

Surrender of the fourth estate?



STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING
Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN, ndc, psc (Retd)

THE media has been looked at both with derision and awe for its capacity to influence the public mind and hold the authority to account. It has also been accused of "misinforming" the public and overplaying its role. But by and large, its importance in shaping the course of events and keeping the government in check, particularly when democratic institutions have been rendered impotent and condemned to the state of obsolescence by an authoritarian regime, has been acknowledged by most critics and scholars. It is for good reason that the press (there was only the print media then) was daubed with the appellation of the "fourth estate", although there are differences of opinion as to whether it was Edmund Burke who first referred to the press as the fourth estate. But Burke made the reference in more of an apprehensive rather than a deferential tone as he is reported to have said, from the floors of the Palace of Westminster, according to Carlyle, looking at the press gallery, "there were Three Estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than they all." The occasion is worth noting too. It was the day that reporting of the proceedings of the House of Commons was allowed for the first time. In other words, he ascribed the same degree (if not more) of importance to the newsmen as had been accorded to the other three "Estates of the Realm," i.e. the Sovereign, the Lords and the Commons. Since then, the term "fourth estate" has become a metaphor for the power of the media. The term has also come to imply the separation and importance of a part of the

society that represents public interest and holds the government and the political party, which the people have chosen by free will to run their affairs, to account if the policies of the government run contrary to the interest of the public. That is why the American characterisation of the media being the fourth organ of the state does not sit well with those who want to assert the separation of the two. The media plays a very important

being loyal to public interest, more often than not, is seen as being an adversary to the powers that be. Thus, the constant effort by the establishment to suppress the media, sometimes openly and sometimes veiled behind the excuse of national security and national interest, as if national security transcends public security and public interest. Regrettably, journalists are the most endangered species in the world today. But

constitution as much consecrated as the scripture, is unthinkable. The American media is noted for bringing to public notice many of the policies that were against public interest in the recent past and forcing the administration to re-address the issues. But in the US too, for example, the *New York Times* had resisted presidential pressure to suppress the news of the impending invasion of Cuba and to put the interest of the country foremost because the government considered not letting the public on, on the Kennedy plan, would endanger the interest of the US much more than if the news was kept secret. But in the US too, the powerful media had succumbed to the government from time to time, for example in selling the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld triumvirate's fake stories of Iraq's nuclear capability and fuelling the Iraq War. The consequences of a pliant media are being suffered by the countries of the region particularly, and the world at large. Contrast this with the role of the US media and its coverage of the Vietnam War. The conclusion of that war was hastened by the true representation of the war and the developments in the battlefield by a ubiquitous media—not embedded though—which presented the people of America with the actual situation on the ground.

closure of some outlets or subjected to litigations by the billionaire businessmen of the ruling party, a feature not new to us either. While in some countries the media has resisted such attempts successfully, in some, journalists have fallen in line with the government. While we have seen everything that could be done to curb media freedom in Bangladesh—from the ICT Act to the Digital Security Act and the proposed Broadcast Act, and a few dissenting voices muted through various means—a large section of the media in the country has chosen discretion as the better part of valour and become, literally, an integral part, an appendage, of the powers that be. While no one is apolitical, and newspaper around the world have been known to express support for particular political parties or presidential candidates, what forebodes a dangerous future for the media in Bangladesh is a situation where journalists engage in open politicking for political parties. Our journalist community, like the rest of the nation, is also divided, but one was not prepared to see them canvassing in public. The purpose of separating the different branches of the state is to exercise checks and balances, without which no democracy can thrive, let alone become robust. And the media as the "fourth estate" plays the watchdog role over all others. But when the separation is forcefully breached and the difference diluted, they are subsumed within each other, and the concoction of disparate "chemicals" becomes a dangerous mix, with impermissible outcomes. When journalists become a part of the establishment, one that they are supposed to hold to account for its actions and inactions, they forfeit their moral authority to play that role, and, instead of being a "watchdog" for the people, they become a "lapdog".



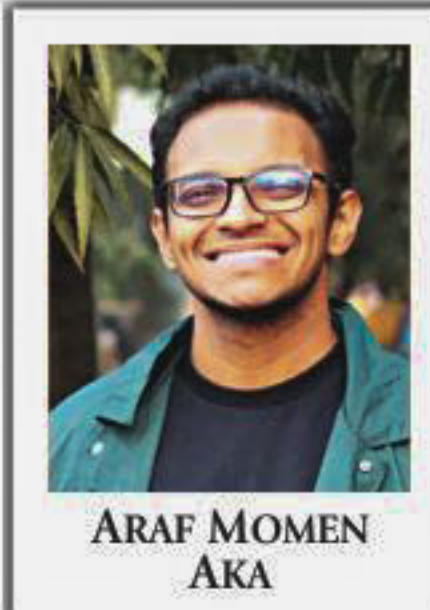
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role—that of a watchdog over the institutions of power, pundits assert, be they political, economic, social or military, while performing its duty of informing the people of what the government and the various agencies under it are doing. It is the conduit between the government and the people, not above accountability though, but the primary loyalty lies with the people they serve. And that, unfortunately, is where the complexity of the situation emerges, because,

that in no sense should suggest that it has been able to acquit itself in all circumstances as the voice of the people. In some countries, a robust independent media has succumbed to the pressure and direct and indirect coercion of the state from time to time. In recent times, the media has come to be described as the "enemy of the people" by the US president (although he is not the first to describe the media as such). This, in a country that holds the First Amendment to its

As Modi faces a weakened economy at home and increased communal tension across the country, the prime minister and his party moved to hijack the country's historically free press. The government has not created an official state-run news service, but instead relies on independent news organisations to peddle its economic narrative, chastise a Muslim minority, and prey on Hindu anxieties in the country." The media is coerced sometimes by temporary

Of mortality and unlearned lessons



ARAF MOMEN AKA

IF you Google "Tragedies in Bangladesh," you will see a multitude of news articles popping up about disastrous mishaps where factories have collapsed, burned, or had a major industrial machinery explode, and claimed the lives of tens to hundreds to thousands of workers and passers-by who were unfortunate enough to be around the area of disaster. And many of these are just the ones in Dhaka city. Including the recent chemical warehouse disaster in Chawkbazar on February 20, there are many disasters that we can recall like the deadly collapse of Rana Plaza in Savar (2013), Nimtoli fire that began with the explosion of an electrical transformer (2010), Tazreen Fashion factory fire in Ashulia (2012), a fire in a factory that made clothes for Gap (2010), Korail slum fire in Mohakhali (2018), and so on. Articles have been penned on other such disasters which have not named many incidents because either the death toll was not high enough, or the disaster was not associated with a well-known company—with titles such as "Boiler Explosion" or "Packaging Factory Fire". Let's not forget that there are numerous unrecorded fire incidents in the slums of Dhaka city.



Aftermath of the deadly Chawkbazar fire in Old Dhaka.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Since the Chawkbazar incident is just a few days old, let's talk about this latest disaster in greater detail, without delving into the gruesome aspects. It is claimed that the fire started due to the explosion of a gas cylinder in a vehicle. The fire from the gas cylinder was easily allowed to spread into a nearby chemical factory, and the fire later transformed into a deadly blaze, engulfing other buildings including a community centre nearby. It should be made clear though that there remains some confusion regarding the presence of a CNG cylinder as some witnesses have claimed that the pick-up's CNG cylinder sparked the fire while others have claimed that an LPG cylinder at a restaurant near Hazi Wahed Mansion triggered the fire. The chief inspector at the Department of Explosives

told this daily that they had not found any sign of a cylinder blast. For the sake of argument, let's say that the so-called CNG cylinder was indeed responsible for sparking the fire. And the reason I said that the fire was "allowed" to spread is because in this case the fire from the CNG cylinder outside the building easily reached the flammable chemicals of a warehouse—and this is a tragedy in itself. The worst part is that this is not the only major fire incident to have happened in Old Dhaka. The last major fire-related incident occurred in 2010. Nine years is plenty of time for authorities to at least start implementing some initiatives and enforce better urban

planning. Isn't it? But we didn't see any of that. At least 123 people died in the previous fire incident in 2010, and at least 67 people have reportedly been killed in the recent fire in Old Dhaka. Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Sayeed Khokon has also been reported to have said that no chemical warehouses will be allowed inside Dhaka. This might cause increased transportation costs for businesses concerned. Instead of banning them completely from Dhaka, why not include regulatory laws that delineate how and where the chemicals should be stored, how flammable chemicals should be handled, etc.? Banning them outright from the city is not realistic either. This is like the idiom where you chop off the head to cure a headache. Banishment is not the answer in this case. The only tragedy that I can think of that brought some major and visible changes to planning and regulation of (garment) factories is the Rana Plaza incident back in 2013. And that's only because it brought international criticism and boycotts of Bangladeshi garments from around the world. The steep death toll of at least 1,134 and haunting images of the incident shook the world. It was only after the deaths of so many workers that people began raising their voices against exploitation of garment workers and flagrant violation of laws in the industry.

But why is it that only after lives are lost, we starting thinking about the need to do better with our urban planning, construction and safety standards? We can point fingers at many and shift the entire blame on to them. The factories can be blamed for not complying with safety standards and for trying to keep labour costs as minimal as possible; foreign buyers can be blamed for paying dismally low prices for industrially produced export materials making factories unable to "afford" safety regulations and better working standards for workers; government agencies can be blamed for not being strict about enforcement of safety standards, and for not trying hard enough to improve living standards of people in slum areas or to give incentives to factory owners so that they can provide better remuneration and benefits to their workers; and even the ordinary citizen can be blamed for not raising their voice demanding change before so many lives were lost. However, pointing fingers and blaming one another will not get us anywhere. We call the disasters "tragedies", but in reality, in light of how the situations are handled, it seems that all we do is pay heed to the statistics of death tolls and disasters that continue to take place. The bigger the number of people killed in the disaster, the more we seem to "care". Apart from the times when tragedies strike, do we seem to care about what we need in this city? We need better urban planning, we need better equipment for our firefighters, and we need stricter enforcement of laws and regulations along with the assurance that those laws cannot be misused against the innocent. Condolences mean nothing to the dead, and compensations will not bring the lost souls back. Do we have to wait for another disaster of the scale of Rana Plaza until any of our needs are met? Will we ever learn? Can we at least bring down the number and frequency of man-made casualties due to shoddy architecture and urban planning, poor handling of flammable materials and industrial products, and usage of old and/or faulty industrial machinery? Araf Momen Aka is an undergraduate student of Jahangirnagar University and a contributor to SHOUT, The Daily Star. Email: akaaraf@hotmail.com

A WORD A DAY
SOCKDOLAGER
NOUN
Something that settles a matter; a decisive blow or answer; finisher.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH
ACROSS: 1 Pass over, 5 Camera feature, 10 Dance in a line, 12 Cost, 13 Provinces, 14 Wrath, 15 Workout unit, 16 Frisk, 18 Fight result, 20 Tell tales, 21 God of war, 23 In addition, 24 Green fruit, 26 Distinct flavour, 28 Paint buy, 29 "Nuts!", 31 "-- longa, vita, brevis", 32 Long sticker, 36 Seedy building, 39 Brouhaha, 40 Love, in Lombardy, 41 Quartet doubled, 43 Ready for bed, 44 Sleep disturber, 45 Looks for, 46 Chef's collection, 8 In a worried state, 9 Like Pan, 11 Had hopes, 17 Mimic, 19 Hurried flight, 22 Attach, as a scuba tank, 24 Wyoming city, 25 Yet to come, 27 Picnic guest, 28 Jewelry units, 30 "Caught you!", 33 Cookout site, 34 That is: Latin, 35 Lecturer's aid, 37 Arduous journey, 38 Cincinnati team, 42 Force member

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER
A B R A D E L S P I N
L I O N E L T A C O
P O N I E S U S E D
T R A M P S
A L F A C O P E D
B E A M I C R O B E
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E N S U E A S K S
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W A F T A B I D E S
E P E E R E L I D E N T
B E S S S T E A D Y

BEETLE BAILEY
THAT SHARK FLOAT SURE LOOKS SCARY. SURE DOES!
B-10

by Mort Walker
BUT BE SURE TO STAY AWAY FROM THAT ONE!

BABY BLUES
OKAY, WHICH ONE OF YOU LEFT MY POWER DRILL IN THE YARD?
I PLEAD THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT.

by Kirkman & Scott
YOU MEAN THE FIFTH AMENDMENT. NO, HE'S AFRAID YOU MIGHT KILL HIM.

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.