

# Making Prothom Alo “the enemy” in Bangladesh

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## **Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League government have gone after Bangladesh’s top newspaper - the last one standing in the country’s media**

It’s a rare thing that a country’s parliament is told by none other than the prime minister that its top newspaper is the enemy of the people. In utter disbelief, people heard last month that Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh’s prime minister and head of the ruling Awami League, told parliament that “the daily *Prothom Alo* is the enemy of the Awami League, democracy, and the people of the country. I am saying with regret that they never want to permit any stability in this country.”

Her unhappiness with the country’s lone independent vernacular daily was already well known – she had barred its journalists from her office and public events in 2013, without giving any reason or making it official. Also, since Hasina returned to power in 2009, she and some of her cabinet had made a number of allegations against *Prothom Alo* – ranging from the newspaper siding with undemocratic forces to it creating instability and thwarting the government’s development agenda. But the prime minister’s declaration in parliament, on 10 April, was still a first, and marked an unprecedented escalation of her hostility. It also had special significance because of the occasion on which she spoke: a special session of Bangladesh’s parliament to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding.

Hasina’s attack on *Prothom Alo* sent shockwaves across Bangladesh’s media industry and society. Many fear that Hasina’s branding of *Prothom Alo* as the enemy of her party and the people will have a further chilling effect on the media, already cowed and constrained by her government. In many ways, and especially when it comes to media freedom, *Prothom Alo* is the last one standing among Bangladesh’s mass media institutions. For Hasina, especially with a general election approaching, it is the ultimate target.

Her tirade followed a report on *Prothom Alo*’s web portal on 26 March, the occasion of Bangladesh’s 53<sup>rd</sup> Independence Day, in which a labourer named Zakir Hossain was quoted as saying, “[we] want the independence of [having] rice, meat and fish.” As is common practice in the media, the news portal posted the story on social-media platforms. While posting on Facebook, it used a photocard with the quote clearly attributed to Zakir Hossain and a picture of a seven-year-old boy standing in front of the National Martyrs’ Memorial. The post took minutes to go viral – *Prothom Alo* has 19 million-plus followers on Facebook, more than the national cricket team. Realising the photocard’s ambiguity and the risks of misrepresentation, *Prothom Alo* quickly removed the post, dropped the photocard and republished the post with an explanation.

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The prime minister said in her speech, “To hand ten taka to a small child, to make him tell a lie, to get some words from the child’s mouth; what were the words? [We] want the independence of [having] rice, meat and fish. A seven-year-old child, to hand him ten taka, and to record his words and circulate it; a renowned newspaper, a very popular newspaper, its name is *Prothom Alo* but it lives in the dark.” (“Prothom alo” is Bangla for “first light”.) This allegation, that the newspaper paid a child and made him parrot the quote, had earlier been made by the news channel Ekattor TV.

One of the owners of Ekattor TV is a well-known supporter of the Awami League, and since its inception the channel has relentlessly promoted the ruling party’s agenda. Some media analysts have compared Ekattor TV to India’s Republic TV, flagrantly partisan to the country’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

Some disclosure is essential here: I worked at *Prothom Alo* as consulting editor for about five years until 2017, and have since been contributing to the newspaper as an independent journalist. I also have a weekly column in the *Daily Star*, which is published by the same business house, Transcom Group, that owns *Prothom Alo*. Unlike other major media-owning businesses in Bangladesh, Transcom Group keeps itself at arm’s length from editorial decision-making at its newspapers, allowing the editors to run them professionally and freely.

*Prothom Alo* and the *Daily Star*, published in Bangla and English respectively, have dominated Bangladesh’s newspaper industry for nearly two decades, and are recognised as relatively independent by media observers both within and outside the country. Both the ruling party and opposition parties frequently complain about the two dailies’ critical coverage. *Prothom Alo* particularly angered both the leading parties – the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – when their never-ending squabbling turned violent in 2007, leading to the imposition of emergency rule by the president and caretaker administration of the time, backed by the army. In an opinion piece, the paper’s editor, Matiur Rahman, called for both the top political leaders – Hasina from the Awami League and Khaleda Zia of the BNP – to retire from active politics.

Despite Hasina and others repeatedly venting their displeasure with *Prothom Alo* in the years since, the daily’s popularity has remained undented. *Prothom Alo* secured top position in Bangladesh’s newspaper market within years of its launch in 1998, and as of 2018 it had a readership of 6.6 million for its print edition. The Covid pandemic hurt *Prothom Alo*’s circulation figures, just as it hurt the newspaper industry almost universally, but the downturn in print readership was compensated by growth in online traffic. The *Prothom Alo* website is Bangladesh’s most popular web address. This explains why politicians, and especially those in power, are so sensitive to what it says – and also why they want to leash the organisation.

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In India, the unprecedented growth of news outlets subservient to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party government is now notorious. In Bangladesh, a recent survey by a think tank, the Centre for Governance Studies, presents a not too dissimilar scenario. A direct comparison can be made to India, where most outlets supportive of the government are owned by businesses using their media ownership as a means of furthering other commercial interests. Bangladesh’s current government, during its 14-year tenure so far, has handed out 45 licences for television channels, dozens for radio stations and hundreds for newspapers and online news portals, largely on the basis of party allegiance. These outlets largely survive on state patronage in various forms or subsidies from their

owners, who consider them an investment for furthering other interests.

Government ministers and leaders of the ruling party have consistently argued that media plurality is proof of media freedom in Bangladesh. But, besides the predominant pro-government slant of the media, there is plenty of evidence contrary to this argument. Indiscriminate use of the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) to sue editors and reporters has created what a senior journalist speaking to Amnesty International described as “an atmosphere of terror”. Though the government has not published any official data on this, unofficial tallies show more than 3000 people have been sued under the DSA, which was passed in 2018. A sizable number of those accused are journalists and academics; according to Amnesty, ten newspaper editors faced legal charges under the act in 2020 alone. In most cases, those filing DSA complaints are linked to the Awami League.

Physical attacks on journalists have risen sharply: about a dozen have died during the present government’s rule, mostly victims of violence by the activists of the Awami League, where impunity for the perpetrators is the norm. A number of journalists have been forcibly disappeared, and later sued on spurious charges after their eventual release. Some have had to flee the country. Bangladesh slipped eleven places in the World Press Freedom Index between 2021 and 2023, leaving it at 163<sup>rd</sup> place – the lowest rank in Southasia.

The attack on *Prothom Alo* encapsulated these trends. Shortly after *Prothom Alo* published the offending Facebook post, an activist of the Awami League’s youth wing filed a general complaint under the DSA against Shamsuzzaman Shams, the reporter behind the original story, and Rahman, the newspaper’s editor. Shams was picked up from his home by police in the middle of the night. On the heels of the first case, another activist filed a case at a different police station under the same law. A number of ministers publicly stated that more cases were likely to follow, although this did not happen – presumably due to global outcry over the earlier cases and Shams’ arrest.

Filing several cases at multiple locations for a single alleged offence has been a trademark tactic of the ruling party for nearly a decade. Following the publication of a report in 2015 on corruption in the purchase of power tillers by a local government office, cases were lodged against Rahman in dozens of locations. Similarly, dozens of cases were registered in multiple locations against Mahfuz Anam, editor of the *Daily Star*, following his admission in a television interview of a lapse in editorial judgement during the previous caretaker regime, which the ruling party claimed was aimed at defaming Sheikh Hasina. A few other editors, too, have faced more than one case for a single act deemed offensive by the ruling party or its supporters. Such multiple and simultaneous prosecutions are designed to harass their targets, keeping them busy with attending court and affecting their ability to run their newsrooms. No matter the outcome of legal proceedings, the process is already a punishment.

Another powerful weapon to intimidate the media is banning advertisements. Since Bangladesh gained independence, in 1971, all governments have used public-sector advertisements to buy the media’s support and allegiance. But after the Awami League retained power in the 2014 election, when more than half of the members of parliament were elected unopposed owing to a boycott of the election by all opposition parties, statecraft started to change. With its consolidation of power, the Awami League government started tightening its control of the media with new methods. Television talk shows were told who can and cannot be invited. Private business houses were advised not to place advertisements in newspapers critical of the government.

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I recall the day I received a call from a senior official of an intelligence agency complaining about a story on a security operation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. That same day, two top telecom operators, one multinational company and a few private commercial banks were forced to pull their advertisements from *Prothom Alo*. Many of those companies are still barred, albeit unofficially, from advertising in the paper. All those companies received verbal instructions they could not defy. It has become the new normal that such restrictive measures are imposed verbally, without any traceable records that could be used by the victims to seek legal redress.

Media analysts fear Hasina's pronouncement that *Prothom Alo* is the enemy will mean a further deterioration of the freedom of information as news outlets opt to avoid antagonising the government to avoid similar treatment, depriving the public of critical facts and sparing the Awami League from scrutiny in the run up to the general election. The knock-on effects of the pronouncement will also inflict further pain on *Prothom Alo* - as state-run and state-supported institutions opt out from subscribing to the daily, refrain from placing any advertisements in it, and maybe restrict access of its reporters, replicating the ban imposed by the prime minister's office.

Though neither the newspaper nor its editor has responded to the prime minister's allegations, it will still likely face serious financial hardship in the coming days. How these constraints impact its resolve has yet to be seen. One silver lining of the whole episode, however, is the emergence of a broader coalition against the Digital Security Act. Another could be *Prothom Alo* becoming even more powerful by winning more popular support as the government's crusade keeps drawing attention to it.

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