

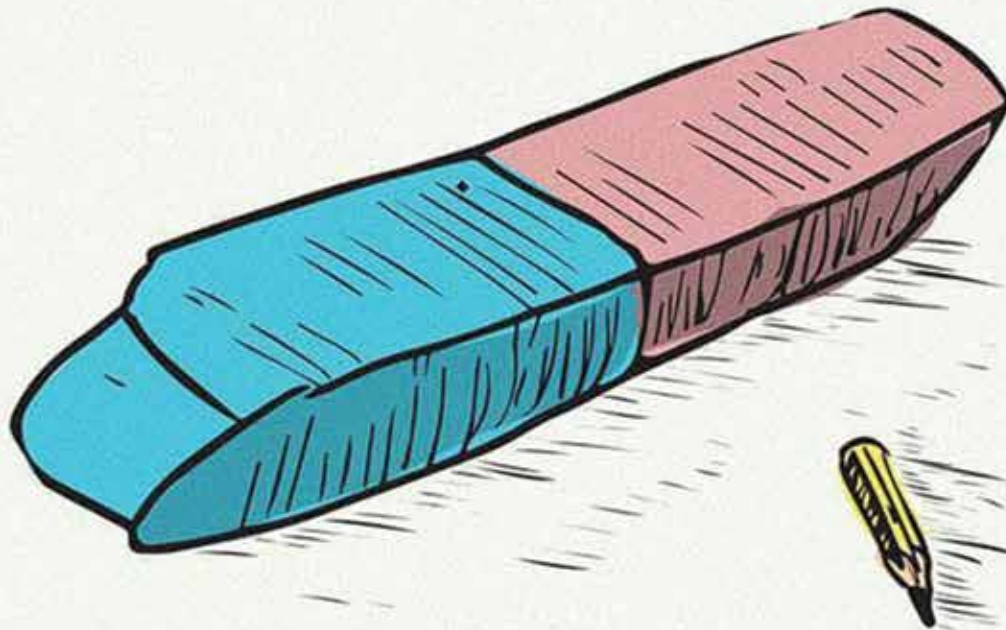
ThirdEye

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BJIM

Press Freedom



Anthon
Artigala 05/03/2021
blogspot.com



FROM THE EDITOR

As I write this editorial, I am getting my news from the news-ticker on my laptop and from my twitter feeds. I get views and comments on those [news] on my facebook wall and occasionally I glimpse the scroll of the news channels to see what they scoop and run under the banner of breaking news.

The fact is—I am not surrounded by news; I am engulfed by it.

As you have noticed, I didn't mention any form of "print media" while talking about from where I got my news. Newspapers, magazines and their ilk are no longer the sole news purveyors that they once used to be in Bangladesh. The print media business is literally getting a run for its money from competitors outside the industry.

So before taking the role of the editor of "another magazine", the question that I asked myself: "Has the death-knell for print media—which the pundits and commoners have long been heralded as a part of the much-hyped but little understood Digital Bangladesh—come yet, or there are still scopes for a quality print media to survive?"

I have taken the risk of finding the answer by myself because "Third Eye" is not just another magazine that is trying to carve out a niche in an already saturated market. First disclosure: This is not a news magazine. At this point we have planned to bring out just two issues a year—so it is essentially a bi-annual magazine.

Third Eye is the publication of our organization—Bangladeshi Journalists in International Media (BJIM). We formed this brotherhood exactly a year ago with the intention of upholding press freedom in a country that is regularly ranked at the bottom tier of the World Press Freedom index. Yes, the number of media houses has mushroomed in the last one decade or so but a select few of those are doing some "actual journalism."

We have felt that there are still scopes for a publication which can focus on critical issues and bring the essence of narrative journalism to the fore. On our first issue, we focused on the press and media freedom in Bangladesh. Since its launching coincided with our first anniversary celebration, we have incorporated photos from our exhibition.

It's just the beginning of us as a magazine. We are planning big but the fate of ours obviously depends on you—the readers. You give meaning to our existence and without you we are just dried ink on some papers.

Hope you will read us.

F. Mahmud

Fasial Mahmud

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FOUNDER'S NOTE

JOURNALISM HAS NEVER BEEN AN EASY JOB

History dictates that it has often been difficult to continue practicing fair and ethical journalism in comparatively younger countries. Or at least it has its own set of challenges. Bangladesh was no anomaly.

We, the journalists, by profession, are the descendants of the messengers or the prophets. They were carrying the divine words from the almighty to the people who needed help to find out self-identities. There were always hindrances and repercussions. The prophets walked the most difficult paths to complete the tasks bestowed upon them. A journalist carries facts and truths to tell the public what is happening somewhere that the eyes and ears of the people cannot physically reach. And this storytelling is not a bed of roses.

The majority of Bangladeshi journalists have been partisan; not only politically but also in so many other ways. While many had actual stalwart causes to support their beliefs, many were simply drawn into the red zone to save the job. Too many people exploited this so-called 'noble' profession as a stepping stone towards a better future – a public service job. Not blaming anyone for such an unfortunate flow of events given the circumstances but in many cases, we, the journalists, keep forgetting the foundation this amazing profession is standing on – Ethics.

Instead of standing by the people, and making them aware of the surroundings, we often sold our souls to the people in the castles who wanted a slice of this prestige and turned it into their weapons. Ill-paid, with debt on our shoulders, and hunger in our stomachs, many of us were compelled to turn

into slaves of such systems. Furthermore, we were slapped harder with spine-chilling regulations that muzzled and kneeled down to the core.

Bangladeshi Journalists in International Media (BJIM) is not a mere press union. Its inception was only a timely necessity. This brotherhood was established on three key objectives: 1. BJIM will be the most vocal press group discussing Freedom of the Press, and 2. We will learn and disseminate knowledge among colleagues across the country and beyond, and, 3. We will create healthcare and welfare commodities for journalists and their families.

We are still in the infant phase. But within a year, we tried our best to achieve as much as possible. Our members work across the global network of top-notch journalism. While doing amazing jobs at work, they are also proudly hoisting the flag of moral ground. We will keep continuing our work according to our priority logbook. This magazine is a humble attempt to simultaneously showcase and celebrate our thoughts. We still have a lot to achieve. As Robert Frost once said:

“...But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep...”

Happy Birthday, BJIM!

Sam Jahan
is a Reuters Video Correspondent and the
Founder & Convener of Bangladeshi Journalists
in International Media (BJIM)



**THE WORST
THING ABOUT
PRESS
CENSORSHIP**

IS SUPPRESSED

INFORMATION

PRESS FREEDOM IS UNDER ATTACK.

SPEAK UP. FIGHT BACK.



GCBRV

es #5

BLACK MOUNTAIN RECORDS



Photo: Abir Abdullah

The jobs of journalists have become very difficult in Bangladesh

JOURNALIST'S WORKS HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT THAN NOW IN BANGLADESH

-Beh Lih Yi

Press freedom is under attack in Bangladesh and the work of journalists has never been more important. From the rising cost of living to communities displaced by floods and cyclones, Bangladeshi journalists are on the frontline bringing first-hand information to millions of the country's citizens and the world. Yet journalists face threats, assaults and arrests for doing their jobs. The Digital Security Act, a draconian law that criminalizes free expression online, has been routinely used against journalists in retaliation for their work.

I am heartened to see the work of the Bangladeshi Journalists in International Media (BJIM) in defending the right of journalists to report safely and without fear, especially at this critical

juncture ahead of Bangladesh's general elections in early 2024. Press freedom is vital for any functioning democracy; people have the right to information. We stand together to defend these fundamental rights.



Beh Lih Yi
is the Asia program coordinator of
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)



A wall-art depicting the symbolic resistance against Digital Security Act (DSA)

Photo: Monirul Alam

MUZZLING MEDIA FREEDOM AND ITS IMPACT ON BANGLADESHI POLITY

-Saimum Parvez



Autocrats use repression for various reasons, including increasing the costs of disloyalty and making critical voices silent, controlling the information flow, and ensuring anti-government mobilization is more challenging. The mechanisms of muzzling media freedom, intimidation, torture, targeted killing, and taking other legal and extra-legal measures are varied but commonly used in autocratic regimes.

Creating a culture of fear, where journalists, opposition activists, civil society members, and other critical voices will impose self-censorship upon themselves, is another effective and widely used mechanism of gagging media freedom. In this age of digital technology, digital authoritarianism often involves repression using digital media, including social media, messenger apps, surveillance software, artificial intelligence, and other internet-based technologies to maintain political control and suppress critical voices.

In recent years, citizens from all walks of life in Bangladesh, including journalists, politicians, students, writers, cartoonists, and academics, have become victims of oppression for expressing their views and opinions. In October 2018, the Bangladesh government enacted the Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018, which allows law enforcement agencies to conduct searches or arrest individuals without a warrant and criminalizes freedom of expression. According to Amnesty International, 1,300 cases were filed, and nearly 1,000 individuals were arrested under the DSA for mostly political reasons.

In just three months between January and March 2023, at least 56 Bangladeshi journalists were tortured, harassed, threatened, or sued. Between 2020 and 2022, 68 minors were accused under the DSA 2018 law.

The online and offline repressions of the Bangladesh government imposed undue restrictions on the right to freedom of expression. The repression mechanisms, of which the DSA is a significant component, gave the existing authoritarian government in Bangladesh opportunities to create a culture of fear through continuous harassment, arbitrary arrests, and gagging of the freedom of expression.

The government's acquisition of surveillance technology provided access to mobile phones, allowing the government to know the physical location, eavesdrop on conversations, and take control measures.

The political impact of repression on media freedom is visible in two ways. On the one hand, the critical voices, including political opponents, journalists, and civil society members, are subdued by the draconian laws; on the other hand, the government loyalists get the opportunities to propagate the ruling party's narratives, slander the dissenters, and vilify the opposition leaders without any legal consequences.

Even the leaked audio tapes are, very conveniently, of the opposition political leaders, which generates a well-grounded suspicion that pro-ruling party authorities are involved in tapping the calls and using the phone call records at the right moments for the benefit of the ruling party. The government's manipulation of digital media platforms becomes evident by an example. In 2021, the ruling party announced a project to train one hundred thousand Cyber Joddhas (Cyber Warriors) to "fight against the rumors and misinformation spread by opposition political parties."

The ruling AL proudly announced that it has already trained 35 thousand online activists and another 10 thousand would be ready soon. It is observed that hundreds of regime-supported social media handles confront any posts critical of the regime. These legions of trolls follow a particular pattern, which includes unabashed praise of the government, Prime Minister, or the founder of the ruling party on the one hand and slating opponent political leaders and critical voices on the other hand.

Five ominous trends are associated with these repressions' social and political impact. First, there exists a "positive correlation" between the intensity of digital repression and the deterioration of democracy in recent years. In 2013, only three cases were under the Information and communication technology act, the predecessor of the DSA 2018. As the democratic backsliding increased, the number of cases and accused also hiked; in 2014, there were 33 cases; in 2015- 152 cases; in 2016- 233 cases; in 2017- 568; and in 2018, the number increased to 676.

Right before the December 30 national election, which was openly rigged by the ruling party AL with the direct participation of the police and government employees, the draconian DSA was enacted in October 2018. With 1302 cases and 3687 accused between October 8, 2018, and April 18, 2023, the DSA has become one of the primary tools to establish and sustain current authoritarian rule in Bangladesh.

Second, legal measures, including the ICT Act and the DSA, have been utilized to permeate repression in every spectrum of society. In previous regimes, the repression against critical voices was fewer both in terms of number and intensity. The current Sheikh Hasina regime's use of legal measures as a political weapon is so pervasive that even local leaders and ruling party loyalists have been using it to muzzle political criticism. Members of every tier of society have become accusers and accused, making it almost an Orwellian state where fear of surveillance is omnipresent, both online and offline.

Third, this widespread fear induced by the repressive laws of

With 1302 cases and 3687 accused between October 8, 2018, and April 18, 2023, the DSA has become one of the primary tools to establish and sustain current authoritarian rule in Bangladesh.

curtailing freedom of expression enhanced the acute animosity between political parties. The repressive laws are fueling hatred and accelerating feuds from the cities to the villages. This paved the way to control the information environment online and create a culture of fear in Bangladesh. The draconian laws contributed to the decline of political inclusiveness, tolerance, and respect for different opinions.

Fourth, this fear is not only limited to politics and political actors. The fear induced by the repressive measures spread to the sectors of art, culture, literature, and even personal relationships. The self-censorship is so widespread that friends, relatives, and acquaintances forbid each other to criticize the government and ruling party leaders, which results in a network of unavoidable and all-encompassing surveillance.

Finally, the existing authoritarian government of Bangladesh criminalizes legitimate forms of expression and undermines the freedom enshrined in the constitution, international laws, and declarations. The most concerning and disturbing trend is the role of the government loyalist journalists, academics, and members of civil society, who either keep silent or try to justify the need for the draconian DSA. The ruling party's false narrative of secularism and development has been built on the heavy toll of several human rights violations and criminalization of freedom of expression.

With the national parliamentary election expected to be held by the end of this year or early 2024, Bangladesh will likely witness one of two trajectories - a reversal of the current slide toward autocracy or a closed system with the de facto one-party system ruled through coercion, intimidation, and fear. Bangladesh's ruling Awami League can continue suppressing dissenting voices, violate human rights, curtail freedom of expression, and diminish democratic institutions to ensure its victory in the next election.

In doing so, it can use the state institutions and reshape the nature of the state. Following this path will lead Bangladesh to a closed autocracy, and the remaining democratic values, however symbolic it is now, will lose appeal. On the other hand, the incumbent can choose to reach a consensus with the relevant political actors to hold a free, fair, and credible election, adopt reform measures to build a neutral civil administration and allow independent state-mandated watchdog institutions to work. It is necessary to underscore the rule of law, restore accountability mechanisms, and move toward a democratic future. These steps are imperative for realizing the country's potential and ensuring freedom of expression, human rights, and media freedom.

Saimum Parvez,

Ph.D., is an MSCA-IMPACT co-fund fellow at the Department of Political Science at the Vrije University Brussels. His research interests include political violence and the impact of digital media on politics.





Photo: Munir Uz Zaman

Tashnuva Anan broke barriers by becoming the first transgender news anchor in Bangladesh

SHIFTING EYES: INTERNATIONAL REPORTING ON BANGLADESH HAS EVOLVED IN MANY WAYS

-David Loyn

One of the most striking changes in international journalism since I started as a reporter more than forty years ago is the way the ‘eye’ has shifted. The Global South, including Bangladesh, tells its own story from its own perspective far more than it did when white reporters would jet in and control everything.

‘Local’ journalists are no longer ‘fixers’ but international journalists in their own right. And that is why the anniversary of the Bangladeshi Journalists in International Media (BJIM) is so welcome. I am glad to see an organisation fighting for the rights of journalists at such a crucial time for one of the most interesting countries in South Asia.

Democracy is only kept honest if journalists ask questions and push lenses into difficult places. The state in Bangladesh has made it difficult to do honest journalism with legislation like the Digital Security Act (DSA), the most severe curb on the media in the region. But that is not the only challenge facing journalists who are subject to arbitrary actions at every turn.

Bangladesh has had a range of news stories of global importance in recent years. As well as its economic success and place on the front line of climate change, there has been proper accounting for conditions in the garment industry, after

the major fire that was covered with courage and ingenuity by journalists who are now members of the BJIM. And Bangladesh has managed one of the world’s largest refugee inflows after the forcible move of Rohingyas from Myanmar, covered by ‘local’ journalists for international media.

The international awards that followed this coverage have properly put journalists from your wonderful country into the place you should be regarded—among the world’s best.

I am struck that the leader facing an election in 2024 is the same one I interviewed when I covered a Bangladesh election for the BBC thirty years ago. Looked at from outside the region, this is not a normal event, and deserves scrutiny. International media organisations will rely on BJIM members to deliver it.

I send greetings to the BJIM on your first anniversary with great respect for your bravery and creativity.

David Loyn

was the BBC Bureau Chief in South Asia in the 1990s and is now a Visiting Senior Fellow in the War Studies Dept at King’s College London.





Over the years, press freedom has deteriorated in Bangladesh

WHY DEFENDING PRESS FREEDOM MATTERS TO BANGLADESH

-Daniel Bastard

Ever since the country's independence in 1971, Bangladesh's successive governments have had the tendency to treat the media merely as a communication tool. The current government led by Sheikh Hasina, who has been prime minister since 2009, is no exception. Members and supporters of her party, the Awami League, often subject the journalists they dislike to targeted physical violence, while judicial harassment campaigns are carried out to silence certain journalists or force media outlets to close. In such a hostile environment, editors take care not to challenge anything the government says.

Legal framework

The Digital Security Act (DSA) is one of the world's most draconian laws for journalists. It permits searches and arrests without any form of warrant, violation of the confidentiality of journalists' sources for arbitrary reasons, and a sentence of up to 14 years in prison for any journalist who posts content deemed to be "negative propaganda against (...) the Father of the Nation," namely the current prime minister's father. In this legislative environment, editors routinely censor themselves.



Photo: Monirul Alam

Media landscape

The two leading state broadcasters, Bangladesh Television (BTV) and Bangladesh Betar radio, function as government propaganda outlets. The densely populated private sector media landscape includes 3,000 print media outlets, 30 radio stations, 30 TV channels and several hundred news websites. The two “all news” channels, Somoy TV and Ekattor TV, are very popular. The two leading dailies, the Bengali-language Prothom Alo and English-language The Daily Star, manage to maintain a certain editorial independence.

Economic context

Most of the leading private media are owned by a handful of big businessmen who have emerged during Bangladesh’s economic boom. They see their media outlets as tools for exercising influence and maximising profits, and they prioritise good relations with the government over the safeguard of editorial independence. As a result, it is very often government representatives who decide who will be the guests on the evening talk shows on the privately owned TV channels.

Sociocultural context

Although defined as a secular country in the constitution, Bangladesh recognises Islam as the state religion. This ambiguity is reflected in the media, where anything involving religious issues is off limits. The mainstream media never address the issue of religious minorities, although they number 10 million in Bangladesh. In the past decade, radical Islamist groups have waged extremely violent campaigns that have led to journalists being murdered. These groups now use social media to track down journalists who defend secularism, the right to alternative opinions or religious freedom.

Safety

Exposed to police violence, attacks by political activists and murders orchestrated by Jihadist or criminal organisations, Bangladeshi journalists are all the more vulnerable because this violence goes unpunished. The DSA is often used to keep journalists and bloggers in prison, in appalling conditions. And in a profession that is still predominantly male, women journalists are exposed to a deeply rooted culture of harassment and are subjected to online hate campaigns when they try to defend their rights.

Why it matters

On all grounds, the press freedom situation is extremely complicated in Bangladesh, which ranked 163rd out of 180 countries in this year’s Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

However, in this very particular context, Bangladesh has a number of assets: a very dynamic, young and fairly well-connected civil society, with a growing thirst for reliable information.

By following in the footsteps of their elders, while finding new ways of communicating with the public, the new generation of Bangladeshi journalists has a major role to play in providing their fellow citizens with this type of verified, independent and pluralist information - whether they are inside the country or abroad. To achieve this, it is fundamental that these new journalists have all the freedoms they need to exercise their profession freely - and to do this, they need to combat the censorship of political leaders, of business executives and media owners, or the more insidious censorship of the algorithms of the major US social media platforms.

This is why the emergence of an independent organisation such as Bangladeshi Journalists in International Media (BJIM) is a very promising sign that must be encouraged. RSF is therefore delighted to be associated with BJIM’s first anniversary and to wish it many years of struggle and victory for journalism in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Happy first anniversary!



Daniel Bastard
is the Asia-Pacific Director at Reporters Without Borders (*Reporters sans frontières, RSF*)



WITNESSING OUR TIME...



This photo of a Rohingya refugee woman walking towards the shore of Bay of Bengal with her toddler was the first from Bangladeshi photojournalists to be featured on the National Geographic cover.

Photo: KM Asad



Police foiled a protest rally of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party organized in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka. Police brutally attacked the rally and forced the leaders and activists to leave the venue.

Photo: Sazzad Hossain

WITNESSING OUR TIME...



Batache (100 years old) sits near the Padma river bank in Munshiganj district as her relatives do the shifting of her home into a new place. Climate migrants like her are increasing over the years as Bangladesh faces the harsh impact of climate change

Photo: Abir Abdullah



A dog sits on a damaged river bank at Syamnagar Upazila of Satkhira in Bangladesh. Every year the sea level rises and damages the embankment there. This river erosion is a result of the global climate change of which Bangladesh is one of the worst victims.

Photo: Abir Abdullah



Photo: Monirul Alam

Journalists in Bangladesh often have to work under hostile environment

JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA OUTLETS FACE UNPRECEDENTED ATTACKS IN BANGLADESH

-Josef Benedict

A free and independent press is a vital element in any democracy. Independent, free and pluralistic media play a critical role in providing reliable news and information, enabling robust public debate, and contributing to building well-informed and active citizenry. As watchdogs, the media critically scrutinises those in power, investigate and report on matters of public interest, and by doing so, contribute to strengthening democratic processes and institutions.

The right to press freedom is enshrined in many national constitutions as well as the founding documents of the United Nations. Article 39 of the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees the right to freedom of expression. Further, Article 19 of the of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Bangladesh is a state party, guarantees the right to freedoms of expression and opinion. This includes the right ‘to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, through any media, regardless of frontiers’.

Despite these obligations, the CIVICUS Monitor, a global tool tracking civic space has documented in recent years a

systematic attack on freedom of expression in Bangladesh, which it rates as ‘repressed’, the second worst rating a country can receive. Unsurprisingly, among those targeted most frequently have been journalists and critical media outlets in the country.

Human rights groups regularly report on the criminalisation of journalists in Bangladesh. The draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) – a law that contains overbroad and vague provisions granting the authorities extensive powers to police the online space – has been the weapon of choice to silence journalists. As of early May 2023, at least 339 DSA cases had been filed against journalists since its inception in 2018, according to a tracker operated by the Dhaka-based think tank Centre for Governance Studies. Journalists have been targeted in retaliation for their reporting on poverty, alleged corruption, and illicit business practices in Bangladesh. In March 2023, UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk called on Bangladesh to ‘suspend immediately its application of the DSA and to reform comprehensively its overly broad and ill-defined provisions to bring them in line with the requirements of international human rights law’.

Besides the DSA, the government has also resorted to other laws to silence journalists. In 2021, investigative journalist Rozina Islam was charged under the Official Secrets Act and penal code for her report on alleged corruption and mismanagement in the health sector during the pandemic.

When the authorities are not able to apprehend journalists - especially those in exile - they often target their families. The sister of exiled Bangladeshi journalist Kanak Sarwar was arrested in October 2021 and subjected to extended interrogation, during which they questioned her repeatedly about her brother, asking why he opposed the Bangladesh government. They also threatened to charge her with possession of methamphetamines unless she confessed to making Facebook posts critical of the government. In September 2022, officers with the detective branch of the Bangladesh police, arrested Nur Alam Chowdhury Pervez, brother of Shamsul Alam Liton, editor of the privately owned United Kingdom-based Weekly Surma newspaper. The police accused Liton of spreading anti-government propaganda on social media platforms and alleged that Pervez conspired with Liton to create "confusion and agitation" among the public.

More recently, in March 2023, a group of unidentified men attacked Mahinur Khan, brother of exiled journalist Zulkarnain Saer Khan, in the Pallabi area of Dhaka. Saer Khan is based in the United Kingdom and works for the Al-Jazeera Investigative Unit who exposed corruption by high-ranking Bangladeshi government officials.

Journalists in Bangladesh have also been subjected to physical attacks and even torture or ill-treatment because of their reporting. Freelance journalist Mahfuz Kabir Mukta was attacked by the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the ruling party's student wing, while he was filming and streaming the BCL's attack on the opposition student wing Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) on 26 May 2022. In April 2023, a group of armed assailants attacked Chattogram-based journalist Ayub



Photo: Abir Abdullah

Police brutality on journalists have increased over the years

News outlets have also been attacked and forced to shutdown. Following a major investigation in August 2021 by Netra News unveiling allegations of corrupt collusion, the ruling party Awami League's cyber troopers flooded Twitter and Facebook with attacks on Netra News.

Meahzi by throwing him off the roof of a two-story building. He believes the attack was in retaliation for his reporting on the involvement of local government officials engaged in illegal land grabbing and hill cutting.

In March 2020, Ariful Islam, a Dhaka Tribune correspondent was arrested for exposing alleged corruption by the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Kurigram district. He was allegedly tortured after his arrest, charged with narcotics possession - believed to be trumped up - and sentenced to a year's imprisonment. In January 2023, the police allegedly tortured Raghunath Kha, a Satkhira district correspondent of privately owned television channel Deepto TV. The police electrocuted Kha and threatened to kill him. Kha is known for his reporting on landless people of the area.

The attack on press freedom has also led to media outlets being targeted. Ahead of the December 2018 national elections, the authorities blocked 54 news websites with the declared aim of preventing the spread of "rumours". In March 2019, the government blocked the Al Jazeera website, after it published an article alleging that a senior Bangladeshi

government official was involved in the disappearance of three men while in May 2019 authorities blocked access to a popular news portal, Poriborton.com, one of the country's top five online news outlets after it reported on a controversial advert. In August 2020, the government blocked The Amar Desh, pro-opposition news portal within 12 hours of its re-launch from the United Kingdom.

This assault on press freedom calls for greater pressure from the international community especially ahead of upcoming general elections scheduled for January 2024. A free press is of particular importance around this time, since people need extensive and reliable information regarding the political parties and their suggested policies.

Therefore, governments and the UN must step up its calls for the suspension of the controversial DSA and other laws used to criminalise journalists in Bangladesh and call for an end to harassment against them. Diplomats in Bangladesh must monitor the trials of journalists as well as demand impartial, transparent, and effective investigations into all acts of violence against journalists. International civil society must do more to stand with journalists and report on violations against them. If this fails, then sanctions must be considered against the perpetrators.

In June 2022, Irene Khan, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression said that 'without concrete action backed by political will, the prognosis for media freedom and the safety of journalists is grim' This is clearly the case in Bangladesh.

Without journalists and impartial reporting, the powerful can manipulate narratives and shape public opinion to serve their own interests. The absence of checks and balances erodes

the very foundations of democracy, leaving room for corruption and abuse of power.



Photo: Monirul Alam

Megh, the only son of the slain journalist couple Sagar-Runi commemorates his parent's killing

Without journalists and impartial reporting, the powerful can manipulate narratives and shape public opinion to serve their own interests. The absence of checks and balances erodes the very foundations of democracy, leaving room for corruption and abuse of power.

News outlets have also been attacked and forced to shutdown. Following a major investigation in August 2021 by Netra News unveiling allegations of corrupt collusion, the ruling party Awami League's cyber troopers flooded Twitter and Facebook with attacks on Netra News. The office of Dainik Somoyer Narayanganj, a local daily newspaper was raided by around 100 ruling party supporters, who threatened to burn it down and shoot the editor after it reported about the murder of the nephew of a local parliamentarian. More recently, in February 2023, Dainik Dinkal, the newspaper of the main opposition party, was forced to close after its printing licence was arbitrarily cancelled.



Josef Benedict
is the Asia-Pacific researcher for
CIVICUS

WITNESSING OUR TIME...



Journalists and activists are expressing solidarity by lighting candles to seek justice for the slain journalist couple Sagar-Runi in front of Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU).

Photo: Monirul Alam



A Rohingya Muslim woman carrying an older one walks along the muddy roads near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border as they enter Bangladesh. The photo was taken at Teknaf, Bangladesh on 04 September 2017 when the largest Rohingya exodus from Myanmar had taken place

Photo: Monirul Alam



PRESS REPRESSION AND THE COST OF SILENCE: THE EROSION OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE RULE OF LAW

-Zahir Uddin Swapon

In the heart of Bangladesh, a country once filled with hope for democracy, darkness looms.

Under an autocratic regime, the Awami League, the nation's citizens suffer from the absence of press freedom, the stifling of expression, and the erosion of human rights and the rule of law. United Nations resolutions emphasize that freedom of information is a fundamental human right, yet in Bangladesh,

this right has been trampled upon for the past 15 years. The suppression of media, the persecution of journalists, and the plight of informants highlight the harrowing reality faced by the people.

The relentless repression and curtailment of freedom of expression have cast a chilling effect on journalists and civil society. Bangladesh's ranking of 162 out of 180 in the 2022 World Press Freedom Index reflects the dire situation.

Investigative journalism and critical reporting have become perilous endeavors in the country. Television channels, newspapers, and websites daring to challenge the government have faced permanent or temporary closures, including Dainik Dinkal, Amar Desh, Channel 1, Diganta TV, and Ekushey TV.

Fearing the risk of information circulation, authorities blocked a total of 54 news websites under the guise of preventing the spread of "rumors" prior to the December 2018 national election. The freedom to report truthfully has been suffocated, leaving the population in a state of manipulated information schemed by the regime.

Across the media landscape, esteemed news editors like Mahfuz Anam, Mahmudur Rahman, and Matiur Rahman have been burdened with an overwhelming number of cases, oftentimes over a hundred. Grounds such as sedition, defamation, and corruption are used to silence their voices. Shockingly, mentioning true facts and figures in international media interviews can result in severe consequences. Shahidul Alam, a prominent photojournalist, experienced brutal torture and prolonged detention due to his objective assessment of the government's authoritarian rule during an interview with Al Jazeera.

As national election approaches, the year 2023 is witnessing an alarming escalation in the persecution of journalists, with 56 cases of torture, harassment, intimidation, and obstruction reported in the first three months alone, as documented by Ain O Salish Kendra.

Lack of accountability to uphold press freedom

The frustration among journalists and the general populace grows as the killing of journalists goes largely unpunished. Since the Awami League came into power in 2009, 18

journalists have been killed in Bangladesh, with most cases unresolved. The notorious Sagar-Runi murder case, now in its 11th year of investigation, exemplifies the lack of justice. The failure to hold perpetrators accountable perpetuates an environment of fear and impunity.

The tragic death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed, detained for nine months over critical social media posts regarding the government's Covid-19 response, raises serious concerns about the regime's suppression of dissent. Similarly, cartoonist Kabir Kishore, arrested alongside Ahmed, suffered torture, including electric shocks.

The draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) has been wielded as a weapon to retaliate against journalists exposing governmental policies, corruption, and illicit practices. The act allows heavy fines, prison sentences, and warrantless arrests based on flimsy suspicions. The media is forced into self-censorship, with government authorities demanding the removal of news articles from websites, effectively strangling the truth.

Journalists like Rozina Islam of Prothom Alo languish in jail, targeted for reporting on government corruption and irregularities. Ayub Meahzi, another journalist who documented alleged local government ties to a criminal group, was hauled from his office and badly beaten by goons recently.

The hostile attitude of the Bangladesh government extends to its failure to hold criminals accountable for crimes against journalists. Violence often goes unpunished, with journalists, particularly district correspondents, becoming targets for political activists, criminals, and even law enforcement agencies due to their reporting on corruption and human rights abuses.

Witnesses, informants and sources of news and reports who dare to expose truth and injustice are not spared. The chilling case of Nafiz Alam, interviewed by Deutsche Welle for an investigative report on Bangladesh's law enforcement agency, RAB, showcases the repercussions faced by those who dare to speak out. He was arrested on trumped-up charges of pornography and subsequently charged under narcotics laws. Such targeted persecution instills fear and discourages the brave souls who strive to shed light on corruption and human rights violations.

Exiled journalists' families are also victimized, aimed at silencing dissent abroad. The targeted assault of journalist Zulkarnain Saer Khan's brother and the arrest of Dr. Kanak Sarwar's sister and her children exemplify the lengths to which the regime will go to stifle opposition and dissent.

Not adhering to the principles of press freedom

The actions of the Bangladesh government stand in stark contrast to the principles enshrined in the country's constitution and its obligations under international human rights law. Article 39 of the constitution guarantees freedom of thought and expression, while Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) affirms the right to freedom of opinion and expression. By trampling on these

rights, the government betrays not only its citizens but also the democratic ideals it is duty-bound to uphold.

The international community, represented by organizations such as the Media Freedom Coalition, has recognized the importance of press freedom and has stood firmly in its defense. It is essential for all major human rights organizations and freedom defenders to continue urging the Bangladeshi regime to end the misuse of laws that curtail freedom of expression and to protect the media's right to operate freely and independently. The world stands in solidarity with the courageous journalists and activists who have risked their lives to uphold the values of democracy and human rights in Bangladesh.

The erosion of press freedom and the curtailment of the right to freedom of expression stand in direct violation of Bangladesh's constitution and its obligations under international human rights standards. The government's flagrant disregard for these principles has drawn international condemnation from organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, etc. These defenders of freedom have consistently called on the Bangladesh regime to cease its misuse of laws and respect the media's right to operate independently and provide unrestricted access to information.

The erosion of democracy in Bangladesh, with zero press freedom and rampant human rights violations, paints a grim picture. Hope lies in the voices of the resilient Bangladeshi people who yearn for a brighter future. The road to restoring democracy lies in a national election that is free, fair, and inclusive, under a non-partisan caretaker government.

Such an election would empower the people to choose their representatives and hold them accountable. It would establish a system in which state institutions are impartial and serve the interests of all citizens, irrespective of their political affiliations. It is through the people's mandate that accountability, transparency, and freedom of expression can be restored.

Let us stand together, united in our commitment to safeguard the rights of journalists and defend the principles that underpin a vibrant democracy. Let us lend our voices to the chorus of those demanding change, urging the Awami League regime to respect the freedom of expression and protect the rights of its citizens. Only then will the aspirations of the people of Bangladesh be realized, and the nation can once again bask in the warmth of a truly democratic society.

The path may be arduous, but it is one we must tread if we are to witness the dawn of a new era – a future where press freedom flourishes and the power of the people prevails.

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Photo: Munir Uz Zaman

Journalists like late Nizamuddin have been the torchbearer of international reporting in Bangladesh

NIZAMUDDIN'S TORCH

-Shafiqul Alam

Nizamuddin Ahmed was perhaps the bravest journalist in occupied Bangladesh—the erstwhile East Pakistan. The chief reporter of the *Ittefaq*, the largest and most respected Bengali daily in the Pakistani period through the early 1990s, he secretly worked for the BBC Bangla Service during the liberation war.

The small BBC Bangla team based at Bush House in London would never cite him as a source for many of its stories on the deadly war. He was perhaps the only Bangladeshi based in Dhaka who worked for a foreign news outlet during the war. Yet only a few people including two or three of his colleagues in BBC Bangla Service in London, his wife and maybe his *Ittefaq* executive editor, Sirajuddin Hossain, would know that Nizamuddin regularly sent stories to BBC defying any threats to his life.

Just days before the war was over, Nizamuddin was abducted by Pakistani collaborators at the order of the Pakistani generals. He was never found. His inspirational boss, Sirajuddin Hossain, and another of *Ittefaq* top journalists Abu Taleb were also abducted and killed.

We did not know whether Niazmuddin was abducted and

killed because of his secret work for the BBC Bangla Service, which played a crucial role in disseminating the news of the war to 75 million people in occupied Bangladesh. Or was he abducted for his journalism at *Ittefaq*, which drummed up support for Awami League's landslide victory in the 1970 election and which acted as the voice of the Bengalis.

But we know from the memoirs of Sirajur Rahman, the veteran BBC Bangla journalist, that among the first persons Nizamuddin's wife frantically contacted after the abduction was Rahman on December 14, 1971 -- just two days before the Pakistanis surrendered. Rahman immediately spoke to Rony Robson, the then BBC South Asia chief and who was at that time staying at Hotel Intercontinental in central Dhaka. Robson was scheduled to join a lunch with general Rao Farman Ali, the Pakistani military ruler in East Pakistan on the day. Robson had assured Rahman that he would raise the issue of Nizamuddin's abduction to Rao.

But unfortunately Robson took a flight to New Delhi on the same day and we never knew why Nizamuddin was abducted and why he had to pay such a terrible price for his journalism -- and our freedom.

The Bangladeshi journalists working for international media no longer face the same terrain of dangers such as Genocide and abductions that Nizamuddin and others witnessed. They are the children of Nizamuddin and his life works as a guiding light for scores of journalists working for foreign media here. Some of us are not as brave as he was. And in an independent nation that he helped create we don't need to be. But journalism has evolved since the days of the war. And we face new threats to freedom of speech from hostile governments, politicians, businessmen who can easily hire mercenaries and security forces who think freedom of speech should never trump the security concerns of a nation.

In the November 1970 Great Bhola Cyclone, which killed half a million people, late A.B.M Musa, the then news editor of the new defunct The Bangladesh Observer, was the only Bangladeshi journalist who covered the world's deadliest storm for a foreign outlet. His reports for the BBC Bangla Service were widely praised for their authenticity as they came straight from the heart of a Bengali journalist -- not many of the foreigners who traveled all the way from America and Europe.

In 1971 only Nizamiddin Ahmed in Dhaka and several other Bangladeshis based in Kolkata worked secretly for the foreign outlets. Even in London, Sirajur Rahman wrote in his Ek Jibon Ek Etihash memoirs that he was the only Bengali hailing from the then East Pakistan when the war broke out. There were two Bengali journalists from West Bengal. The BBC hastily recruited several journalists and part-timers including top novelist Syed Shamsul Haque. But according to Rahman, Haque was reluctant to unveil his identity as his wife at that time used to work for Pakistan Air Force.

Foreign correspondent-ship in Bangladesh has traveled a long way since those turbulent years. No longer we only write and cover stories for big media behemoths and agencies such as BBC, Voice of America, Reuters, AFP and AP. We now write stories for hundreds of outlets who cover every aspect of Bangladesh. There are now correspondents and award winning photographers who cover wildlife for some of the top international magazines and websites such as the National Geographic.

There are reporters who only look into the economic issues including pretty secret subjects such as purchase of military hardware or renewable energy. I even met a person who only covers gender and diversity issues in Bangladesh. I met a few years back who only writes religious stories for a foreign faith outlet.

So when the Rohingya crisis unfolded in August 2017 after the Myanmar military launched a Genocidal attack on the most persecuted Muslim minority, the Bangladeshi journalists working for international media were the first responders. Hundreds of them rushed to Cox's Bazar and spent weeks in the remote border towns of Ukhiya and Teknaf to break stories of their plight.

Photos of the humanitarian crisis shot by a Bangladeshi won Pulitzer Prize and became a cover page on the prestigious National Geographic. Young reporters won awards from rights

groups and global journalistic communities. No longer they were reduced to the roles of fixers -- and equipment carriers. They are right in the middle of the crisis and it was their brave stories that forced the international community to respond as quickly as possible.

Journalists working for foreign media don't always get the same access that their local counterparts get. Very often they were considered as stooges of the West or the countries where their outlets are based. Even some of the top bureaucrats, politicians, academics and businessmen believe in these craps. They are very often discriminated against based on these perceptions.

Certain areas are still no-go for them. Certain subjects -- such as judiciary -- are meant to be covered by the local press. Yet, in untroubled time and during illiberal politics local journalists working for international media keep the embers of freedom of press alive. They shed greater light on the things going "abnormal" here. They write about human rights issues when HR defenders are thrown to jails or muzzled. They write about the politics of inclusion and diversity when plurality comes under fire. They write about historic truths when history is assaulted by vested interests.

The flame that Nizamuddin lighted and then carried by generations of journalists is still burning bright. It will never die!!



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WHAT DOES THE NEAR-ABSENCE OF A MARKET FOR FREELANCE JOURNALISM TELL US ABOUT BANGLADESH'S PRESS FREEDOM?

-Faisal Mahmud

In many ways, reading Jessica Muddit's "Our Home in Myanmar" was an eye-opening experience for me.

The book can be dubbed as a seminal work on a country that had been shrouded in mystery and was misunderstood and isolated for over half-a-century. Very few Westerners actually bothered to penetrate deep into the fabric of Myanmar's society and portray their lives.

They [Westerners] were in a rut of—and for good reasons—mentioning Myanmar in the same breath with North Korea. I remember reading a TIME magazine article which celebratorily detailed the account of Coca Cola reentering Myanmar after six decades in 2013. At that point the global beverage giant had presence in every country on earth except North Korea and Cuba. Myanmar was the third one in that small list before the reentrance!

So what Ms Muddit had done is of course very important as it delved into the depth of this underreported Southeast Asian nation's heart with the customary rigor of Western academia as well as the sensibility of a seasoned journalist. Her chronicling of four years in Myanmar from 2012 to 2016 coincided with its short-lived democratic transitions Under Aung Sung Suu Kyi's leadership before the country fell under the de-facto military leadership again. It's well-written and has

breadcrumbs for a number of multi-disciplinary researchers to cook their own piece of pie.

For me, it was sort of a shocking revelation about the status of journalism, especially freelance journalism in Myanmar! I was surprised to learn that a freelance journalist can actually make a decent living out of selling stories in the country's local media—something which is absolutely unthinkable in Bangladesh.

Living well on freelance works

Ms Muddit moved to Myanmar after her year-long stint in some Bangladeshi newspapers. There she first took a job in "The Myanmar Times" but her tenure ended badly with a forced resignation from the paper. After that bad experience as a newsroom full-timer, she opted for freelance reporting and to her surprise she found out that a good number of Myanmar newspapers and magazines were ready to pay quite well for her pieces.

She was paid at least \$100-a-piece and was commissioned 10-15 articles per month by those publications. So, she was able to make \$1200-\$1500 per month by selling 10-12 articles to Myanmar's local media houses. That amount of money was good enough for her to maintain an upper-middle class life in

Yangon. She also did reporting for a few foreign publications but that's not the point here.

The point is—a freelance reporter was able to make at least \$1200 per month by selling not more than 15 articles to the local publications of Myanmar—a country that with \$66 billion, has one-eighth the size of GDP and with \$1260, has half the amount of per capita income of Bangladesh!

But if you look carefully, these make some actual sense. On the outset, Myanmar might seem like a very-dystopian place with decades of Junta-rule, deadly violence amongst different ethnic groups and a strong protectionist policy that bar foreign products, ideas or even people. Even the freedom of press index prepared by the Reporters Sans Frontier (RSF) puts Myanmar in the 173rd position (out of 180) whereas Bangladesh is positioned at a not-very-impressive 163rd position in 2023.

But Myanmar does have some brave and impartial independent publications like Frontier Myanmar and The Irrawaddy which have been producing significantly critical pieces even under the Junta-rule. And most importantly, these media houses, along with a few others, pay well to reporters as they know the risk they are taking to produce “newsworthy” pieces.

In simpler terms—they know journalism is not cheap and it deserves to be compensated well to ensure “people’s right to know.”

Why hasn't the market thrived here?

This is not unique to Myanmar. Even Nepal—way poorer in terms of the size and prospect of the economy—than Bangladesh had the presence of strong independent media houses like Himal Southasian and The Record Nepal. These two publications have seized their operations now because of financial unsustainability but they also used to pay freelance reporters more than \$100-a-piece.

In Bangladesh, this has never happened.

First of all, the market for freelance reporters has never even thrived in Bangladesh; not for once—even during the heydays of newspapers or magazines like Bichitra or Jai Jai Din or Star. Yes, some of the media houses pay for articles produced by the freelancers but those are mostly soft-feature pieces which someone can write from the desk. The concept of commissioning articles that require a good amount of groundwork or research is practically absent here.

Result: the payments for those soft-feature articles by local Bangladeshi media have never exceeded \$30-a-piece. I am pretty sure that I have generously mentioned \$30 but in reality it is usually just \$10-a-piece and the guarantee of commissioned works too is very infrequent with which a freelance reporter cannot sustain any decent living.

Secondly, freelance journalism usually stands on critical reporting—something which most of the media houses in Bangladesh have deliberately been averting for the past one decade. The country’s turn towards authoritarianism has given birth to a new kind of journalism which mockingly is

called “Thank you journalism.” It is called such because of the media’s sheer vehemence towards adhering to the government’s propagated narrative of “unprecedented development.”

Freelance reporters usually write for multiple publications, creating a brand name and credibility for themselves in the process. S/he is as good as his/her track records and credibility and any freelance reporter has the aspirations of writing for global news outlets which obviously pay significantly higher than the local publications. So, a freelance reporter here in Bangladesh might moonlight in some local media by producing these “Thank you journalism” pieces but it will obviously shut his/her door for international openings—a cost no decent reporter would want to bear.

What’s the need for freelance journalism?

But where lies the main problem of not having a decent local market for freelance reporters in Bangladesh? In the West and even in neighboring India, the media industry had newsrooms packed with journalists but now, much of the news cycle is happening remotely, and with freelance journalists instead of employees.

Yes, with news websites proliferating (I would prefer mushrooming), digital media employment is up—in Bangladesh too—but the truth is there are fewer journalists, the actual ones in the truest possible sense, today than ever before. For respectable news brands, this means there are fewer people available to tell your stories—which translates into tighter deadlines and more work for journalists, too.

This means to reduce costs without compromising on the amount of content they produce, most media outlets in North America and Europe hire freelance journalists to fill in the gaps. In fact, many journalists are leaving the media room altogether for careers as freelance journalists.

This has worked fantastically for those media houses. By hiring freelancers, those media outlets were able to share stories from a greater variety of people. While most media outlets definitely put their spin on stories, this is still a great way to showcase more diverse stories that the media would normally overlook. On the financial front, they have become a gainer as these diverse stories bagged them the most coveted thing in our current media landscape—a paying subscriber.

In Bangladesh, media houses need to stave off that old mindset as well as the business models. They need to understand that by creating a market for freelance reporters, they not only will be able to have an engaged and paying audience who don’t mind spending for consuming quality pieces but also will be able to fight the ever increasing viruses of misinformation and disinformation.

As a freelance reporter, I am eagerly waiting for those golden days!



Faisal Mahmud
covers Bangladesh mostly for Al Jazeera
and Nikkei Asia among others

We Mourn for our



ABDUL KADIR SHARIF

HANAFI KHAN

EMAN KHAN

ISLAM KHAN

SADIK KHAN

fallen comrades



SHREYAS BHOW

SHRUTI ABU ABDEY

ANANDH SOLENY

SHRI KANAK



Photo: Monirul Alam

Number of media houses have increased in Bangladesh in the last one decade

REFORM OF PRESS COUNCIL, PRESS FREEDOM, AND RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISM

-Shah Ali Farhad

For the first 25 years of Bangladesh's existence, there was only one television channel and one radio station, both owned and operated by the government. It was only during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's first tenure (1996-2001) that media ownership/operations were liberalized for the private sector to step in. Today, the country can boast of 38 TV channels, and 26 radio stations, in operation. 701 newspapers are currently in print, of which 169 also have online versions. This is complimented by 170 standalone registered online news portals (Source: Mol Bangladesh).

The 'Digital Bangladesh' campaign has resulted in an explosion of content creation by private individuals, giving rise to the phenomenon of citizens' journalism. There are currently 125 million internet users and 182.6 million mobile users in Bangladesh, says the data of Bangladesh Telecommunication

Regulatory Commission (BTRC). Journalists these days not only have to compete with each other, but also with hundreds of thousands of individual content makers, to capture the attention of their readers/viewers.

Need for Regulation

The hyper-competitive media landscape in Bangladesh has inevitably led to such phenomena as, click-bait headlines, "sensationalization and tabloidization" of news, misinformation, disinformation, and even fake news. According to the Global Disinformation Index (GDI) 2023, all 33 Bangladeshi news websites studied showed a medium to high risk of 'disinforming' their online users, including sites which are widely respected for their independent news coverage.

This is consistent with the findings of independent fact-checking organizations. Rumor Scanner, an independent fact checking group, flagged a total of 1021 inaccuracies in 118 different incidents, published in 101 news media of the country throughout the year 2022, including some of the most popular and reliable names in press and media in Bangladesh.

Judicial Regulation: DSA

In the absence of effective self-regulation in the media, especially an effective press council, legislation became the preferred method for ensuring press accountability. This includes the controversial Digital Security Act (DSA), 2018, and its predecessor, the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act, 2006 (as amended in 2013). The DSA is particular has been an issue of concern for journalists for the following reasons:

First, the DSA was never meant to be a forum for regulating the press. The predecessor of the DSA, the ICT Act, came about as a response to several high profile incidents of online fake news and rumours which resulted in breach of peace, communal tensions, sectarian violence, and public panic, throughout 2013,. The DSA too (at least the relevant sections like 24, 25, 26, and 27), was enacted for the same purpose of tackling the challenge of fake news and online rumours.

Second, the criminal nature of the offenses under DSA, including for defamation, makes it particularly harsh for journalists. It should be noted that 28% of the accused under all DSA cases are journalists (Dhaka Tribune, April 2, 2023).

Third, some relevant sections of the DSA are not only arrestable but also non-bailable. Given the nature of the offenses in the DSA, in general, there have been a lot of arrests. Between 8 October 2018 and 30 June 2021, in 2,646 cases under the DSA, among the 5,851 accused, 2,607 were arrested (Source: Bangladesh Police).

Fourth, the law is open to procedural abuse. Anyone can file a case under DSA against a journalist, even if he/she is not personally aggrieved in the matter.

Naturally, the use of DSA, in its current form, against journalists have given rise to concerns about press freedom and free speech. Is there an alternative to the DSA which promotes both press freedom and responsible journalism at the same time? Experts and stakeholders have, for long, advocated for utilizing the Press Council of Bangladesh in this regard.

Press Council of Bangladesh

The Press Council of Bangladesh was set up in 1974 by the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman through a law which underscored the importance of “preserving the

According to the Global Disinformation Index (GDI) 2023, all 33 Bangladeshi news websites studied showed a medium to high risk of ‘disinforming’ their online users, including sites which are widely respected for their independent news coverage.

freedom of the Press”. Section 11 of the Press Council Act declares the council’s goal “to help newspapers and news agencies maintain their freedom”. The Press Council was supposed to be the primary forum for media regulation in Bangladesh, although lately it has become something of a lame-duck. Nonetheless, it has the powers of a civil court under the Code of Civil Procedure 1908, with the authority to issue summons and impose nominal fines. Inquiries by the council are deemed judicial proceedings.

Proper Code of Ethics

The Bangladesh Press Council Act mentions a “code of journalistic ethics” in Section 12 (1), which is absent in the language of the Indian Press Council Act of 1978 where Section 14 authorizes the Press Council of India to censure any news organization for violating the standards of journalistic ethics and professional misconduct. Despite Bangladeshi law specifically mentioning a code for journalists and the lack of similar language in Indian law, the Bangladesh Press Council has not yet developed such a code while the Indian Press Council has done so. A fair, nuanced and balanced code will undoubtedly help the Press Council to adjudicate disputes. India introduced its Norms of Journalistic Conduct in 2022. The policy promotes responsible reportage, including aspects of accuracy, fairness, verification, confidentiality and privacy.

Defamation and Tort Law

It should be noted that even with a proper code of ethics under the Press Council, certain constitutional rights of the citizens need to be protected by tort law, including the right to privacy, non-discrimination, private property, and freedom of thought, conscience and speech. A breach of these citizens’ rights should give rise to legal liability and financial damages

DSA was never meant to be a forum for regulating the press. The predecessor of the DSA, the ICT Act, came about as a response to several high profile incidents of online fake news and rumours which resulted in breach of peace, communal tensions, sectarian violence, and public panic, throughout 2013

on the part of the violator. Ensuring this kind of accountability will serve as a strong deterrent against “yellow” journalism.

Defamation is another such area where genuinely aggrieved individuals can seek redress of courts. However, given the current nature of defamation proceedings, that is criminal under the Penal Code 1860 or the controversial Digital Security Act 2018, the process simply serves as an avenue for harassing the press, as opposed to a genuine grievance-redress mechanism. Converting defamation proceedings into civil, in line with the rest of the world, has become an urgent necessity too.

Reform of the Press Council

In 2016, the Bangladesh Law Commission published its opinion on proposed amendments to the Press Council Act. It included references to the Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure. Any criminalization of faulty news reporting will be a deeply counter-productive move. It is to the government’s credit that unreasonable amendments were not adopted.

The Commission also referred to comparative best practices in the UK, New Zealand, France, Denmark, Germany, India, Sri Lanka, Canada and Australia. At the heart of best practices is the availability, functionality and effectiveness of a complaint mechanism. This includes the right of the public to inform regulators about inaccurate or false reporting. Regulators must then decide whether the journalistic material conformed to the high standards of integrity.

The importance of self-regulation in the media is often emphasized. Indeed, the composition of the Press Council is meant to be dominated by the representatives of journalists’ associations, editors’ guilds, and publishers’ associations. Given the legal powers of the Press Council, it is only natural that a Judge of the Supreme Court is appointed as its chair. Journalists should also nominate legal experts to assist the Press Council in dealing with content disputes. Media law is a

flourishing profession in many countries. Hence, content disputes need to be addressed in an appropriate forum and not be subjected to politicization or criminalization.

Complaint Mechanism

Modern regulatory bodies, like Ofcom in the UK, rely on a flexible complaint system based on telephone dial-ins and online applications from the public. Moreover, regulators in the UK get to scrutinize both entertainment and news content. The PCB and PCI still rely on a cumbersome system of filing complaints; and are focused solely on the news media. In 2021, Ofcom received a record-breaking 57,121 complaints for Piers Morgan’s commentary on the Duchess of Sussex during the ITV show Good Morning Britain.

UK’s Independent Press Standards Organization (IPSO) also receives complaints from the British public regarding press reports. In 2021, for example, IPSO ruled 15 times against the online version of the Mail. Both Ofcom and IPSO have hotlines for the public to dial in and report concerning media content. The statistics for dial-ins are transparent and available in the public domain, which acts as a counterweight in terms of self-regulation. Ofcom and IPSO have established codes of conduct, including a Broadcasting Code for networks and an Editors’ Code of Practice for the press.

The Indian Press Council law establishes a complaint mechanism for faulty news reporting, with the option for arbitration conducted under The Press Council (Procedure for Inquiry) Regulations, 1979. The procedure for inquiry serves as the rules of arbitration. However, our Press Council lacks a similar set of procedural rules governing the arbitration of content disputes. The only regulation listed on the Press Council website concerns the council’s employees. It is therefore necessary to introduce a set of procedural rules to give effect to Section 12 (1) of the Press Council Act, 1974.

Understanding the whole scenario

In conclusion, it is submitted that while there is a clear need for regulating the press and promoting responsible journalism, it is also clear that criminal laws like the DSA is not the way forward. Rather, a modern and reformed Press Council, with a proper code of conduct for the press, a set of arbitration rules, and a flexible and approachable complaints mechanism, can help the state strike the appropriate balance between freedom of the press and responsible journalism.



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WITNESSING OUR TIME...



This 2017 photo shows a Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) soldier manning a Heavy Machine Gun pillbox at Tombru border observation post near Bangladesh-Myanmar border, ready to immediately retaliate if attacked, as Myanmar security forces started firing mortar shells and spraying bullets on thousands of fleeing Rohingya Muslims.

Photo: Sam Jahan



The year 2017 has witnessed the largest ever Rohingya exodus from neighboring Myanmar. At least 6,50,000 new Rohingya refugees crossed the border to escape what UN has termed as a "Genocide." The photo was taken near Bangladesh-Myanmar Border

Photo: K M Asad



Photo: Munir Uz Zaman

RMG sector has long been the mainstay of Bangladesh's export

ECONOMIC HEADWINDS AND AN UPCOMING ELECTION: WHERE DO WE STAND?

-Jyoti Rahman

It seems a distant memory now, but only 18 months or so ago, there was a plethora of op-eds and essays about Bangladesh's remarkable economic progress in recent decades.

Were those articles correct? Or were vulnerabilities building up in the economy even before the pandemic? Of course, the economy has been in doldrums for over a year now. The government blames external factors for the difficulties. Is that correct? Or did the policymakers bungle their response? Will the IMF program, if properly implemented, help improve things?

The answer to all these questions, in fact, is yes.

From an inauspicious beginning in the aftermath of a devastating war in one of the poorest parts of the world, Bangladesh did experience strong economic growth and rising standards of living in the past few decades. The 'Bangladesh

miracle' stories that abounded in the country's 50th year were not wrong.

Some of the better articles, and more in depth studies, however noted the vulnerabilities and imbalances that had been building up in recent years.

Bangladesh is excessively reliant on remittances and the export of readymade garments. The country has one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the world. Inequality has been rising for over a decade now. The banking sector has been a mess for years, and the electricity sector is rife with sweetheart deals that leave the taxpayers carrying a heavy future burden.

All of these vulnerabilities were known, if not as vocally articulated during the boom years. Any of them could have created economic difficulties. However, it is also correct that

when troubles came, they were in the form of external shocks.

Inflation in the advanced economies started rising towards the end of 2021 on the back of loose fiscal and monetary policy as well as supply chain disruptions in the aftermath of the pandemic. Russia's invasion of Ukraine aggravated the inflationary pressure, leading to a spike in food and energy prices in the first half of 2022. The American Federal Reserve and other advanced economy central bankers responded by raising interest rates more sharply than has been witnessed in decades. This saw the US dollar appreciating sharply in mid-2022.

Like many other oil importing developing countries, Bangladesh was hit hard. The bill for oil and related imports in the 2022-23 financial year came in at around \$40 billion more than previously expected. Reflecting both the widening trade deficit as well as stronger dollar, like many other developing country currencies, taka too faced strong depreciation pressure in mid-2022. Policy responses in Bangladesh, however, were different from those developing countries that handled these shocks better.

Food and energy prices shocks and depreciation pressures present vexing policy challenges for oil and food importing developing economies. Depreciation of the currency can exacerbate the inflationary shock. The poorer and more marginalised sections of the society can be particularly hurt. So, it is understandable why Bangladeshi authorities balked at allowing the exchange rate to fall.

But their policy steps were neither effective nor equitable, and ultimately made things worse.

Buffeted by the external shocks, the government's response was strict demand management —through import controls and rise in the administered price of energy — to reduce the demand for dollars. These steps hit the poor hard. And their impact on import demand was offset by caps on interest rates. With borrowing rates lower than inflation, credit was effectively free for those with access to loans. Meanwhile, opacity around the stock of foreign reserves and confusions around parallel exchange rates added to speculations of further depreciation.

This dissuaded remitters from using formal channels, which reduced supply of dollars. The net result of all this was that reserves kept depleting, inflation remained high, and both inequality and informality in the economy increased.

That is —the policymakers bungled is perhaps an understatement!

Against that backdrop, the IMF program asked for: interest and exchange rates that were more commensurate with an economy adjusting to an inflation shock; rationalisation and eventual removal of energy subsidies; higher revenue mobilisation and spending on the poor; more transparent national and fiscal accounts; and banking reforms.

Bangladesh is excessively reliant on remittances and the export of readymade garments. The country has one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the world. Inequality has been rising for over a decade now. The banking sector has been a mess for years, and the electricity sector is rife with sweetheart deals that leave the taxpayers carrying a heavy future burden.



Photo: Munir Uz Zaman

As the country is heading towards the next general election, political situation is increasingly heating up

By all accounts, the government has started the process of implementing the program, albeit unevenly. There are grounds for cautious optimism that the worst may be behind us. Global inflation pressures are subsiding. Remittances are recovering and exports are steady. Even the exchange rate might be stabilising.

If the program is properly implemented, it should help the economy adjust to inflation in the near term by slowing demand while cushioning the poor. Over the longer term, the economy ought to become more resilient.

By all accounts, the government has started the process of implementing the program, albeit unevenly. There are grounds for cautious optimism that the worst may be behind us. Global inflation pressures are subsiding. Remittances are recovering and exports are steady. Even the exchange rate might be stabilising.

On the other hand, the more difficult policy steps —from a political economy perspective —such as those around the energy or banking sectors are yet to be seriously taken. Meanwhile, the country is heading into an election.

That is, while the external conditions improve, domestically generated turmoil could well lie ahead for the economy.

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WITNESSING OUR TIME...



People, including women and children, stand in front of an inundated shop as they wait for vehicles to reach a safer place in Gowainghat, Sylhet on June 17, 2022, as the worst floods in decades hit the region.

Photo: Mohammad Ali Mazed



Students and activists from different universities were protesting against the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) in Dhaka in March 2021. Human Rights organizations have been accusing the government of misusing DSA

Photo: Monirul Alam



Photo: Monirul Alam

Prothom Alo Journalist Rozina Islam was charged under flimsy ground

MUTING WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES IS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY LOSS

-Maksuda Aziz

Mayesha Momtaz, a student at North South University, perished in a road accident on a flyover near Khilkhet, Dhaka, on April 1, 2022. She was riding her scooter at the time. The majority of national news media headlines discuss her family's remorse about the scooter purchase. Even in many of the news media's social media postings, many commented that she should not have ridden a motorcycle. On the same day, a 13-year-old boy in the district of Faridpur died while riding a bicycle, but the news did not attribute his death to his bicycle riding.

The roads in Bangladesh are typically hazardous. According to the 2016 Health Injury Survey, approximately 64 people per day die in motor vehicle accidents. In the first ten months of 2022, there were 2,033 motorcycle accidents, data from the Road Safety Foundation says. However, when the victim is a woman, the general conclusion—purported by both the mainstream and social media— is that she should not have been riding on a motorcycle.

This treatment as well as the underlying meaning is not uncommon in Bangladeshi media. Here, women are portrayed through a misogynistic lens, and their actions for equal rights and freedom, including exercising legal rights, are viewed as annoying. Sometimes the news media uses women's struggles for basic human rights as sort of a comic relief.

For example, on May 12, 2023, a man bathed in milk following his divorce. Milk baths have special significance in Bangladeshi culture; people used to take them after getting rid of a major annoyance. This Auto Rickshaw driver had a love marriage that did not work out for some reason. He expressed his hatred for his ex-wife after the divorce. It has no value as news, but the news media did their job by keeping the women silent. It left most of us to wonder: Where lies the news media's duty? And where is the basic media literacy?

It might sound like a very unpopular and deemed opinion but the fact is all those conscious or unconscious news treatments are silently killing the human rights of women in Bangladesh.

If we take a look at two of the most well-liked Bangla movies in recent memory, *Paran* and *Suranga*, both of which were based on authentic and well-known incidents, the director in both cases portrayed women as a negative force.

Now let us dig down another piece of news. This was also published in numerous news outlets. The corpse's name was Sumi Akter, and she arrived as an unidentified dead body on June 19, 2020. Police investigated her case and discovered that she was found as a newborn in a Dhaka street. She was adopted by a family and sent to school, but she dropped out due to sexual harassment in the streets. Then she got married, and her husband started abusing her. She went back to live with her foster parents and their two children. Things were even tougher for her as she had to take care of her foster parents. After her death, the police thought that Sumi Akhter had worked as a sex worker. It was just a hunch, but the news said right away that she was living a life that broke the law. Prostitution may be against the law, but how many times was she a victim of something illegal before she broke the law? What made her come here?

There was a time when the media had no way to find out what people thought. Neither print media nor broadcast media. But those days are long gone. The majority of news organizations

have social media pages. They not only see how people react to news, but they can also tell where it is going. Yet the media sells women's issues and leaves open questions about women's freedom of choice, equal human rights, and their preferences. These are clear cases of human rights being broken, but no one is here to talk about them.

Bangladesh lags far behind when it comes to women in the media. This is not merely an opinion; it is supported by evidence. 32% of social media users are female, despite the fact that women make up 51% of the total population. According to the Global Audience Measure 2021,

Despite the BBC's best efforts to implement a 50:50 gender participation initiative, only 20% of its news consumers are female.

Without regard to serving human rights or gender mainstreaming, this data has a multidimensional value. Additionally, it is a fact that women are also consumers; silencing their opinions would result in a loss of consumption. The big question however is whether media executives realize they are also losing the opportunity or not.



Maksuda Aziz
is an Independent Journalist and
Journalism Trainer



WITNESSING OUR TIME...



Even though there have been widespread protests against DSA from many quarters, the government has shown its reluctance to abolish this draconian law.

Photo: : Monirul Alam



Workers are dismantling a building from the riverside. River erosion has increased significantly over the years and has caused a huge number of people to migrate from the countryside to the cities and towns.

Photo: Monirul Alam



WITNESSING OUR TIME...



In 2013, one of the deadliest industrial disasters in human history had taken place when 8-storied Rana Plaza at Savar collapsed and killed 1,134 people. This photo was taken on that fateful day. Hundreds of fire-fighters and volunteers rushed towards the spot to launch the rescue operation

Photo: K M Asad



Photo10: Wife of a deceased Rana Plaza worker was mourning when the coffin of her husband was taken away. Many like her have lost their near and dear ones in that deadly man-made disaster

Photo: K M Asad

No press can be free...



**...if journalists are in fear
of their lives.**

BJIM

WITNESSING OUR TIME...



Garment workers camped out in front of the Dhaka Press Club to protest against unpaid wages. It was 4.30am when the police charged the hundreds of garment workers sleeping under makeshift shelters. By morning, police cleared the area.

Photo: Sazzad Hossain



A man with his grandson standing in front of his dilapidated house in the middle of a haor (wetland) in Gowainghat, Sylhet on August 19, 200, just two months after the deadliest flood hit the region in decades.

Photo: Mohammad Ali Mazed

WITNESSING OUR TIME...



The younger daughter of the abducted BNP leader Sajedur Rahman Suman wrote the word “baba” (meaning father) on the wall of her room. When Suman was allegedly abducted by the RAB before the national election of 2014, her younger daughter was only a year and half years old. She never got to see her father again.

Photo: Munir uz zaman



This 2016 photo shows Mosammat Jasmin posing for a photograph in Chittagong. She was the first discovered female rickshawpuller in the country who has been driving across the hilly roads of the port city with a battery-run rickshaw. Always wearing a helmet to stay safe for her children's sake, the mother of two became the talk of the country for her audacious move of doing apparently a 'men's job' in a conservative region.

Photo: Sam jahan



A representative artwork against the current regime's oppression against freedom of expression

LAYERS OF 'SUCKING': THE STATE OF CONTEMPORARY JOURNALISM IN BANGLADESH

-Anupam Debashis Roy

When I was at my first job in Dhaka Tribune, an older journalist friend of mine first introduced me to the term “layers of sucking.” He gave me a voice recording. I do not remember who the speaker was, but he was someone big from Bangladesh’s media industry and he was saying that before any story gets out into the media, it goes through multiple layers of sucking.

Now, one may be perplexed as to what he meant by that. It needed some explaining for me to get the idea too. You see, in

Bangla, the word chanka means filtering. So the executive was saying that each story goes through multiple layers of filtering before it gets published. But it was a joke to us, journalists, because we knew first-hand that this “sucking” does not simply mean filtering but sucking in the literal English meaning of the word.

Each story gets its life sucked out of it before it comes out. And that is what the various roadblocks to getting published are put up for.



Photo: Monirul Alam

I spent most of my brief career in Bangladeshi journalism working for two of the most-read English dailies in the country: Dhaka Tribune and The Daily Star. Both of these dailies have amazing star-studded teams. But I found that all of them were restricted for one reason or the other. I have also worked with Bangla dailies, They have a similar story to tell. Amazing journalists, amazing stories, amazing opinions, amazing angles, but all getting dulled down to blunt pieces that fill the papers, but fail to serve the responsibilities of a journalist, principle among which is to keep systems accountable.

I was a sub-editor at the newsroom and the editorial department at Dhaka Tribune and an editorial assistant at the editorial department at the Daily Star. Each day we would sit together to discuss which opinion pieces to run or which editorial topics to pursue. Although our bosses made the final call, we also had some say. I also wrote my own weekly column for both of the papers. But whenever I wanted to go for a sharp angle, or a sharp story--my idea was welcomed, but blunted.

Each time the response went something like this: The idea is very good, but due to the current conditions of the country, we cannot pursue this. Please choose a different topic.

They had reason to worry. Our own papers were filled with stories of journalists getting attacked or facing charges under the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) and even our editors were often not spared. How would the paper take the responsibility of a small-time young journalist like me under these circumstances?

So instead of writing a scathing commentary about the state of politics, I would have to write a wishy-washy fluff piece on coping with work stress. Instead of writing about corruption and the backsliding of democracy, I had to write theoretical pieces on how an ideal democracy should work, even when my own country was failing to hold on to the standard of even a flawed democracy.

This bothered me as a journalist. I consider journalism, which is a form of writing, to be its own art form--especially opinion journalism. To see my art restricted in such a manner all but killed the artist in me. I started writing conforming pieces that would fit the borders of censorship.

Even when I did that and one of my articles or videos got an initial green signal, it would go through the layers of sucking. Each stage would suck the life out of my piece and the final product became a garbled muffled impotent piece of text that is not discernible from AI-generated generic content.

Even the top Bangla newspaper in the country once altered one of my articles in such a way that it included some

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offensive terminologies about indigenous people in the country. That was done to fit the text into the government-approved terminology which I objected to strongly, but I was not even consulted when the change was made. This, too, was a sort of sucking that my work went through.

I understand why they do this. I have no malice against my bosses. They are doing their best to keep their head afloat in a ruthless industry where new papers of various business interests are always trying to take over the spot of the leading trustworthy journalism institutions. They are fighting a silent war on many fronts for our sake. We can only try to understand their situation and help them do their job.

But the fact remains that the life of a journalist in Bangladesh is a frustrating one. After weeks of chasing a story, you may find your paper will not (or will not be able to) carry that story. The only refuge is international media which is outside of reach for most. The second alternative is to rely on alternative media outlets like Muktipotro, but they cannot pay very much. So, a good reporter, too, is limited, if not completely debilitated. I am sure the other more experienced reporters who are writing for this publication will provide further illustration of that Kafkaesque story.

But as a former editorial staff, I must report that the state of journalism in today's Bangladesh is dismal. The journalists are working hard to keep the papers going, but the restrictions from all ends are making good work nearly impossible. But still, the few good stories that come out do so through thorough gatekeeping and editing.

So the people behind the sucking that I was lampooning also deserve credit. They are the reason that the papers are still running. We all know what happens to media outlets when they step out of line. But all I want to say in conclusion is that these layers of sucking are sucking the life out of our journalism and hindering the path to good content being published.

I hope that through a thorough transformation, which is nothing short of a revolution, takes place in Bangladesh soon so that the fourth estate is freed from its shackles and good journalism and good writing prevail in this art form.

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contributor at *Himal Southasian*.



Photo: Sazzad Hossain

Most of the media houses are censoring themselves now

WITNESSING OUR TIME...



This 2017 photo shows a landmine victim Rohingya boy Azizul lying on his deathbed. Defying the Geneva Convention, Myanmar security forces planted anti-personnel landmines across the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. During the great Rohingya exodus of 2017, many like Azizul stepped on the deadly mines and either lost their lives or got injured.

Photo: Sam jahan



This 2018 photo shows a little girl with a 'We Want Justice' placard dangling around her neck holding hands of her brothers during a human chain at Shahbagh intersection as she was brought to the Safer Road Students' Movement. Tens of thousands of school and college going students took the streets demanding justice as a reckless city bus killed two students near a bus bay. The unfortunate deaths instantly sparked protests which ended up in brutal violence brought down on the protesters.

Photo: Sam jahan



Photo: Courtesy of The Conversation

Filipino journalist Maria Ressa herself became global news after she became one of the first two journalists to win Nobel prize ever

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE FOR JOURNALISTS SERVES AS REMINDER THAT FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IS UNDER THREAT FROM STRONGMEN AND SOCIAL MEDIA

-Kathy Kiely

Thirty-two years ago, I was in Germany reporting on the fall of the Berlin Wall, an event then heralded as a triumph of Western democratic liberalism and even “the end of history.”

But democracy isn’t doing so well across the globe now. Nothing underscores how far we have come from that moment of irrational exuberance than the powerful warning the Nobel Prize Committee felt compelled to issue on Oct. 8, 2021 in awarding its coveted Peace Prize to two reporters.

“They are representative for all journalists,” Berit Reiss-Andersen, the chair of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, said in announcing the award to Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov, “in a world in which democracy and freedom of the press face increasingly adverse conditions.”

The honor for Muratov, the co-founder of Russia’s Novaya Gazeta, and Ressa, the CEO of the Philippine news site Rappler, is enormously important. In part that’s because of the

protection that global attention may afford two journalists under imminent and relentless threat from the strongmen who run their respective countries. “The world is watching,” Reiss-Andersen pointedly noted in an interview after making the announcement.

Equally important is the larger message the committee wanted to deliver. “Without media, you cannot have a strong democracy,” Reiss-Andersen said.

Global political threats

The two laureates’ cases highlight an emergency for civil society: Muratov, editor of what the Nobel Prize Committee described as “the most independent paper in Russia today,” has seen six of his colleagues slain for their work criticizing Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

Ressa, a former CNN reporter, is under a de facto travel ban because the government of Rodrigo Duterte, in an obvious attempt to bankrupt Rappler, has filed so many legal cases against the website that Ressa must go from judge to judge to ask permission any time she wants to leave the country.

Inevitably, Ressa told me recently, one of them says “no.” Maybe that will change now that she has a date in Oslo. But Ressa probably knows better than to hold her breath.

In 2020, when I – a long-time journalist turned professor of journalism – helped organize a group of fellow Princeton alumni to sign a letter of support for Ressa, more than 400 responded. They included members of Congress and state legislatures and former diplomats who served presidents of both parties. One of them was former Secretary of State George P. Shultz, who died several months later, making a show of solidarity with Maria Ressa one of his last public acts. This show of support is a sign of what’s at stake.

Three decades after the downfall of totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe, forces of darkness and intolerance are on the march. Journalists are the canaries down the noxious mine shaft. Attacks on them are becoming more brazen: whether it is the grisly dismemberment of Saudi dissident and writer Jamal Khashoggi, the grounding of a commercial airplane to snatch a Belarusian journalist or the infamous graffiti “Murder the Media” scrawled onto a door of the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6 insurrection.

This irrational hatred of purveyors of facts knows no ideology. Former U.S. President Donald Trump’s disdain for the press is at least equaled by that of leftist Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega, whose response to his critics in the media has been to, well, lock ‘em up.

Digital menace

What makes today’s threats to free expression especially insidious is that they don’t come just from the usual suspects – thuggish government censors.

Democracy isn’t doing so well across the globe now. Nothing underscores how far we have come from that moment of irrational exuberance than the powerful warning the Nobel Prize Committee felt compelled to issue on Oct. 8, 2021 in awarding its coveted Peace Prize to two reporters.

They are amplified and weaponized by social media networks that claim the privilege of free speech protection while they allow themselves to be hijacked by slanderers and propagandists.

No one has done more to expose the complicity of these platforms in the attack on democracy than Ressa, a tech enthusiast who built her publication’s website to interface with Facebook and now accuses the company of endangering her own freedom with its laissez-faire approach to the slander being propagated on its site.

“Freedom of expression is full of paradoxes,” the Nobel Committee’s Reiss-Andersen observed, in an interview after awarding the Peace Prize. She made it clear that the award to Ressa and Muratov was intended to tackle those paradoxes too.

Asked why the Peace Prize went to two individual journalists – rather than to one of the press freedom organizations, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, that have represented Ressa, Muratov and so many of their endangered colleagues – Reiss-Anderson said the Nobel Committee deliberately chose working reporters.



Photo: Courtesy of The Conversation

Nobel laureate Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov has shown how to do critical reporting under an oppressive regime

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Reessa and Muratov represent “a golden standard,” she said, of “journalism of high quality.” In other words, they are fact-finders and truth-seekers, not purveyors of clickbait.

That golden standard is increasingly endangered, in large part because of the digital revolution that shattered the business model for public service journalism.

“Free, independent and fact-based journalism serves to protect against abuse of power,” Reiss-Andersen said in the prize announcement. But it is increasingly being undermined and supplanted by what’s called “content,” served up algorithmically from sources that are not transparent in ways that are designed to addict and that drive partisanship, tribalism and division.

This poses a challenge for public policymakers and the democracies they represent. How to regulate digital media and still protect free speech? How to support the labor-intensive work of journalism and still protect its independence?

Answering those questions won’t be easy. But democracy may be at a tipping point. With its recognition of two investigative journalists and the crucial – and dangerous – work they do to support democracy, the Nobel Committee has invited us to begin the debate.

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**Silence
kills
the
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