

## **Govt keeps private broadcast media in grip, same as BTV, Betar**

**Staff Correspondent**

The government, the main obstacle to providing autonomy to the state-owned broadcasting media, is also keeping the private electronic media in its grip through a non-transparent licensing process, a workshop was told on Tuesday.

There, a leading opposition leader questioned the sources of funding of some private television channels, saying that rampant corruption led to the proliferation of electronic media channels that might be used as propaganda tools in the run-up to the upcoming general elections.

'We have to keep a very close watch on the roles of these electronic media outlets [in the election process],' Saber Hossain Chowdhury, political secretary to the Awami League president, told the workshop on 'Diversification of Broadcast Media in Bangladesh: Development Implications' organised by the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute at its conference room in the city.

In their dissenting views, ruling party lawmaker Naser Rahman and former secretary M Asafuddowlah said to promote a free media the authorities should liberalise the licensing process without considering the source of funding, since agencies are there to deal with the corruption issue.

Asafuddowlah, who once headed a commission on media during the previous AL regime, blamed the then state minister for information, Abu Sayeed, for obstructing a move to make the state-run Bangladesh Television and Bangladesh Betar autonomous.

'What is the need and relevance of having an information ministry?' he asked, quipping, 'The ruling party people just love to hear their own voices and watch their own faces on TV screen.'

The chief guest of the workshop, the information minister, M Shamsul Islam, was present at its opening session but not during the detailed deliberations by the participants, who commonly emphasised the need for formation of an independent commission to regulate the broadcast media.

Censorship is inherent in the state as well as the media in Bangladesh borrowed from the West through the colonial rule, opined Imtiaz Ahmed, a professor of international relations at the Dhaka University. In this context, he referred to the 'utterly biased role' of the BBC and the CNN during the Iraq war.

A stalwart of the advertising industry, Ali Zaker, said because of the censorship the Bangladesh Television failed to make any significant impact on people's life, while his colleague Ramendu Majumder, also a member of the Asafuddowlah commission, remarked that no government would like to give autonomy to the national electronic media.

Golam Rahman, a professor of mass communications and journalism at the Dhaka University, underlined the need for de-centralising radio and the importance of public service broadcasting to reduce the 'digital divide' created by the urban-centric satellite television channels.

In the keynote, Shahab Enam Khan, a lecturer in international relations at the Jahangirnagar University, recommended issuance of terrestrial broadcasting licences to private-sector electronic media channels having considerably wide coverage.