WORLD

How Rappers Become Regime-Change Agents: America's Covert Hip-Hop Diplomacy

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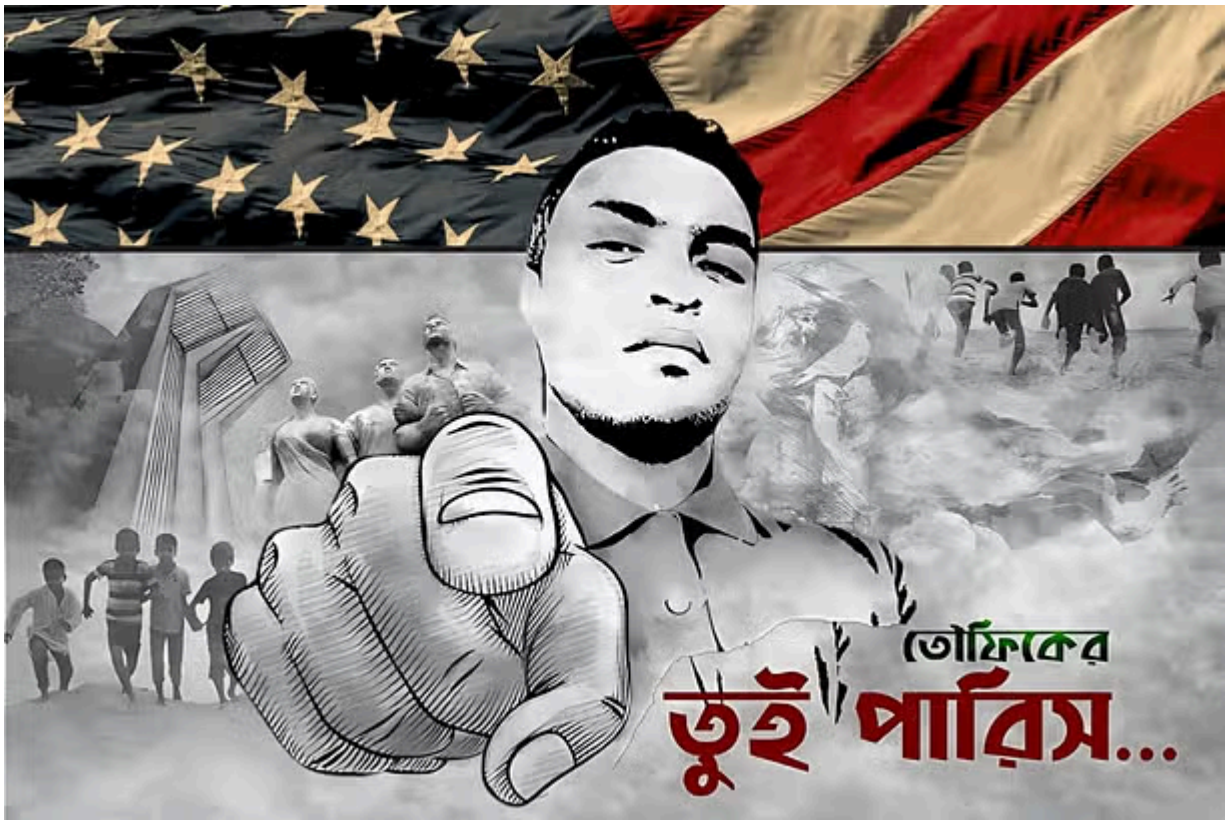

Bangladeshi rapper Towfique Ahmed benefited from explicit US government funding, with his 2020 release 'Tui Parish' created under IRI's small grants program.

- From Bronx to Bangladesh, hip-hop has evolved from a voice of resistance to a tool of American hegemony cloaked in cultural diplomacy.
- As beats echo worldwide, the question remains—where does artistic expression end and propaganda begin?

Amongst the many controversial programmes funded by the USAID, the most curious one to emerge is what can be termed as the USA's Hip-Hop diplomacy.

Hip-Hop, with its roots in the Bronx, has gained import all over the world. And this popularity has helped it evolve into a tool of Washington's soft power.

The packaging is often that of the coalescing of the world's oppressed to create a sense of solidarity around music which has its origins deep within the African American narrative quest for recognition.

In truth, it is a tool for the deep state to paint the USA and its deeds in positive light while at the same time fuel domestic narratives that aid Washington's political interests within the region.

The reach of this propaganda is vast.

The USAID is said to have run the rap game, from Cuba to Kosovo, recruiting hip-hop artists in Austria, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Costa Rica, Greece, India, Lithuania, Madagascar, Malawi, Mexico, Mongolia, Morocco, Philippines, North Macedonia, Congo, Senegal, South Africa, and beyond.

In fact, the State Department's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs through its 'Next Level' programme is pretty open about its intentions to "engage underserved communities in countries around the world and use artistic collaboration and social engagement to enhance people-to-people diplomacy, especially among young audiences".

Presently, participants in the overseas workshops, as well as international artists selected for the U.S. program, have the opportunity to "gain the skills needed to become music producers – with America providing economic opportunities not only for themselves but for generations of musicians and artists to come".

One of the earliest examples of American Hip-Hop influencing protests marches around the world is the instance of the 1989 song 'Fight the Power', transcending from the streets of New York to as far as the Serbian capital of Belgrade to protest Milošević's regime in 1991.

Scars Of Gaza

While this “voice of the voiceless” rhetoric may not be as overtly propagandistic as the efforts of Joseph Goebbels, its underlying intent remains clear.

Recent revelations by Congressman Mike Lawler show how in 2022, a $3 million grant—funded by U.S. taxpayers—was allocated to the Palestinian organization "Tomorrow’s Youth" under the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA).

The funding, intended to promote peace and understanding between Israelis and Palestinians, was instead used to support rapper LXIV 64 (Raffoul Saadeh), whose music contains anti-Israel and anti-Semitic themes.

Saadeh’s track *“Scars of Gaza”* has drawn particular criticism for drawing direct comparisons between Israel and Nazi Germany, a stark contradiction to the initiative’s supposed peace-building mission.

Tui Parish **(You Can Do It)**

Similar are its activities in India’s neighbourhood.

Documents leaked by news website Grayzone reveal that days after the August 5 regime change in Bangladesh, the U.S. government-funded International Republican Institute (IRI) trained an army of activists including rappers and "LGBTQI people", even hosting "transgender dance performances", to achieve a national "power shift." Institute staff said the activists "would cooperate with IRI to destabilize Bangladesh’s politics."

IRI, a subsidiary of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), has fueled an array of regime change operations across the globe since it was conceived in the office of CIA Director William Casey over forty-one years ago.

The IRI also supported a variety of "socially conscious artists", which it called "an underutilized actor" for regime change purposes. "While traditional [civil society organizations] face constant pressure,

individual artists and activists are harder to suppress and can often reach a wider audience with their democratic and reformational messages", the Institute points out.

In total, between 2019 and 2020, "IRI issued 11 advocacy grants to artists, musicians, performers or organizations that created 225 art products addressing political and social issues," which it claimed were "viewed nearly 400,000 times".

IRI exposed a direct financial connection between the U.S. government and Towfique Ahmed, a barrister and Bangla rap artist widely celebrated by Bangladeshi media as a prominent figure in the anti-Hasina protest movement.

According to IRI records, Ahmed's musical career benefited from explicit US government funding, with his 2020 release *Tui Parish* (You Can Do It) created under IRI's small grants program. This was reportedly the first of two music videos produced with this financial support.

Ahmed gained significant public attention during the protests when Bangladeshi media outlets highlighted both his artistic contributions to the movement and his offer to provide pro bono legal representation to demonstrators detained during the unrest.

The lyrics of his second IRI-funded music video addressed "a variety of social issues in Bangladesh including rape, poverty and workers' rights". It was explicitly "designed to reveal social issues in Bangladesh and build up disappointment and even dissent to [the] government so as to call for social and political reforms".

IRI was particularly proud of the fact that its Bangladesh "art program… contributed to American cultural diplomacy in Bangladesh". By funding local hip-hop artists, "IRI promoted a uniquely American art form", the group noted.

Long Live Free Cuba!

According to records obtained by the Associated Press, USAID secretly attempted to infiltrate Cuba's underground hip-hop scene as part of a broader strategy to undermine the government of President Raúl Castro.

The plan aimed to use Cuban rappers to "break the information blockade" and mobilize a network of young people advocating for social change, ultimately sparking a youth-led opposition movement.

The initiative was initially overseen by Serbian contractor Rajko Bozic, who drew inspiration from the protest concerts of Serbia's student movement, which played a crucial role in the downfall of former President Slobodan Milošević in 2000.

Under his direction, contractors recruited numerous Cuban musicians under the guise of cultural initiatives, boosting their visibility while subtly encouraging political dissent among their fans.

One of the primary targets of this effort was Los Aldeanos, a hip-hop group known for its sharp criticism of the Cuban government. Frustrated by state-imposed restrictions and highly respected among Cuban youth, the group became a focal point of the USAID-backed operation. Their lyrics, particularly in songs like 'Long Live Free Cuba!', carried strong anti-government messages:

"People marching blind, you have no credibility.
Go and tell the captain this ship's sinking rapidly."

Through music, USAID sought to channel public frustration into a larger movement, demonstrating how hip-hop—deeply rooted in resistance and protest—became a tool of political influence far beyond its origins.

DEI, Music and USAID

Hip-Hop was used not just as a tool for regime change, but also to export USA's morals and values when it comes to DEI (Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion).

Take for instance the $70,000 for the production of a DEI musical in Ireland. Funding went to South Wind Blows which produced 'Ireland 100: An Old Song Resung', a musical that was televised nationally to mark Ireland's independence.

The event featured Ireland's Catholic mother and baby homes, black artist Denise Chaila "confronting prejudice" with spoken word poetry, and black musician Tolü Makay paying tribute to Sinéad O'Connor.

Similar were its activities in Columbia. USAID spent $47,000 on an opera in Colombia that narrates the evolution of a transgender artist. Shortly after its premiere, the U.S. embassy in Colombia awarded the show the resources necessary to put it on at the Teatro Libre.

Multidimensional Chess? Absolutely!

In 2005, the U.S. State Department launched a program deploying "hip-hop envoys"—rappers, dancers, and DJs—to perform and engage with audiences across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

These tours have since spanned much of the Muslim world, with performances in Senegal, Ivory Coast, North Africa, the Levant, the Middle East, and even Mongolia, Pakistan, and Indonesia.

More than just entertainment, these initiatives involve workshops and performances, with officials framing them as efforts to promote democracy and encourage dissent. The underlying belief, as articulated by Hillary Clinton, was that given the choice, people would ultimately "choose freedom over tyranny."

Discussing the State Department’s hip-hop program in Syria, Clinton likened cultural diplomacy to a game of "multidimensional chess." When an interviewer questioned whether hip-hop could be a chess piece, her response was emphatic: "Absolutely!"

The State Department’s use of hip-hop as a diplomatic tool traces back to the mid-2000s, when Karen Hughes, then Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, introduced Rhythm Road.

Modeled after the Cold War-era jazz diplomacy initiative, this program sought to counter negative perceptions of the U.S. in the context of the "War on Terror", particularly in the wake of Abu Ghraib and the Taliban's resurgence.

Unlike its predecessor, however, hip-hop—an art form deeply rooted in protest and resistance—was placed at the center of this modern cultural offensive.

During the Cold War, the U.S. government organized jazz tours, sending integrated bands led by legends like Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Benny Goodman to Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

These tours aimed to counter Soviet propaganda about racial discrimination in the U.S. while promoting "the American way of life" to international audiences.

Similarly, Naresh Fernandes, in his seminal book *Taj Mahal Foxtrot*, explores how American jazz not only helped cultivate a thriving jazz scene in Non-Aligned nations like India but also played a subtle yet significant role in nation-building.

Domestic Artists

The United States government's music outreach is not limited to foreign artists alone. They seem intent on using popular pop stars back home to widen their reach and influence. For instance, the Pentagon's Psychological Operations (PSYOP) unit proposed turning Taylor Swift into an asset during a NATO meeting.

While many on the Left in America tend to dismiss such assessments as conspiracy theories, it must be noted that Swift has over the years, been very vocal about her political standings. She endorsed Joe Biden in 2020 and Democrat Phil Bredesen against Republican Marsha Blackburn when the latter was first elected to the Senate in 2018.

More recently, she had endorsed Kamala Harris in an Instagram post signed as 'Childless Cat Lady', a reference to comments by President Trump's then running mate and now Vice President JD Vance.

Her post, breaking her silence on the 2024 vote, explained: "I'm voting for @kamalaharris because she fights for the rights and causes I believe need a warrior to champion them."

She even concluded her record-breaking Eras tour by warning Americans that it may be their "last chance to vote". She said, "here's a friendly but extremely important reminder that tomorrow is the U.S. election and your last chance to vote".

Thus having had some experience navigating both politics and pop culture, pop would seem like the rational pick if America ever decides to revive its Cold War era designations of music ambassadors: from America to the world.

The story of America's hip-hop diplomacy represents a sophisticated evolution in soft power projection. From its beginnings in the Bronx to its current deployment as a geopolitical tool, hip-hop has traveled a remarkable path through American foreign policy circles.

What began as an authentic expression of marginalized voices has transformed, in many instances, into a calculated instrument of state influence. This dual nature creates unavoidable tensions.

On one hand, these programs offer genuine opportunities for artistic expression and cross-cultural exchange. On the other, they function as vehicles for advancing specific American interests and narratives abroad—be it promoting particular social values in Ireland and Colombia, cultivating opposition movements in Cuba and Bangladesh, or attempting to reshape perceptions in the Middle East.

The historical parallels to Cold War cultural diplomacy are unmistakable. Just as jazz ambassadors were once deployed to counter Soviet narratives about American racial inequalities, today's hip-hop envoys serve in a complex geopolitical chess game—one

where cultural authenticity and state objectives often exist in an uneasy balance.

As these initiatives continue to expand—potentially even incorporating mainstream pop stars like Taylor Swift—the fundamental questions become more pressing: Can art retain its integrity when deployed as statecraft? Does the strategic deployment of cultural expressions undermine their authenticity? And perhaps most importantly, where does cultural exchange end and propaganda begin?

What remains clear is that in the modern landscape of international relations, the beat goes on, carrying with it not just rhythms and rhymes, but carefully calibrated messages designed to advance America's position on the world stage.

As audiences in India and worldwide consume this cultural export, we would do well to consider not just what we are listening to, but why these particular voices have been amplified, and who stands to benefit from their reception.

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Tags USAID DEI Hip-Hop Rappers US Diplomacy American Propaganda