

State of Emergency in Bangladesh

## **We can be repressed but not silence**

The hated press advisory calls should stop immediately

Monday 15 January 2007, by [ANAM Mahfuz](#) (Date first published: 15 January 2007).

Most regrettably, the newly formed caretaker government headed by Dr. Fakruddin Ahmed seems to be headed in the direction of a confrontation with the independent media, both electronic and print. For the first time in 16 years this writer received a call from the press information officer of the ministry of information very gently, saying: "I hope you are aware that we are in an emergency." I asked him what he meant and under what authority and on whose directive was he calling me. He avoided my questions and I told him never to call me again with anything that has to do with restricting press freedom.

Obviously this official was not calling me on his own. So who are pushing the just-born caretaker government towards an inevitable clash with the independent media? Let us make it unambiguously clear and say with as much forthrightness as possible that we will never accept censorship or any attempt to restrict the media. The media in Bangladesh will not allow even an iota of restriction imposed on them.

We understand what is national interest, what is good for our people and how people's rights can be better served. We also know our responsibilities and how to be restrained, if necessary. The fact that those in power felt the need to start the discredited and hateful system of issuing press advisory over the phone is not only shameful but also suicidal. Such advisory only protects those who are afraid of transparency and openness. They cannot be friends of Dr. Fakruddin's government, not for that matter of Bangladesh or of anybody who has the country's interest at heart.

It is a well-known experience and one that is globally applicable that media restrictions only

serve the corrupt and the vested interest groups. Anybody or any group devoted to serving public interest has nothing to fear from a free press. In the past when media censorship existed in the country whom did it serve? Never the public. We accept that free media have not always succeeded in eliminating the corrupt and the criminal elements from the society. But that has been so because the people in power never used the media reports in investigating further and finding out the truth. The government of the day, irrespective of any party, in fact blamed the media for maligning them and as such protected the corrupt simply because of the nexus that grew between the politicians and the criminals. Even under such constraints, whatever little public interest has been served it was due to the relentless pursuit of the journalists to expose corruption. Few other groups did as much for public interest as the media.

Take the most recent political crisis. The nation would have had to suffer a one-sided election, with the most flawed voter list and partisan bureaucracy imaginable but for the media. If President Iajuddin really pursued public interest he would have gotten our full backing even after assuming power unconventionally, according to some illegally. But he got the very opposite from the media as a result of which people have been better served.

With the declaration of emergency, an overall legal cover has been brought into effect within which the government now has the power to institute some restrictive rules for the purpose of maintaining law and order and related governance issues, including restricting some fundamental rights. But it does not automatically mean that a government will have to issue restrictive rules in all the fields covered by the emergency provision of the constitution.

Therefore we urge Dr. Fakruddin not only NOT to go in the direction of press restrictions but also to issue a clear statement re-asserting the centrality of free media in his policies and categorically stating his government's full commitment to the highest degree of freedom for the media. Such a statement by the Chief Adviser is very necessary because the lower level

government and law enforcement officials, especially those corrupt officials who have a lot of dirty linen to hide, may use the pretext of the emergency to harass the media professionals. They also sometimes act on behalf of the corrupt businessmen to intimidate the investigating journalists to desist them from following their stories.

We have said so in the past and repeat ourselves now that free media have greatly enhanced Bangladesh's prestige globally. It is a matter of pride for our people. Of the things that give a positive image of our country, free media is high among them. Restricting it in any way will come at a great cost to our international goodwill. Since the promulgation of emergency almost all the foreign press that contacted this writer for comments, and it was nearly two dozen, all invariably asking about the fate of press freedom under the present circumstances.

We wish the new caretaker government well. We pledge our full co-operation in all its pro-people and pro-democracy activities. We will vigorously support its good actions and criticise the bad ones. We may even be merciless on occasions. But all our actions will be solely guided by national interest and the desire to strengthen democracy and empower the people to have a greater say in running their country. As for the immediate task, all our effort will be directed to the holding of a free and fair election at the earliest. This, as we know, is also the number one task of the new caretaker government and in that sense we are allies. There cannot be any sense on part of Dr. Fakruddin's government to debilitate its ally, perhaps the most valuable one. So, Dr. Fakruddin, say NO to press restrictions, and say it repeatedly and loudly so that the whole world can hear it and the enemies of the free press lurking in the shadows know that they have no place in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bangladesh.

Postscript: After conclusion of this piece, the news came that the advisory council in its first meeting decided to uphold fundamental rights as much as possible under the purview of emergency. We are heartened by this decision, but we would have preferred if upholding press freedom was

separately mentioned.

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**P.S.**

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