

# Where do we stand?

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There is hardly any need to emphasise the importance of free media for democratic functioning in Bangladesh. The essential elements for good governance include participation by as broad a section of the population as possible and the accountability and transparency of the service providers. All of these qualities require the action of free, independent and vigorous information media. A free media which actually monitors, investigates and criticises the administration's policies and actions is a fundamental enabler of good governance. Yet, in much of the world, media freedom is under increasing attack.

A long line of liberal political theorists including John Locke and James Madison argue that the existence of a free and independent media within each nation is essential to the process of democratisation. Media reflects how a society functions and thus it is often considered the "mirror of a society". It is possible to comment on the state of a country's governance, as well as its commitment to democracy and economic and social development, by looking at

whether it respects its citizens and its media. Media acts as a bridge between the state and its citizens. By creating public support on different rights of citizenship and avenues of public scrutiny, it keeps governments under pressure to be more transparent and accountable. The stronger the media is in a country, the better its ability to play the role of a watchdog. The more it is able to play this role, the more the citizens are informed. Thus, in the presence of a dynamic media, the government is pushed to perform and serve its citizens better.

In the process of democratisation, one of the first stages in the transition to democracy is deregulation of the state's control over the media. The public, thereby, receives greater exposure to a wider variety of cultural information products and ideas through access to independent media. In the second stage of democratic consolidation and human development, journalists play a greater role in ensuring transparency and accountability in governance by playing the role of a watchdog. Thus, freedom of media is considered one of the most important instruments of democracy and governance, and is given due importance by different national and international agencies, including the World Bank governance report under its Voice and Accountability component.

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees the freedom of speech and expression under Article 39. The history of the media in Bangladesh is also embedded in the birth of the country. Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, the radio-broadcasting centre of Bengali nationalist forces during the Bangladesh Liberation War, played a vital role in the liberation struggle, including broadcasting the declaration of Independence and providing vital moral boost to Bangladeshis during the war. International media also played a very positive role during the war to attract global attention. The recent development of media in Bangladesh is impressive. Over the last decade, both print and broadcast media have experienced remarkable advancement in terms of number. But, despite its growth in numbers, the question arises whether the media in Bangladesh can enjoy a constructive and favourable environment. During authoritarian regimes, governments introduced several measures to crack down on media critics. However, since the rebirth of democracy in 1991, despite a less restricted environment and more media activity, even democratically elected governments continued a policy of media clampdown when faced with critical voices from them.

According to the recent Freedom House Index, the environment for media in Bangladesh is “partly free”. The World Press Freedom Index 2014 of Reporters without Borders ranked Bangladesh as 146th out of 180 countries. Besides, Amnesty International also stated that Bangladeshi journalists, who write about corruption, judicial irregularities, and human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, rape in custody and other gender-based violence, are particularly at risk of being harassed by police or security agencies, detained on politically motivated charges and tortured or otherwise ill-treated. Journalists in Bangladesh face various legal restrictions on free expression, some of which seem incompatible with democratic values, and these restrictions, to various degrees, deter media freedom in the country. In the last decade, successive democratically elected governments enacted a number of policies and ordinances including the recent National Broadcasting Policy 2014. Under this new broadcast policy, the government intends to establish a National Broadcasting Commission. The objectives behind this initiative, according to the government policy statement, are to bring all the media outlets into one integrated structure and to help build up an independent, pluralistic, accountable and responsive broadcasting system in Bangladesh. However, national and international journalists and media activists have already expressed reservations about specific aspects of the National Broadcasting Policy 2014.

Moreover, the state of freedom of media in Bangladesh is still a matter of concern, in spite of its huge growth in terms of quantity, as also evident by the State of Governance in Bangladesh report 2014-2015 of the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development. Most perceptible deterioration has been observed in the areas of regulatory impediments and political environment faced by journalists for media performance. The environment in which media representatives and journalists operate leaves much room for improvement, which may contribute to the overall improvement in the process of democratic governance and accountability in Bangladesh.

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