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TRUTH IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC: THE VIRAL FRONTLINE BANGLADESH COUNTRY REPORT

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BANGLADESH

NOT COWED DOWN DESPITE EXTREMISM AND DIGITAL ONSLAUGHT

The Covid-19 pandemic that gripped the region in 2020, became a pretext for an authoritarian crackdown in Bangladesh, which saw a series of arrests of journalists, censorship and targeting of critics of the government.

Harassment, intimidation and the targeted killing of three journalists were grim reminders of the dangers faced by Bangladeshi journalists in the line of duty. The death of a writer in police custody detained under the Digital Security Act once more shone the spotlight on this draconian law that institutes heavy penalties with little due process protections for perceived violations. It is a serious curb on freedom of expression online.

Defamation laws are very widely construed and enforced. For instance, magistrates regularly permit unrelated third parties to bring defamation cases on behalf of someone ostensibly injured, leading to a serious chilling effect on free speech. The increasing influence of a right-wing Salafist ideology is also taking firm root in all sections of society and poses a challenge to freedom of expression and other democratic values.

The official version, that the 1,227 daily newspapers with a total of 10 million daily circulation, are "enjoying more freedom than many developed countries across the globe" as stated by Information Minister Mohammad Hasan Mahmud on March 29, 2021, seems to be in stark contrast to the realities on the ground for journalists in Bangladesh.

HARASSMENT AND MURDERS

There were 225 cases of harassment of journalists from April 2020 to March 2021, according to data compiled by human rights organisation Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK).

From April 2020 onward, at least three professional journalists – Ilyas Hossain, Julhas Uddin and Borhan Uddin Muzakir – were killed in Bangladesh in the line of duty.

Reporter for the news website Barta Bazar and Bangladesh Samachar, Muzakir, 25, was shot in the throat as he covered the clashes in the street between two factions of the ruling Awami League party in the Companiganj area of Bangladesh's southern Noakhali district on 19 February 2021.

Julhas Uddin, 35, a local correspondent of private television channel Bijoy TV and Vice President of Dhamrai Press Club was stabbed to death by miscreants in Dhamrai, Dhaka on 2 September 2020.

Ilyas Hossain, 45, a correspondent for the local Bangla daily newspaper, Dainik Bijoy, was hacked to death while returning home from work on the evening of October 11, 2020, in Narayanganj, a suburb of Dhaka. He had been investigating irregularities in gas line distribution.

Writer Mushtaq Ahmed, 54, detained under the Digital Security Act (DSA) on 6 May 2020, for allegedly posting criticism of the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic on Facebook, died in police custody on 25 February after nine months of

incarceration. The writer was allegedly tortured in custody and his family members described the death as mysterious. His 'crime' was to question the government about the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The only good news in this bleak period was the recovery on 1 November of journalist Golam Sarwar, who went missing on 29 October. He was found unconscious near a canal at Sitakunda of Southern Chattogram district. He was heavily bruised, stripped off his clothes, but thankfully, alive.

ARRESTS AND CASES UNDER DSA

The government cracked down on free speech during the pandemic, and regularly dissenting voices were silenced by the draconian Digital Security Act.

The lone Cyber Crimes Tribunal in Dhaka launched in 2013, with the entire country under its jurisdiction, has 3,324 cases pending, most of which are filed due to Facebook posts. The cases filed under the highly repressive Digital Security Act (DSA), which was passed in 2018 replacing the erstwhile Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act of 2006, are dealt with by this tribunal.

The court could dispose only 128 of the 3,324 cases that landed in its docket between 2013 and March 2021, and obtained only 30 convictions, as reported by the US based BenarNews on 16 March this year.

The Bangladesh government blocked the website of BenarNews, an online affiliate of Radio Free Asia, in April 2020 after it covered a leaked UN memo warning that two million Bangladeshis could die from COVID-19 in the absence of appropriate government measures. The police in a statement at the time said that a list of 50 social media accounts had been sent to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) for action against them and "we are also working at the moment to identify and locate people involved in spreading rumours from 82 other accounts, pages and sites."

**THE DEATH OF A WRITER IN POLICE CUSTODY
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PROTECTIONS FOR PERCEIVED VIOLATIONS.**

The first seven days of May 2020 saw the arrest of eight journalists and writers under the DSA over their news articles and Facebook posts. The detainees included freelance journalist Jamal Mir; cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore; writer Mushtaq Ahmed; editor of Haorancholer Katha and district correspondent of SATV, Mohammad Mahtab Uddin Talukder; editor of Pakkhakal Shafiqul Islam Kajol; Dainik Grameen Darpan news editor Ramzan Ali Pramanik; staff reporter Shanta Banik and publisher and editor of online news portal Narsingdi Pratidin, Khandaker Shahin.

THE TIMES HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY CHALLENGING FOR THE MEDIA IN BANGLADESH WHEN SALAFIST (ORTHODOX ISLAMIC) IDEOLOGY IS SPREADING AND TAKING ROOT UNDER A SO-CALLED SECULAR REGIME.

After being in incarceration for ten months, cartoonist Kishore was released on bail on March 3 2021. He said he had been subjected to torture while in custody. Mushtaq Ahmed, co-accused in the same case, died in prison on 25 February.

Chief reporter of Daily Sangram Ruhul Amin Gazi, also the president of the pro-opposition faction of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalist (BFUJ), was arrested on 21 October 2020. He is still under pretrial detention in a case filed under the DSA. Editor of the same daily, which was found involved in inciting crimes against humanity during the country's war of independence in 1971 in a war crime tribunal, had also been arrested on 13 December 2019 in the same case. He, however, secured bail from the High Court on 23 September 2020. The case was filed as the newspaper described Abdul Quader Mollah, an executed 1971 war criminal, as a 'martyr'.

A ruling party activist filed a case against Asad Noor on 14 July under the DSA on charges of spreading rumours and defaming Islam on Facebook and other digital platforms through defending a Buddhist monk. Noor has consistently been in hiding for the last six years. In December 2017, Noor was accused of hurting religious sentiments only to be released on bail in August 2018. After pressure from radical Muslim groups, Noor was re-arrested and only released in January 2019.

A case was filed in South Eastern Lakshmipur district against AKM Mizanur Rahman, editor and publisher of the Daily Banglar Mukul; executive editor, Afroza Akter Ranga; Mohona TV correspondent SN Uddin Riad and Asian TV correspondent Jahirul Islam Titu on 31 October.

NEW DANGERS LOOM

The times have become increasingly challenging for the media in Bangladesh as Salafist (Orthodox Islamic) ideology is spreading and taking root under a so-called secular regime. A four-minute video of sermons by Wasik Billah Nomani, an Islamic preacher that went viral on social media presents this situation very well. In the video the mullah is seen repeatedly vowing to 'slaughter' journalists after establishing the caliphate. He delivered the speech in the presence of thousands of people and repeated the words several times.

Maulana Nomani is a prominent activist of Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh, which is apparently the largest Islamic organization in Bangladesh populated by teachers and students of quami madrasas. Maulana Nomani himself is a teacher at a madrasa in Mymensingh city. His sermons, available on YouTube and Facebook, are replete with hate speech against Hindus.

The Detective Branch (DB) of the police detained him on April 11 from Mymensingh for allegedly making provocative statements during his sermons. The arrest of an Islamic preacher on such allegations is the first of its kind in Bangladesh, though social media is overflowing with such

Wazes (Islamic lectures) by scores of Islamic scholars.

There have been increasing attacks by the radical outfit Hefazat-e-Islam and its followers against journalists, freethinkers, religious minorities, mystic baul singers, cultural activists, sculptures and institutions in recent years.

On April 6, Hefazat activists attacked the house of journalist Habibur Rahman at night and dragged him out of his home, assaulted him mercilessly and ransacked his house in Sonargaon. They were allegedly irked with Habibur, local correspondent of satellite channel SA TV, for not apologising to the organisation's joint secretary, General Mamunul Haque. Habibur had reported on an incident which showed Haque in a compromising situation with a woman. A video shows Hefazat's men assaulting Habibur and asking him to apologise to the leader.

On March 28, Hefazat-e-Islam members went berserk in Brahmanbaria amid a countrywide general strike protesting the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The men attacked the press club – with more than 25 members inside – torched public infrastructure and vandalised spots across the town. Press club president and Daily Janakantha staff reporter Riazuddin Jami was seriously wounded.

At least 13 journalists were injured across the country, including four journalists in Noakhali as they reported the dawn to dusk strike called by Hefazat-e-Islam that day. At least 14 Hefazat men – 10 in Brahmanbaria and four in Chittagong – were killed in the ensuing clashes with law enforcement officials from March 26 to 28.

Hundreds of Hefazat men attacked and looted homes of minority Hindus at Noagaon village in eastern Sunamganj's Shalla, alleging they had given insult to Islam in a Facebook post criticising their leader Mamunul Haque. It left about a hundred Hindu households and temples destroyed in its wake.

Jhumon Das, a local Hindu youth posted on Facebook on March 16, criticising remarks made by Mamunul at Hefazat's conference the previous day. Police detained Jhumon with the help of locals the same night and charged him under the DSA.

Over the years, the Hefazat has orchestrated many incidents of violence across Bangladesh since its mass gathering in Dhaka in May 2013, which spearheaded its 13-point demands. These demands included hanging of all atheists and bloggers, framing of anti-blasphemy laws, curbs on women's rights, and other obscurantist proposals. Significantly, many of these demands were later reflected in certain decisions of the government, including the insertion of an anti-blasphemy provision in the DSA.

The leaders of the organisation have made public statements in support of the killings of atheist bloggers by the militants and demanded the release of convicted killers. Islamic extremists have carried out many attacks and killed secularist and atheist writers, bloggers, publishers, foreigners, LGBT activists and religious minorities such as Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and

Shias between 2013 and 2016. At least ten bloggers had their lives sacrificed in the bloodshed because of their opinions and many others fled the country.

THE FLIPSIDE OF THE SPACE PROVIDED BY SOCIAL MEDIA FOR DEMOCRATIC VOICES, IS THE EASE WITH WHICH FACEBOOK AND YOUTUBE AS PLATFORMS ARE CAPABLE OF FACILITATING ISLAMISTS TO AMPLIFY FUNDAMENTALIST VIEWS AND HATE SPEECH.

MISSING: TO HELL AND BACK

Shafiqul Islam Kajol, a photographer and editor of Pakkhalakal Shafiqul magazine, went missing on March 10, 2020, a day after being charged under the DSA, along with 31 other journalists, for allegedly publishing false information. He had been sued by a ruling party lawmaker in connection with an article published on March 1.

Fifty-three days after his disappearance, the journalist turned up on World Press Freedom Day on May 3, 2020, in police custody at a border town 150 miles from where he had last been seen. "I am alive," he told his son over the phone, the first time the family had heard his voice since his disappearance. The family rushed to see him but had only a brief opportunity to talk to him at court as he was jailed for trespassing and for Facebook posts that fell foul of Bangladesh's highly repressive internet law.

So began Kajol's pretrial detention, where he was to languish for 237 days until he was released on bail on December 25. Kajol is now facing trial in three DSA cases filed by lawmaker Saifuzzaman Shikhor and two Jubo Mahila League activists for a Facebook post. However, he is still yet to get the opportunity to seek justice for his alleged abduction and ill treatment.

"It felt like I was in a grave," he said, describing his 53-day disappearance. "It was a very small, enclosed space with no windows. My eyes were bound, my hands were cuffed behind, and my mouth was gagged for all 53 days up until I was dropped off to Benapole. I only kept count of the days. That is it. It was indescribable. I spent my days thinking about my family and whether I would ever see them again. I feel like I have died and come back," Kajol narrated to the Daily Star newspaper, which published the interview on January 6, 2021.

On November 1, 2020, journalist Golam Sarwar, who went missing a few days before, was found unconscious and bruised near a canal at Sitakunda of Southern Chattogram district. Sarwar, who works for a local news portal, had been missing four days after publication of an article about the alleged involvement of a minister's family in land grabbing.

A video clip capturing the early moments of his rescue shows a barely conscious but deeply traumatised Sarwar — believing he was still being held by his abductors — begging for relief from their torture. He is heard saying: "Bhai, please don't beat me. I won't write

news anymore!" He stretches his hands in a pleading gesture as he repeats the words again and again.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), ASK, Article 19 and many other human rights bodies nationally and internationally described these two incidents as a threat aimed at gagging freedom of speech and freedom of the press in Bangladesh. What distinguishes violence faced by journalists from others is that no assault on them is a one-off event. It is intended as a message to anyone in the media who dares to speak or unearth the truth, to those who believe in the lofty ideals of journalism.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MINORITIES

Given the restraints and challenges of mainstream media in Bangladesh, social media has emerged as one of the biggest platforms for journalists to publish critical reporting in the country. But social media users face multiple forms of censorship including arrest for posts, having articles or pages removed, as well as silencing through online harassment from state and non-state actors.

Critical analysis of religion is totally forbidden in Bangladesh. No newspaper will dare publish anything that may hurt religious sentiments of the majority population. Ahmadiya Muslim Jamaat, a minority sect within Islam, is a victim of communal attacks by orthodox Islamists in Bangladesh, but coverage of such harassment is scant in mainstream media.

State-run as well as private television, radio and newspapers regularly publish Islamic content, though coverage of other faiths is rare. However, the internet has opened the widest window for minorities to express opinions which have otherwise been marginalised by traditional media.

Bloggers of Bangladesh criticise religions, mostly questioning Islam, which often has violent repercussions. After a grim period of blogger assassinations in the country from 2014 to 2016, many bloggers went into hiding or fled the country. The government also arrested some atheists on charges of hurting religious sentiment of the people. Secular blogs including istishon.com, songsoy.com, nastikya.com and dhormockery.org, which are used to publish the voices of minority atheists, are now blocked by the authorities in Bangladesh territory. However, the sites can be viewed using alternative technologies such as proxy servers or VPNs.

The flipside of the space provided by social media for democratic voices, is the ease with which Facebook and YouTube as platforms are capable of facilitating Islamists to amplify fundamentalist views and hate speech. The platforms, while regularly taking down opposing views and deactivating the accounts of the critics, are now more powerful than the traditional media in this light.

On March 16, Jhumon Das, a young man from Noagaon village in Shalla of Sunamganj district posted a Facebook update criticising Hefazat-e-Islam joint general secretary general Mamunul Haque, which caused a stir among Hefazat supporters. That night, thousands of people gathered following announcements from local mosques. When Hindu residents of the area fled, the attackers destroyed 80 houses and eight temples.

Attacks on minorities on the pretext of Facebook posts insulting religion is now a familiar tactic, said a citizens' delegation, which visited Noagaon on March 26 and 27. It

is worth noting that the attacks in Pabna's Santhia in 2013, Cox's Bazar's Ramu in 2012, Brahmanbaria's Nasirnagar in 2012 had the same pattern; even though police arrested the persons behind the Facebook posts, most of the investigation remains incomplete, and the real culprits never brought to justice. Minorities are attacked live on Facebook and YouTube, as it happened in the latest attack against Noagaon residents. But Facebook and YouTube appear to take little action against such practices.

"I protested a viral video on Facebook in which an Islamic scholar advised Muslims to crush non-Muslims responding to their salam (greeting). Facebook blocked my account, but preserved videos of those, who in the name of propagating religion, are preaching that if a Hindu greets you, you have to curse them in response. This type of hate speech apparently does not violate the community standard of Facebook, but the social media giant is deactivating the accounts of those of us criticising hate speech in the name of religion. My Facebook account faces frequent bans and remains inactive for almost half of a year. I wrote to Facebook authorities many times, but did not get any remedy," says Susupto Pathok.

"For my activism, I have been receiving frequent threats from the Islamists. Simultaneously, with mass reports and fake copyright claims, they disabled my YouTube Channels and Facebook profiles. Furthermore, at the Bangladesh Government's request, Facebook restricted at least 12 video documentaries in my Facebook page for Bangladesh viewers," said Asad Noor, a vlogger on the run facing death threats, a number of DSA cases and pretrial detention. When Noor fled Bangladesh, the police detained his family members for more than 48 hours, and also picked up his father multiple times in order to pressure him to return.

"The role of Facebook and YouTube is clearly controversial. They are apparently working as a Taliban media in Bangladesh. Responding to mass reports by the Islamists as well as the government, they have been cracking down on the secular activists and promoting the fascist agenda of the Islamists and the Bangladesh government," said Noor.

Islamic scholar Mufti Abdullah Al Masud, who was the principle of a madrasa in Dhaka, started to write blogs seeking to reform the religion and was soon announced an apostate and had to flee from Bangladesh to save his life.

Now a well-known atheist blogger from Bangladesh, Masud narrated his experience; "Facebook bans my ID every couple of months and the ban lasts from one month up to three months. My Facebook ID was unlocked on the 10th of this month, but I still can't upload any pictures to Facebook. Because Facebook has banned me from uploading pictures until the 16th. I had my own picture in my profile. When believers claim my photo as their copyright, Facebook accepts it without question and removes my photo. Facebook has removed many of my posts that did not contain the slightest intolerant remarks. Many times, Facebook has deprived me of the opportunity to appeal. This is also the case in YouTube. As soon as someone reports a video of mine, the YouTube authorities start to serve notices and remove the video if it is late to answer questions from the YouTube authorities.

"There is a page on Facebook right now called 'Mufti Abdullah Al Masud' which is not mine. From there, various posts are made in favour of Islam which are provocative

and hateful. Many friends and I have reported against that page, but Facebook has never taken notice. My original page called 'Mufti Abdullah Al Masud' and my group called 'Mufti Masud Debate Club' was shut down by Facebook due to reports from some believers. The state of Facebook now is such that it is repeatedly shutting down my real page thinking it is fake and keeping the fake page as a real page despite my repeated objections!"

Human rights organisation, Article 19, also says Facebook's transparency and community enforcement reports do not go far enough and fail to provide a genuinely transparent account of content removal decisions made by Facebook. Faruq Faisel, Article 19's regional director for Bangladesh and South Asia, said; "Facebook still has a long way to go in terms of transparency and accountability for its content moderation processes."

Sexuality remains another taboo topic. In Bangladesh, no-one dares to focus on LGBT issues, either on social media or in any newspaper. This follows on from the killing of Xulhaz Mannan on April 25, 2016. The founder of Bangladesh's first and only LGBT-themed magazine, Roopbaan, who was killed in a machete attack by Islamist extremists in his apartment along with another LGBT activist Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy.

"Everyone thinks twice before pitching an article that talks about LGBT rights. Despite the fact that I wrote a report on the deprivations of the LGBT community and the editor of our daily praised the quality of the article, he declined publication," a reporter told IFJ on condition of anonymity.

The pandemic has worsened the situation for women journalists. Many families and even media houses are not allowing women to come out and work in such a dangerous situation as men. Very few women journalists have had the opportunity to work.

"Women as well as feminists are regular victims of online harassment and abuse," said Jharna Moni, a senior reporter of Bangla Newspaper Bhorer Kagoj, adding: "Facebook is a platform of hate speech against women."

Dr Gitiara Nasrin, a professor of journalism at Dhaka University, echoes these views. "[The harassment] is despite the fact that we are freer than any previous time because of the internet which have given us the scope to launch feminist websites and blogs. In Bangladesh we have a number of web portals dedicated to women."

Nayeemul Islam Khan, editor of the Bangla daily Amader Orthoneeti and English daily Our Time, told IFJ; "In Bangladesh as in many other countries of the world, fake news and false news are being spread in the mainstream media from time to time through social media. Some people are creating fake news unconsciously. But many are doing it consciously."

"They are trying to catch more readers online with fake news and monetize their platform or increasing revenue. This is a very bad sign. The history of misinformation in the field of journalism is not unprecedented. But with the proliferation of social media, we have noticed that fake news has increased alarmingly, resulting in dangerous consequences. There is evidence of several communal attacks against minorities in our country. There has also been political violence due to various baseless provocative propaganda."

VIRAL LOAD

Covid-19 continues to create havoc in the media industry in Bangladesh, with at least 37 journalists having succumbed and 14 others who died with the symptoms of Covid-19 but died without being tested, according to a study conducted by 'Our Media Our Rights', a social media platform of Dhaka-based journalists.

"A total of 1,346 journalists, including 946 in Dhaka were infected with Coronavirus till 15 April 2021. The virus infected 218 media houses including 131 newspapers, 32 TV channels and 48 internet portals, 5 radios and two news agencies," Ahammad Foyez, chief coordinator of the group said. "Around 1,250 journalists lost their jobs while several thousand journalists are facing salary cut or irregular payments amid the pandemic."

The owners blame the pandemic for revenue shrinkage and consequent salary cuts. But the general secretary of Dhaka Union of Journalists (DUJ), Sajjad Alam Khan Topu, said; "The tendency of irregular payment is nothing new for a section of unhealthy media houses. The pandemic is nothing but an excuse for them. The media outlets, which used to pay the employees properly are still doing so despite the pandemic."

Noted media personality and vice president of the Bangladesh Federal Union Journalists-BFUJ, Syed Istiaq Reza, also criticised the large-scale retrenchments, irregularity in payments and lack of medical help by the media owners amid the pandemic, many of whom forced their employees to work without providing protective gear.

Bangladesh witnessed a major upheaval in Daily Janakantha, a major Bangla language newspaper, which issued a termination letter to 26 journalists including the unit chief of DUJ through email on March 15, without paying their dues.

The journalists came under brutal attack on its premises in Dhaka's Eskaton area allegedly by the employed thugs of the owner, as they started a sit-in demonstration against the wholesale termination on April 11. At least ten journalists were injured, of whom three were hospitalised in a critical condition.

Bangladesh's media industry is dominated by the private sector. Less than 10 per cent of newspapers follow the government declared wage structure to pay their employees.

"The media industry is disproportionately bigger; it is bigger than the necessity. Some wealthy people float media houses without assessing its business viability. For this reason, many media houses shut down without showing any responsibility to workers," said Dr Gitiara Nasrin, journalism teacher at Dhaka University.

Meanwhile, on April 13, the Directorate General of Health Services director general, ABM Khurshid Alam, accused some media outlets and public health experts of causing damage to the morale of health service providers through criticising them.

INDUSTRY IN TRANSITION

Given the challenges faced by individual journalists, the media industry in Bangladesh is not all in the doldrums. According to the editor of the Dhaka Tribune, Zafar Sobhan, "The industry appears in decent shape despite the challenges. New newspapers

and TV stations are continually being launched."

The impact of the pandemic has not been uniform. Though print circulation numbers have been in freefall for years, 2020 saw the industry's already attenuated numbers drop by half. Most of the readers who stopped buying newspapers are not coming back. On the flipside, there is continued demand for news, says Zafar Sobhan: "Our total circulation, of which now upwards of 90 per cent is online, has gone through the roof. Yesterday Dhaka Tribune had 350,000 unique visitors to our site, a new record. So, the Covid-19 crisis has merely accelerated what we all knew was coming: the industry's transformation from print-first to digital-first. Together with this transformation has been the transformation in operations and procedures, with work becoming decentralized and the traditional news desk and newsroom becoming de-emphasised, if not obsolete."

The media in Bangladesh has tremendous potential in intervening in public culture, protecting its citizens' human and cultural rights and playing a watch dog role on the political, social and economic front – a role that is desperately needed to maintain accountability of the government.

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Afghan Independent Journalists' Association
Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum
Federation of Nepali Journalists
Federation of Media Employees' Trade Unions, Sri Lanka
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