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Without the restoration of democracy press freedom remains unattainable



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“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”- This is what article 19 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration promised 75 years ago. As a signatory to this declaration, Bangladesh is duty-bound to uphold these rights for all its citizens. At the heart of this commitment lies the crucial role of journalists and media outlets, entrusted with the responsibility of delivering fact-based, unbiased information. Nevertheless, within the current political environment and economic realities, the cherished ideal of press freedom appears increasingly elusive.

Even more disheartening is the unprecedented level of assault on journalism worldwide. Governments, large corporations, tech giants, transnational criminal syndicates, and various interest groups are all intimidated by revelations, fiercely striving to conceal them from public scrutiny and resorting to every

conceivable method to target the media.

Statistics may vary, but 2023 was the deadliest year ever for journalists. During the last 100 days of the year, the ongoing systematic destruction of Gaza and indiscriminate killing of Palestinians by occupying Israeli forces saw, on average, more than one journalist lose their lives each day. Due to varying counting methods, the International Federation of

has systematically destroyed the Palestinian media in Gaza by bombing their offices and facilities.

This distressing toll in Gaza comes on top of the worldwide worsening media environment which is consequential to the gradual weakening of democracies and the rise of authoritarianism. Collating data from the Observatory of Killed Journalists of UNESCO the PEC reports that outside the

rights group called Ain-o-Salish Kendra in its annual review noted that 290 journalists were subjected to assault, intimidation, and harassment last year. Undoubtedly, assaults on the media surged with heightened intensity in the run-up to the national election, and the year 2023 was no exception. Rather it is part of a disturbing trend developed throughout the AL government's shift towards authoritarianism

has become the norm. A glaring example of the failure to bring the perpetrators to justice is the case of the double murders of Sagar Sarwar and Meherun Runi, a well-known journalist couple. A court has allowed the investigating agency more than 100 times of extensions to complete its probe.

Furthermore, several journalists have been forcibly disappeared and later sued on spurious charges after their eventual release. Some have also had to flee the country. A study by the Centre for Governance Studies (SGS) found that journalists were the second most victimized professional group, subjected to abuse by the dreaded Digital Security Act (DSA) which eventually was replaced last year. Bangladesh slipped eleven places in the World Press Freedom Index between 2021 and 2023, leaving it at 163rd place – the lowest rank in South Asia.

This grim glimpse of the state of press freedom is not an aberration, but rather commensurate with the rapid backsliding of democracy in the country. More than a decade-long suppression of dissent and crackdown on the potentially challenging force, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, (BNP) and capturing major state institutions have transformed the country from a multi-party democracy to a virtual one-party state. Two leading research organizations engaged in global monitoring of democracy and freedom; the V-Dem Institute of Sweden and Freedom House of the United States have been consistently

flagging these backsliding in democratic practices and personal freedoms both offline and online ranging from freely expressing opinions to political, civil and cultural rights. The V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2023 puts Bangladesh in the group of countries that are in the process of autocratizing and Freedom House classified us as a country partly free.

National and international rights groups have long been documenting incidents of curtailing civic rights including freedom of association, organizing protests, and expressing opinions and thoughts freely which the authorities do not approve of. These restrictions also extend to shutting down the internet or frequent slowing down of mobile connectivity during anti-government protests. A New York-based non-profit organization working on the digital rights of people globally, Access Now reported in 2022 that Bangladesh was one of the top five countries of internet shutdowns. It observes that governments wield Internet shutdowns as weapons of control and shields of impunity.

Paradoxically, the last 15 years have witnessed a proliferation of news outlets in the country with over 50 licenses for television channels, dozens for radio stations, and hundreds for newspapers and online news portals. However, this growth is tainted by a lack of independence, as media ownership is often entwined with party allegiance.

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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Journalists (IFJ) toll stood at 120, while the Geneva-based Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) put the figure at 140.

According to the rights group, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), no other war has taken so many journalists' lives in such a short period. PEC also states that the Israeli army

Gaza Strip, 59 journalists have been killed in 27 countries with Mexico standing second in the list of most journalists killed with a total of 9 deaths recorded. Bangladesh is also on the list with two victims. According to them, 547 journalists spent New Year's Eve in jail worldwide.

In Bangladesh, a national

since it succeeded in holding a one-sided election in 2013. Since then, physical attacks on journalists causing deaths have risen sharply taking the tally to 16 in a decade, mostly victims of violence by the activists of the Awami League. Attacks causing physical harm remain high as impunity for the perpetrators



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