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Freedom of the Press 2013 - Bangladesh

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score: 53

Legal Environment: 15

Political Environment: 22

Economic Environment: 16

Bangladesh's media environment remained relatively open in 2012, despite some worrying signs of intolerance by the government and an increase in physical harassment against the press. Although the constitution provides for freedom of expression subject to "reasonable restrictions," the press can be constrained by national security legislation as well as by sedition and criminal libel laws. The punishment for sedition ranges from three years to life in prison. The 15th amendment to the constitution, passed in July 2011, includes language that equates criticism of the constitution with sedition. Journalists can also be arrested under the 1974 Special Powers Act – which allows detentions of up to 90 days without trial – for stories that are critical of government officials or policies, or they can be charged with contempt of court. Arrests stemming from defamation charges continued to occur in 2012. In January, a university lecturer was given a six-month jail sentence for comments made in 2011 on Facebook about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The opposition-oriented daily *Amar Desh* has faced a barrage of legal and regulatory threats over the past several years. Acting editor and majority owner Mahmudur Rahman, who spent 10 months in jail in 2010-11 on charges of harming the country's reputation, was charged with sedition in December 2012, following the publication of a story regarding leaked conversations between a judge and a lawyer/activist based in Brussels.

Since its passage, the 2009 Right to Information Act has improved transparency and accountability. It applies to all information held by public bodies, simplifies the fees required to access information, overrides existing secrecy legislation, and grants greater independence to the Information Commission (IC) tasked with overseeing and promoting the law, according to the press freedom group Article 19. The law has been used primarily for investigative journalism. In February 2012, the high court upheld a fine levied by the IC on an official who refused to provide information under the law.

The Ministry of Information controls broadcast licensing and issues licenses for both commercial and community outlets. Television stations have occasionally been closed ostensibly for being in

breach of broadcasting regulations. A comprehensive broadcast policy, intended to simplify the existing patchwork of laws and regulations, has been under discussion for several years by government and industry representatives and other stakeholders. In November 2012, the government formed a committee comprising a range of official and industry stakeholders to draft a National Broadcasting Policy. In September 2012, concern was raised over a proposed regulation calling for the registration of online news portals, including the imposition of steep registration fees (an initial fee of around \$6,100, plus annual renewal fees of around \$610), limits on eligibility of applicants, and broad restrictions on content.

The print media are generally allowed more leeway than broadcasters and new media, with private television channels that provide 24-hour news coverage facing particular scrutiny. Authorities reportedly drafted unofficial guidelines for media houses regarding television talk shows in 2009, noting that "provocative statements" could lead to the banning of a show. In March 2012, the transmissions of several television stations were suspended shortly before a planned opposition rally. Attempts to censor internet-based content occasionally occur; in September the government blocked access to YouTube following a global uproar over a video produced in the U.S. of the prophet Muhammad. Some journalists practice self-censorship when reporting on sensitive topics like the military and judiciary. Sensitivity regarding reporting on the proceedings of the International War Crimes Tribunal heightened during the year. Coverage of labor disputes has also become more slanted as garment factory owners have moved into the media sector, buying up both print and broadcast outlets; as a result, stories often highlight violence or work disruptions initiated by workers rather than labor rights issues.

Journalists continue to be threatened and attacked with impunity by organized crime groups, party activists, and Islamist groups. Three journalists were killed in 2012, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists – the first journalist deaths in the country in seven years. In February, Sagar Sarwar, editor with the private channel Maasranga TV, and his wife Meherun Runi, reporter from the ATN Bangla channel, were murdered in their home in Dhaka. No arrests were made and the motive is unknown. In June, reporter Jamal Uddin of the daily *Gramer Kagoj* was stabbed to death, possibly as a result of his reporting on a local drug-smuggling syndicate. Three arrests were made in the case. Physical harassment of the press also increased. In May 2012, nine journalists were injured when armed men attacked the newsroom of the bdnews24.com news website, and several other violent attacks on individual journalists occurred that same month. The local rights group Odhikar reported that dozens of cases of threats and physical harassment leading to injury had taken place during the year. Impunity is the norm for those who perpetrate crimes against journalists, with at least 24 murders since 1998 remaining unpunished, according to the International Press Institute. Investigations of such crimes generally proceed slowly, if at all.

A primary threat to journalists' physical safety comes from security forces, including the police and military intelligence. Police brutality toward reporters and photographers attempting to document political protests or other sensitive events remains a concern, as do occasional cases of arrest, detention, or custodial torture of journalists. In May 2012, three photojournalists from the daily *Prothom Alo* were beaten badly by police while attempting to cover a story. In December, two more photojournalists endured similar police abuse while photographing arson at an opposition rally. Some journalists continued to receive threatening telephone calls from intelligence agencies seeking to prevent negative coverage. Criminal gangs and business owners also attempt to influence coverage through coercion or threats.

With hundreds of daily and weekly publications, the privately owned print media continue to present an array of views, although political coverage at many newspapers is highly partisan. Private broadcasting has expanded in recent years, with more than 20 satellite and cable television stations and a number of private radio stations now operating, including 3 private FM stations and a dozen community stations. A number of private broadcast outlets are owned by individuals with close political or official affiliations. The state owns or influences several broadcast outlets, including the public BTV, which remains the sole national terrestrial channel. Private outlets are

required to air selected government-produced news segments and official speeches. 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 allocation of advertising. A directive issued in 2012 to government institutions limited their list of newspaper subscriptions to a small range of dailies that supported the governing Awami League.

Access to the internet is generally unrestricted, but the penetration rate was just 6 percent of the population in 2012. During the last few years, the number of online news outlets, including news websites and internet-based radio stations, has increased dramatically, as has use of major social-networking sites such as Facebook. The government continues to monitor internet activity. 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.

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