strategy beyond those proposed in SCCT that the BAL applied to manage the situation.

RQ3 examined how the BAL responded depending on the timing of the crisis. In response to this research question, the chi-square test suggested that the relationship between the strategies and phases was significant ($\chi^2 (5) = 35.251, p < .05$). Based on the findings, two multiple comparisons were run. The first one tested the significance of the attack the accuser by phases, which was significant ($\chi^2 (1) = 32.111, p < .05$). The second multiple comparison looked at excuse by phases, which was also significant ($\chi^2 (1) = 3.769, p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The first research question asked how the newspapers framed the types of crises, depending on the timing of the crisis. This study's findings suggest that the two newspapers – The Daily Star and the Samakal – portrayed the crisis as largely preventable for the BAL throughout the two phases. The framing is supported by 67.5 percent of the articles sampled for this study, indicating the newspapers' narrative that the crisis was created and intensified due to the government's failure to address the issue. Framing the situation as a victim-type crisis for the government was also observed in the second phase. Of the total articles collected from the newspapers, 32.5 percent framed the crisis as a victim-type, meaning that the newspapers overwhelmingly portrayed it as preventable.

The second and third research questions in this study asked which crisis response strategies the BAL employed to handle the crisis during the uprising and how it responded depending on the timing of the crisis. The findings of this study indicate that the BAL took an aggressive approach to handling the situation and eventually changed its response strategies to keep up with the evolving nature of the crisis. The party relied on an excuse approach of the diminish strategy in the first phase. During the second phase, the BAL applied the attack the accuser of the deny strategy in the majority of the cases. The findings indicate that the BAL sharply switched from the excuse strategy used in the first phase to the attack the accuser and denial strategies to address the crisis in the second phase.

Under the Lens of SCCT

The media framing indicates that the preventable crisis cluster was largely dominant compared to the victim cluster during the protest in Bangladesh. From the perspective of newspaper articles, the BAL took the opposite stance to the SCCT. This indicates that it is difficult for an authoritarian government to employ proper crisis response strategies due to its

crisis information conundrum [9]. The BAL that established an authoritarian regime in Bangladesh for over a decade also experienced the same conundrum. The killing of more than 600 people indicates that the core objective of the crisis response strategies employed by the authoritarian regime was not to reduce the risk confronting ordinary citizens, as it focused on easing its political crises. This study's results suggest that the BAL faced a sharp mismatch in employing crisis response strategies to address the crisis, which eventually might have played a central role in unseating the BAL from power.

CONCLUSION

The case study of Bangladesh is an example of how an authoritarian government mishandled a crisis emerging from a political movement and mass uprising. SCCT suggests that crisis-hit organizations should employ a rebuild strategy in the event of a preventable crisis. However, the then-ruling party of Bangladesh ignored its responsibility for the crisis by aggressively tackling it. The mismatch between the crisis response strategies and the crisis responsibilities ultimately unseated the BAL from power after 15 years, forcing the then-prime minister to give up her position and flee to India. Based on its findings, this study contributes to the existing crisis communication literature, revealing the consequences of improper crisis response strategies applied by a ruling party.

Author Biography

A K M Zamir Uddin. A Ph.D. Student in the Department of Advertising & Public Relations, University of Georgia. USA. Au52627@uga.edu

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