

We must curb the rise of unscrupulous media

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strengthen the unions' capacity to represent journalists' interests?

KA: Union activities, including whether there should be a single union or multiple unions, are not within the remit of this commission, and we cannot offer an opinion on that. However, based on the feedback we received from the field, we do feel that in the absence of a strong union, journalists' rights are being compromised, ignored, and undervalued.

There is a sentiment that there should be a strong union, but whether and how a stronger union can emerge depends on the journalists themselves.

Conversely, journalists across the country are deeply divided. In some upazilas, there are as many as four press clubs. In certain cases, internal conflicts among rival journalist groups have forced the administration to intervene—appointing administrators for press clubs or even having deputy commissioners take over as district press club presidents, as seen in Mymensingh, Rangpur, and Chattogram.

Such disunity is deeply disheartening. The root cause of this division seems to stem from petty interests, such as owning

media ownership, especially for smaller, independent outlets?

KA: A key issue is assessing whether a media house serves the public interest. A clear test should determine if it prioritises group or party interests—such outlets should not receive public funds, state sponsorship, government ads, or tax benefits. Support for newsprint, broadcasting equipment, and electronics must be transparent, corruption-free, and accountable to curb industry malpractices.

Fraudulent certifications and inflated circulation numbers distort competition and fuel corruption. Advertisement rates should be based on accurate circulation figures. Two methods currently exist. One involves inspection by government officials and teams assisted by representatives from the industry, including journalists, union members, owners, and other employees. Another approach is to link circulation figures to annual tax returns. A newspaper having 100,000 copies in circulation would not report 150,000 for tax purposes. While this policy already exists, it remains unenforced. Proper implementation would curb fraud and push dishonest players out of the industry.

Additionally, many media owners violate employment laws by denying job security, failing to issue appointment letters, and terminating employees unlawfully. Media houses not complying with these laws should be penalised. Practical steps include enforcing labour laws and eliminating corrupt practices for a fair and accountable media environment.

TDS: How can the Press Council be strengthened to effectively regulate media accountability and uphold press freedom?

KA: Established in 1974, the current Press Council has failed to uphold press freedom, as seen in its approval of Dainik Dinkal's closure. Having lost its purpose, its very existence is now in question. There is a pressing need for reform and the creation of a unified regulatory body covering all journalists across print, television, radio, and online media. This body must remain independent of government control and funding. A possible model could be drawn from the Press Council of India, which sustains itself through a one-percent levy on newspapers.

A self-regulatory body should function as both a grievance mechanism and a



▲ **Attack on journo during July Uprising.**

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

mediator while protecting journalistic rights. Stakeholders have suggested forming a permanent media commission to assume the responsibilities of the current Press Council, with a broader focus on press freedom. Additionally, there is a strong call for a national journalism standard—a universally accepted code of ethics. This permanent commission would ensure industry adherence to these standards, fostering effective media regulation and ensuring journalists comply with ethical guidelines.

TDS: What legal reforms is the commission considering to safeguard media freedom?

KA: We are seriously considering this. Several countries have already enacted laws to protect media freedom. In the European Union, there is a region-wide law that safeguards media freedom, prohibiting the invasion of reporters' privacy and protecting them from state or agency surveillance.

Pakistan has also proposed a press freedom protection law, which is in its final stages of approval. This law would make the government bound to ensure the protection of journalists while they work. Under this law, professional journalists

cannot be intimidated, harassed, threatened, or legally sued for carrying out their professional duties. The responsibility for enforcing these protections would lie with the government. We need to propose and consider implementing a similar law to safeguard press freedom and protect journalists in their work

TDS: What are the challenges in implementing reform recommendations, and what steps are needed to address them?

KA: Media reform depends on investors, many of whom resist compliance with regulations and disregard employment laws, making them likely opponents of enforcing journalists' rights. Additionally, media ownership is often concentrated, limiting fair competition. Investors with political ties may resist reforms, creating challenges for any government. However, the interim government has the authority to enforce existing laws, which, if implemented properly, could bring significant change to the media landscape.

The interview was taken by **Saudia Afrin.**



▲ VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

a building for the press club, collecting monthly rents, or pursuing other financial gains. These financial motives fuel rivalries, leading to disunity and the formation of parallel organisations.

TDS: What recommendations are being considered to ensure sustainable