How much longer must we wait for press freedom?



Matiur Rahman is the editor and publisher of Prothom Alo.

■ MATIUR RAHMAN

On February 1, 1962, the first student strike and protest against Pakistan's military rule took place at the University of Dhaka. Among the many demands raised that day was a very simple but fundamental one: "We must have the right to speak. We must have freedom of the press." I was one of the participants in that day's demonstration.

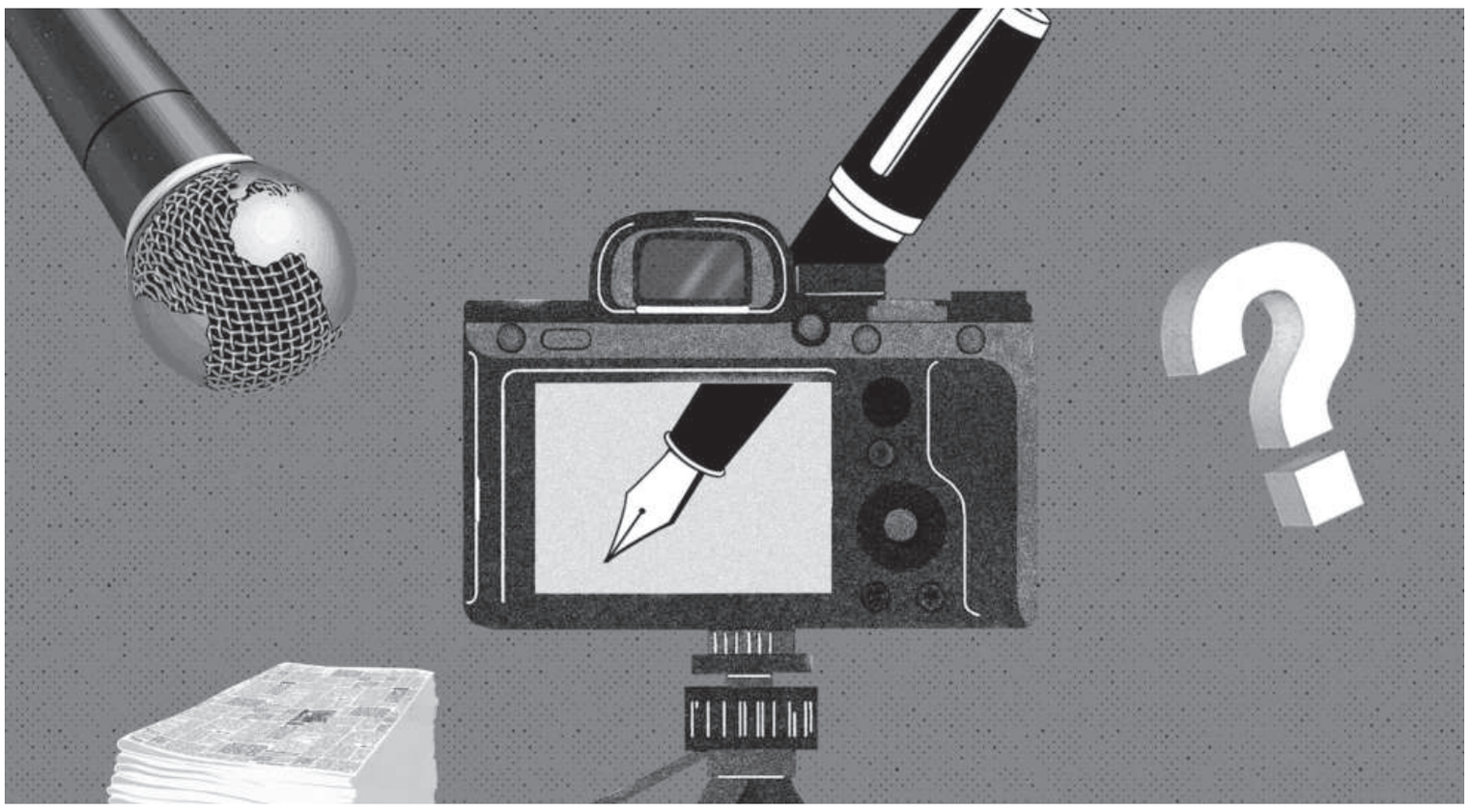
After that, through years of struggle and sacrifice, Bangladesh achieved independence. In the 55 years since then, the country has experienced many ups and downs. In July-August 2024, a nationwide mass uprising brought down an authoritarian ruler. It was an extraordinary and almost unbelievable moment in our history.

The interim government then ran the country for nearly 18 months. People had high expectations of that government, but in many respects, those were not fulfilled. There were initiatives towards political and constitutional reform, but many did not progress very far. Some important recommendations of the reform commissions were also not implemented.

During the interim government's tenure, newspapers, television channels, and other media outlets faced considerable difficulties in operating freely. Under various forms of pressure, media managements changed, editors were replaced, and many journalists were forced to leave their jobs. The media industry became quite unstable. As a result, newspapers and other media outlets often had to operate amid uncertainty and self-censorship.

Speaking from the experience of Prothom Alo, I can say that we, too, went through an atmosphere of fear. Throughout that period, we faced pressure and threats from extremist groups. Hateful propaganda was directed at The Daily Star and Prothom Alo, both inside the country and from abroad. In December 2025, extremists demonstrated in front of the Prothom Alo office for nearly seven days. These activities ultimately culminated in the burning and destruction of our office. On December 18, 2025, the Prothom Alo office remained on fire for almost the entire night. There was looting and destruction of property. Only after everything had been burned and damaged did law enforcement agencies clear the way for the fire brigade to arrive.

Those responsible within the government did not issue any direct or effective instructions to the police, Rab, or members of the armed forces to prevent the destruction. One or two advisers tried to intervene in their individual capacities, but those efforts were unsuccessful. After Prothom Alo, The Daily Star office was also blockaded and set on fire. Its employees were eventually brought out under extremely difficult and suffocating circumstances.



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Although the interim government made various statements, there was no significant change in the situation facing the media. The government did, however, establish a Media Reform Commission that worked extensively on important issues concerning the media, proposing a range of short- and long-term measures. There was broad and positive consensus among journalists, editors, and media managers on many of these proposals. Unfortunately, the interim government took virtually no initiative to implement them.

After all these experiences, a general election was held on February 12, 2026. The administration, armed forces, and police worked together to conduct the election, while people across the country also wanted to see a credible election. BNP secured a major victory and returned to power after nearly 19 years. The important question before us now is: what direction will Bangladesh take after this change? More specifically, how will we ensure media freedom, the safety of journalists, and an environment in which an independent and responsible press can operate freely? That is the question that matters to all of us.

During BNP's two previous terms in government—from 1991 to 1996 and from 2001 to 2006—I was the editor of Bhorer Kagoj and then Prothom Alo, respectively. During both periods, we enjoyed considerable freedom in practising journalism. In particular, during the 2001-2006 government, we strongly criticised many of its policies and actions. Yet this did not prevent us from having access to the prime minister or other leaders. We were not subjected to major harassment or legal action simply because of our criticism.

I remember having heated arguments with Begum Khaleda Zia when she was prime minister. At times, both of us became quite agitated during our conversations. But I never had to face punishment for expressing my views. During that period, I also had disagreements and arguments with Tarique Rahman, then a young BNP leader. There were debates between us in newspaper pages as well. Those disagreements were ultimately resolved.

In contrast, during the previous authoritarian government, journalists and editors were imprisoned, with numerous cases filed against them. People were intimidated and threatened. Prothom Alo and I personally faced sustained pressure. Various efforts were made to reduce the newspaper's circulation. Government advertisements were withdrawn and, in August 2015, advertisements from around 50 domestic and international companies were also stopped. At one stage, the number of cases filed against me came close to 80. On March 30, 2023, a case was brought against me under the Digital Security Act.

In parliament, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina described Prothom Alo as "an enemy of the Awami League, enemy of democracy, and enemy of the country." The journalists of Prothom Alo were also barred from entering the Prime Minister's Office and attending various national events. In early 2024, the military intelligence agency exerted tremendous pressure on the chief executive of our company to give up ownership of Prothom Alo. Behind that pressure was also an effort to remove the editor.

The situation reached such a point that, had that government remained in power for a few more months, the management of Prothom Alo could have been taken away from us, and I might no longer have been able to remain its editor.

Those experiences have left an indelible scar on our minds. After the authoritarian Awami League government's tenure and the multiple crises experienced during the interim government, the return of BNP to power has created a sense of optimism among the people. Given BNP's past experience with newspapers and the media, we hope that Prime Minister Tarique Rahman and his government will, during this important transitional period, continue to adopt a constructive attitude towards newspapers, television channels, and the broader media.

BNP's commitments concerning the media in its 31-point reform programme and election manifesto have strengthened this expectation. Point 11 of its 31-point programme specifically addresses the media. It proposes establishing a Media Commission to ensure full media freedom and comprehensive reform of the sector. It also commits to restoring an environment conducive to honest and independent journalism and protecting freedom of speech and expression. The programme proposes amendments to relevant laws and the repeal of laws that restrict fundamental rights, as well as steps to ensure justice in cases involving the killing and torture of journalists.

BNP's election manifesto also states that fearless and impartial journalism will be protected and recognised, and that objective criticism will be welcomed. It says that ensuring the professional independence and security of journalists who engage in constructive and objective criticism is a responsibility of the state. It also proposes legal mechanisms and a special cell to prevent the harassment and persecution of journalists.

These commitments are important. However, no significant steps have yet been taken to reform the newspaper industry and the broader media sector. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has expressed interest in introducing a system for auditing newspapers and clearing long-outstanding bills, but these initiatives have yet to be implemented. There was also a meeting to discuss urgent reforms needed in newspapers, television, and the wider media sector following the proposal to establish a Media Commission. Since then, however, we have heard little about the matter.

Over the past few months, there have also been reports of unwelcome interference and changes in the internal management of some newspapers and television channels. Some editors and senior journalists say they continue to operate under uncertainty and pressure. In some cases, journalists are exercising excessive caution over particular reports and opinion pieces. There are also concerns about the government's approach to the cyber law and the possibility that journalism and freedom of expression could be placed at risk under certain circumstances.

The government has completed only seven months of its tenure, so there is still considerable time ahead. But the urgent issues facing newspapers and the broader media sector need to be addressed without delay. Otherwise, we risk falling behind once again, and the freedom and aspirations of journalists could face another crisis.

In such a situation, I repeatedly find myself thinking of that day 64 years ago—February 1, 1962. That day, we raised the demand that we must have freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Through successive movements and struggles, Bangladesh's political circumstances have changed again and again. Governments have changed. Political leaders have changed. The political landscape has changed. But the fundamental issues underlying our demands seem to have remained largely where they were all those years ago. And that is deeply unfortunate.

After 64 years, we still have to speak about those demands. We still have to ask for them. We still have to remind those in power that freedom of speech and freedom of the press are not privileges, but fundamental rights.

At the end of my 56-year career in journalism, I find myself standing in the same place once again. So I end with the same question that has stayed with me since that day in 1962: how much longer will we have to wait?

This is a slightly abridged version of a speech that Matiur Rahman delivered on the second day of the recently held Bay of Bengal Conversation 2026, organised by the research institution Centre for Governance Studies (CGS).

Modernise flood damage assessments to protect haor farmers



Dr Niaz Md Farhat Rahman is principal scientific officer at the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) and was the team leader of the assessment discussed in this article. He can be reached at niaz.sust@gmail.com.

■ NIAZ MD FARHAT RAHMAN

Bangladesh's haor region is both an ecological treasure and one of the country's most important centres of Boro rice production. During the monsoon, its vast bowl-shaped depressions turn into an inland sea. In the dry season, the same landscape becomes an extensive agricultural zone on which millions of farmers, labourers, traders, and consumers depend.

This seasonal transformation also makes the haor exceptionally vulnerable. A few days of intense rainfall in Bangladesh and the upstream catchments of Meghalaya, Assam, and Tripura can rapidly raise river levels and inundate standing Boro rice shortly before harvest. By then, farmers have already invested heavily in seed, fertiliser, irrigation, labour, and machinery. A flood arriving even one or two weeks before harvesting can therefore wipe out an entire season's income.

In such circumstances, reliable estimates of loss and damage are essential for timely compensation, disaster-relief allocation, and recovery planning. Traditional field-based assessments are often slow and labour-intensive and may not capture the full extent of the damage. Satellite remote sensing, by contrast, can provide rapid and spatially detailed estimates of flood extent, damaged rice area, and associated losses.

The flash flood during the 2025–26 Boro season demonstrates how serious this risk has become. To the disaster scale, the Agromet Lab of the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) conducted a satellite-based assessment covering seven haor districts: Sunamganj, Netrokona, Kishoreganj, Habiganj, Sylhet, Moulvibazar, and Brahmanbaria.

The study estimated that 124,972 hectares were inundated, equivalent to 13.3 percent of the cultivated area. Nearly all of the flooded land (120,081 hectares, or 96.1 percent of total inundated land) consisted of active Boro rice fields. This means the flood primarily affected standing crops rather than uncultivated land. Sunamganj recorded the largest inundated area, followed by Habiganj and Moulvibazar.

The credibility of the satellite assessment is strengthened by its estimate of the total area under Boro cultivation. Remote-sensing analysis identified 940,004 hectares of active Boro rice across the seven districts, only 2.5 percent lower than the Department of Agricultural Extension's (DAE) estimate of 963,694 hectares. The two methods were therefore broadly consistent in identifying the overall cultivated area. However, notable district-level differences remained. DAE estimates were considerably higher in Netrokona and Moulvibazar, while satellite estimates were higher in Sylhet and Sunamganj.

Reliable estimates of loss and damage are essential for timely compensation, disaster-relief allocation, and recovery planning. Traditional field-based assessments are often slow and labour-intensive and may not capture the full extent of the damage. Satellite remote sensing, by contrast, can provide rapid and spatially detailed estimates of flood extent, damaged rice area, and associated losses.

The sharpest difference emerged in the assessment of flood damage. The satellite study estimated that 120,081 hectares of Boro rice were damaged, representing 12.77 percent of the area under cultivation. Sunamganj suffered the largest damaged area, at 43,797 hectares, followed by Habiganj with 24,576 hectares and Moulvibazar with 14,273 hectares.

By comparison, DAE reported a total of 65,236 hectares of damaged Boro rice, equivalent to a damage rate of 6.77 percent. The satellite estimate was therefore 1.84 times higher than the official field-based estimate. Although both approaches identified broadly similar affected districts, satellite mapping detected a much wider extent of crop damage.

The difference was equally significant in estimated production losses. Satellite analysis placed the loss at 508,856 tonnes of rice, compared with the DAE estimate of 288,783 tonnes. The satellite-based figure was 1.76 times higher, representing an additional loss of approximately 220,073 tonnes. The largest production loss occurred in Sunamganj, where an estimated 181,757 tonnes were lost. Habiganj followed with 104,693 tonnes, while Moulvibazar lost an estimated 58,090 tonnes. The satellite assessment also identified a broader high-loss zone than the one reflected in the official field reports.

The findings do not stand alone. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) conducted an independent assessment using a different method. CPD estimated that 122,016 hectares of rice were damaged, remarkably close to the satellite estimate of 120,081 hectares. Both figures were almost twice the DAE estimate of 65,236 hectares. Production-loss estimates varied more widely. CPD estimated a loss of 339,449 tonnes of rice, while the satellite-based study estimated 508,856 tonnes and DAE reported 288,783 tonnes. Despite the differences, both independent assessments placed the loss above the official field estimate.

The agreement between the satellite study and CPD is particularly important. Both identified Sunamganj and Habiganj among the worst-affected districts and reached similar conclusions about the extent of cultivated and damaged rice areas. CPD also recommended using Sentinel satellite data to assess flood losses within 72 hours of an event, broadly supporting the approach applied in the study conducted by BRRI.

However, these comparisons should not be viewed simply as a dispute over which institution produced the correct number. Field surveys remain essential, particularly for identifying affected farmers, evaluating field-level crop conditions, and verifying losses. Immediately after a major flood, field officers often face serious constraints, including inundated roads, inaccessible villages, limited personnel, and pressure to submit estimates quickly. Satellite observations can provide a rapid and spatially comprehensive picture of inundation and crop damage.

Nevertheless, this approach also has limitations. Cloud cover may restrict optical imagery, classification methods may introduce uncertainty, and moderate-resolution images may miss small or fragmented fields. Production losses may also vary according to crop variety, growth stage, and field management. Most importantly, the BRRI assessment primarily captured losses to standing crops. Paddy that had already been harvested and was drying on threshing floors, roadsides, or homestead yards may also have been damaged or destroyed, but such losses fell outside the satellite estimate. The actual flood-related loss may therefore have been somewhat higher.

Hence, the takeaway is not that satellite analysis should replace field surveys. Rather, Bangladesh needs an integrated assessment system that combines the strengths of both. A standard post-flood protocol should be introduced under which preliminary satellite maps of inundation, damaged crop area, and likely production loss are produced within 72 hours. These findings should then be verified through rapid, statistically designed ground surveys and integrated with DAE records, digital land maps, and farmer databases.

Such a system would produce faster and more credible estimates while reducing the risk of omission, duplication, and arbitrary compensation. It would also help ensure that relief, financial assistance, and recovery support reach the farmers and locations that need them most.

Haor farmers cannot be protected from every flood, but they can and must be protected from delayed assessments, incomplete loss records, and poorly targeted assistance. The evidence from the 2025–26 flood shows that Bangladesh already has the technological capacity to improve the system. What is now required is the institutional commitment to use it.