

Ben Steward, speech to ACPAB conference, 24 June 2016

Freedom to Publish in Bangladesh

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,

I'm honoured to have been asked to address you today. Thank you for this chance to discuss an extremely important matter before such a **relevant** and **personally invested** audience.

Before I get started, I'm sure you have no idea who I am.

I'm British, 40 years old and a former newspaper and television journalist.

Ever since I can remember, I have believed that freedom of expression is sacrosanct.

Today, I'm in charge of **communications and the freedom to publish** programme of the International Publishers Association — **the IPA**.

Founded in 1896, and based in Geneva, Switzerland, the IPA today represents more than 60 associations in 50-plus countries — including the **Academic and Creative Publishers Association of Bangladesh** — on all aspects of book and journal publishing.

Our **mission** is to **promote** and **protect** publishing, and to **communicate** its power to drive economic, cultural and social progress.

We're an industry association that **defends copyright** and **encourages literacy** around the world.

But the IPA also has an important **human rights mandate**.

Voltaire's supposed creed — *'I do not agree with what you say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it'* — neatly encapsulates the IPA's work in this area.

We fight against censorship globally and we consistently support agendas linked to **freedom to publish**, which we uphold as a fundamental aspect of the human right to freedom of expression, as defined under Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Our **position** is an ideological one, yet it also has very real **economic** and **developmental** dimensions.

For there's a wealth of evidence to show that the most prosperous and stable economies are those that **don't obstruct** freedom of expression and freedom to publish.

These freedoms are **essential** if societies are to fully nurture, develop and reap the benefits of **human creativity**.

The IPA is not alone in its endeavours: we're a member of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) and have longstanding collaborative relationships with the global PEN network, Amnesty International, the International Federation of Journalists and many other likeminded organizations.

In fact, we recently joined forces with 15 NGOs that are equally worried about Bangladesh — including PEN Bangladesh, PEN International and Reporters Without Borders — to urge the United Nations to concentrate more effort here.

The UN Human Rights Council — of which Bangladesh is a member — is currently meeting in Geneva for its 32nd sitting, which includes discussion of a statement that we have jointly submitted.

That text asks the Human Rights Council to press the government of Bangladesh to take **urgent, concrete** steps to address the worsening conditions that are **strangling** freedom of expression in this country.

I'll happily send you a copy of that statement afterwards if you ask me.

So that's us.

Now, I couldn't address a freedom to publish conference in Bangladesh without talking about the violence.

The world has watched with growing alarm at the wave of ferocious, hate-filled attacks on Bangladeshi publishers, writers, bloggers, academics and intellectuals.

What we're seeing is clearly a deliberate, organized attempt to spread terror and silence dissenters.

The government should be unequivocal about that, and urgently reassess its approach to demonstrate that rule of law is paramount.

In recent years, there has been a rapid, general decline in respect for freedom of expression and, particularly, freedom to publish in Bangladesh.

Urgent action is needed to reverse this downward spiral and create a Bangladesh where political and religious views can be discussed in safety, and where civil society is empowered to fulfil its vital function of **holding government to account**.

I'd like to read out a message from one of your compatriots, Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury of Shuddhashar publishing house, whom we all know as **Tutul**, and who was forced to flee Bangladesh last year after being viciously attacked here in Dhaka.

He asked me to deliver this message to you:

"Greetings to the delegates of this important conference, and greetings to my publisher friends. I want to thank ACPAB for organizing a debate on freedom to publish at this urgent time.

If Jagriti Faysal Arefin Dipan were alive today, he would play an important role in this conference. But because he published free-thinking books, Islamist fundamentalists killed him. I hope that ACPAB will ensure that Dipan is not forgotten.

Through ACPAB, I urge all my publisher friends to continue to publish the works of free thinkers.

I believe this is the best reply to the fundamentalists. By increasing the number of people that free-thinking books can reach, we'll be able to weaken fundamentalism in Bangladesh.

Another writer and publisher, Shamsuzzoha Manik is in jail today merely for doing his job. I call upon ACPAB to take whatever steps are possible to secure Shamsuzzoha Manik's release.

Bangladesh. My beloved Bangladesh. How I miss Bangladesh and my book-related life and work there.

I hope the day will come when Bangladeshi writers can live and write in safety, and publishers can publish books free from fear. Thank you."

Now, in addition to the well-documented attacks on intellectuals, the IPA is alarmed by certain provisions contained in Bangladesh's proposed **Draft Education Act 2016**.

This would-be law tables many commendable changes to education, such as the introduction of pre-primary education in all government primary schools, abolition of class one entrance exams, and penalties for corporal punishment.

But it also includes a provision that publishing of unapproved "note and guide books" be a **criminal offence** punishable by up to six months in jail, or a 200,000 taka fine, or even both.

Not only that, but this law would make the **National Curriculum and Textbook Board** a total state publishing monopoly for ALL academic books. In our opinion, this can only be a **bad thing**.

Ladies and gentlemen, to make publishing educational materials a criminal offence is not only **unconscionable**, it is a counterproductive way to address the issue of quality of educational materials.

ACPAB has said that, if enacted, this law will drive down educational performance, decimate the country's libraries — denying millions of people access to books, and wipe out 125,000 book industry jobs.

It would also isolate the Bangladeshi school system from innovative educational resources being developed around the world.

So, while the law's intended purpose is to **increase classroom efficiency**, it actually risks doing the very opposite, and wreaking havoc — not only on the **publishing sector**, but on the **education system, employment** and the **future** of the Bangladeshi economy.

The IPA firmly believes that **education is a strategic resource**, and that a **healthy** educational publishing industry is a vital asset to any democratic society, and an essential element of a competitive knowledge-based economy.

In February of this year, the IPA president, Richard Charikin, spoke at the Ekushey Book Fair before the Bangladeshi Prime Minister and government ministers.

He said that a publishing industry only prospers — quote — "when it is free to compete and invest to ensure the highest quality books, particularly in the educational sector". I would like to echo that sentiment here.

We have seen repeatedly that where educational authorities try to build their own controlling publishing operations — examples being Hungary, Georgia and South Africa — it invariably courts disaster.

Standards and quality fall; teacher satisfaction plummets, student results suffer, and there is a seriously harmful long-term effect on the local economy.

Our recommendation is that, at the very least, this draft act be comprehensively revised to ensure that:

1. These 'note and guide books' are redefined, and their publication and use is unrestricted.
2. **Private** publishers be allowed to publish all kinds of creative exercise-oriented books for pre-primary, primary, secondary and higher secondary levels.
3. A national monitoring system is set up to guarantee standards of privately published creative exercise-oriented books

We believe these modifications will enable the Draft Education Act 2016 to achieve its stated goals, and give Bangladeshi schoolchildren an honest chance of realising their true potential in a global economy where a high-quality education is one of the few proven ways of avoiding poverty.

Thank you.