

Give teachers respect, financial security

Their role is crucial in shaping the nation's future

Reports published on the occasion of World Teachers' Day have, unsurprisingly, portrayed a woeful state that should not be unfamiliar to erudite observers in Bangladesh. The respect and financial security afforded to our teachers remain persistently inadequate. Even government policies related to education still fail to adequately recognise the vital role teachers play in driving learning, innovation, and the advancement of both society and the nation.

The situation is especially dire at the foundational level of primary education, where many teachers have been pushed into debt traps and are not being duly respected. Current salary levels in non-government primary schools are so low that they can no longer attract talent. For example, the basic salary of an assistant teacher starts at a mere Tk 11,000, while a trained head teacher receives Tk 12,500—far below what is required to sustain a family. Contrast these figures with a 2023 study by the non-governmental thinktank Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) that revealed that a family of four needed Tk 18,115 per month to cover food costs in 2022.

The impact of poor pay on national educational development has been depicted in detail in the white paper on the state of Bangladesh's economy, produced by a task force led by economist Debapriya Bhattacharya and submitted to Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus on December 1, 2024. Among other things, the paper noted that teachers continue to be underpaid compared with their counterparts in other Asian countries, thereby adversely affecting the quality of education and limiting their intellectual output.

According to globally accepted norms, as reflected in the 1966 ILO/UNESCO recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers, working conditions for teachers should be such that it best promotes effective learning and enables teachers to concentrate on their professional duties. Our lack of sincerity and insufficient attention to equipping teachers with proper training, academic freedom, and a decent salary are the reasons the teaching profession has become unattractive.

Beyond financial insecurity, teachers' dignity has been severely undermined by the intrusion of partisan politics into educational management. The capture of school and college managing committees by political forces has vitiated the academic environment and, in many cases, drawn teaching staff into partisan rivalries. This has also adversely affected the accountability process. The white paper noted that the culture of political criminalisation in educational institutions has far-reaching social effects, as these teachers will continue teaching for the next 30 years or so. Sadly, we have witnessed its consequences in the form of teachers being humiliated, forced to resign, and deprived of their livelihoods. According to the paper, more than 150 teachers were forced to resign following the July uprising.

We, therefore, must recognise teachers' importance in building the nation's future and improve both their financial security and societal dignity. While the interim government may have missed an opportunity to restore teachers' status meaningfully, there is still time to initiate a realistic plan. As the country prepares for the election phase, all parties vying for power should make quality education a priority and commit to far-reaching reforms to ensure a future that can keep pace with global advancements.

Regulate battery-run rickshaws

Proper steps needed to protect the interests of passengers, operators

It is true that battery-run rickshaws have provided a source of income to thousands from low-income groups; their operation also makes practical sense in an increasingly fast city. However, the unregulated way in which these vehicles operate comes at a heavy cost. Most drivers have no training in driving or traffic rules. Moreover, these rickety vehicles can, and often do, run at speeds of up to 30 km per hour, making them quite accident-prone.

Accidents involving battery-run rickshaws have therefore been on the rise, often resulting in injuries and even fatalities. According to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity, battery-powered rickshaws were involved in about 15 percent of the 315 road accidents in Dhaka during the Eid rush between March 24 and April 7. This pattern of road risk has often raised concerns, with a report in this paper citing urban planners who warn that without regulation these rickshaws may cripple Dhaka's transport network. Underlying their concern is the fact that drivers frequently ignore traffic signals and cross intersections at high speed, exacerbating congestion.

With no central registry or licensing system for those involved in this system in the country, the exact number of battery-powered rickshaws is unknown. But it is estimated that around five lakh vehicles operate in Dhaka city alone, far outnumbering paddle rickshaws. It is, therefore, heartening that the government has drafted a policy to regulate battery-powered rickshaws nationwide. The policy will reportedly prohibit these electric three-wheelers on highways and introduce mandatory registration, fitness certificates, and driving licences.

Moreover, if the government's pilot project using a Buet-designed model of the battery-run rickshaw turns out to be successful, it will make these vehicles structurally safer. The idea is to introduce the new models in selected areas of Dhaka, track illegal rickshaws there, and gradually replace traditional rickshaws with the safer new models in each zone. According to Dhaka North City Corporation, 20,000 drivers have already received training, with sessions continuing for others.

The government policy will also set vehicle fitness standards, provide for driver training, and impose penalties for violations of traffic rules. Drivers will be required to own the vehicle they operate, discouraging individuals from owning multiple rickshaws. Establishing discipline will understandably be very challenging given the staggering number of vehicles. But it is imperative that the policy is implemented without delay, accompanied by expanded training workshops for drivers, to ensure the safety of both operators and the public.

Corrigendum

In the article titled "Can Trump's proposal deliver real peace for Gaza?", published on yesterday's Editorial page, the author's name was misspelled. The correct spelling is Yousef SY Ramadan. We regret the inadvertent error.

Time to draw the line between influencers and journalists



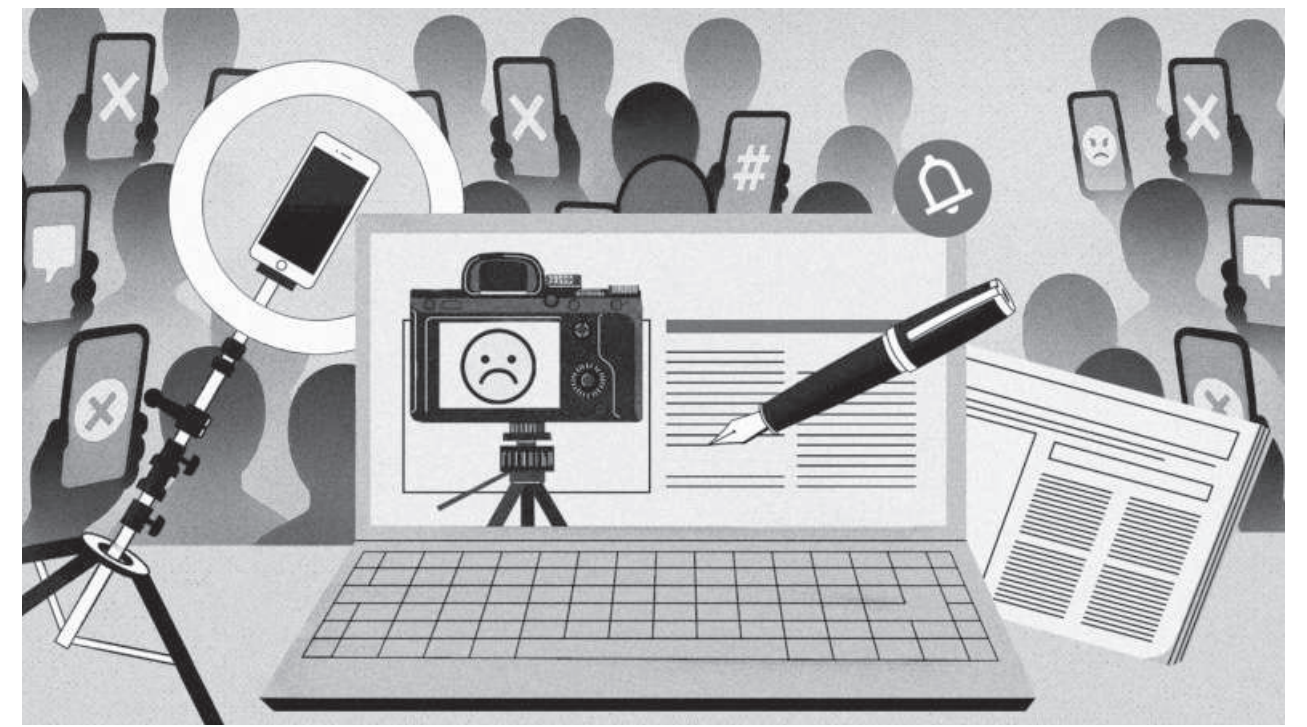
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KAMAL AHMED

The well-known proverb "the pen is mightier than the sword" perhaps needs redefining in today's world, as social media has emerged as the mightiest of all. These platforms have spawned a vast number of so-called "influencers" who operate without formal accountability, thriving on their ability to deepen divisions and sharpen antagonisms. They often recklessly blend lies with half-truths, distort facts, misquote others, and cherry-pick data to suit their purposes. And here lies the real danger—the blurring of lines between professional journalism and influencer content—which has become one of the most disruptive developments of the digital age.

This failure to distinguish between professional journalists and self-styled influencers has left the public vulnerable to manipulation. In particular, assembling a mob for political or personal gain has become one of the most alarming phenomena in Bangladesh today. Professional journalists working for newspapers and broadcast channels—those who painstakingly verify facts, exercise editorial judgment, and adhere to professional ethics—are losing ground in the battle for truth. In contrast, influencers are driven by an insatiable hunger for popularity, likes, and content-generated income, sometimes twisting facts or spreading lies to suit their agenda. Shockingly, quite a few people having years of experience in journalism have also senselessly sacrificed ethical standards for cheap popularity or political ambition.

Bangladesh, where media literacy among the general populace is still quite low, has thus become fertile ground for the cultivation of hatred. Politicians, artists, cultural figures, and media personalities all remain at risk of being targeted for online harassment. Rather than fostering healthy debates or meaningful counterarguments, the widespread practice is to brand opponents with derogatory labels, distort information, or unleash vulgar language. During the Awami League regime, "razakar" was the most feared insult; today, it is "Indian stooge." For victims, such stigmatisation is akin to digital mob lynching, and in many



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

cases, it has spilled over into offline violence.

We have witnessed several such unsettling incidents in recent times, some of which were unpredictable. There is growing suspicion that such incidents are deliberately designed to create chaos and derail the chief adviser's election roadmap. Two main forces are being held responsible for this sinister drive: first, the organisational networks of the fugitive leadership of the fallen Awami League regime; second, powerful individuals or groups who have mastered the art of using social media as a weapon to spread hatred and sow animosity.

In Bangladesh, Facebook and YouTube are the primary battlegrounds for such attacks, while globally, X (formerly Twitter) plays the leading role. The destructive power of social media is not unique to Bangladesh: in 2018, UN investigators concluded that these platforms helped incite ethnic hatred against the Rohingya in Myanmar, contributing to what many recognise as genocide. In 2021, a lawsuit was filed against Facebook's parent company,

Meta, for failing to prevent incitement of violence against the Rohingya.

Of course, social shaming as a trend is not new. But strikingly, those most frequently targeted are not black marketeers, corrupt bankers, or food adulterators, for instance, as one might expect. Instead, political rivals and public figures often face the brunt of orchestrated campaigns.

tolerated.

The government appears not to be paying sufficient attention. Some critics even allege that it is deliberately ignoring these provocations—an accusation many of us would rather not believe. Still, inaction is no longer an option. While no one expects an interim government to shut down the internet or suppress free speech,

Just as the Awami League had become a fascist party by often calling for the total annihilation of their political opponents, now we are witnessing the emergence of another group of people who have started to act in the same way to eliminate their rivals. If this pattern continues, Bangladesh's political crisis will deepen, leading to further violence, which may endanger the upcoming election.

In this volatile context, the government's response has been far from satisfactory. It has failed to prevent troublemakers, provocateurs, and criminals, particularly those driven by or operating on social media, although quick arrests were made in a few cases, such as the rape and murder of a child in Magura and the brutal murder in Mitford. But in most other cases, the state has appeared unprepared, reactive, or indifferent. Particularly worrying has been the misuse of religious or sectarian sentiment by influencers who use emotive language to destabilise society. Under the banner of "freedom of expression," acts of incitement to violence are being increasingly

it is internationally recognised that governments bear the primary responsibility for curbing online hatred and incitement to violence. The UN General Assembly reaffirmed this in two resolutions adopted on December 19, 2023 (A/RES/78/214 and A/RES/78/213).

Yes, regulating social media is undeniably complex, given that these platforms are run by multinational corporations. Yet governments around the world have already imposed billion-dollar fines, forcing companies to adopt stricter policies against the circulation of harmful content. So, Bangladesh must follow suit, and urgently. It must hold these companies accountable, compel them to act against hate speech or manipulated content, and ensure that the digital space does not remain a breeding ground for hatred. Ahead of the 2026 election, holding social media platforms accountable is paramount. Regulating social media is not about curbing freedom of expression; it is about safeguarding society from manipulation, division, and violence. The cultivation of hatred must not continue unchecked.

Why Trump's Bagram rhetoric matters beyond Afghanistan



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SAIMA AFZAL

US President Donald Trump's recent statement to get control of Bagram airbase has started a new debate among global policymakers, and they are concerned whether the renewed US interest in Afghanistan, especially in the airbase, could destabilise the region and reignite the global rivalry. Trump wrote on Truth Social that "bad things" would happen if Afghanistan did not return Bagram airbase to America. He also noted the strategic importance of Bagram airbase due to its proximity to China.

For the US and Nato forces, Bagram has been the epicentre of the war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda for two decades. The airbase was built by the Soviet Union in the 1950s and played a major role in its occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. The US controlled the airbase when it overthrew the Taliban regime in 2001; the Taliban regained its control when the US abruptly withdrew its forces from Afghanistan in 2021. Trump, at various occasions, expressed that Washington should have a small force in the airbase to keep an eye on China's activities.

However, the Afghan government has strongly rejected recent US calls to reclaim the airbase, reaffirming its

unwavering commitment to national sovereignty and urging Washington to honour its pledge against military interference in the 2020 Doha Agreement. Deputy spokesman of the Taliban, Hamdullah Fitrat, posted on his X account that in accordance with Islamic principles and grounded in its balanced, economy-oriented foreign policy, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan seeks constructive relations with all states based on mutual and shared interests.

While framed as a bilateral issue between the US and Afghanistan, control of Bagram carries profound regional and global consequences. Afghanistan risks once again becoming a battleground for power competition, undoing fragile efforts for stability and peace. Afghanistan shares borders with Tajikistan, China, Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Iran views the US control of Bagram airbase as a natural threat. Situated in northern Afghanistan close to the Iranian border, the base would allow surveillance and possible military operations to target Iran's eastern provinces. The *Tehran Times* highlights Bagram through the lens of US-Iran geopolitical rivalry; the US return to Afghanistan is likely

to encircle Tehran and check Sino-Iran's growing influence in South and Central Asia.

Establishing a foreign military foothold risks provoking regional rivalries rather than encouraging cooperation. The struggle over Bagram is embedded within a broader triangular contest involving the US, China, and Russia, all vying for influence in Afghanistan and the Central Asian

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corridor. For Washington, Bagram symbolises a foothold from which to project power, counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, and monitor regional security threats. China sees Bagram with concern, as it would be US surveillance near Xinjiang province, which faces ethnic unrest and terrorism. Russia and China, both of which view Bagram as a strategic threat, would likely react strongly, potentially creating new rifts in global peace. Militarisation could fuel proxy conflicts, drawing multiple actors into confrontation.

The Taliban has been balancing relationships with China, Russia, the US, and regional powers such as

Iran and Pakistan. Their refusal to cede control of Bagram despite US pressure underscores this new reality. In an increasingly fragile regional order, Bagram's fate carries both practical and symbolic weight, shaping diplomacy, influencing alignments, and serving as a measure of power in and beyond Afghanistan.

For Afghanistan, hosting US troops in Bagram risks eroding sovereignty, sparking internal backlash, and destabilising governance. Such a move may also inflame anti-American sentiment in Afghanistan and the wider Muslim world, providing extremist groups with fresh agendas. Re-occupation would require massive manpower and defences, effectively resembling a new US invasion. Even with Taliban compliance, US presence would remain a magnet for ISIS-K, Al-Qaeda, and other militants, deepening insecurity. For Washington, "taking back" Bagram also risks another protracted conflict with no clear endgame, repeating past mistakes.

In the end, talk of Trump reclaiming Bagram is less a blueprint than a political gesture; a projection of American resolve at home rather than a practical plan abroad. Yet the symbolism carries weight. Bagram remains more than an abandoned airfield; it is a reminder of unfinished wars, contested sovereignties, and the fault lines of great-power rivalry. Whether it re-emerges as a military asset, a bargaining chip, or a symbol of decline, Bagram's shadow will continue to stretch far beyond Afghanistan's borders, shaping calculations in Washington, Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Kabul alike.