

Chapter 9

Political Economy of the Relationship Between Crony Capitalism and the Private Television Channel Boom in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh noticed a boom of private television channels in 2001 when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government gave 10 private TV licenses to its cronies, brushing aside all rules and regulations. Private TV owners are present or former members of Parliaments (MPs), ministers, and the ruling party's leaders and cronies. They were imprisoned with heavy corruption charges during the period of the army-backed caretaker government. Then, Sheikh Hasina committed to bringing private television channels under strict rules and regulations. The Bangladesh Awami League (AL) formed the government in 2009 under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina and started to give private TV channel licenses to its cronies. The private TV boom is very much political and an easy way to convert the black money of the country's crony capitalists into white. This chapter concentrates on the very symbiotic relationship between crony capitalism and the private TV boom in Bangladesh and its critical political economy.

INTRODUCTION

Private television channels in Bangladesh have become one of the strong political tools for all ruling parties (both the past ruling party and present one) in today's Bangladesh since 2001. Political media hegemony of the ruling party is vividly noticed in the private television sector in Bangladesh society. After the fall of General H. M. Ershad's nine-year autocratic regime through people's upsurge in December 1990 democracy was restored in the country. A boom was noticed in the print media sector in the 1990s.

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It was a new trend in the country's media sector. Different business groups brought out at least a daily newspaper apart from other business outlets. Business people began to think of media business largely because of their political greed and interest as well. Sheikh Hasina permitted private television channels during her first regime from 1996 to 2001. Hasina government allowed three private TV channels ATN Bangla, Channel-I and ETV—in 1997, 1999 and 2000, respectively. That was the beginning of private television chapter in the country's media history.

The four-party alliance government led by BNP behaved in an undemocratic and anarchic way in giving licenses to private television operators from 2001 to 2006. No rules and regulations were followed at all. The only criterion was to get a private television license is to be Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) MP or minister or their party men or relatives or somehow related to the BNP politics. Ten private satellite television channel licenses were given to all the front rank BNP leaders and their party men (Khan, 2007). More interesting is that when Bangladesh Awami League (AL) along with its 14 parties grand alliance came to power with a landslide victory having the two-third majority in the parliament in 2008 it repeated the same political formula in giving private television licenses to another 12 operators, all their party men or cronies. The private television channels in Bangladesh are wrapped up with the ruling party's power and political tricks. Whoever comes to power gives licenses to its party colleagues invading all rules and regulations. The ruling party thinks that in this way they can manufacture people's consent and earn support in favor of their politics and rule.

At present, there are 30 private satellite TV channels in Bangladesh. All these channels are owned by the country's well-known businessmen and political figures. Most of their political inclination is towards the two big political parties –Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Most of the owners are present and former ministers and members of parliament (MPs) of both parties. If not they are somehow attached to the two political parties. There is a direct and strong relationship between the ruling party's power practice and private televisions in the country. The owners are the political and business elites of the dominant class in society. The discourse of these private television channels is highly pro-market and free economy and city-centric. All these channels are operating within the frame of corporate journalism. (Haider, 2007; Haq, 2011a, 2011b; Rahman, 2009; Rahman, 2012).

The common people depend on the private satellite television channels for news and entertainment programs rather than state control terrestrial channel Bangladesh Television (BTV). It is an open secret that BTV always acts as the mouthpiece of the government. There is no place for the opposition voices. The availability of international and local satellite channels and their diversified programs have reduced the number of viewers of the state-run BTV from 98 per cent to 83 percent in the last five years (Hasan, 2010). All these private channels have crossed the Bangladesh territories in their transmission. They transmit their programs to most of the countries abroad where Bangladeshi communities and diasporas live in (Khan, 2007). As Khan continues:

As for the commercial television channels, they are owned and run by big business magnates, powerful political elites and influential media barons within the corporate structure of private limited companies incorporated under the Bangladesh Companies Act 1994. The articles of private companies limit the number of their members to 50, the minimum being two; restrict the free transfer of shares; prohibit any invitation to the public to subscribe for their shares, and prevent their shares from being quoted on the stock exchanges operating in the country. As most of these television companies are owned by single majority stakeholders or controlling interest holders, their management style tends to be highly individualistic (Khan, 2007, p. 128).

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