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Increasing intimidation and harassment of Prothom Alo signals deepening crisis of press freedom in the country

Bangladesh

Prothom Alo, Bangladesh's largest daily newspaper is the latest media platform to come under increasing attack including intimidation, harassment and arrest of journalists signalling a deepening crisis for press freedom in the country, said Amnesty International today.

Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina on Monday called Prothom Alo 'an enemy of the Awami League, democracy, and the people of Bangladesh,' while speaking in Parliament, with reference to an article published by the media outlet on the Independence Day of the country, covering the cost of living in Bangladesh. The journalist who wrote the article, Shamsuzzaman Shams was arrested and charged under the country's draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) and was later granted bail. The editor of Prothom Alo, Matiur Rahman was sued under the DSA and named as the main accused in one of the two cases against Shams.

Hours after the Prime Minister's statement, a group of individuals barged into Prothom Alo's office in the capital city of Dhaka, issued threats and vandalized its logo in the reception by writing 'boycott' over it.

"This is the latest in a series of attacks by the government of Bangladesh threatening press freedom in the country. Penalizing a media outlet, publisher or journalist solely for being critical of the government or the policies it promotes is a restriction of the right to freedom of expression that can never be justified. The attacks on Prothom Alo which has the largest daily circulation come close on the heels of the closure of Daily Dinkal, the only newspaper belonging to the main opposition party last month," said Yamini Mishra, regional director for South Asia at Amnesty International.

"The use of the draconian Digital Security Act on journalists and attacks on some of the largest news publications in the country together indicate a worrying trend towards repression and a downward spiral of the right to freedom of expression in Bangladesh."

'We were worried sick'

On 29 March, Bangladeshi journalist Shamsuzzaman Shams was picked up from his residence by a group in civil clothes that identified as the Criminal Investigations Department. His whereabouts

were unknown for about 10 hours, after which the police stated that he was in custody and was being charged under Bangladesh's draconian DSA.

A family member of Shams speaking to Amnesty International said, "We were worried sick... There was no warrant issued against him. No one informed us of anything. Even when it was confirmed that he was in custody, that too we came to know from mass media."

The editor of Prothom Alo, Matiur Rahman and a group of 'unnamed people' were also charged under DSA including a photographer. Although Shams was granted bail on 3 April 2023, and released from prison, if convicted he could face up to seven years in prison.

'Atmosphere of terror'

A senior news editor from Bangladesh speaking to Amnesty International described the government's crackdown on Prothom Alo as a deliberate campaign 'to create an atmosphere of terror ahead of the general elections.'

Speaking on the condition of anonymity, he said, "The government is sending a very clear message (that) this is what happens when you cross the limits of speech we have set. Even if journalists eventually receive bail, until the day the case is dropped the pressure will remain... Many of those who criticize the ongoing crackdown on freedom of press in Bangladesh think the DSA is being misused by targeting journalists. However, this is a conceptual mistake. The DSA is not being misused – it is being used exactly in the way the government intended the law to function."

Bangladeshi authorities stopped the publication of the Daily Dinkal on 20 February, the only newspaper belonging to the main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). A total of 56 journalists have been tortured, harassed, sued, intimidated and obstructed from doing their jobs in the first three months of 2023 according to the data published by Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), a Bangladeshi legal aid and human rights organisation.

Previously, Amnesty International documented the escalation in the use of the DSA against independent media and journalists following critical reporting on leaders of the ruling Awami League party. Amnesty International has also published its findings of a concerning pattern in which the authorities weaponized Sections 25 (publication of false or offensive information), 29 (Publication of defamatory information), and 31 (Offence and punishment for deteriorating law and order) of the Act to criminalise dissent including criticism expressed by journalists, activists, and human rights defenders.

On 31 March 2023, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk called on Bangladesh to impose an immediate moratorium on the use of DSA until it is reformed to ensure compliance with international human rights law. The Commissioner expressed concern that the DSA 'is being used across Bangladesh to arrest, harass and intimidate journalists and human rights defenders, and to muzzle critical voices online.'

"Since its inception, the Digital Security Act has been wielded as a weapon by the Bangladeshi authorities to silence critics and suppress dissent. They have increasingly exploited the law's vague and broad provisions to escalate attacks on independent journalism and media freedom. The authorities must repeal the DSA and immediately cease the harassment and intimidation of journalists in Bangladesh," said Yamini Mishra.