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2015 Scores

Press Status: Partly Free

Press Freedom Score (0 = best, 100 = worst): 54

Legal Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 16

Political Environment (0 = best, 40 = worst): 22

Economic Environment (0 = best, 30 = worst): 16

Bangladesh's media environment remained relatively open in 2014, despite several problematic legal verdicts, continued attempts to extend state control over online content, and further physical attacks on journalists.

Legal Environment

Although the constitution provides for freedom of expression, subject to "reasonable restrictions," the press is constrained by national security legislation as well as sedition and criminal libel laws, which are occasionally used to arrest and prosecute journalists in practice. 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. Journalists can also be arrested under the 1974 Special Powers Act – which allows detentions of up to 120 days without trial – for stories that are critical of government officials or policies. Reporters sometimes face contempt of court charges for critical reporting on judicial proceedings or personnel.

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 was arrested in April 2013 and his paper was banned during an investigation into charges of sedition and inciting religious tension through the paper's reporting. He remained in custody throughout 2014, and at year's end the government upheld the ban on the newspaper's publication. Separately, after years of inaction, a decade-long case against *Weekly Blitz* editor Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury culminated in January 2014, when he was convicted of writing "distorting and damaging" articles about Islamism and was sentenced to a seven-year prison term. In December, British journalist David Bergman was convicted of contempt of court for his writing on war crimes issues and the proceedings of the country's International Crimes Tribunal; he was ordered to pay a fine of 5,000 taka (\$65) or serve seven days in jail.

In 2013, amendments to the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act – which covers online crimes including defamation, blasphemy, and other expression-related offenses – were passed through a presidential decree, expanding police powers and increasing the penalties for violations. The amendments upheld the right of law enforcement agencies to arrest and indefinitely detain suspects without bail, and they set no limits on officials' power during the investigatory period. In addition, penalties for online offenses were set at between 7 and 14 years in prison, regardless of whether the crime is related to defamation or national security.

By February 2014, a case against four bloggers indicted for alleged blasphemy under the ICT Act in September 2013 had been suspended pending an evidentiary hearing. In April, Asif Mohiuddin, the most prominent of the accused, went into exile in Germany. The ICT Act was used to arrest and charge a number of other individuals for online expression in 2014. Moreover, three journalists from the *Daily Inqilab*, an opposition-aligned newspaper, were arrested under the act in January; the paper's offices were raided, equipment was seized, and access to its printing press was barred. The paper was raided again in August, and its news editor, Rabiullah Robi, was held without charge for several days under the law.

Since its passage in 2009, the Right to Information Act has improved government 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, tasked with overseeing and promoting the law. The act has been used primarily for investigative journalism and by activists, but following promotional campaigns and workshops by nongovernmental organizations such as Article 19 and the Manusher Jonno Foundation, the law's use by ordinary citizens reportedly increased during 2014.

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 comprehensive broadcast policy, intended to simplify the existing patchwork of laws and regulations, has been under discussion for several years by a committee composed of government and industry representatives and other stakeholders. In August 2014, the cabinet approved a draft broadcast policy that was roundly criticized by activists and opposition figures. It contained a range of potentially restrictive provisions, including a prohibition on programming deemed excessively critical of state priorities or threatening to national security and sovereignty. The measure called for the establishment of a nominally independent regulatory commission to oversee its implementation, but also empowered the Ministry of Information to revoke the broadcasting licenses of noncompliant outlets. Parliament had yet to approve the policy at year's end.

Activists expressed concern in late 2012 over proposed regulations for online news portals, including compulsory registration, steep associated 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. In 2014, a subcommittee within the Ministry of Information formally submitted the draft regulations to other government entities for consideration, but it was still awaiting approval at year's end.

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.

Political Environment

The Bangladeshi media collectively present an array of views, though political coverage can be highly partisan, and many private outlets are owned by individuals with close political or official

affiliations. Private outlets are required to air selected government-produced news segments and official speeches.

Although censorship of internet-based content has become increasingly common in Bangladesh, with periodic blocking of YouTube, Facebook, and high-profile Bengali blogs in recent years, no new cases of such blocking were reported in 2014.

Some journalists practice self-censorship to avoid repercussions when reporting on sensitive topics like the military and judiciary. Tensions have increased in recent years with respect to coverage of the International Crimes Tribunal and the place of Islam in politics and society. Self-censorship can also stem from the interests of media owners. Reporting on labor disputes has become more slanted as businessmen involved in the garment industry have moved into the media sector, buying up both print and broadcast outlets; as a result, coverage often highlights violence or work disruptions initiated by workers rather than underlying labor rights issues.

Journalists continue to be threatened and attacked by criminal organizations, party activists, business owners, and Islamist groups. Three journalists were killed in 2014, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, with one of the murders definitively linked to the reporter's work. On a number of occasions during the year, journalists were assaulted while trying to cover breaking news stories, though conditions improved slightly compared with 2013. Targeted attacks or threats against individual journalists were also recorded; several during 2014 involved cadres of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, a student wing of the ruling Awami League party. Impunity is the norm for those who perpetrate crimes against journalists, and police investigations generally proceed slowly, if at all.

The police and military intelligence agents have also been known to threaten and physically attack journalists. Police brutality toward reporters and photographers attempting to document political protests or other sensitive events remains a concern, as do cases of arrest, detention, or custodial torture of journalists. Some journalists receive threatening telephone calls from intelligence agencies seeking to prevent negative coverage.

Economic Environment

There are hundreds of privately owned daily and weekly print publications. Private broadcasting has expanded in recent years, with more than 40 satellite and cable television stations and two dozen radio stations – including four private FM stations and a dozen community stations – operating as of 2014. According to the Ministry of Information, in the 2013-14 fiscal year the government issued licenses to an additional 16 private television stations, although they had yet to be allocated a broadcast frequency. The state directly owns or influences several broadcast outlets, including the public BTV, which remains the sole terrestrial television broadcaster with national reach.

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.

Access to the internet is generally unrestricted, though the penetration rate was still less than 10 percent of the population in 2014. 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. In April 2014, it was reported that the country's notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) security agency had attempted to procure advanced mobile surveillance technology from Neosoft, a Swiss company. In March 2013, an official government committee was formed to monitor blogs and social-media sites and to identify individuals who produced or posted anti-Islamic content.

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