

When mobs decide who can speak, what happens to democracy?



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The night *The Daily Star* building was set on fire by mobs incited by known right-wing political figures and social media influencers, at least 28 journalists and staff were trapped on the rooftop. One of them wrote on Facebook: "I cannot breathe." Anyone who has worked in a newsroom in Dhaka can imagine the scene—smoke filling the corridors, shouting from below, the sound of glass breaking, and the quiet panic of not knowing whether the stairs are still safe. Now add one very typical Dhaka detail. In many buildings, the rooftop door is often kept locked. If that had been the case that evening, we would probably not be discussing a Facebook status. We would be talking about bodies.

I cannot remember any other moment in our 54 years of independence when, at a time officially described as "peaceful," so many journalists came this close to being burned alive or mortally wounded inside their own office. This was not a protest that went a little too far. The way the fire was set and the way some people tried to block the fire service from reaching the building make it hard to escape one conclusion: someone deliberately wanted the journalists to suffer, or worse.

What makes this episode even more disturbing is that the attackers did not know the people they were trying to burn. They had no personal quarrel with a particular reporter or editor. In many cases, they probably never noticed the bylines of those trapped on the rooftop. Their real target was not individuals; it was two institutions: *The Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo*. For months, parts of our public conversation have described these newspapers and some cultural centres as "anti-national," "foreign agents," or "serving Indian interests." These are serious accusations, yet they are

usually made without evidence. Still, they are repeated on TV talk shows, at rallies, and on Facebook Live videos. Gradually, a picture emerges in which certain media houses are no longer seen as legitimate subjects of criticism, but as enemies.

Sociology offers a useful lens here. When a group is constantly painted as traitorous, some begin to feel that violence against them is acceptable, even if regrettable. In other words, they become "killable" in the public imagination even before a single match is lit. Once that mental line is crossed, setting fire to a newsroom can start to feel like a form of justice.

This pattern is not unique to Bangladesh. In the United States, years of loose talk about "fake news" helped normalise hostility towards journalists. The language came first; actions followed later. Dhaka is now witnessing a similar script, accelerated by social media. After the brutal attack on Osman Hadi, speeches at public meetings spoke of "blood for blood" in reference to alleged India-Awami League connections. Social media posts listed specific addresses: Dhanmondi-32, the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, Chhayanaut, *Prothom Alo*, and *The Daily Star*. Anonymous pages, and even well-known political figures, singled them out repeatedly. None of this was hidden. Anyone following events could see that a climate was being created in which attacks on these institutions could be framed as righteous acts.

Scholars of political communication sometimes describe this process as "stochastic violence." Leaders do not issue direct instructions like "Go there at 7pm and burn the building." Instead, they consistently

describe certain people as enemies, use emotional language, and hint that "the people" will one day rise against them. It is then left to someone in the crowd, or to groups with vested interests, to take the final step. That is what happened here. One evening, a mob appeared in front of two newspaper offices and a cultural centre. They were not carrying placards or petitions. They arrived with the confidence that what they

turned against you, there is no guarantee that the state will reach you before the flames do.

Some readers say they do not always agree with the editorial positions of these newspapers and therefore struggle to feel sympathy. That is a dangerous misreading of what is at stake. The same crowd that can be mobilised today against a newsroom can be turned tomorrow against a university, a theatre group, a human rights organisation,

Bangladesh has real disagreements with India, from water sharing to border violence. Citizens have every right to criticise unjust Indian policies and to demand that their government protect national interests. That debate is healthy. The danger begins when "anti-India" becomes a flexible label used to attack anyone who does not support a particular agenda. A newspaper that questions a movement, a cultural centre that invites diverse voices, or an activist who calls for institutional reform can suddenly be branded "pro-India" or an "Indian agent" without evidence. Once labelled this way, they are treated as less deserving of protection. Violence against them starts to resemble a patriotic duty in the eyes of some. This is not nationalism. It is a narrow and fragile identity politics that weakens society and places slogans above constitutional commitments.

So what can be done? The first step is straightforward, even if politically inconvenient. There must be a serious investigation into the attacks on media houses and other institutions and sites targeted recently. The question is not only who lit the fire, but who spent days and weeks preparing the emotional ground for it. That trail can be traced through speeches, posts, and organising networks—if there is genuine political will, that is. The second step concerns parties that claim to stand for democracy. They may disagree with media coverage and feel unfairly treated, but they have a responsibility to tell their supporters clearly that arson and intimidation are not a form of political participation. A party that cannot restrain its own angry followers will struggle to convince anyone that it is ready to govern a diverse and noisy society.

The next election will not magically resolve these problems, but it will signal what kind of Bangladesh we want. If we imagine this country as a pluralist state, guided by the constitution and the rule of law rather than by mobs, we have to organise and vote with that vision in mind. The questions are simple: are we as a nation prepared to live with media and institutions that challenge dominant narratives, or do we quietly long for a landscape where only one story is told?



PHOTO COLLAGE: STAR

were about to do had already been justified through weeks of speeches and social media posts.

There is another question we cannot avoid: where did the state stand in all this? When inflammatory speeches are made in public, when such addresses are openly shared and promoted, and when pages fantasise about burning institutions, it is reasonable to expect intelligence agencies and law enforcement to take notice. It is also reasonable to expect that once an attack begins, rescue services will reach the victims quickly. Instead, journalists trapped inside their own building had to ask for help—help that was delayed anyway—while some in the crowd tried to stop firefighters. The message is chilling: if enough people are

or even a religious institution that does not fit a particular narrative. This was not merely an attack on two media houses; it was a warning to every institution that produces ideas, culture, or independent knowledge. We have already seen how fluidly mobs shift targets. Similar patterns have played out elsewhere in South Asia, where campaigns that begin with slogans and rumours against one group end with attacks on shops, homes, and places of worship. Once the habit of settling disagreements by targeting institutions and individuals takes hold, it rarely stops with the first target.

In Bangladesh, much of this is now wrapped in the language of "India" and "anti-India." Here, a careful distinction is necessary.

'Fire safety enforcement is harder without full-time magistrates'

With the number of fire-prone establishments in the country tripling within a year, questions have emerged about how effectively safety standards are being enforced. In this interview, Fire Service and Civil Defence Director General (DG) Brig Gen Muhammad Jahed Kamal talked to *The Daily Star's* Mohammad Jamil Khan and Dipan Nandy about enforcement challenges, the lack of magistracy powers, and the steps being taken to reduce fire risks.

The number of fire-prone establishments has tripled in a year to 7,987. What steps are taken once a site is identified as risky?

After identifying fire-prone establishments, we carry out regular inspections, provide necessary advice, issue notices, and, where required, conduct mobile court drives with the help of magistrates. However, to reduce the number of fire incidents and the extent of damage, everyone must become more aware and respectful of fire safety laws. Each establishment must maintain its fire prevention systems as per the rules, keep trained personnel and adequate equipment for initial firefighting, and practise fire drills regularly. Only then can we expect to see a real reduction in fire disasters.

Visible actions often seem limited with regard to risky buildings. What actions are taken against building owners who do not comply with the notices of the fire department?

Being primarily a service-oriented organisation, the Fire Service and Civil Defence's core mission is to build public awareness to prevent disasters. To that end, we regularly carry out drills, public awareness campaigns, building inspections, surveys, and training programmes. On our official Facebook page, we also publish safety tips, photos, and videos of awareness activities. However, when required, we also conduct mobile court drives with magistrates.

There are other relevant agencies that also take legal action. The main goal is to promote awareness first, but persistent non-compliance does lead to penalties.

To share some of the work we do: from October 1, 2025, until the second week of December, we trained 61,063 people through 1,363 courses, conducted 2,293 fire drills, and held public outreach programmes in 2,119 places. Additionally, we inspected 203 buildings and surveyed another 1,338, providing fire safety advice. During this period, we tackled 1,421 fire incidents, saving property worth Tk 34.35 crore. We also responded to 901 other emergencies, rescuing 717 people alive and recovering 169 bodies.

How many non-compliant building owners faced legal or financial penalties this year? Can you mention specific examples of legal action?

From January to November 2025, we conducted 107 mobile court drives across the country. A total of 211 establishments faced penalties, and fines amounted to Tk 1.99 crore. Three individuals were jailed for different durations. Recently, after the Tongi chemical fire incident, we filed a criminal case against the factory owner.

Although we are mainly a humanitarian service agency, we are increasingly taking regulatory actions to ensure compliance



Brig Gen Muhammad Jahed Kamal

PHOTO: COURTESY

with the support of district administrations.

Following some major fires recently, questions have been raised about fire service preparedness. Where do you face the main challenge: equipment, manpower, or access?

We have sufficient manpower and equipment according to our operational mandate. Our

teams are always ready to respond. We also have modern equipment, including 68 metre turntable ladders. But in many areas, building code violations, overhead power lines, and poor infrastructure prevent their proper use. We also have remote-controlled firefighting vehicles, drones, search vision cameras, and thermal imaging systems. However, their numbers are limited, and we are working to expand our capacity.

Other factors that constrain our capacity to act are often external—narrow roads, water shortages, lack of hydrants, curious crowds, and the absence of firefighting systems in many buildings.

Although traffic police cooperate with us during emergencies and our control room maintains wireless communication with theirs to clear roads for fire vehicles and personnel, the reality of existing urban congestion often makes emergency response very difficult. Effective coordination among all relevant agencies is essential to improve response time.

As we are trying to enhance our capacity, we are also working on amending fire safety laws and regulations. If we had full-time magistrates, enforcement of law in these areas would have been more immediate and effective.

You mentioned the lack of functional fire hydrants. What practical steps have been taken to address this issue, and also to expand magistracy authority for better intervention?

At present, Dhaka's streets have no hydrants, but a memorandum of understanding has been signed with WASA to begin feasibility studies for a hydrant system. Meanwhile, in Chattogram, a few exist, but they were not installed in coordination with the Fire Service and are largely unusable.

With regard to magistracy authority, we earlier sent a proposal requesting magistrates on deputation for the fire service department. Magistrates are currently nominated by the district administration to conduct mobile courts for us alongside their other duties. If we had full-time magistrates on deputation, enforcing the law against irregularities would be much more effective.

Public participation in fire prevention remains minimal. Are there any plans to make regular fire drills mandatory in schools, markets, or residential buildings?

Since October 1, 2025, we have trained over 61,000 individuals across schools, colleges, and industrial institutions. We have proposed including fire safety lessons in the national curriculum; basic safety tips have already been added at the primary level.

Fire drills are mandatory under existing laws, and many institutions already practise them. Consistent training ensures readiness during real emergencies. But without collective awareness and strict adherence to building codes and fire safety laws, reducing accidents will remain very difficult.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Sign after Virgo
6 Script unit
10 Studio sign
11 Some golf clubs
13 Hayek of "Frida"
14 Designer's asset
15 Ram's mate
16 Nittany Lions' sch.
18 Light metal
19 Computer connectors
22 Bashful
23 Odometer unit
24 Rene of "Thor"
27 Valleys
28 Bible twin
29 Shark feature

DOWN
1 Finishes last
2 Deeply impressed
3 Farm machine
4 Crater part
5 Plains people
6 Illuminated

30 Supermarket section
35 Peculiar
36 Recipe unit
37 Indulgent
38 Less cordial
40 Select group
42 Jessica of "Tootsie"
43 Subway patron
44 Old autos
45 Wasn't thrifty

7 Nest egg acct.
8 Facial feature
9 Qualify
12 Hearing and sight, for two
17 Cunning
20 Debate topic
21 Muscat native
24 Shrink in fear
25 Lot buy
26 Fish in a can
27 Nursery supply
29 Winter bug
31 Land units
32 Playground sight
33 Grow toward night
34 Bring to bear
39 Sense of self
41 Sassy talk

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NOVEMBER 30TH'S ANSWERS

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