

A retrogressive policy

It will throttle media, stymie democracy and damage the govt

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IN any conflict between free media and government, the latter wins in the short run while the former wins in the end. But a lot of valuable nation building time is lost in the intervening period.

Government wins initially because it has all the fund and coercive machinery of state at its disposal to cajole, bribe, intimidate, threaten and intern people and force its way. Freedom and free media win in the end because people rally behind them -- which is necessarily a time consuming process. This lesson of history our government does not seem to have learnt.

If we look at the relative development of countries a co-relation between free media and prosperity immediately emerges. In fact, a reverse co-relation also comes forth that countries that do not permit a free media have all stagnated far below their national potential.

The whole of present day Africa and much of Latin America of the '70s bear testimony to this. Those African countries that are now showing promise -- Ghana, Botswana, Burundi, Angola, Tanzania, South Africa, to mention a few of them -- without exception have a media scene that is marked by gradual expansion of freedom. Even in China, the reporting on corruption in the China Daily, including that of Communist party officials, was something unimaginable in the recent past.

There are obviously numerous reasons why the Soviet experiment failed. However, an important one, in our view, was the absence of a free media. Constantly flattered by compliant journalists under threat of banishment to Siberia (for example) the leaders just did not know when the ground was shifting from underneath their feet until one day literally the sky fell on their heads. The state with its entire coercive edifice collapsed, leaving their own people and the world wondering what could have been and what these megalomaniac leaders had done to some worthy ideals.

So, with all these historical experiences around, why is Sheikh Hasina's government going after the free media? The draft of the National Broadcast Policy that has just been approved by the cabinet and gazetted on August 7, 2014, does just that.

Why is a new Broadcast Policy such a priority?

If we start from our latest tragedy, thousands of lives have been lost from launch disasters over the years and yet there has been no attempt to frame appropriate policies that ensure proper construction, maintenance and operation of these launches.

People live in fear of buying food sprayed with poisonous preservatives from kitchen markets, and yet no policy to ensure safe food.

Pharmacies are stocked with adulterated medicine and yet no policy to reward good pharmaceutical companies and punish the

bad ones. When fake paracetamol medicine killed more than 2,000 kids over a 10-year period our archaic law took 15 years to act and ended with a whimper of punishment that will do nothing to deter its future occurrence. Our road accidents are the highest in the world but no policy to safeguard the public. All rivers surrounding Dhaka are so polluted that no marine life now survives. Pollution is now spreading into the countryside, threatening our sweet water fish reserve. Tanneries spewing toxic water into the rivers have gone on for decades. And yet the government either remains unmoved or indulges in eye-wash. No accountability encourages the polluters and land-grabbers.

So when a government that fails to discharge its most basic duty -- that of providing safe food, medicine, water and transport to the citizens -- and focuses on harnessing the media, then what are we supposed to conclude? That the government does not want the truth to be known?

The irony is that throttling the so-called 'bad' news from reaching the public does not serve those who do it -- the decision makers. It only helps the law breakers to continue cheating the public and in effect cheating the government, and in time destroying the latter altogether.

Following are samples of "Provisions" in the gazetted policy, along with our comments.

1. Military, civil and public information that may compromise state security cannot be broadcast.

This provision is self-contradictory and verges on absurdity. If something is already "public information" then why shouldn't the broadcasters use it? Then again how can something in the "civil" domain compromise "state security"? As for military, media usually is very careful and in general never publishes and broadcasts "military secrets."

2. Anything demeaning to the armed forces, law enforcement agencies and government officials who can punish people for criminal offences can't be broadcast.

Imagine the absurdity of this policy. If this policy was already in place then we could not have written about the ten trucks arms haul where NSI and DGFI (according to confessions of accused) officials were directly involved.

We also could not have written about the August 21 attempted assassination of the present PM in which three former IGP, two ex-NSI bosses and three former CID officials and high ranking officials of army and navy were involved and against whom charges have been framed.

According to the policy approved, we cannot broadcast stories regarding death in police custody or torture, abuse of power by military, Rab, DGFI, intelligence agencies and government officials who can "punish." If this policy is enforced then we can never write about cases like the recent 7 murders in Narayanganj where Rab officials

were involved, or the recent killing of a garment waste trader who was tortured to death by a Mirpur Thana sub-inspector. We cannot report incidences of cross-fire, torture in remand, etc.

Would Limon -- the innocent school boy who was bullet hit by Rab and who the latter tried for months to stigmatise as a terrorist -- have ever received justice if media did not expose the Rab?

3. Mutiny, chaos, violent incidents ... can't be aired?

"Mutiny" we understand and we may discuss how to cover it. (Here also we would like to argue that in covering the case of the BDR mutiny, our broadcast media did a professional job).

But what is meant by "chaos" and "violent incidents"? According to this policy we cannot cover unrest or show footage of violence. It appears that this policy expects the TV stations to broadcast song and dance episodes while miscreants uproot railway lines and burn our factories. The extensive footage showing the opposition BNP-Jamaat throwing fire bombs into running buses in pre-election violence was all "wrong" and such coverage would not be allowed in the future?

To us this policy means the government will unleash police violence against dissenters and media will not be allowed to cover it because it depicts "chaos" and "violence." Would coverage of police action against Tuba workers be permitted under the present policy?

4. Broadcasting anything that may hamper friendly relations with foreign countries is to be BANNED.

If this law existed then we couldn't have covered Myanmar's sending warships to threaten our Navy that was protecting our maritime boundary back in 2007/8. We couldn't have covered the 'Felany' incident or the regular incidents (now significantly lessened) of border killing by Indian BSE. Is writing about our due share of Teesta Water and criticising India for not responding to be permitted? Or would it be banned in the name of jeopardising our friendly relations?

By the same law, we could not have covered the news of killing, torture, rape, or illegal detention of our expatriate workers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Malaysia or any of the foreign countries where they work in the name of "friendly relations." So all our expatriate workers, on whose remittance we flaunt the story of 'huge reserve,' are to be left at the mercy and good wishes of host governments and our most timid and sometimes corrupt commercial attaches?

5. No scenes can be shown in advertisements that are not environmentally friendly.

What is wrong with advertisements showing polluted rivers, uncollected garbage, or cutting of trees and urging people to desist from such practices?

6. Misleading and untrue information must be avoided.

About "untrue" information, of course

they should be avoided. If by chance unverified information is broadcast then immediate corrective steps are taken along with appropriate apology.

About "misleading" information, can we match what goes on in the name of debate inside the parliament? More often than not, it is the government and not the broadcasters that indulges in half-truths and sometimes outright lies.

The truth is the Broadcast Policy passed by the cabinet has had two mindsets working behind it. One is that of bureaucracy who never feel comfortable with the free media. Now that they have become more partisan than ever and see their future more in sycophancy and less in merit, they prefer a gagged media that will be less prone to doing investigative journalism.

The other mindset is of a political party that, having come to power through a questionable process, sees an enemy in every critical voice. It feels vulnerable to a free spirited media culture and is foolishly moving towards throttling it.

Attitude towards a free media as expressed in the policy is counter to history and the unrelenting march forward of the human spirit that only freedom can fulfill. The PM is totally misjudging and completely undervaluing the contribution that the free media have made in Bangladesh's growth over the last three decades under democracy.

Here, I would like to draw the PM's attention to the writings of Amartya Sen -- whom she likes a lot as evidenced by her repeated invitations to him -- how freedom (including that of the media) assists the process of development. His classic work "Freedom and Development" should be an eye opener to those who have formulated this policy.

We conclude by saying that we are not opposed to a broadcasting policy per se. What we want is a law that nurtures freedom and helps us to grow as a matured industry where maximum public service can be rendered while upholding the highest ethical standards of an ethical and free media.

To get such a law we think -- as does the association of broadcasters ACTO --- that we should first have an independent Broadcasting Commission that should frame a new law with the stakeholders as partners and not as victims.

Form the independent Commission immediately and let it formulate the policy. Government has put the cart before the horse.

We end as we started. Government can throttle the media for the present, but free media will win in the end.

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