



Bangladesh Media Monitor

Policy Paper

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**Legal Actions Against Propagandist Journalists: Ensuring Accountability without Political
Revenge in Bangladesh**



1. Executive Summary

The connection between the media and political authority has always been dubious in Bangladesh. The dissemination of partisan press and propagandist journalism became the main medium of story-telling, gagging the opposition, and justifying state policies during the Awami League era (2009-2024). After the change of government, a number of journalists who have distributed fake news or served as political propagandists have been arrested. These detentions are, however, regularly packaged, both internally and abroad, as matters of political revenge over clean accountability.

In this policy brief, the writer focuses on helping Bangladesh to walk the narrow line between ensuring disinformation and propaganda accountability and protecting press freedom and avoiding moves that erode democratic regard. The paper suggests a layered legal framework with an independent watchdog to draw the line between a real sense of accountability and the partisan vengeance ringing in the ears of the Republican Party basing its arguments on international standards, cross-national practices, and local case studies.

2. Background: Propaganda and Partisan Journalism in Bangladesh

Known history of Bangladesh media is partly political partisanship, concentration and poor regulations. The quality of the journalism has been inconsistent, even though Bangladesh has a comparatively high number of television networks, newspapers and online portals as compared to many of the other South Asian neighbors (Ahmed, 2025). Because between 2009 and 2024 the Awami League was able to consolidate political influence, partisan journalism and propaganda in the support of the state have reached unprecedented levels, which has left a significant imprint on the reputation of the media, as well as on the state of healthy debate (Chowdhury, 2023).

2.1 Rise of Propagandist Journalism under the Awami League

Under the Awami league regime, the government nurtured friendly media houses and rewarded them with licenses, adverts, and access to officials. There were numerous television networks that



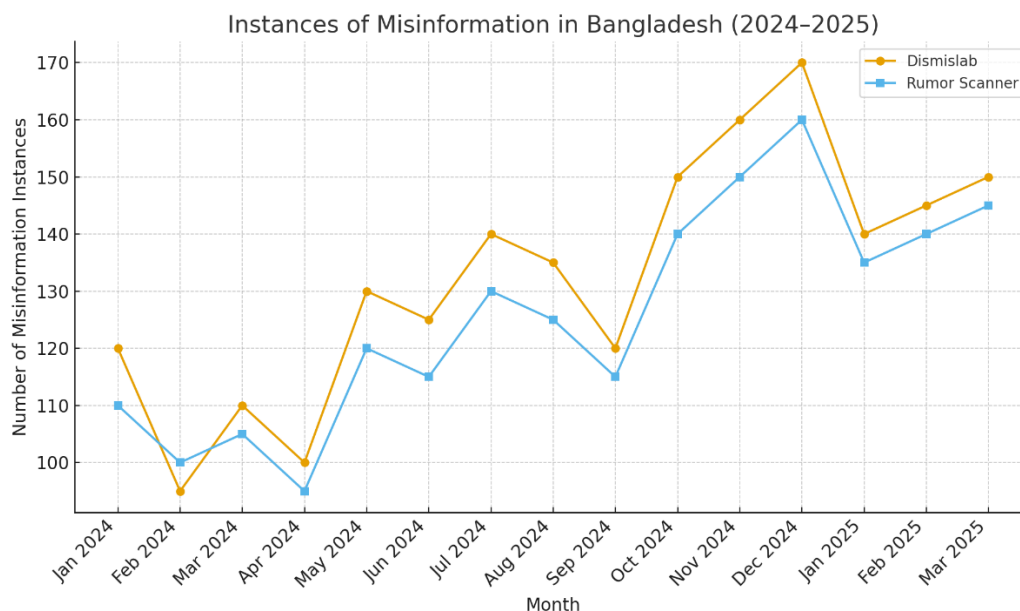
were owned by businessmen affiliated to the ruling party. This provided journalists and editors with structural incentives to conform to the government stories (Alam et al., 2024). News content has as a consequence tended to obscure the distinction between reporting and political campaign.

During elections propaganda kind of journalism was in the limelight (Naser, 2021). In 2014 (and in 2018 when dissent turned out in limited numbers) a number of influential outlets boosted government claims of normalcy and legitimacy even as those who opposed the regime were denounced as destabilizing or anti-state. Reports of any type of electoral violence, corruption, or human rights abuses were often underreported (Bhowmik and Fisher, 2024).

2.2 Tactics of Propaganda and Disinformation

Propagandist journalists used the following tactics among others:

- **Framing dissent as extremism:** Backlash opinions were usually framed as threats to national security or local peace.
- **Character assassination:** It was a standard practice to attack personal critics, scholars, and civil society leaders.
- **Selective reporting:** Only stories that were friendly to the ruling party featured in headlines and no attention was given to inconvenient issues (Ahmed, 2025).
- **Election disinformation:** Disruptive statements regarding voter turnout, violence by opposition, or foreign backing were spread to create the impression of an extensive legitimacy.
- **Use of talk shows and infotainment:** Partisan analysts employed during prime-time programming tended to strengthen government propaganda without questioning it in any way (Shaikh, 2024).



Graph 2: Instances of Misinformation in Bangladesh (2024–2025)

Such patterns diminished the watchdog role of the press and led to a deterioration in public trust. According to a 2022 survey by local media monitors, most of the people disagreed that major TV channels were partisan.

2.3 Targeting of Independent Voices

Concurrent, critical journalists and outlets that critiqued the government were either harassed, censored or prosecuted under repressive laws. Already the Digital Security Act (2018) turned out to be an exceptionally effective weapon of censorship as dozens of journalists were detained because they had published a report that appeared to be a lie or a threat to the reputation of the state. This sent shivers down the spines of newsrooms as self-censorship was the order of the day (Hossain, 2024). Independent newspapers (and web portals) that still engaged in investigative reporting would often be the target of advertising boycotts or tax inquiries.

2.4 Legacy and Current Situation

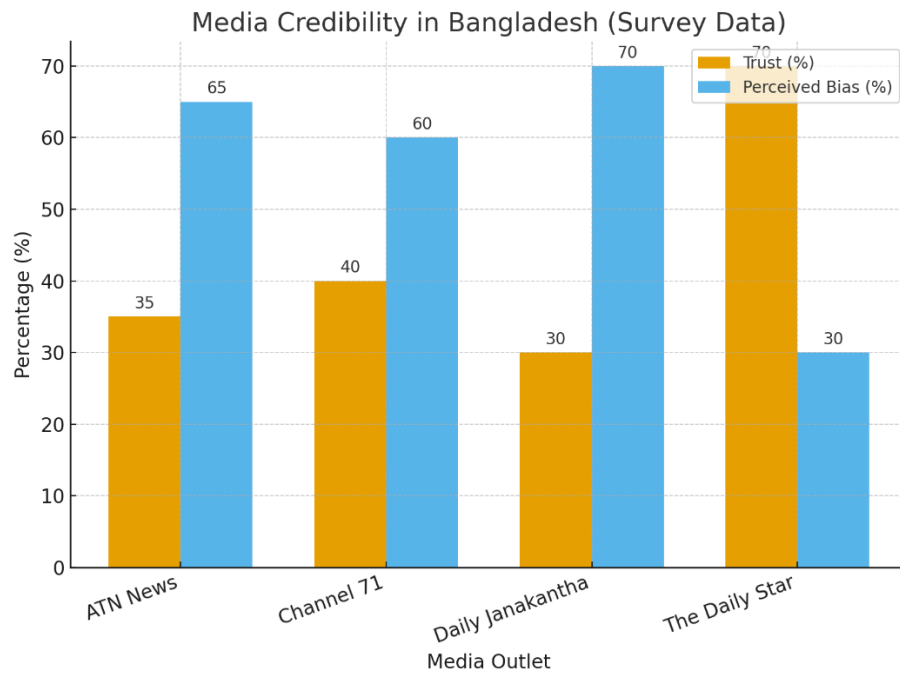


The era of partisan journalism has entrenched itself immensely on the media landscape. By the time the political transition took place in 2024, and a number of high-profile propagandist journalists were arrested, the reaction of the population was split. On the one hand, a lot of citizens were glad that culprits of disinformation and polarization were getting a taste of their own medicine (Shams, 2024). On the other, international observers and human rights agitators complained that these measures bordered on political vengeance instead of objective justice. Accordingly, the history of propagandist journalism in Bangladesh is twin-fold: not only has it helped to curtail media independence under the Awami League regime, but it has also made attaining accountability complex (Khan, 2025).

3. Problem Statement: Accountability vs. Political Retaliation

3.1 The Dilemma of Media Accountability

The media in Bangladesh is on a cross road. On the one hand, an actual necessity exists to overcome the harm done by partisan propaganda and organized disinformation. Propagandist journalism has undermined citizen trust, contributed to political polarization, and on other occasions misused violence or justified repressive state actions (Khan, 2021). It is important to hold those to account so that media credibility can be rebuilt so that journalism can be used to serve the people and not some political agenda (Reza and Bhuiyan, 2025).



Graph 1: Media Credibility in Bangladesh (Survey Data)

3.2 The Risk of Political Retaliation

But, in the attempt to enact accountability, the continuation of the politics of score-settling threatens to be understood as such. Bangladesh governments have used the media repeatedly not as an independent democratic organization but as a tool of power. Whenever the new government arrests or tries journalists who previously supported the Awami League, the feeling, both in their own country and internationally, is that they are just seeking revenge (Ahmed, 2025). This impression is supported by the non-transparency of legal proceedings, ambiguous accusations on the terms of general security legislation, and selective approaches to individuals according to their political backgrounds, without regard to the extent of their wrongdoing (Khan and Islam, 2022).



3.3 Balancing Justice and Freedom

The central issue is that there is no distinct organizational framework that would lead to the distinction between propaganda as an unethical journalism and propaganda as a criminal act with a criminal outcome (Abid et al., 2024). Without this difference, every punishment measure will run the risk of becoming revenge. According to international norms of human rights, like the Article 19 of the ICCPR, a limitation to free expression should be legally justified, needful and reasonable. This is not always the case with Bangladesh, as its existing style of operation compromises justice and credibility (Silwal and Kshetri, 2025).

3.4 The Urgency of Reform

Until there are structures built in Bangladesh to deal with media misconduct impartially, transparently and based on the rights of individuals, the cycle of partisan revenge will continue. This not only undermines the democratic institutions but also tarnishes the reputation of Bangladesh, as a nation that tries to show its commitment to the rule of law and the respect of human rights (Khan, 2021).

4. International Standards Review

Whether states ought to respond to disinformation, propaganda, and unethical journalism is a subject of debate around the world, particularly in an age of digital communication where untrue or partisan information can travel far and wide with severe effects (Ahmed, 2025). Bangladesh is guided by international human rights regulation and comparative regulatory practice. They note that the responsibility of media wrongdoing should be balanced with freedom of expression to allow limitation to be legal, necessary, and proportionate without being discriminatory (OHCHR, 2023).

4.1 The ICCPR and the Principle of Proportionality

The balance between accountability and freedom of expression is principally defined by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) ratified in 2000 by Bangladesh.



Article 19 also ensures the right to freedom of opinion without interference and a right to demand, obtain and share information via any media (OHCHR, 2021).

The General Comment No. 34 of the UN Human Rights Committee explains that restrictions of this kind have to pass the legality, necessity, and proportionality tests. In practice, this implies that no government can introduce a loose and excessively broad law on journalists, nor can they choose only to mark certain people down to shut them up (AP News, 2019). In the case of Bangladesh, it means that any court proceeding against propagandist journalists needs to be based on some clear legislation that spells out what disinformation is or incitement and apply it to propaganda is imposed impartially, and is open to judicial review (Bangladesh Press Council, 2025).

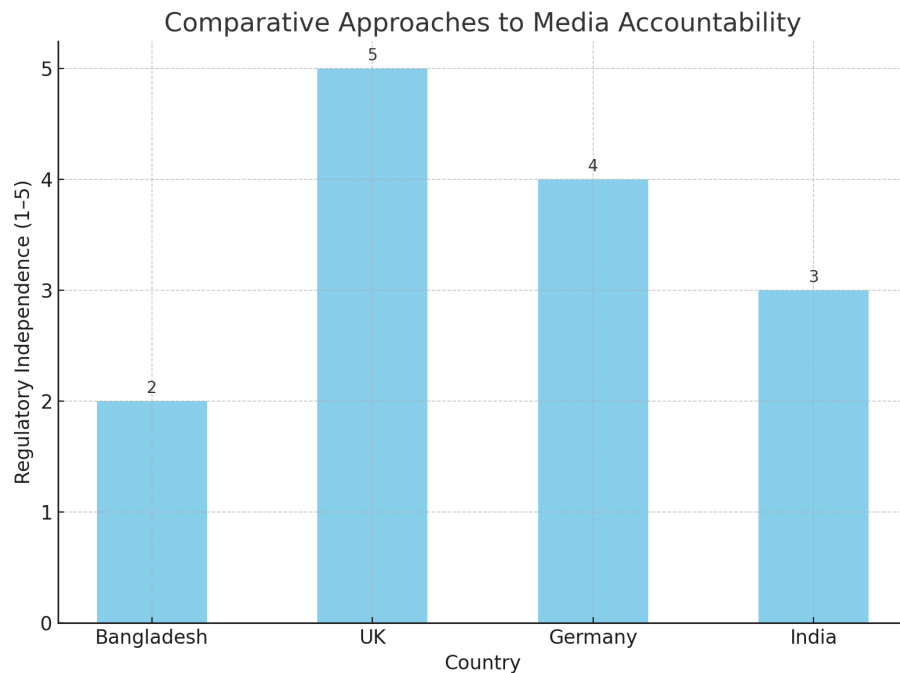
4.2 UN Guidelines and the Safety of Journalists

According to the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (2012), journalists are to be safeguarded against violence, harassment, and arbitrary arrests, but it is also recommended that states should enforce media ethics and accountability by instituting self-regulation (BD Media Monitor, 2025). Notably, the plan emphasizes the fact that freedom of press is a fundamental pillar to democracy and that the fight against propaganda or misinformation should not result in the violation of the rights of journalists.

Likewise, OHCHR reports on disinformation suggest a multi-stakeholder approach. It is encouraging governments to focus more on transparency, promote independent fact-checking, and improve media literacy, instead of harsh punitive actions that may produce an inverse effect: taming dissent (OHCHR, 2021). The implementation of these rules in Bangladesh implies changing the focus on creatively prosecuting propagandist journalists to capacity building aimed at enhancing accountability via autonomous structures and civil legal action (OHCHR, 2023).

4.3 Comparative Country Practices

Another way that Bangladesh can take lessons on dealing with disinformation and propaganda in legal and regulation-based contexts is by considering how other countries have handled it.



Graph 3: Comparative Approaches to Media Accountability

4.3.1 United Kingdom – Ofcom Model

In the UK, the media regulator Ofcom is independent of the state and is legally authorized to investigate the allegations of bias and misinformation as well as unethical reporting. Penalties can be fines, corrections, or in the worst scenario, loss of licenses to broadcast. Notably, decisions by Ofcom are informed by open procedures and are subject to judicial oversight limiting the chances of political abuse. In the case of Bangladesh, such a model implies the need to establish an independent body of oversight that would decouple accountability and partisan politics (Ha, 2024).

4.3.2 Germany – NetzDG Law

The Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) is a social media law in Germany that came into effect in 2017, and obliges social media companies to take down unlawful hate speech and disinformation within hard time limits (Hamilton, 2022). Although it has been accused of creating excessive pressure on the privately owned entities, the legislation has brought more accountability to the



online platforms. Most importantly, the control had to be left in German courts to prevent abuse (Salimullah, 2024).

4.3.3 India – Paid News Cases

India has also experienced major problems in paid news whereby news outlets run political stories at payment. Candidates and media houses have been sanctioned against such practices by the Election Commission of India, although it has been shown to be ineffective due to lax enforcement and interference by politics (Anik, 2024). The Indian example illustrates the risks of selective enforcement, and shows the importance of a high level of institutional independence in the regulation of propaganda (Bari, 2021).

4.4 Lessons for Bangladesh

Based on these international standards and other related cases, some lessons crop out:

Clarity and Narrow scope: legislation to combat disinformation should be presented clearly so as to prevent arbitrary application.

Independent Oversight: Regulatory bodies should not be controlled by the government; they should be independent that way they would not be seen as being politically revengeful (Lewis and Hossain, 2022).

Proportional Remedies: Procedures of civil and ethical accountability should receive the first line of attention in terms of criminal sanctions taking place in only two situations: incitement to violence or gross harm.

Transparency and Due Process: Any proceedings against journalists should become translucent, and the final verdict can be reviewed by the court, and this is necessary to develop not only domestic but also international trust (Md Shahin and Hasan, 2023)

Promotion of Media Literacy: Media Literacy: Punitive strategies should be scaled back in favor of long-term investments in fact-checking, journalism training and public education (Huber and Schormair, 2021).

4.5 Implications for Bangladesh

In the case of Bangladesh, adherence to the global situation would imply law amendments that include fixing the Digital Security Act, criticized due to the ambiguous definitions and disproportional sentences. It would also be the creation of self-regulating and self-judicial bodies to deal with complaints against journalists (Uddin, 2021). Through the Ofcom approach and the lessons previously learned in India, with its poor enforcement, Bangladesh will be able to build a framework that guarantees accountability, without strengthening the feedback mechanisms of political revenge (Uddin et al., 2021).

Finally, the global community has emphasized that fighting propaganda and disinformation is one thing, but it should never be used as justification to suppress opposition. In the case of Bangladesh, this principle plays a crucial role in safeguarding the freedom of the press, as well as in promoting its democratic legitimacy and image at the global scale (Mostofa, 2021).

5. Policy Options

This is a policy dilemma that conflicts Bangladesh is grappling with: how to deal with propagandistic reporting in such a way that does not impair the freedom of the press, nor facilitate the claim that the government is speaking back (Baffoe and Roy, 2023). There are a number of avenues and each of these avenues has unique consequences on governance, accountability and image.

Table 1: Policy Options Overview

Policy Option	Description	Pros	Cons	Risk of Political Abuse
Status Quo	Continued use of broad punitive laws	Immediate action; visible accountability	Perceived revenge; undermines press freedom	High
Civil Remedies Only	Defamation, retractions, ethical regulation	Low risk of abuse; aligns with ICCPR	Limited deterrence for severe propaganda	Low
Tiered Legal Framework (Recommended)	Ethical regulation, civil remedies, criminal sanctions (narrow)	Balanced, rights-based, credible internationally	Requires tribunal and capacity building	Low to Moderate

Option 1: Status Quo – Continuation of Current Practices

The current trend uses a lot of punitive action based on general laws designed to cover the whole gamut of digital crime i.e. Digital security act and other laws of special powers. Journalist charged with the propagation are usually locked up or even prosecuted without due process (Ahmed, 2025). This strategy can meet the requirements of the immediate accountability; however, it strengthens the image of political revenge and may lead to the further decline of the international reputation of Bangladesh. Such practices have already been condemned by international bodies as not being in line with human rights (Chowdhury, 2023).



Option 2: Civil Remedies and Ethical Regulation Only

Decriminalizing propaganda related offences and mainly relying on civil and ethical penalties are also an option. This would involve defamation suits, compulsory retractions, apologies in public, financial penalties and the strengthening of the Bangladesh Press Council (Alam et al., 2024). It also would entail the enhancement of self-regulatory processes by way of journalist unions and professional associations. This solution complies with international human rights principles to control the possibility of arbitrary detention (Naser, 2021).

Option 3: Tiered Legal Framework (Recommended)

A less extreme solution is the introduction of a grading system that differentiates between the misconduct levels. The first level self-regulation and professional accountability would bring to justice any ethical violations (Bhowmik and Fisher, 2024). Serious cases of disinformation would be punishable at the second stage by civil measures like payment of fines, damages, or corrective measures. At the third and most radical level criminal penalties would be imposed exclusively on acts of incitement to violence, communal hostility or intentional falsehoods with provable damage (Ahmed, 2025).

This graded strategy is in line with global best practices and provides Bangladesh with a way to achieve accountability that is legal, proportional, and credible at the domestic and global levels.

6. Recommendations

In order to stop the cycle of partisan revenge and also hold perpetrators of propagandist journalism accountable, Bangladesh needs reforms that are both legally acceptable and institutionally viable. The recommendations below are in line with international human rights and comparative best practices:



6.1. Legal Reform

Bangladesh needs to change or repeal overly general laws, including the Digital Security Act, which has been used to attack journalists blindly. Instead, it can be proposed a Disinformation and Media Accountability Act, focusing specifically on such crimes as incitement to violence, communal hatred or intentional release of demonstrably false information. According to Article 19 of the ICCPR, the legal protection should provide that such restriction of freedom of expression should be legal, necessary and proportionate.

6.2. Independent Oversight

An independent, executive and political party-independent Media Accountability Tribunal must be created. The tribunal would consist of judges, media experts, and representatives of the civil society engaging in adjudication of serious cases in a due process and transparent manner. It must be independent so that they do not feel political revenge.

6.3. Transparency/Disclosure

It must also mandate the media to reveal their structures of ownership, political financing, and editorial affiliations. The increased transparency will allow the populace and the regulators to see the difference between fair journalism and partisan propaganda and avoid resorting to repressive actions.

6.4. Civil Society and Fact-Checking Partnerships

Independent fact-checking bodies and journalism training should be reinforced by the government and donors. Media literacy can be fostered through partnerships with civil society to ensure that citizens are able to critically assess information and overcome propaganda.

6.5. International Engagement

Bangladesh must also ensure active co-operation with UN agencies, UNESCO and press freedom organizations in order to make it clear that Bangladesh is committed to reform. Not only would



such involvement introduce technical expertise, it would facilitate restoring the tarnished reputation of Bangladesh as the state dedicated to free expression and democratic responsibility.

Combined, these reforms offer a middle ground on which to proceed, maintaining accountability yet not continuing the cycle of political retaliation.

7. Conclusion

A pressing problem confronting Bangladesh is how to deal with propagandist journalism: how to hold someone accountable and how to avoid the accusations of politically canceling anyone. The history of partisan media under the Awami League regime has undermined the trust of people, and has polarized the population, and it is imperative that a new system be put up which is transparent, fair and has a rights-based foundation. The country can improve the level of disinformation within code-switching without impairing the freedom of the press by adopting a tiered legal framework, enhancing independent control with a Media Accountability Tribunal and encouraging civil remedies and ethical regulation. Anthropomorphic activities will support a culture of responsible journalism by complementing these efforts with media literacy programs and fact-checking activities as well as international involvement. Such reforms will not only safeguard democratic institutions in the long term, but will benefit Bangladesh internationally by showing a desire to fulfill human rights, rule of law, and good governance.



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