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Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Total Score: 62/100 (↓1) (0 = Most Free, 100 = Least Free)

Legal Environment: 19/30 (↓1)

Political Environment: 27/40

Economic Environment: 16/30

Quick Facts

Population: 162,900,000

Freedom in the World Status: Partly Free

Net Freedom Status: Partly Free

Internet Penetration Rate: 14.4%

Key Developments in 2016:

- Physical violence and threats against journalists and bloggers continued with impunity, with past murders remaining unsolved and other acts of violence going unpunished.
- Authorities initiated legal action against several journalists under restrictive laws, including defamation, sedition, and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act.
- Authorities periodically blocked access to certain news websites, and in August shut down internet access for several hours in parts of Dhaka.

Executive Summary

The absence of justice for the murders of several bloggers since early 2015 has helped to cultivate an environment of impunity for threats and attacks against journalists. While the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) did not record any murders that were explicitly connected to journalists' work in 2016, at least one blogger, as well as the editor of Bangladesh's only LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) magazine, were murdered during the year in apparent retaliation for their activism.

Meanwhile, the government continued to intimidate and silence critical journalists via legal threats, arrests, and prosecutions. For example, multiple defamation and sedition lawsuits were filed against

the editor of the *Daily Star* after he admitted in February to publishing unsubstantiated information, given to him by the military intelligence service in 2007 and 2008, about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Several journalists also faced arrest under the restrictive Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act.

In August 2016, authorities restricted access to 35 news websites, including several known for criticism of the government. The same month, access to the internet was blocked for over three hours in parts of Dhaka, with the shutdown explained as a test of safety procedures that might be necessary in the event of a terrorist attack or other emergency.

Legal Environment: 19 / 30 (↓1)

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, subject to "reasonable restrictions," but this right is not always enforced. Impunity is the norm for those who perpetrate crimes against journalists, and police investigations that are initiated in response to such crimes generally proceed slowly. However, in a positive development, in June 2016 authorities arrested a suspect for the 2015 attack on the Shuddhashar publishing house in Dhaka, in which publisher Ahmed Rahim Tutul was seriously wounded. (Tutul had since fled Bangladesh and in 2016 settled in Norway).

A number of laws may be invoked to restrict journalists' activities, and 2016 saw an uptick in legal cases against journalists, notably against those at mainstream outlets. A number of these cases involved the ICT Act, which covers online crimes, including defamation and blasphemy; permits law enforcement agencies to arrest and indefinitely detain suspects without bail; and imposes no limits on officials' power during the investigatory period. Shamsuzzoha Manik, owner of publisher *Ba-Dwip Prakashan*, was arrested in February 2016 at the Bangladesh International Book Fair and charged under the ICT Act with criticizing religion. His arrest came after Islamist extremists threatened violence if he was not detained for disseminating publications they considered disrespectful of Islam. He was released late October and his trial was set for early 2017; he could serve up to 14 years in prison if found guilty. In August, police invoked provisions of the ICT Act against two editors with the news website *Banglamail24*, after it had run a story refuting speculation that the prime minister's son had been killed. The following month, police arrested and detained the editor of education news website *DainikShiksha* under the ICT Act for alleged defamation of a former official with ties to the ruling party. Reporters sometimes face contempt of court charges or other legal action for critical reporting on judicial proceedings or personnel, including on the actions of Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal, which is tasked with examining war crimes associated with the country's 1971 independence conflict.

Defamation is a criminal offense. Sedition laws can be applied broadly, and penalties range from fines to life in prison or even the death penalty if the accused is found to have undermined the constitution. Ekushey TV chairman Abdus Salam, who was arrested and charged with sedition in 2015 after the station aired a speech by an opposition figure, remained imprisoned at the end of 2016. Mahfuz Anam, editor of the *Daily Star*, had 62 defamation and 17 sedition lawsuits filed against him after he admitted in February to publishing unsubstantiated information, given to him by the military intelligence service in 2007 and 2008, about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. A warrant was also issued for his arrest and lawmakers called for his paper to be closed.

The 2009 Right to Information (RTI) Act simplified the fees required to access information, overrode existing secrecy legislation, and granted greater independence to the Information

Commission, tasked with overseeing and promoting the law. However, ongoing challenges include low response rates to requests for information, and the need to increase awareness of the act's existence among the general public and the authorities.

The Ministry of Information controls broadcast licensing for both commercial and community outlets. Television stations have occasionally been closed, ostensibly for being in breach of broadcasting regulations. A draft Broadcast Act was pending at the end of 2016; it drew criticism from rights groups for permitting jail terms, rather than fines and other civil measures, for the violation of its provisions.

The government at times interferes with journalistic work through surveillance. Some journalists' e-mail correspondence is reportedly watched by police, and those brought in for questioning have been asked to supply personal internet passwords to intelligence officers. An official government committee was formed in 2014 to monitor blogs and social media websites, and to identify individuals who produced or posted anti-Islamic content.

Political Environment: 27 / 40

The Bangladeshi media collectively present an array of views. However, political coverage can be highly partisan, as the owners of many private outlets exert editorial control that reflects their personal political affiliations. Private broadcast outlets are required to air selected government-produced news segments and official speeches. There have been reports of government officials instructing private outlets not to cover activities of the opposition, and outlets with ties to opposition parties or critical of the ruling party have been threatened with closure. Additionally, in the wake of a deadly terrorist attack in Dhaka in July 2016, authorities banned the Islamic television station Peace TV, amid accusations that the station incited the attack.

Authorities have been known to withhold information from or obstruct the activities of journalists they view with suspicion. In 2016, journalists from the newspapers *Prothom Alo* and the *Daily Star* were not permitted access to events with the prime minister due to their criticism of the government.

Censorship of internet-based content has become increasingly common in Bangladesh. In August 2016, authorities restricted access to 35 news websites, including several known for criticism of the government. Separately, there have been reports of authorities prohibiting broadcasts of opposition events.

Some professional journalists practice self-censorship to avoid repercussions when reporting on sensitive topics like the military and judiciary; journalists may also self-censor in order to keep from harming the business or political interests of media owners. Death threats and attacks against bloggers have exacerbated self-censorship amongst them, leading many to stop writing, go into hiding, or leave the country.

Journalists risk threats and retaliatory violence by criminal organizations; party activists; business owners; figures associated with the intelligence services, police, and military; and Islamist groups in connection with their work, and some such attacks have been deadly. In November 2016, two television journalists were assaulted by about 10 people while covering an illegal polythene factory

in Dhaka. The attackers also damaged their equipment, and one of the journalists was doused in kerosene, but bystanders intervened before the attackers could set him on fire.

Extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent have been confirmed or suspected in several recent assassinations of bloggers who had criticized Islamic fundamentalism. In April 2016, law student, blogger, and secular activist Nazimuddin Samad was murdered in Dhaka. Samad regularly posted critical commentary regarding Islam on Facebook, and his name was included on a hit list of atheist bloggers Islamic extremists had sent to the Interior Ministry. In April, Xulhaz Mannan, editor of the only LGBT magazine in Bangladesh, *Roopbaan*, was murdered at his home in Dhaka. The killings followed the murder in 2015 of four bloggers who were critical of fundamentalist Islam. Impunity is the norm for attacks against journalists. Some officials have suggested that those writing on controversial subjects self-censor in order to avoid being attacked.

Economic Environment: 16 / 30

There is a wide variety of privately owned daily and weekly print publications. There are more than 40 privately owned television stations and some two dozen radio stations, including a number of community stations. The public Bangladesh Television (BTV) remains the sole terrestrial television broadcaster with national reach. Many families in rural areas – where the majority of the country's population lives – do not have a reliable supply of electricity or cannot afford a television set. Access to television in urban areas is much more common. Low literacy rates in rural areas limit the reach of newspapers outside of urban centers.

Private broadcast and print media in Bangladesh are often owned by business conglomerates controlled by politically influential individuals or families with extensive assets in other industries, such as manufacturing and finance. Some such outlets allow the interests of their owners to influence their news coverage.

Access to the internet is usually unrestricted, though the penetration rate was still only about 18 percent of the population in 2016, according to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). During the past few years, the number of online news outlets, including news websites and internet-based radio stations, has increased dramatically, as has use of social-networking websites.

The government has occasionally interfered with internet and mobile networks. In August 2016, access to the internet was blocked for over three hours in parts of Dhaka, with the shutdown explained as a test of safety procedures that might be necessary in the event of a terrorist attack or other emergency. YouTube, Facebook, other social media and messaging applications have been blocked occasionally.

Political considerations influence the distribution of government advertising revenue and subsidized newsprint, on which many publications depend. Private media owners and corporate interests are also able to influence content through the allocation of advertising. In 2015, the army's military intelligence wing successfully pressured a number of major companies to stop advertising in *Prothom Alo* and the *Daily Star* after both papers reported on a sensitive army operation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region.

Because salaries are often low, some journalists are open to bribes or other incentives to slant their coverage or suppress embarrassing or sensitive information.

