

Media Censorship in Bangladesh: A Threat to Democracy and Human Rights

Areeb Uzzaman

Philip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland College Park

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Dana Priest

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Background

Bangladesh, a densely populated South Asian country with approximately 164 million people, has a literacy rate of around 74.7% (CIA, 2021). The country's parliamentary democracy is led by a Prime Minister, with the ruling Awami League party holding power since 2009. Media consumption in Bangladesh has grown significantly as more people access television, radio, and the Internet (BTRC, 2021). However, increasing media censorship has led to press freedom and freedom of expression concerns.

The media landscape in Bangladesh comprises a variety of national newspapers, local publications such as Kaler Kantho, Jugantor, and Manab Zamin, television channels like Ekattor TV, Channel i, and ATN News, and online news portals including bdnews24.com and Jago News 24. Many media outlets, like Dhaka Tribune and Prothom Alo, operate independently of direct government ownership. The country boasts a vibrant press, journalists consistently critiquing the government and promoting accountability. For instance, numerous newspapers and TV channels reported the government's response to the 2018 road safety protests and the protesters' demands.

Despite this, media censorship has intensified recently as the government enacts laws such as the Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 and the Digital Security Act 2018. These laws have been used to arrest and prosecute journalists and activists for their online activities (Human Rights Watch, 2020). 2018, for example, a prominent photographer and activist, Shahidul Alam, was arrested under the ICT Act for his social media posts about protests in Dhaka (Al Jazeera, 2018). Additionally, in 2020, Tasneem Khalil, editor of the news website Netra News, faced charges under the Digital Security Act, which criminalizes online criticism of the government and allows for the detention of individuals for spreading "propaganda," for

publishing a report on an alleged corruption scandal involving medical equipment purchases (BBC News, 2020).

Many media outlets in Bangladesh are controlled by business conglomerates with close ties to the ruling party or military, leading to self-censorship and biased reporting (CIMA, 2019). For example, Jamuna TV, a prominent television channel, is owned by the Jamuna Group, which has connections with the Awami League, a center-left political party and the current ruling party. Furthermore, several news websites have been blocked due to security concerns, such as Al Jazeera's website in 2020, after they published an investigation into high-level corruption in Bangladesh (Freedom House, 2021).

Considering the varying levels of professionalism and political affiliations within the Bangladeshi press is essential. Some media outlets, particularly smaller ones, might accept bribes or link to political parties, compromising journalistic integrity. In 2016, the daily newspaper Amar Desh was accused of accepting bribes from a businessman to publish a false report about a rival company (The Daily Star, 2016). Additionally, smaller media outlets with connections to local politicians have engaged in biased reporting favoring affiliated political figures. Sensationalism also plagues parts of the media, as seen in coverage of celebrity scandals or controversial political events like the 2018 student protests in Dhaka.

It is important to note that not all media outlets in Bangladesh engage in these practices, and many uphold high standards of professionalism and ethics. For instance, the Center for Investigative Journalism in Bangladesh (CIJB) advocates for investigative journalism and media ethics. However, powerful and prominent outlets, such as television channels owned by Beximco Media, are often controlled by business conglomerates with close ties to the ruling party or military, leading to self-censorship and biased reporting (CIMA, 2019). This dynamic creates a

complex media landscape where independent voices coexist with outlets influenced by the government or military. As a result, the overall picture of media freedom in Bangladesh is nuanced, with a mix of vibrant, critical voices and more constrained, biased reporting. The government must respect and protect media freedom in this context, ensuring that Bangladesh's pluralistic and independent media environment thrives. By supporting a free and diverse press, the government can foster transparency, encourage public discourse, and promote a well-informed citizenry that contributes to a healthy democracy.

Historical Context

Media censorship in Bangladesh has a long and contested history, dating back to the country's independence in 1971. Successive governments have employed various laws and regulations to control the media and suppress dissenting voices, including the Official Secrets Act of 1923, the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1973, and the Special Powers Act of 1974 (Islam & Islam, 2018).

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), a center-right political party that has been one of the two major political forces in the country, led the government between 2001 and 2006. During this period, the BNP imposed widespread media censorship, which included measures that curtailed press freedom and free speech, such as restrictions on the distribution of newspapers, and forced journalists to self-censor their reporting (Mohaiemen, 2013). For example, in 2002, the government arrested several journalists, including Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, the editor of the Weekly Blitz, on charges of sedition (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2002). During the BNP's tenure, access to various news websites, including those of opposition parties and foreign broadcasters, was blocked multiple times. 2005, for instance, the government temporarily blocked access to the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Bengali

news website, citing concerns about the content's potential to incite violence (Reporters Without Borders, 2005). Similarly, in 2006, the government blocked several Bangladeshi websites that supported the opposition Awami League party, including Amader Shomoy, Shomokal, and Poriborton (The Guardian, 2006).

Media censorship in Bangladesh has been influenced by the socio-political climate, political instability, religious extremism, and cultural nationalism (Rahman & Islam, 2018). These factors have fostered a hostile environment for journalists and activists who challenge the state's and society's dominant narratives and ideologies. For example 2013, amidst the Shahbag protests demanding the death penalty for war criminals, several bloggers and journalists were targeted and attacked by religious extremist groups, accusing them of promoting atheism (BBC News, 2013). The government's response to these attacks involved arresting some bloggers instead of protecting them, reflecting the influence of religious extremism on media censorship (Amnesty International, 2013).

Another example is the government's reaction to the 2016 terrorist attack in Dhaka, which saw a crackdown on media outlets critical of the government's handling of the situation. Journalists reporting the attack faced harassment, intimidation, and arrest as the government sought to control the narrative and maintain its image (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

The Current State of Censorship

The government in Bangladesh, led by the Awami League, has continued the trend of media censorship, similar to the previous Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government. It has targeted specific media outlets and journalists critical of the government, with evidence showing incidents of harassment and intimidation. For instance, in 2018, the government shut down the

popular news portal "Monga Namer Boi" and arrested its editor for publishing a report criticizing a government minister (The Diplomat, 2020).

The government has imposed restrictions on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, requiring them to register with the government and provide user data upon request (CJR, 2015). The stated reason for these restrictions is to protect national security and prevent the spread of misinformation. Still, independent experts argue that these measures aim to stifle dissent and control the narrative on these platforms (Freedom House, 2020).

Television news channels, in particular, have been most affected by censorship. Evidence suggests that the government has pressured TV stations to limit critical content. For example, in 2018, the government temporarily shut down the private broadcaster Ekushey Television (ETV) after it aired a report on the repression of the opposition (RSF, 2018). Moreover, the government has pressured cable operators to remove channels critical of the government from their packages. As a result, several news channels, including Jamuna TV and Independent TV, have been taken off the air, forcing journalists to self-censor their reporting to avoid government retaliation (CIMA, 2020).

Various government agencies, including the police, intelligence agencies, and the judiciary, enforce media censorship in Bangladesh, such as using the Digital Security Act. The government has also resorted to violence and intimidation to silence journalists. For example, in 2020, investigative journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol went missing after facing defamation charges under the Digital Security Act, only to be found 53 days later near the Indian border (CPJ, 2020). Additionally, reporter Rozina Islam was arrested in 2021 for her investigative reports on alleged corruption in the health sector during the COVID-19 pandemic (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Media censorship in Bangladesh has been influenced by political and religious factors, such as the rise of Islamist extremism and the rivalry between the two major political parties, the Awami League and the BNP. This rivalry has resulted in a highly polarized media landscape, where outlets are often seen as aligned with either of the major parties. For instance, the Daily Star is generally perceived as pro-Awami League, while Amar Desh leans towards the BNP. This polarization has intensified censorship and self-censorship, as journalists and media organizations fear reprisals from the ruling party or opposition (The Diplomat, 2020).

Religious extremism has also played a role in shaping media censorship in Bangladesh. The rise of Islamist extremist groups has led to targeted attacks on journalists and bloggers who criticize religious fundamentalism or promote secular values. In 2015, a series of attacks on secular bloggers and publishers were carried out by extremist groups, resulting in several deaths and forcing many writers into hiding or exile (BBC News, 2015). This climate of fear has had a chilling effect on free speech, as journalists and writers are reluctant to address sensitive religious topics for fear of violent reprisals.

Ultimately, media censorship in Bangladesh is detrimental to the press and the free flow of information, as it undermines freedom of expression and the democratic rights of the people. The public is deprived of diverse and independent sources of information and opinions when the media is censored. Consequently, the media cannot effectively perform its role as a watchdog and a platform for public debate.

Analysis and Prospects of Change

The prospects for change regarding media censorship in Bangladesh remain uncertain. Although the international community has criticized the government's actions, it has had minimal impact on its policies. To ensure a pluralistic and independent media environment in Bangladesh,

it is imperative that the government respects and protects media freedom. This can be achieved by repealing restrictive legislation like the Digital Security Act, fostering a climate of transparency, and holding those responsible for attacks on journalists accountable. By doing so, the government will not only promote democratic values but also contribute to developing a vibrant, diverse, and informed society.

Notably, civil society groups in Bangladesh, such as the Bangladesh Centre for Development, Journalism, and Communication (BCDJC) and Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), have been vocal in their opposition to media censorship and have called for the government to respect freedom of expression (The Diplomat, 2020). These groups have organized protests and campaigns calling for the government to respect freedom of expression and allow the press to operate freely (DW, 2018). International human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, have criticized the government's actions and called on the government to respect freedom of expression. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression has urged the government to repeal the "Digital Security Act" and respect freedom of expression and the press (RSF, 2020).

The current government's term expires in 2024, and the upcoming elections will be crucial for future media freedom in Bangladesh. The main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), is one potential contender. Although the BNP has criticized the current government's media censorship policies, it should be noted that they themselves faced accusations of media censorship during their tenure (Mohaiemen, 2013). The electoral outcome and the press freedom stance of the winning party will heavily influence the future of media freedom in Bangladesh. External actors, such as international human rights organizations, donor

countries, and regional powers, can also shape media freedom policies by exerting diplomatic pressure and providing financial and technical assistance to promote media development.

Media censorship in Bangladesh is not only a political issue but also a cultural and religious one. The rise of Islamist extremism and cultural nationalism has created challenges for media freedom and pluralism in Bangladesh (Rahman & Islam, 2018). For example, the emergence of extremist groups like Hefazat-e-Islam has contributed to a climate of fear and self-censorship among journalists, who may be hesitant to criticize religious or cultural issues. Simultaneously, the rise of cultural nationalism has led to the suppression of minority voices and the promotion of a homogeneous national identity that restricts media diversity. These intertwined factors have further complicated the media landscape, requiring a holistic approach that addresses the underlying causes and dynamics of media censorship in Bangladesh.

Addressing media censorship in Bangladesh will require concerted efforts from the government, civil society, media organizations, and international actors. By fostering an environment that values freedom of expression, diversity, and inclusivity, Bangladesh can strengthen its democratic institutions and contribute to developing a vibrant and informed society.

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