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Press Freedom in Asia: Present Scenario — The Bangladesh Perspective

By Mahfuz Anam

Introduction

Democracy has taken a quantum leap in the last decade or so. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the dismantling of the USSR, and the end of the ideological conflict, democracy as the most popular form of political system has established its unquestioned supremacy. No ideological garb can hide any government's recalcitrance regarding introducing democracy in one's own country.

This surge of democracy worldwide has greatly expanded the role of press in individual societies. In Asia also the role of independent press can be said to have increased greatly in the last decade.

This expanded role has to be understood not only in terms of the traditional link between democracy and a free press, but also in context of the increasingly persistent cry for 'good governance' in the Asian region. Today people want more from their governments than they did before. With contemporary life becoming increasingly interdependent, and making a place in it substantially more competitive than ever before, governments today face challenges that never existed in the earlier times. These new demands on the role and responsibility of governments have led to a new demand for good governance, two important elements of ensuring which are transparency and accountability of administration. To ensure both what is needed is a free press.

It is the desire to establish a more accountable and transparent government which lies, in my view, at the core of a renewed felt-need for a free and independent press.

Decades of military dictatorship in many countries of Asia, and quasi-dictatorships in numerous others, now dismantled by the great democratic revolution sweeping through this great continent, have made the people of these countries strong advocates of a free media, especially that of a vibrant and independent press.

It is within this twin process of increasing the democratisation process of society and the rising demand for good government that the role and importance of freedom of press will have to be understood in Bangladesh.

Brief History of the Print Media

The tradition of print media goes far back in the Indian sub-continent. There are more than a dozen newspapers in the South Asian region that are more than a 100 years old, with some crossing the 150 years mark. The birth of print media in the Indian subcontinent was caused by the economic and colonial interest of the British. Though an integral part of the colonial system, under the impact of liberalism in Europe, especially in Britain, a tradition of free and independent media began to take root in the early Indian newspapers and periodicals.

Keeping pace with the rising anti-colonial struggle, many of these newspapers voiced, if not totally independently but quite effectively, the social and political issues of the day. Thus the tradition of the 'Fourth Estate' began to show some early signs in this region, most prominently in undivided Bengal of British India.

Part of Bengal, which is now Bangladesh, joined Pakistan in 1947, and formed its eastern wing, with the historic city of Dhaka as its capital. Since almost all of the print media was Calcutta-based, which now formed part of India, the eastern wing of Pakistan hardly had any print media of its own. A few newspapers started within a few years of partition, and one relocated here from Calcutta. There were a few district newspapers with very limited readership having no national impact.

Though in a nascent state, the infant print media began to show early signs of boldness. Starting with the issue of Bangla being made a state language of Pakistan, the relatively weak print media began to voice economic and cultural demands of the Bengali people of Pakistan.

As the people of East Pakistan increasingly grew disillusioned with the new state of Pakistan, and their protests grew in frequency and in strength, so did the print media's criticism of the ruling party and its autocratic government. They began to write openly of oppression and discrimination against the Bengali people. This trend continued with
increasing momentum, till the coming of military dictatorship under General Ayub Khan in 1958.

Strict censorship on the mass media is one of the first things that any military regime imposes, and the Pakistani version of it was no different. Military rule, either directly or through some sort of a civilian facade, continued in Pakistan for the rest of the decade of fifties and throughout the sixties, all the way up to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Impact of Dictatorship

This extended period of dictatorship and autocratic rule had some long term impact on the mass media. Given its intrinsic illegitimacy and anti-people character, military dictatorship tends to create its own clientele in the community, in the professional groups, including in the public opinion forming groups, such as the journalists. The media professionals in East Pakistan became subject of some special attention of the rule of Ayub Khan, which resulted in the creation of a 'lackey press' within the print media.

After the initial shock of the military takeover, and after overcoming the fear of the new rulers, the print media began slowly but surely to assert itself once again. However, this time around a section of the print media, led by what subsequently became known as the 'Trust Papers' (now known as Trust) which controlled its funding) began to take strong pro-establishment stance. This section of the press began to term as 'unpatriotic' any criticism of the government. Religion began to be increasingly used to discredit the media and journalists. This, however, did not stop, or in any way blunt, the courage or the effectiveness of the main section of the print media.

What it did was to create a rift within the 'fourth estate', and among the media professionals, which appeared so far to be united. Regardless of the impediments and ruling class attempts to divide the media, it can be said that the pro-democracy and pro-people role of the print media made significant contributions in mobilising the people behind the independence movement which, at that time, was expressed through demands for regional autonomy.

The "Patriotic" Press

Bangladesh became independent in December 1971. The mass media, like every other institution in the country, was swept away by the euphoria of independence and was totally supportive of the new state and its leadership. The leader of the movement, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, lovingly called "Bangabandhu", was an extremely popular personality, whom the public adulated for his courage, patriotism and leadership, and so did the media.

However in the euphoria of liberation, and in the overwhelming flood of patriotism that swept us all, the print media and the journalists as a group lost one very important professional trait — their critical objectivity.

It suddenly became very fashionable, in fact "patriotic", to be hundred per cent pro-establishment. So much so that for any journalist to point out the shortcomings of the new government of Independent Bangladesh, became equivalent to being unpatriotic. This section of the press held sway, showering praises on everything the government did, and glossing over its critical failures.

This, as can be expected, did not last very long. A section of the more conscientious journalists, who began to raise questions, were at once termed as either 'misguided', or outright enemies of the new country. What had started to happen during the military dictatorships of the late fifties and sixties, now appeared in a new and a more insidious form. "Lackey journalism" of the pre-liberation period, which was essentially a marginal trend, suddenly reappeared under a powerful "patriotic" garb, quashing any attempt in expressing alternative views. This essentially meant that the media was forced to abdicate its responsibility to play the 'watchdog' role and abandoned its professional obligation of representing the public 'good', over the governmental interest.

As is only natural, a strong resistance began to grow against this trend and more and more journalists, prompted by their professional obligation, began to reassert their right to criticise the government. A rift developed between journalist supporters and the opponents of the government. The tragedy of this rift, and one that haunts us till today, is that, though the basis of it was purely professional, it was seen as 'ideological'. The issue was really of being either a good professional or a bad one. But it was seen as being pro or anti-Bangladesh. It began to be termed as a rift between the so-called 'pro-liberation' and 'anti-liberation' forces. It is true, however, that forces who were opposed
to the birth of Bangladesh took full advantage of this rift. The fundamental professional issues hidden in this rift were lost sight of, and what we saw was a sudden and irreversible politicisation of the profession of journalism. This greatly compromised the print media’s capacity to act as an independent voice — the traditional “Fourth Estate”.

The Fourth Amendment

In January ‘75 Sheikh Mujib introduced one party rule, and nationalised the private print media, closing down all, except a total of four newspapers — two Bangla and two English dailies. Through an amendment to the Constitution — the fourth — the parliamentary form of government was changed to a presidential one, changing the fundamental character of our government.

This was the severest blow to independent press. No regime had ever before nationalised the private print media.

The split within the profession now became much more intense, with the question of what to do with the large number of journalists rendered unemployed by the closure of so many papers, becoming a part of the debate which was already contentious enough. The pro-establishment press now became a supremely “lackey press”, with its so-called pro-liberation stance, not giving them any protection against the overwhelmingly negative public reaction against this move.

In August ‘75 a military putsch occurred, and the leader of our liberation movement, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated along with his family, in the most brutal and bloody manner. This launched Bangladesh into a series of military coups and a long period of dictatorship. Ironically, it was this military government that immediately restored multi-party politics and all the newspapers that were closed were now free to resume publication.

Those journalists who were angered by the banning of newspapers by Sheikh Mujib, became automatic supporters of the new government, even though it was bloody in nature and unconstitutional in origin. The existing rift in the media now became ever more sharper.

The period from 1975 to end 1990, consisted of military and quasi-military rule. It was a replay of the Pakistani experience of military intervention into the political life of the nation. Once again there was the creation of a vested group within the journalist community who would lend support to the undemocratic government. A planned attempt came into play to recreate the old “lackey-journalism” in favour of military rule.

Restoration of Democracy

The election of 1991 was an immensely successful affair. It was followed by the 12th Amendment to the Constitution that brought back a parliamentary form of government.

The extreme divisiveness among journalists that marked their role ever since Sheikh Mujib’s assassination in ‘75, appeared to be over as the print media professionals united against autocracy and the rule of Gen Ershad. The support coterie that the military-backed rule had developed, suddenly collapsed and a united force of media professionals lent very valuable support to the democracy movement that was successfully waged during 1990. In fact the allot opposition of the media professionals to the government of Gen. Ershad did much to erode the last vestiges of credibility of the tottering corrupt regime.

On the media’s side it restored, at least for the moment, the long missed unity among the journalists and brought them together under the issues of freedom of the press and freedom of expression. It also greatly enhanced the journalists’ stature in the public eye. After many years, and perhaps for the first time in Bangladesh, a proper constitutional and political environment was created for the functioning of a truly independent press.

Present State of Print Media

There are about fifty-nine daily newspapers in Bangla language and nine English language dailies in the capital city of Dhaka. Of them, about 15 Bangla newspapers and six English language ones can be said to constitute the mainstream of the print media in the country. In addition, there are 17 weeklies published in English and 131 in Bangla. Of these hardly a few weeklies in English and Bangla are reasonably successful ones.

Of the Bangla papers three, namely Ittefaq, Sangbad and Dainik Bangla, and in English, the Bangladesh Observer (previously Pakistan Observer), are the major papers that predate the birth of the country. They are between 40 to 45 years old. The rest of the
papers are almost all post-Bangladesh creations, some being as young as only a year and
half.
In addition, several dozen dailies and nearly a hundred weeklies are published from
outside the capital city of Dhaka.
The rather high number of publications can give the misleading impression about an
extremely thriving newspaper industry. The truth is that many of the daily publications
exist merely in name, and a large number of weeklies are published only occasionally.
Most of these publications are small time operations with hardly the staff or the
necessary facilities to bring out anything of reasonable quality.
Of the mainstream press, as mentioned earlier, six dailies in English and about a
dozen in Bangla constitute our quality print media. This group of newspapers has
experienced a heartening growth in the last few years both in circulation and financial
strength.
There has been an overall growth of the market which has remained mostly confined
to the vernacular press. The English language press continues to have comparatively
small circulation but commanding almost equal importance in terms of impact on the
policy makers.

State of Press Freedom in Bangladesh
As Bangladesh celebrates 25th anniversary of its independence this year, it
remembers sadly, that of this period more than fifteen years have been under direct or
indirect military rule. This is of singular importance in judging the nature and extent of
press freedom here. If to this we add the fact that during the Pakistani period — from
1947 to 1971 — we had direct or indirect military rule from 1958-71, we realise that of
the last 49 years, 28 years were under military rule. Of the remaining 21 years, the
period from '47 to '57 was that of domination of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) by West
Pakistani political and bureaucratic leadership. Of the remaining 11 years (within
Bangladesh), some of it passed in the euphoria of independence, some of it under the
domineering role of a very powerful ruling party, some of it under draconian laws (like
the Special Powers Act) and some of it under a one-party state with all but four
newspapers being banned, and those allowed to operate, fully owned and controlled by
the one party government.

To make a long story short, it is only from '91 onwards that the press in Bangladesh
has had a genuine chance to flower as a free media.

Four characteristics mark the present state of press freedom in Bangladesh:

a) lack of awareness of freedom of press being an integral part of democracy;
b) lack of awareness of the responsibility of journalists when media are free;
c) inadequate professional training and development of the media professionals;
d) inadequate growth of the media industry as a whole.

Because we were unable to institutionalise democracy in Bangladesh, we also could not
develop the awareness in the public mind as to how almost organically linked democracy
and freedom of press is. The fact that as the voice of the people, as the mechanism of
protest against oppression and injustice, as a fighter for the rights of citizens and, most
importantly, as a 'watch dog' against official abuse of power, the existence of a free
media is a must is something which has not yet become obvious to our people.

Freedom for journalists is seen by many as a special privilege that a certain group
within the society enjoys. To many people such privileges are both unnecessary and even,
dangerous. They feel that such freedom puts journalists in a special category that is
against the very principle of democracy.

This is the result, in my view, of a failure on the part of the free press to prove its
utility. It is also the result of the excessive politicisation of the media that has occurred
over the last decade or so. Because the media is politicised, it takes very partisan
positions on national issues leading to the general view that media is not, and cannot be,
objective. If the media cannot be objective, and if the media uses its freedom only to
peddle one view or another, then why should they be given a special "freedom" to carry
on a role which is essentially one of propaganda, and not one of objectively informing the
public?

One example of how divided the print media in Bangladesh is that most journalistic
bodies — like the Bangladesh Federation of Journalists (BFUJ), the Dhaka Union of
Journalists (DUJ) etc. are all divided into groups that toe one political line or another.
Such divisions of professional bodies on political lines have greatly eroded the credibility
of the print media, and have weakened the argument for greater press freedom.
Where the public hold the print media at fault is their lack of responsibility in taking sides on political issues. This has been most dramatically demonstrated in the more than two years of public agitation over the demand for a caretaker government to supervise the next general elections, followed by what we call the non-cooperation movement that occurred after the rigged one-party elections of 15th February '96.

Here the partisan nature of role of newspapers went far beyond the journalistic need to expose the farcical and rigged election. For example while the print media did a creditable job in taking the government to task for forcing a one party election upon the nation, they did not equally delve into the legal, moral and economic consequences of strikes and hartals (when civic life is brought to a complete halt) which continued for 3, 5 and even 7 days in a row, and was for an indefinite period (ending after 21 days) when the so-called non-cooperation movement started.

The state of our press freedom needs also to be judged from the point of view of professional training and exposure to the international media. With regular telecast of the BBC and CNN over the satellite channels there is now a greater awareness about the nature and functioning of independent media. Though these are examples of electronic media, yet the demonstrative aspects of seeing them covering events have had a singular impact on the whole range of journalists in Bangladesh.

However the limitations due to lack of training is still very much there. Because of long stretches of military and quasi-military dictatorships during which journalism consisted mostly of publishing government handouts, a healthy competitive spirit did not develop. The long hand of censorship cut through the independent spirit of the brave and the adventurous and tamed all into keeping to the dotted lines.

As and when mass agitation weakened the stranglehold of the armed forces few of the more brave newspapers would try and reflect the rising sentiment. Some would go a few steps further and take sides with the people. But this pro-people role, while highly laudable in spirit cannot be a substitute for hard-nosed professionalism which can only develop when a press lives and works within a democratic environment.

The coming elections and the subsequent democratic development will provide both a challenge and an opportunity for further growth of free media.

The challenge is to hold a free and fair election, have all political contenders accept the outcome and bring about a peaceful transfer of power, to be followed by normal functioning of the parliament. In bringing all this about the print media can play a very constructive role.

The opportunity is that while helping the above process the press can far advance the horizon of freedom and greatly strengthen the foundation of press freedom in Bangladesh.