

End the legacy of banking plunder

New data reveals how far the rot of bad loans reached under Awami regime

It is quite telling that defaulted loans in the banking sector reached a record Tk 3,45,756 crore by the end of 2024, as per the latest data from Bangladesh Bank. A major factor behind this rise is the long-overdue exposure of financial corruption and cover-ups under the former regime. For years, as non-performing loans (NPLs) continued to rise, we repeatedly pointed out how the Awami League government was using various state and non-state entities to obscure the true extent of NPLs through accounting manipulation. Financial fraud was concealed through deceptive tactics, and the lack of transparency made it difficult to assess the true condition of our banks, even though the public had long suspected the severity of the crisis.

The interim authorities deserve credit for bringing the truth to light. However, this may have been the easier part. The real challenge lies in reversing this trend and recovering as much of the lost money as possible, whether through selling collateral or other means. The situation has been particularly complicated by the massive defaults of some borrowers, such as S Alam Group and Beximco Group, following Awami League's departure. As a result, total defaulted loans have reached an unprecedented level. According to the central bank, the defaulted loan ratio for state-run banks stood at 42.83 percent, while that of private sector banks was 15.60 percent.

Among state banks, Janata had the highest volume of bad loans at the end of last year, with as much as 66.8 percent of its total outstanding loans classified as non-performing. Of Janata's Tk 67,300 crore in defaulted loans, approximately Tk 23,000 crore belongs to Beximco, which was classified as defaulted in the last quarter of 2024. Meanwhile, S Alam Group's defaulted loans at Janata Bank reached Tk 10,200 crore.

Across the sector, similar looting by oligarchs connected to the fallen regime has left a number of banks extremely vulnerable. Even more concerning is the risk that legitimate businesses, struggling as they are in a slow economy, may find it difficult to repay their loans, further worsening the NPL crisis. Under these circumstances, it is crucial for the authorities to send the right signals to help restore confidence in the sector.

The authorities must work diligently to ensure that banks recover risky loans and that stolen funds parked abroad are reclaimed through diplomatic efforts. They also must restore oversight mechanisms and regulatory institutions that have become dysfunctional, ensuring they serve the interests of the nation rather than political elites. They also must hold to account those responsible for the crisis—including corrupt bankers, policymakers, and borrowers—so that such reckless mismanagement is not repeated again.

Refrain from student politics of old

Chaotic launch of a student body harks back to toxic politics of past

Given the July uprising's promise of a new political landscape free from toxic and self-serving partisanship, students' involvement in politics or any other organised activity has since attracted great interest. On Wednesday, we saw the launching of a new student organisation—Bangladesh Gonotantrik Chhatra Sangsad (BGCS)—led by some former leaders of the Students Against Discrimination (SAD) platform that coordinated the uprising. This was expected to be a step towards that lofty vision. However, we were greatly disappointed to see skirmishes erupting between BGCS supporters and a group of private university students during the launching event.

According to a report in this daily, private university students were protesting their "exclusion" from the central committee of BGCS, demanding its dissolution. This led to scuffles that left several injured, including female students, with at least two hospitalised. Later, the private university students blocked the Bangla Motor intersection for an hour protesting the "attack" by supporters of the BGCS.

The names of six of BGCS's central committee—including chief organiser, convener, member secretary, and spokesperson—that were initially announced had no private university representation. However, on Thursday, at a press conference, the BGCS announced a full 200-member committee that included students from both private and public universities, madrasas, colleges under the National University, and so on. This raises questions about whether Wednesday's clash was a misunderstanding or a symptom of deeper tensions. Whatever may be the reason, such incidents bear disturbing similarities to the violent, power-hungry politics that plagued our university campuses for decades—precisely what the uprising sought to move beyond, among other authoritarian tendencies and practices.

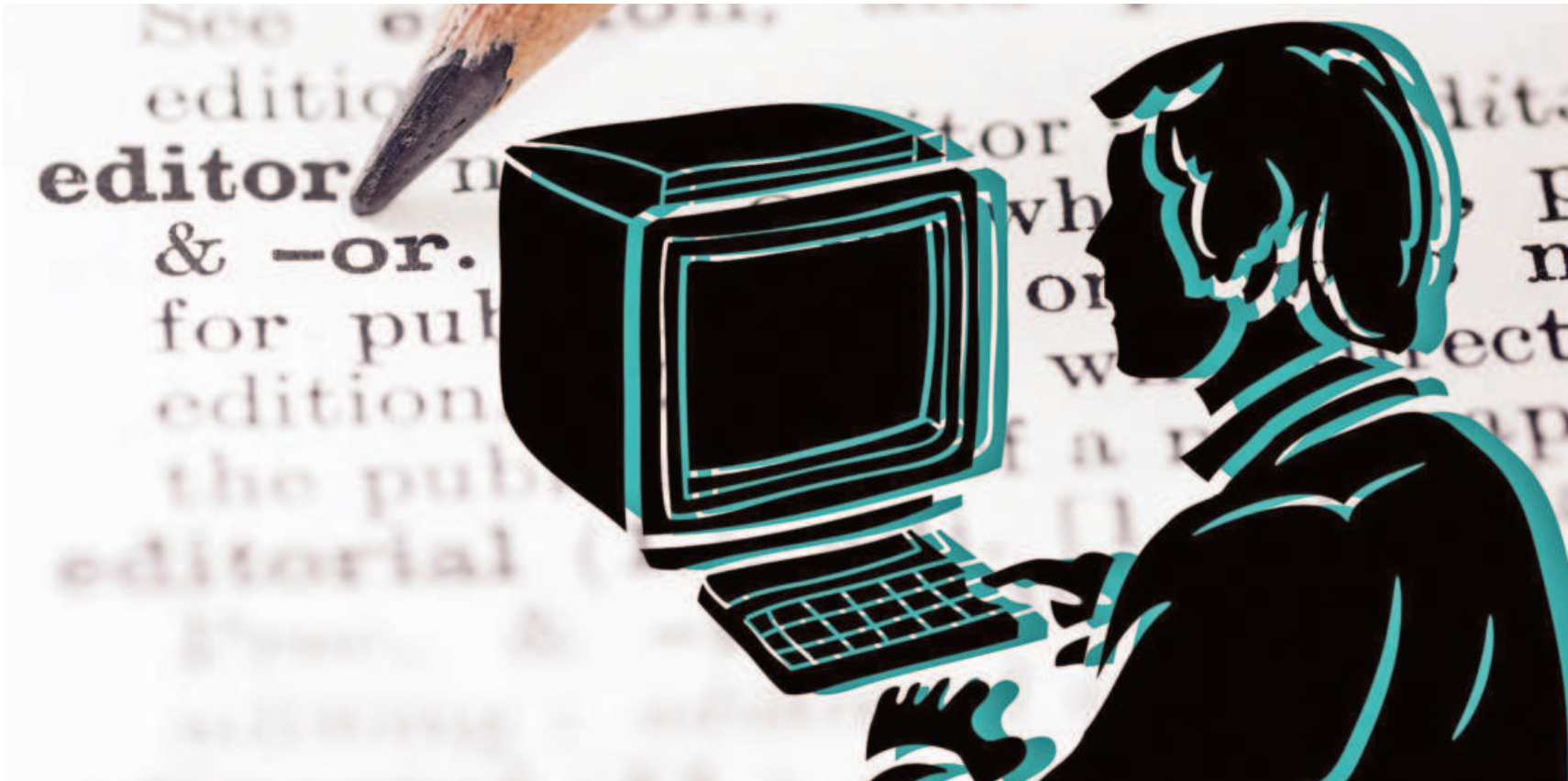
Wednesday's incident thus goes against the values and ideals students were expected to represent. We urge the leaders of the new student organisation, and all pre-existing student bodies, to distance themselves from the divisive politics of the past, unequivocally reject any sort of violence, and ensure that such incidents do not recur. If they are to embody the values of the uprising, they must prove that student politics can be democratic, inclusive, and free of factionalism.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

'228 Incident' in Taipei



A day after a vendor was assaulted by a government agent in Taipei, protests against the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) spread across Taiwan. Known as the 228 Incident, the uprising was violently suppressed, resulting in thousands dead and decades of martial law.



VISUAL: SIFAT AFRIN SHAMS

Editors, don't become PROs of proprietors

How some editors are destroying the editorial institution



THE THIRD VIEW
Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

Having been a journalist since 1972 and an editor-publisher since 1993, it saddens me deeply to see some editors, instead of embellishing, strengthening, and bringing more honour and dignity to their position, are doing the exact opposite: bringing shame, disrepute, and indignity by acting as public relations officers (PROs) of their owners.

Editorship is, no doubt, a job. However, far more importantly, it is a position of public trust. It is on that trust that the credibility of a particular media outlet depends, which, at the end of the day, determines its success. An editor must adhere to the fundamental ethics of journalism: truth, objectivity, honesty, and a complete absence of bias. Every story must be fact-based, verified by multiple sources, and the person or the institution being written about be given a chance to respond. Yes, proprietors may, and can and sometimes do, have an agenda of their own, but it is the editor's duty to protect his/her institution from gross misuse.

A prerequisite of being an editor—qualities far more important than his/her ability to write, edit, direct, lead, brief reporters, have a nose for stories, etc—is to have sufficient self-respect, personal courage, and dignity to never to allow the media under his control to be used to spread lies and hatred, defame, and falsely malign. When a proprietor forces an editor to publish something, the latter must ensure two things: one, that it is fact-based; and, two, that the other side is given a chance to respond. If all his/her efforts fail, he/she should resign and go public to show how he/she tried to save journalism from being exploited. That is how the editorial institution is built and the public respect for it grows.

It is not uncommon for proprietors and editors to have political leanings. But that should be in the opinion section and should never cloud reporting, which should only be fact-based and adhere to the fundamental ethics of journalism.

A proprietor can own anything permitted by law. But there is a difference between owning a shoe factory and a pharmaceutical company. As the owner of the former, he/she can experiment with practically anything: design, colour, material, shape, etc. But in the case of the latter, the owner must totally and completely submit to the professional management and allow complete freedom to operate the factory according to all scientific specifications. Can an owner tell a doctor how to treat a patient or which medicine to prescribe for which malady? Similarly, the media must be run by professional journalists. An owner must allow total independence of the professionals, led by the editor, to run a media establishment in an unbiased and fact-based manner.

The purpose of this column is to raise the issue of owner-driven journalism versus professional journalism, a PRO-editorship versus professional editorship.

Let us remember with pride that only two professions are given protection in any democratic country's constitution: the judiciary and mass media. Why? Because experience has shown that an independent judiciary acts as a pillar of democracy, and free media serves the essential purpose of assuring accountability and transparency of the governance process.

What I write below—without mentioning the names of either the newspapers or their editors—is not aimed at shaming journalists or fellow editors, but at raising the issue of how we are destroying the editorial institution and thereby bringing disrepute and ignominy to our highly esteemed profession.

Today, I appeal again to all journalists, and especially to fellow editors, to move away from all our past prejudice, hatred, biases, and tendency to make fatal compromises and, alongside rebuilding Bangladesh in the post-July-August 2024 era, also rebuild journalism with renewed pledge to our journalistic ethos and commitment to democracy, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and public service.

On February 23, three newspapers—two Bangla and one English—published the same report, with the same headline, "Prothom Alo, Daily Star: The 'masterminds' behind plot to eliminate Begum Zia from politics," referring to the events that occurred in 2007–18 years ago. What sort of journalism is it when the same text—word for word—is published in multiple newspapers, each claiming it to be written by their own "special correspondent"? What does it say about the "editor's" authority in deciding on content? Where does such content originate from, what is the process of its verification, and what leads editors to carry such content without any explanation to its readers? This is when editors relinquish their authority and become PROs of their media owners.

The story line is: *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star* masterminded the

ouster of Khaleda Zia from politics. The reports begin like this, "In 2007, a blueprint was devised to destroy democracy in Bangladesh and depoliticise the country. One of the key architects of the blueprint was the Prothom Alo and The Daily Star group. The two newspapers not only played (a) key role in formulating the plan but also engaged in relentless smear campaigns

Recently, I came across a term in Bangla—'shikari sangbadikota' ('target journalism'), meaning journalism designed to target an individual, institution, personality, editor, or newspaper without proof. The purpose is to denigrate, malign or discredit someone. Just as one hires an assassin to kill someone, one hires 'shikari sangbadik' to assassinate the character of a person of high repute or a newspaper of high standing.

to eliminate BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia from politics."

The origin of the story is a press conference held by Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, the then secretary general of BNP, which was covered by all newspapers and TV stations at the time. We were able to gather the following few: "Khaleda Zia baad" by *Ittefaq*; "Khaleda Zia out" by *Sangbad*; "BNP's reform initiative keeping Khaleda Zia out" (translated) by *Inquilab*; "Proposal to reduce the power of BNP chairperson" (translated) by *Naya Diganta*; "BNP reform plan shows door to Khaleda" by *The Bangladesh Observer*; and "BNP's reform proposals" (translated) by *Janakantha*. The reports of the three newspapers singled us out and did not mention that all others newspapers published the same story. We had similar heading and content as the others.

What is striking is that this very line of propaganda was followed by the fallen regime, which is now being repeated by these three papers. *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*—because we spoke truth to power—were accused by Sheikh Hasina and Awami League ministers and party leaders that we were behind the 1/11 army-backed caretaker government—again without submitting an iota of proof. For 15 years, Hasina and her party held unquestioned power. They must have investigated us as thoroughly as can be imagined. They found no proof. That is why, in spite of lodging 84 cases against this writer—16 of which were for sedition—they did not follow through.

On what basis, using what proof did the three newspapers' journalists write this common copy, and why did three separate editors allow this story to be printed? What fact-checking did they do? What sort of authentic—

as against biased—investigation did they undertake? And how could the editors violate the most basic norm of journalism, and not give the subjects of the report any chance to respond?

Among many reforms that Bangladeshi newspapers must undertake—and we are looking forward to the report of the Media Reform Commission—an important one is to move away from "owner-driven journalism" to "editor-driven journalism."

The three newspapers in question have published false, twisted, distorted reports against us many times before, similarly without evidence. On April 21, 2011, the Bangladesh Press Council passed a stern judgement against one of the said newspapers on its reporting against Matiur Rahman, editor of *Prothom Alo*, saying that "... reporting constituted yellow journalism which is a violation of newspaper ethics." A similar judgement was passed against the other Bangla newspaper on May 12, 2011 on another report against the *Prothom Alo* editor, saying "... the report was false, fictitious and was an example of yellow journalism." On both occasions, the editors and publisher of those newspapers were reprimanded. Similar condemnatory judgements was passed by the press council and delivered against all three newspapers on May 22-24, 2013, who were accused of publishing false, fictitious, derogatory, and unsubstantiated news against *Prothom Alo* and its editor.

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I appealed to journalists in a piece I wrote on April 7, 2023, titled "Only journalists can protect journalism." This was in response to a vicious, Goebbels-style campaign, conducted by a private TV station against *Prothom Alo* about a photo of a child published with a quote from a day labourer as a photo card. The TV station accused *Prothom Alo* of "conspiring to destabilise our independence and make our Liberation War questionable." The *Prothom Alo* editor was sued under the infamous Digital Security Act (DSA) and his Savar correspondent was picked up, gangster-style, without a warrant. Sadly, other than the Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU), no other journalists' body or media organisation said a word.

Today, I appeal again to all journalists, and especially to fellow editors, to move away from all our past prejudice, hatred, biases, and tendency to make fatal compromises and, alongside rebuilding Bangladesh in the post July-August 2024 era, also rebuild journalism with renewed pledge to our journalistic ethos and commitment to democracy, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and public service.

Editors, please don't sacrifice your dignity and become PROs of the proprietors.