

Govt must walk the talk on press freedom

Scrap provisions of laws that threaten journalists

It is concerning that Bangladesh's score in the 2026 World Press Freedom Index ranks 152nd out of 180 countries, slipping three notches from the previous year. The Reporters Without Borders (RSF), which published the annual index, has noted that journalists still face major risks, particularly from draconian laws inherited from the past. Previously, at least 296 journalists and media managers were entangled in cases linked to the July uprising as of November 1, 2025. The culture of impunity for violence against journalists, which was blatant during the 2009-2024 period, still remains a matter of concern. Therefore, on this World Press Freedom Day, and with a new elected government in power, there are justified expectations that the press will be freed from previous shackles.

Over the years, we have seen how laws have been weaponised against journalists. During the interim government, the notorious Cyber Security Act, 2023 was scrapped and replaced by the Cyber Protection Ordinance, with the promise that cases filed over freedom of speech would be dismissed. In fact, many individuals accused under the act were released on bail. However, although the ordinance eliminated some repressive clauses, it retained sections that allow police to arbitrarily detain individuals and seize and search their computers and other devices. Another section allows content to be blocked if it is deemed contrary to "national unity" or as "hurting" religious sentiments. The BNP government passed the Cyber Protection Act, which adopts the Cyber Protection Ordinance wholesale, and still criminalises the "hurting" of religious sentiments. This is a fundamental violation of freedom of speech.

Surveillance is also another major obstacle to media freedom. The home ministry has decided to allow the National Telecommunications Monitoring Centre (NTMC) to continue operating for another year, even though the interim administration had moved to abolish this much-criticised surveillance agency used by the Sheikh Hasina government to spy on and target citizens. The NTMC is supposed to be abolished and replaced with a new oversight body under the new Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation (Amendment) Act, 2026. However, it can still carry out surveillance with minimal restraint, without adequate oversight. One of the clauses in the law allows for interception of phone calls and internet-based messages on grounds of "national security" or "emergency," without the need for a court order. For investigative journalism in particular, which heavily relies on confidential sources, this may spell disaster.

The prime minister recently assured that his government will stand by press freedom, but as long as such clauses remain that allow scope for misuse, journalists will continue to face threats. If the government is serious about its commitment to democracy, it must protect press freedom by scrapping such provisions and dismissing all false cases against journalists. For the same reason, the government must also ensure that the masterminds and perpetrators of the December 2025 attacks on *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*, which had endangered the lives of close to 30 journalists and staff members of *The Daily Star*, are brought to justice.

Whom does a city corporation work for?

DSCC-DNCC's persistent inability to clear canals unacceptable

It was in January 2021 that the two city corporations of Dhaka took over the management and maintenance of 26 canals and 10 kilometres of box culverts from Dhaka Wasa, under whose authority the canals of our capital had become victims of clogging, pollution, and encroachment. With the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) and Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) taking over responsibility for the city's canals, we had hoped that these issues would be resolved and we would not only have healthy canals, but also clearer roads in the monsoon. But five years on, it seems that we had hoped in vain. As a recent report by *Bonik Barta* revealed, neither city corporation has fully restored a single canal in the last five years. However, they have spent hundreds of crores on drainage development and other activities during the same period.

Whether city corporations are helmed by elected officials or administrators, it is expected that they would work in the best interests of the capital and its residents. Yet, despite political power changing hands three times in Bangladesh since 2021, there has been no pause in canals and their surrounding areas being encroached by influential entities. The mismanagement of canals has become so severe that many areas near these waterways become flooded following even light rainfall. Concerningly, the clogged canals also contribute to rising dengue mosquito populations.

Residents of the capital continue to suffer the consequences of laidback city corporations' failure to manage roads, canals, etc. Yes, power has changed hands a few times. But why should that matter anyway? Are the public servants working in the DSCC and DNCC incapable of carrying out their designated work without some kind of signal from a political power? Does their sense of duty not originate from a will to do good for the residents of the capital? How is it that, despite the announcement of many canal restoration efforts over the last few years, encroachers are still grabbing these waterways unchallenged? The DSCC CEO claims that their work has been limited to cleaning canals, but the frequent waterlogging on even some main roads indicates otherwise.

The current government's nationwide canal excavation campaign has renewed our hope that the state of these crucial waterways will be improved. We urge that the capital's two city corporations are not only made to work more dedicatedly to this end, but also that they are held accountable for their failure of the last five years. With the monsoon upon us, waterlogging will only worsen. In the coming weeks, it is up to the city authorities to ensure that the capital does not become even more unliveable for its residents.

WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

Press freedom in a world of slopoganda and churnalism



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Do you feel exhausted trying to find reliable facts about everything happening around you? As emerging digital platforms increasingly outpace legacy media, it is often frustrating to discover that a seemingly credible story, complete with high-quality video footage, turns out to be fabricated. Such content is frequently designed either to malign individuals or to advance the vested interests of particular groups. While many of these interests are political in nature, they can also serve corporate or business agendas.

Rapid technological advancement and the widespread, low-cost accessibility of artificial intelligence (AI) tools have significantly lowered the barriers to content creation. Today, almost anyone with minimal resources can become a content producer. Much of this cheap, low-quality content is now weaponised as propaganda, used by malicious actors to run disinformation and misinformation campaigns. Communication experts have coined the term "slopoganda" to describe this phenomenon. Although the word has yet to enter common vocabulary, most of us have encountered, and at times been misled by, such content. Across the spectrum—politicians from all sides, business leaders, civil society representatives, academics, and activists—there is now broad recognition of the dangers posed by slopoganda, along with growing calls for urgent measures to counter it.

Alongside this trend is another troubling form of media proliferation. A number of media outlets have emerged that show little interest in serious public-service journalism. Instead, they are used as tools to advance specific business interests, shield corruption and malpractice, or promote one-sided narratives. These outlets often rely on the unethical practice of copying and republishing press releases or producing derivative content with minimal verification or critical analysis. Experts have termed this practice "churnalism," distinguishing it from genuine journalism. In Bangladesh's already overcrowded media landscape, churnalism has become a dominant practice and is widely regarded as one of the key reasons behind the

audience's growing disengagement from legacy media.

If reading this far feels disheartening, it is important to recognise that Bangladesh is not unique in facing these challenges. The global media ecosystem is currently in a dire state, confronting levels of adversity and attack that are unprecedented in recent history.

The latest World Press Freedom Index indicates that global media freedom has fallen to its lowest level in a quarter of a century. In 25 years, the average score across the 180 countries and territories assessed has never been



FILE VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

this low. Should this come as a surprise? When self-proclaimed leaders of the free world remain conspicuously silent in the face of what many rights activists describe as "journocide" in Palestine and Lebanon by Israel, their moral authority to criticise censorship in fragile democracies or countries drifting towards autocracy becomes increasingly questionable. According to the United Nations, since the start of Israel's war on Gaza, more than 260 media professionals had been killed by December 2025. In addition, 11 Lebanese journalists were killed in their own country in connection with this conflict, as per figures compiled

and prolonged detention on questionable charges.

Further underscoring the challenges, UNESCO's World Trends Report on Freedom of Expression and Media Development (2022-2025), released ahead of this World Press Freedom Day, notes that freedom of expression worldwide has declined by 10 percent since 2012. The report describes this regression as comparable in scale to the most unstable periods of the 20th century, encompassing both world wars and the Cold War era.

According to UNESCO, several factors are driving this setback,

including the intensification of armed conflicts (61 active conflicts were recorded globally in 2024), alongside rising information manipulation and interference by malicious actors, often facilitated by AI technologies. The erosion of trust and concerns over national security also play a role. The report highlights a 48 percent increase in efforts to control or restrict media, as well as persistent violence against journalists, with 85 percent of such killings going unpunished. It also points to the growing economic fragility of independent media, linked to the concentration of more than 54 percent of global advertising revenues within digital platforms. At the same time, digital disruption and AI-driven transformations of information ecosystems are accelerating, with 40 percent of users already relying on AI to create or modify content. These pressures have contributed to a 63 percent increase in self-censorship since 2012, driven by fear of reprisals, online harassment, judicial intimidation, and economic constraints.

These adversities are not unfamiliar. Bangladesh's Media Reform Commission (MRC), formed by the interim government following the 2024 uprising, identified many of these issues during its investigations and consultations. Some of these challenges are deeply rooted and historical, while others are emerging and largely uncharted. The MRC put forward a comprehensive set of recommendations, proposing phased implementation. Notably, several of these measures could have been enacted immediately under existing laws and regulations. However, the interim government failed to take meaningful action during its tenure, resulting in a missed opportunity for reform.

Fortunately, Bangladesh witnessed a successful national election last February. This democratic transition has opened a new window of opportunity to undertake meaningful media reforms, without which democratic recovery risks faltering once again. In its election manifesto, the ruling BNP pledged to ensure full independence of the media, establish a permanent media commission to safeguard press freedom, protect journalists from attacks, and restore public trust through mechanisms of self-regulation. These commitments are critical. Without a vibrant, transparent, and accountable media ecosystem, the threats posed by slopoganda, churnalism, and other challenges will continue to undermine democratic stability and distort public discourse.

Without real agency, reserved-seat MPs cannot serve the public

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The primary goal of reserving seats in Bangladesh's parliament was to ensure women's representation and voice in parliament. But this plan failed miserably by disenfranchising citizens from choosing their preferred woman representatives.

A research study titled "Legitimacy and Leadership: Strengthening Women's Political Representation Through Electoral Reform in Bangladesh," by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), found that since women are not elected to reserved seats by direct vote, there is a lack of public accountability which weakens their legitimacy to influence political affairs. Rather, this system promotes nepotism and becomes a tool for rewarding party loyalty.

Historically, most of the nominees for reserved seats were loyal party members or relatives of senior party leaders. They proved to be solely a symbolic representation of women in parliament, with no intention of safeguarding women's rights.

One respondent participating in the BIGD study said, "We haven't seen

who they [reserved seat MPs] are, and they did not even come here to see us. How do they become members of parliament? If they were elected, they could have a mandate to speak on our behalf."

Moreover, there is always a conflict of interest between the elected representative and the reserved-seat members. Elected representatives have always sidelined the selected women MPs in decision-making and allocating budgets for their constituencies. Despite their genuine intentions, these women MPs are unlikely to be able to contribute effectively to public welfare, even when they are highly educated, as would be the case in the 13th parliament. A former reserved seat MP from Chandpur told BIGD, "It is just an ornamental position! When I was elected, we did not have any selected constituencies to work on." She said designating a specific region or locality for reserved-seat MPs to work on would have been better. Without such a provision, ambiguity arises, exacerbating tensions between elected MPs and reserved-seat MPs over who is responsible for what in their associated constituencies.

Following the July uprising, the constitution and election reform commissions formed by the interim government, as well as some parties, had proposed the direct election of women MPs to the reserved seats. The Women's Affairs Reform Commission proposed a dual representation system

in parliament along with direct vote for reserved seats. But proposals failed to address conflicts of interest among party members at the grassroots level and in parliament. However, people from diverse age groups, occupations, classes, and genders expressed a strong desire to elect their female representatives through voting—something political parties seem unaware of or uninterested in. An elderly research participant from Savar noted that the public has to bear the expenditures of the reserved seats, although the corresponding MPs are not required to maintain public engagement.

Under the circumstances, the recently formed parliament should focus on the strategic distribution of reserved seats that reflect women's agency by establishing parameters for selecting female representatives based on their past performance in upholding women's voices in parliament.

According to the Jatiya Sangsad (Reserved Women Seats) Election Act, 2004, parties should nominate potential women candidates for reserved seats and later elect them through the MPs of respective parties. In practice, the parties decided to stick to the conventional selection process—bypassing the significant step of voting—to sustain control over nominations. Although this provision doesn't address the lack of public mandate, skipping the voting process reinforces the prioritisation of party

loyalty over any other qualification.

However, this time, parties have tried to maintain a relatively inclusive approach by nominating women beyond party members. Nominated individuals include civil society representatives, minority group members, and representatives from the survivors of the July uprising. However, existing challenges such as lack of agency and party dominance remain unaddressed. Most of the nominated candidates have—both in the ruling party and opposition—some connections to party members or some wings of the party. BNP has nominated 36 candidates, while the Jamaat-e-Islami-led alliances have nominated candidates for 13 reserved seats. Unfortunately, both have bypassed the election process and submitted the list of candidates for the exact number of proportional reserved seats they have won.

When asked about the selection process, a senior leader from the ruling party mentioned organisational capability, contributions to street politics, and expertise in parliamentary debates as screening criteria. While these qualities are expected of all members of parliament, there is still no clear distinction in the qualifications required for reserved seats. The selected women MPs must be capable of performing their duties; otherwise, the price that both the citizens and the reserved-seat MPs have been paying for this ornamental arrangement is too high to be continuously ignored.