

Media Reform in Bangladesh - Pathways to a Transparent and Accountable Press

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“Since 1971, every government in Bangladesh has tried to hold the pen that writes its own story. Whether by decree or discretion, the press has rarely been free to speak for the people , only to speak to them.”



Introduction



Introduction

In Bangladesh, the media serves as a pillar of democracy, tasked with the critical role of informing the public, providing a platform for diverse voices, and holding those in power accountable.

However, this ideal is far from reality as the media faces numerous challenges that hinder its function as a watchdog and a free press. Recent years have seen a troubling trend towards increased censorship, political pressure, and threats to journalistic independence, underlining a growing need for comprehensive media reform¹.

This paper aims to explore the necessary reforms to ensure a free and fair media landscape in Bangladesh, focusing on legal protections, institutional restructuring, and the promotion of media literacy and ethical journalism.

The urgency of these reforms is underscored by the media's potential to influence political stability and public trust in a rapidly evolving socio-political environment.

“In Bangladesh, censorship is rarely declared — it is implied, enforced through a glance, a phone call, a delay in funding. Repression has become bureaucratic, digital, and routine — clothed in policy, wrapped in patriotism.”

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Background



Background

The media landscape in Bangladesh has evolved significantly since the country's independence in 1971, marked by periods of both liberalisation and restriction. Initially, the media operated under heavy state control, with successive governments using legal and extrajudicial means to curb press freedom.

This trend saw a temporary reversal during the democratic resurgence in the 1990s when private television channels and newspapers began to flourish, expanding the scope of media engagement and public discourse.²

However, the advent of digital media brought new challenges. While the internet and social media platforms have enabled greater freedom of expression and information dissemination, they have also been met with stringent regulatory responses.

The Digital Security Act (DSA) of 2018, for instance, has been widely criticised for stifling dissent and curtailing journalistic freedom, enabling authorities to arrest journalists and shut

down outlets on vague charges of “spreading propaganda” or “hurting religious sentiment”.³

The current media environment in Bangladesh is a complex mix of vibrant journalistic activity and severe constraints. Media outlets often face political pressures that influence editorial policies, while journalists risk harassment and violence for reporting on sensitive issues. The economic viability of media operations also remains precarious, as many outlets depend on government advertisements and patronage, which can be used as tools for political influence.⁴

“When the streets of Dhaka flooded with rage and resistance in 2024, it was not the legacy media that led — it was the people, live-streaming their defiance while the press hesitated, edited, and obeyed.”

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The Monsoon Revolution



The Monsoon Revolution

The July-August 2024 uprising in Bangladesh marked a historic turning point, serving as a collective demand for a future built on accountability and transparency. This period, which saw the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, also highlighted the critical role of media in democratic movements.⁵

Despite the change in leadership, with Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus at the helm of an interim government, the media's entrenched flaws, including self-censorship and political bias, remain largely unaddressed.

During the uprising, social media platforms played a pivotal role by documenting real-time atrocities, which galvanised widespread protests against governmental corruption, economic inequality, and democratic backsliding.

The transition from self-censorship under severe governmental pressure to a more assertive role underscores the transformative impact of digital platforms in challenging authoritarian controls.

Businessmen-politicians have long dominated media ownership in Bangladesh, turning some channels and newspapers into tools of influence rather than pillars of democracy. This has eroded public trust and hindered the media's ability to function effectively as a watchdog.

The uprising exposed these dynamics, revealing media outlets' hesitance to support reform movements and question authority, perpetuating a culture of fear and self-censorship within the industry.

With the fall of Hasina's regime, there was a fleeting hope that the media would embrace its role as a cornerstone of democracy: to amplify the voices of the people, hold power to account, and operate without fear or favor. However, the early signs have been disheartening, with continued harassment of journalists and a reluctance to challenge the narratives propagated by those in power.

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism provided insights into the role of media during these protests, emphasising the need for a media landscape that upholds journalistic integrity and freedom.⁶

This transformative vision seeks to restore integrity and independence to the nation's media, ensuring it can truly serve as a pillar of democratic society. In light of these challenges and opportunities, "Bangladesh 2.0" must prioritise systemic media reforms to foster a robust and free press capable of supporting the nation's democratic processes.

“When government ads keep the lights on, journalism becomes a service — not to the public, but to power. In Bangladesh, economic dependency is the quiet censor in every newsroom.”

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Challenges Facing Media in Bangladesh



4

Challenges Facing Media in Bangladesh

The struggle for a free press in Bangladesh is marred by several significant challenges that undermine its effectiveness and integrity. These challenges span political, legal, and economic spheres, each contributing to the precarious state of media freedom in the country.

In his detailed analysis for The Financial Express, Moslem Uddin Ahmed outlines the urgent need for media reforms in Bangladesh.⁷ He emphasises that the recent shutdown of a corporate-owned English daily starkly highlights the crises in media sustainability and independence, spurred by the volatile mix of corporate and political influences that have characterised the industry over the past decades.

Ahmed recounts the legacy of media evolution from patriotic fervor during the independence era to the corporatisation of media, which has led to its commodification rather than serving the public interest. He suggests that the media's downfall is intrinsically linked to its transformation into a tool for political influence and business interests, culminating in a lack of credibility and a crisis of job security among journalists.

To remedy these deep-seated issues, Ahmed advocates for a public-private partnership model, suggesting it as a progressive solution to ensure financial stability and reduce unethical monopolistic practices. Such partnerships could serve as a regulatory check, balancing interests and promoting a diverse and ethical journalistic practice.

Ahmed also proposes enhancing the Press Council of Bangladesh, giving it quasi-judicial powers to handle journalistic misconduct more effectively. This would align it with other professional regulatory bodies, ensuring that the press can

maintain its integrity and accountability without succumbing to external pressures.

The analysis concludes with a call for a holistic approach to media reform, incorporating both structural changes to ownership models and substantial improvements in journalistic standards and protections. This, Ahmed posits, is crucial for the media to regain its role as a pillar of democracy in Bangladesh.

Following the resignation of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and amidst calls for significant reforms, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has urged Muhammad Yunus, head of Bangladesh's interim government, to prioritise press freedom as a fundamental pillar of democracy.⁸

In a detailed plea, RSF highlighted the oppressive conditions under which journalists operated during Hasina's tenure, characterised by severe restrictions and violent repression, including the notorious Digital Security Act which led to arrests and prosecutions of numerous journalists.

RSF's recommendations to the interim government are comprehensive, advocating for the repeal of all repressive laws used against the press, resolving cases of murdered journalists with particular emphasis on high-profile cases like that of Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi, and ensuring fair trials for journalists currently detained under dubious charges.

This call to action comes in response to the declining state of press freedom in Bangladesh, which saw the country fall to 165th out of 180 in RSF's World Press Freedom Index — the lowest ever.

The urgency of these reforms is underscored by the violence during the Monsoon Revolution,

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Challenges Facing Media in Bangladesh continued...

where over 250 journalists were injured, and the environment of fear perpetuated by legal harassment and cyber-intimidation from military and governmental bodies.

By addressing these critical issues, RSF envisions a reformed legal and institutional framework that not only ends the longstanding repression against journalists but also establishes a safeguard for future governance that respects and upholds the freedom of the press.

Political Pressure and Censorship

Political interference is pervasive, with the government and political entities often exerting pressure on media houses to sway public opinion and suppress dissent. Journalists face threats, harassment, and even violence for reporting critical of the government or touching on sensitive issues such as corruption and human rights abuses.

A poignant example is the case of Rozina Islam, a senior reporter for Prothom Alo, who was detained in May 2021 under the Official Secrets Act for her investigative reporting on health ministry corruption during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹

Kamal Ahmed, head of the Media Reform Commission, recently addressed the pressing issue of political bias in journalism at a gathering with journalists from the Chattogram division. He criticised the alignment of certain media outlets with authoritarian agendas over the past 15 years, stating that this has significantly eroded journalism's reliability. Ahmed emphasised that for journalism to regain its credibility, it is essential to end the political bias that has infiltrated the media landscape.

He further highlighted the need for immediate redress for journalists who have been unfairly treated due to political bias, advocating for the withdrawal and compensation of unjust cases



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Challenges Facing Media in Bangladesh continued...

or imprisonment. Ahmed proposed a minimum wage system with special allowances for journalists in high-cost areas like Dhaka to address the disparity in journalists' earnings and provide financial stability.

The commission is not only focusing on financial reforms but also on enhancing editorial standards and qualifications for newspaper publishers to ensure professionalism within the industry. Ahmed criticised the exaggerated circulation claims by some publications and called for stricter audits to prevent such misleading practices.

He also expressed concerns about the concentrated media ownership and the lack of diversity in media content, pointing out the dangers of allowing one entity to own multiple outlets.

Ahmed concluded by emphasising the importance of collective efforts to overcome the challenges facing Bangladesh's media landscape and enhance its professionalism and credibility. The meeting, which also included other commission members and various editors and journalists, highlighted the broad consensus on the need for substantial reforms to restore the integrity of journalism in Bangladesh.

Legal and Regulatory Hurdles

Legal frameworks like the Digital Security Act serve as tools for censorship and control rather than protection. Introduced in 2018, this act has been used to arrest journalists and activists under ambiguously defined provisions that are heavily punitive.

For instance, in 2020, cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore was arrested and allegedly tortured in custody for publishing a series of cartoons titled "Life in the Time of Corona," which critiqued the government's response to the pandemic.¹⁰ International bodies and local rights groups have

repeatedly called for revisions to these laws to ensure they conform to international standards of freedom of expression.

Economic Constraints

Media outlets in Bangladesh often rely on government advertisements for revenue, which can lead to self-censorship or biased reporting to stay in favor with current political powers. This economic dependency compromises editorial independence, with media owners frequently making decisions that prioritise financial survival over journalistic integrity.

The closure of the Daily Star's online video portal, Star Multimedia, due to economic hardships exacerbated by the withdrawal of government ads following critical reporting, underscores this issue.¹¹ Moreover, the rise of digital media has disrupted traditional revenue models, making it even more challenging for outlets to maintain financial stability without political patronage.



“Reform cannot mean swapping one narrative for another. It must mean protecting the right to question all narratives, especially those dressed as national interest. In Bangladesh, media reform must start where fear ends.”

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Proposed Reforms



Proposed Reforms

For Bangladesh to foster a free and fair media environment, sweeping reforms across legal, institutional, and economic dimensions are essential. The following proposals aim to address the core challenges identified previously.

Strengthening Legal Protections

Key among the reforms is the amendment or repeal of the Digital Security Act. This act has been instrumental in the arrest of over 1,000 individuals, including journalists and activists, for their online activities from its inception until 2023.¹² The United Nations and multiple human rights organisations have criticised the act for its broad and vague terms, which conflict with international freedom of expression standards.

Reforming this law to eliminate provisions that allow for arbitrary detention and suppress dissent is crucial. Additionally, Bangladesh should establish clear legal guidelines that protect journalists from harassment and ensure transparent judicial proceedings in cases involving media personnel.

In a recent editorial by The Daily Star, the urgent need for media reform in Bangladesh is discussed, highlighting the Media Reform Commission's initiatives aimed at safeguarding journalists and amending laws that restrict press freedom.¹³ These reforms are seen as fundamental to transforming the media into a robust democratic pillar, capable of holding power accountable.

The chief of the Media Reform Commission has emphasised financial security for journalists as a cornerstone for effective reform. He has advocated for a minimum floor wage nationwide, reflecting findings from a Broadcast Journalist Center survey which uncovered that over half of the country's TV channels fail to pay their employees on time, with some owing several months' salaries.

The lack of physical security for journalists also remains a grave concern, with frequent reports of attacks, some fatal. Tragic cases like the murder of Golam Rabbani Nadeem and the unresolved killings of journalists Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi underscore the perils journalists face while performing their duties.

The commission suggests that journalists face significant job insecurity, with at least 150 TV journalists having lost their jobs in the past year alone. The proposed reforms aim to protect journalists from government interference and the influence of powerful entities, promoting a media landscape that fosters ethical and high-quality journalism, aligned with international best practices.

The Daily Star editorial underscores the critical role of government support in ensuring these reforms lead to a more transparent, accountable media environment that benefits all of society, emphasising the indispensable nature of independent, fact-based journalism for a functional democracy.

Institutional Reforms

The independence of media regulatory bodies is vital. Currently, entities like the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) and the Ministry of Information have extensive powers over media licensing and content, often used to enforce political agendas.

Establishing an independent media council, staffed by members elected by their peers rather than appointed by the government, could help ensure media oversight free from political interference. An example to consider is the model adopted by countries like the United Kingdom, where independent bodies such as Ofcom regulate the media industry without direct government control.¹⁴



Challenges Facing Media in Bangladesh continued...

Supporting Media Literacy and Ethics

To combat misinformation and raise journalistic standards, investing in media literacy programs is essential. Such initiatives should be incorporated into school curricula and supported through public campaigns. Additionally, promoting ethical journalism is vital.

The Press Council of Bangladesh could be empowered and given the mandate to not only enforce ethical standards but also to mediate conflicts between the public and the press, ensuring accountability while protecting press freedom.

Economic Incentives and Support

The economic viability of media houses should be supported through non-partisan avenues. One approach could be the establishment of a public media fund that supports projects and media outlets dedicated to investigative journalism and public interest reporting, regardless of their

political affiliations. This fund could be modeled on similar initiatives in countries like Canada, where the government provides conditional grants to media companies to support local journalism without interfering in editorial content.¹⁵

Implementation Strategies

Implementing the aforementioned media reforms in Bangladesh requires careful planning and the involvement of various stakeholders. Here's a step-by-step approach to ensure the reforms are practical and effective:

Government and Stakeholder Involvement

Collaboration between the government, media professionals, civil society, and international organisations is crucial. For example, the government can initiate a Media Reform Committee that includes representatives from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural





Challenges Facing Media in Bangladesh continued...

Organisation (UNESCO), local media associations, and civil rights groups to oversee the reform process.

This committee could use benchmarks from countries that have successfully reformed their media landscapes, such as South Africa, which underwent significant media reform post-apartheid to ensure a free and unbiased press.¹⁶

Phased Implementation

Reforms should be implemented in phases, starting with the most critical areas:

1. Legal Reforms: Begin with the amendment of the Digital Security Act to ensure that its provisions meet international human rights standards. This could include removing vague terms like “spirit of the Liberation War” or “public order” which are currently used to suppress dissent.

2. Regulatory Reforms: Establish an independent media council within two years, separating media oversight from government control. Training sessions for council members on international best practices in media regulation should be conducted by experts from countries with robust media freedoms like Sweden or Norway.¹⁷

3. Economic Support: Introduce a pilot project for the public media fund within the first year, selecting five independent media houses that demonstrate commitment to public interest journalism for initial funding.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Set clear metrics and timelines for each phase of implementation. The Media Reform Committee should publish annual reports evaluating the progress of the reforms and their impact on media freedom and quality. Additionally, feedback

mechanisms should be established to allow journalists and the public to report any ongoing challenges or breaches in media freedom.

In a compelling discourse, Shafiqul Alam, the Press Secretary to the Chief Adviser, illuminated the pressing necessity for media reform in Bangladesh. He detailed how, during the Awami League’s 15-year regime, the media was extensively manipulated to craft specific political narratives and even fabricate events. This exploitation was facilitated by direct interventions from various governmental agencies and ministries, severely undermining journalistic independence.¹⁸

Alam highlighted the significant misuse of Information and Communication Technology laws that led to injustices against journalists, including arbitrary detentions and suppression of free speech. He underscored the critical need for robust copyright enforcement to protect journalists’ intellectual property and ensure they receive due compensation for their work. The rampant theft of content across media platforms was noted as a particularly egregious issue that affects journalists’ livelihoods and the economic pressures from low wages and irregular payments further compound the challenges faced by journalists in maintaining standards and independence.

During a discussion titled “Proposals for Media Reform: Citizen’s Thoughts” hosted by “Fascism-Free Media,” participants, including journalists, legal experts, and media stakeholders, suggested several reforms. These included establishing a minimum wage for journalists to align with standards in other sectors, forming an independent media commission to oversee operations and prevent government overreach, enhancing transparency in media ownership and funding, and implementing stronger legal protections for journalists to operate without fear of persecution.



Challenges Facing Media in Bangladesh continued...

Alam's call for a collective effort to overhaul the media landscape in Bangladesh emphasises the need for a media environment that is free, fair, and economically stable to uphold democracy and protect the rights of journalists. This transformative vision seeks to restore integrity and independence to the nation's media, ensuring it can truly serve as a pillar of democratic society.

International Cooperation and Funding

Seek partnerships and funding from international bodies committed to press freedom, such as the International Press Institute or the European Commission, to support the implementation of these reforms. These partnerships can provide both financial support and expertise, leveraging international experience in similar contexts.

Kamal Ahmed, the head of the Media Reform Commission, emphasised that without financial security, meaningful media reform in Bangladesh cannot occur.¹⁹ During a discussion with journalists in Rajshahi, he highlighted the vital link between financial stability and the quality of journalism, suggesting that only a financially secure media can maintain independence and integrity. Ahmed advocated for journalists to transcend political divisions and work collectively toward reform.

The gathering saw various proposals from journalists aiming to reshape the media landscape. These included establishing a more structured entry into journalism through exams, ensuring job security, introducing a fixed salary structure, and preventing political affiliations within news organisations. Further suggestions were to regulate online platforms, elevate the Press Council to mirror the standards of the Bar Council, and provide life insurance and pensions for journalists.

Ahmed also questioned the sustainability of numerous media outlets given the limited audience size, highlighting the need for

government oversight to address these disparities. He pointed out the need for a collective approach to solve media-related problems, involving feedback from all stakeholders, including readers, which he deemed crucial for crafting effective reforms.

Moreover, interactions with academic professionals revealed concerns over the exploitation of journalists, particularly young campus reporters who often juggle multiple roles, adversely affecting their studies. This discussion underlined the urgent need for guidelines that align with international standards to ensure fair treatment and professional growth within the media sector.



“If journalism is to survive in Bangladesh, it must do more than speak—it must refuse to be spoken for. Its future lies not in proximity to power, but in its distance from it.”

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Conclusion

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Conclusion

The media in Bangladesh stands at a crossroads, faced with significant challenges that undermine its role as a pillar of democracy. The reforms proposed in this paper—amending restrictive laws, establishing independent regulatory bodies, enhancing media literacy, and providing economic support are not just necessary but imperative for fostering a free and unbiased press. These changes would not only safeguard the rights of journalists but also enhance the overall quality of information available to the public.

Successful implementation of these reforms requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society. It is crucial that the government champions these changes, not as a concession but as a commitment to democratic principles.

Civil society, media professionals, and international partners must also hold steadfast in their support and oversight, ensuring that the reforms are not just implemented but sustained.

The path to media freedom in Bangladesh is fraught with obstacles, but with a clear strategy and collaborative effort, it is a goal within reach. By learning from global best practices and adapting them to local contexts, Bangladesh can ensure that its media not only survives but thrives, thus strengthening its democracy and providing its citizens with the reliable and independent journalism they deserve.



FOOTNOTES

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