

How is shrinking media space affecting our democracy?

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Information and Communication Technology (Amendment) Act 2013, National Broadcasting Policy 2014, draft Broadcast Act-2018 and the infamous Digital Security Act-2018 that directly or indirectly restricts the news media. However, no law ensures freedom of the press and the safety and security of the journalists.

Favouritism is killing journalism

Repressive laws and policies are not the only problems that are limiting press freedom. Impartial and unbiased journalism is getting rarer every day in other ways. So, even if press freedom is guaranteed by the constitution or laws, it will never be free unless journalists practice impartial, unbiased and fact-based journalism.

Except for a few, a good number of mainstream media establishments in Bangladesh took little time in exposing the identity of a young girl whose body was recovered from a flat in Gulshan in late April 2021. The media exposed everything it knew about the girl, while it initially decided to remain silent over the most critical aspect: "who was involved." A media conglomerate went even further by making a concerted effort to malign the character of the victim. The integrity of the press came into question as it not only failed to uphold the spirit of a free press but also exposed a harsh reality of favouritism. There are plenty of similar examples in today's democracies in the world.

The impact

The key role that an unbiased and impartial media industry in any given democracy plays, among others, is keeping the people informed and aware about government decisions that affect their lives. It also holds the government and democratic institutions accountable.

For instance, by holding the election authority (for Bangladesh it is the



Election Commission) accountable for free and fair election or holding the human rights authority (National Human Rights Commission in Bangladesh) accountable for protecting the rights of every citizen in the country.

The absence of media freedom restricts peoples' participation in the governance mechanism that ultimately results in unimpeded abuse of power by the elected but authoritarian regime.

Shrinking global media freedom is interlinked with the decline of democracy. When democracy is on the decline, the government in power usually attempts to limit the civil and political rights of its citizens and restricts media freedom. The democratic institutions that are meant to protect these rights

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either stay on the sideline or echo the message of the authoritarian regime.

Attacks on media freedom are often connected with the abuse of power by the authoritarian regime that attempts to eliminate apparent fears of losing control over state affairs. Shrinking media freedom thus gradually undermines rule of law, flouts transparency and accountability, promotes favouritism by eliminating competition and creates unabated scopes of political meddling by the powerful.

The route to freedom

Journalists, media entrepreneurs and civil society groups must speak out for good governance. Each group has its share of responsibilities—journalists must uphold media ethics, entrepreneurs

should run their media business with a greater level of professionalism and without interference to benefit themselves, groups or individuals and the civil society should monitor government policies and actions, propose alternatives that are beneficial to the people and hold the government accountable. When there is a need, all three stakeholders should collectively demand legal reforms and the adoption of safeguarding laws and policies. Individuals and organisations that believe in media freedom and want a functional democracy should expose illusory and surreptitious activities of the authoritarian government. Such actions will support, encourage and create opportunities for the media to rebound from authoritarian repression.



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