PRESSURE & POLARISATION
POWERING MEDIA RESISTANCE IN SOUTH ASIA

BANGLADESH COUNTRY REPORT

21ST ANNUAL SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2022-2023
Unnatural deaths

Journalists in Dhaka demonstrate for justice every year on February 11, to mark the murder of journalist Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Bani on the same day in 2012. More than 11 years have passed since the ghastly double murder, but a court in Dhaka on March 5, 2023, granted bail for the 9th time - the request of the country’s elite police force Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) for more time to complete the investigation.

According to the UNESCO Observatory of Killed Journalists, there are 1,176 unresolved cases of murdered journalists in Bangladesh. The list has a total of 26 journalists, including some bloggers, killed between 2004 and July 2022.

The year 2023 opened with the brutal killing of a journalist. AkhileshIslam, 27, district correspondent for the Daily Mirror and a reporter with a local online newspaper called Bahamnagar Sangbad in Brahmanbaria district. He was hacked to death on January 9.

The accused was arrested within hours, and the motive behind the murder is still being investigated.

Nine cases of unnatural deaths of journalists and media workers were registered in 2022, of which four were murders, and five were suicides according to police statements.

The body of the acting editor of the daily Kashub Khabar, Hashib Rahaman Ruhel, was found in a pond in Kumarkhali Upazila (sub-district) of the Southern Khulna district on July 7, a day after he disappeared. His family and colleagues alleged that the law enforcement agencies acted immediately after he was reported missing, he could have been found alive. The police are yet to ascertain the motive behind the killing or bring the perpetrators to justice.

On August 4, 2022, the decomposed body of journalist Golam Rahman was found near a pond in Sonargaon Upazila of Narayanganj district. He was suspected to have been murdered by narcotics dealers because of his reporting on drug trafficking and illegal activities. He had worked as a reporter in a local newspaper, a small site on a daily and as a fact-finder with a Dhaka-based weekly newspaper.

On June 8, the police recovered the mutilated body of Abdul Bari, a producer of private TV channel DBC News from Hatirjheel lake near Police Plaza in Dhaka. His throat had been slit and he had visible stab wounds. After investigations, the police declared that it was a suicide.

Police recovered the dead bodies of four other journalists - three of them women – and concluded that they were suicides.

Attacked with impunity

At least ten journalists were injured in police action at the Supreme Court in Bangladesh on March 15, 2023, while covering the Bar Association election. The attack was criticised as a trampling of the constitutional recognition of press freedom in Bangladesh. Senior diplomats announced their intention to hold meetings to discuss whether journalism is carried out independently and responsibly as a profession.

Safiurahm-based journalist Raghunath Kha, known for his writing about the rights of landless people, was blinded, injured and stripped by a group of police from the US embassy. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina however announced on March 13 said that she would never bow down to foreign pressure.

BANGLADESH

Quantity Over Quality

As Bangladesh heads into a general election, likely to be held in January 2024, the atmosphere is heating up and presenting major challenges for the media. The good news is that both domestic and international stakeholders are now more vocal than ever before about protecting freedom of expression in this troubled, dynamic and complex space.

Bangladesh has achieved remarkable progress in a little over five decades since its bloody Liberation War of 1971. Since 2000, it has been among the fastest growing economies in the world. Yet, democracy and freedom of expression are being severely tested amid growing fanaticism, intolerance and political rivalry between the ruling and opposition parties.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who survived harassment and attacks while in opposition, is now criticised for being too authoritarian and prioritising the consolidation of her power rather than fulfilling her obligations to democracy. She has been prime minister since 2009.

While the media is seemingly booming, the sharp rise in the number of media outlets presents a big challenge for the media industry, even as the government’s heavy-handed regulation of the rapidly mushrooming online portals, social media sites, newspapers and television channels adds to the challenge.

Bangladesh has 3,176 registered newspapers and magazines of which 1,179 are weekly or daily. According to data from the government’s Department of Films and Publications. Currently the number of daily, weekly and monthly newspapers published from the capital city is 96, 199 these, 309 are dailies, 345 are weeklies and 287 are monthlies. Industries insiders however say that these numbers do not represent credible media outlets. The number of authentic copies published from Dhaka is more likely to be just 32, and fewer than 10 English dailies they say. These are publications that have offices and staff and are published every day. There are a few dailies, according to different districts, which maintain minimum journalistic requirements.

The mushrooming of media registered with the government website represents a boost in quantity rather than in credible and ethical journalism.

International spotlight

The United States in its 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices strongly criticised Bangladesh for “serious restrictions on free expression and media, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and enforcement of or threats to enforce criminal libel laws to limit expression and serious restrictions on internet freedom.” It highlighted issues like “unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; forced disappearances; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government.”

According to the Observatory of the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC), including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland, ten journalists were arrested and 14 forced to remain in prison.

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A media industry in Bangladesh is still largely male dominated. Women still must work hard to gain acceptance as professionals in the news media, although social taboos and conservative values continue in the four walls are gradually loosening. A study

The study also found that only 8 per cent of stories had bylines by women. The scenario is slightly better in electronic media. The South Asia Center for Media in Development (SACMID) monitored news reports of two television channels from April to June 2022 and found that 71.29 per cent news presenters were women. But this appears to be a cosmetic change, not reflected in genuine gender perspectives in media coverage. The SACMID study found that the media featured women as the first character in only 20.57 per cent of the total 1122 news reports.

### Unsafe private data

Shrinking labour rights

On January 8, 2022, the Parliamentary Standing Committee in the Information and Broadcast Ministry was granted another 90 days to examine the Mass Media Employees (Services Conditions) Bill 2022. The Bill had been placed before Parliament in March 2022.

Once the new law is passed, jobs of media employees will no longer be regulated under existing labour law. The wages and benefits of journalists, employees and press workers, artists of broadcast, online, and print media outlets would be fixed under the proposed law, a prospect that has been opposed by both trade unions and media owners’ associations.

As per the bill, journalists will be regarded as “media professionals”, and not as workers. The bill incorporated a provision of forming “mass media welfare boards” to safeguard the interests of journalists’ rights to union activities. It has been made punishable offence to participate in any protest program without the media owners’ consent.

Section 12 of the proposed law gives media owners the right to terminate a journalist’s employment. The rehired journalist would not get one month’s salary under the proposed law while in the existing law a journalist was entitled to a salary for four months in case of termination.

While MANDA’s opinion is a relief for science teachers, it prompted secular activists to demand using the DSA against those spreading rumours against science teaching. This strong contradiction in the response to the

### A long struggle

The media in Bangladesh is today confronted by complex challenges to the practice of ethical journalism ranging from obstacles to the flow of information, the lack of government will, misinformation and inadequate fact-checking, self-censorship and fear of the DSA, ineffective implementation of the Right to Information Act and the prevalence of paid-content creators who circulate fake news on social media. There is unhealthy competition among media outlets, and excessive pressure on reporters which impacts professional journalism. One of the main contradictions in Bangladesh is that press freedom means freedom of the owners of media outlets who are corporate houses who are in turn governed by business interests and political affiliations. Journalists are not free; they are bound to serve the interests of media owners, work for precarious pay and in insecure working conditions. Given the stupendous challenges, it is only unity among media unions and associations overcoming political polarization, that can reinstate professional and independent journalism.

### Attack on Prothom Alo

A group of youth bailed to the Kawran Bazaar office of prominent independent Bangla daily Prothom Alo on April 10. They hurled abuses at the editor and the writer and threatened to break the newspaper into pieces. The incident happened within two hours of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s declaration in parliament: “Prothom Alo is the enemy of Awami League (ruling party), the enemy of democracy, and the enemy of the country’s people.” The new wave of attacks on the newspaper began on the country’s Independence Day on March 26, 2023, when an online report quoted a citizen saying, “What will we do if the news clip rings like no food to the starving stomachs?”

The report reflected the government’s failures in economic management amidst growing inflation. The leaders of the ruling party and its floating voters interpreted the country’s hard-earned independence and as an assault on their nationalist sentiment and in response let loose a barrage of criticism against the paper.

In the early hours of March 29, Criminal Investigation Department personnel in plain clothes picked up Prothom Alo reporter Samsuzzaman Shams from his home in suburban Dhaka. The court sent the reporter to jail the next day, in a case filed on the midnight of March 30 under the draconian Digital Security Act 2018, in which the newspaper’s editor was named as the main accused. The High Court granted Prothom Alo editor Motiar Rahman anticipatory bail for six weeks on April 2. The reporter was released from Dhaka Central Jail in Keraniganj on April 3, 2023, after obtaining bail in two cases filed against him over the issue.

The newspaper has since faced smear campaigns with diverse groups, including the Dhaka University Teachers’ Association, siding with the government. However, the opposition parties and their followers stood with the daily against the attempt to intimidate the management.

The draft Data Protection Act 2022 (DPA), the first law for data protection in the country, has engendered new fears. Critics at home and abroad say that the draft law poorly defines the classification of data and does not follow international definitions of privacy. It does not mandate that privacy-related data fields be removed from telecom voice and data call records, broadband internet packets, intercepting sources, financial sources, and smartphone app crowd-sourcing data. The UN pointed out that the definition of “sensitive data” in the draft DPA was limited — it does not include disclosure of information related to race or colour, political opinion, trade association membership, religious or other beliefs, sexual orientation, etc. The draft does not clearly define personal data and the principles of data protection stated in Article 25 are insufficient.

Section 33 of the DPA empowers the government to exempt law enforcement and intelligence agencies from the Act, which may allow surveillance of data centres and servers in Bangladesh. These provisions raise apprehensions that such a weak data protection law will protect the government’s interests and not those of the citizens.

Women in media

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On February 28, a civil society platform with prominent rights leaders of the National Press Club in Dhaka, both Hindus, have spoken up against unregulated social media. It has brought multiple challenges, they said, with which the country and the people are not yet ready to cope.

MA Aziz, a senior journalist and former secretary general of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists said that most hate campaigns happen on Facebook and YouTube, platforms that do not allow any editorial control. “But at the same time, we cannot seek to control the voice of the people on social media. We cannot support a draconian law like the DSA. We need responsible actions from all sides so that free speech is allowed in a better environment,” he said.

The government had withdrawn the “Religious Education in Science” and was meant for classes 6 and 7. The Islamists on YouTube and Facebook criticising two textbooks for explaining the evolution in line with Charles Darwin’s theory, which the Islamists consider anti-religious, the government had withdrawn the textbooks. They were titled “History and Social Science: An Inquiry- based Reader” and were meant for classes 6 and 7.

Conducting academic discussions on scientific matters has become fraught in Bangladesh, given the need to tread carefully on religious feelings. On February 28, PhD History Mandir’s science lesson in a Class 10 classroom was filmed by a student and soon went viral. Students and locals held protests outside the school demanding action against Mandir. Police forthwith arrested the teacher, who served 19 days in jail before being freed on April 10 after counter-protests by secular activists.

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Censorship, Threats Erode Media Freedom In Bangladesh

With elections slated for January 2024, journalists in Bangladesh are facing increased censorship and threats.

Since January 2022, 256 journalists were targeted by attacks, threats or harassment from law enforcers, government officials and other influential people. Of these, 30 cases were reported in 2023.

In January 2023, the government blocked 191 news portals for propagating “misleading anti-state content.”

The Digital Security Act has been used to create a fearful environment and protect the interests of influential and wealthy quarters, leading to a culture of self-censorship in Bangladesh media.

9.2% of the 3,565 people accused under the law till January 2023 are journalists.

60% of those prosecuted for “hurting religious sentiments” under the act belong to the minority Hindu community.