

Student Politics: A Complete Overhaul Is In Order

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ALTHOUGH years of frustrating experience involving student politics in Bangladesh should convince almost anybody to call for order and discipline in the sphere, most governments or regimes in our history lacked the willingness or guts to do it. Reasons are simple and clear—ruling authorities need strong student force to sustain their power, positions and influence. Government leaders are politicians—they care for staying in power. They are not statesmen who care for the wellbeing of nation, even at the expense of party or personal interests. Bangladesh has seen numerous politicians but hardly any statesman. No segment of the nation should realize it better than the student community—it is the worst victim of the process.

There is, however, nothing wrong with student politics as such. Students at degree colleges and universities have every right to be involved in active politics—like any other adults in the country they have constitutional rights to do so. The problem, however, is that a great majority of our youngsters, who neither have the educational background to understand politics nor the constitutional rights to do active politics—are, in fact, indoctrinated into politics—thanks to intrusion of political parties even in primary or secondary schools.

Such indoctrination of young boys and girls at the primary and secondary schools frustrates the basic purpose of politics—ability to make conscious choices from alternatives. By involving primary and secondary school students into active politics—political parties concerned are, indeed, doing more disservice than service to the nation—these students are hardly exposed to and therefore, barely understand different opinions and philosophies. Politics, therefore, should absolutely be forbidden for persons below age 18. This will be a perfectly democratic standpoint. No civilized and democratic country can allow its kids to get involved in politics before they acquire basic minimum knowledge about their society and the world.

An enforceable legislation to this effect will eliminate a big chunk of the student community from politics. It will also transform primary and secondary schools into real centres of foundational education and training. Two-year colleges also should be brought under such prohibition, as students of such colleges should be less than 18 years old. Strong emphasis on politics-free education up to 18 years of age or intermediate level education should, presumably, provide the nation with future leadership with basic minimum educational level and skills.

Politics, on the other hand, must be allowed at the levels of degree colleges and universities. Our future leaders must be politically conscious. Efforts should, however, be made to make such politics constructive and patriotic. The nation that sacrificed decades after decades watching nonsense and nuisance in the name of student politics must have the rights to stop any and every means aimed at

frustrating its hard-earned momentum towards political stability, democratization, and industrialization. The nation, however, must provide a congenial, free and safe academic environment to our students and faculties—in colleges and universities—indeed, in all centers for education and learning. It is high time for the nation to work out feasible and practical measures to ensure academic environment, in the interest of stopping mindless wastage of the nation's scarce resources. Neither the faculties, nor the administrative staff stop receiving their benefits of employment when the universities are closed sine die. The nation pays—despite no work is done. The students pay too—in terms of missing classes/grades/semesters, unutilized time, talent and energy. No nation can afford such a nuisance for ever.

Prospects for maintaining academic environment, however, remains problematic in Bangladesh. Many suggest that until a system of law and order is built by the universities and degree-awarding colleges, interested groups may be able to stir violence and other kinds of disruptive incidents in the campuses, which might threaten normalcy, even lead to closures of campuses. Many suggest that universities form their own security squads to maintain their own law and order situations.

Western universities—irrespective of state or private ownership—have their own security guards to protect their resources—human and physical alike. No demonstration/procession can take place in the university premises without prior permission of the security forces. Universities have their own laws—applicable to their own campuses. Of course, all universities work in close liaison with the government law enforcing agencies. Many foreign trained faculties in our universities and government offices are well-aware of organizational and functional dimensions of such security forces.

But how far a university-operated security force will be effective in our campuses remains an open question. In Western countries university security police can function effectively because the societies that incorporate the campuses are based on rule of law. Second, outside forces hardly mess around with students in campuses. Our country is different in both respects. The society is hardly based on the rule of law, almost everybody is above law in our country—some frustrate the due course of law by using political force or power, others use cash. Although law enforcing agencies may challenge such contentions, to an overwhelming majority of people in this country this is plain and simple truth.

Moreover, who in this country can doubt that most turmoil, problems, strikes, processions, even killings, in our campuses are almost regularly provoked by forces outside the campuses? Campus security guards will never be capable of handling such situations.

Even if it is assumed that security

forces might be able to handle law and order situations in our campuses, none should be so naive as to believe that they alone can solve the problems of violence and other political disturbances in our campuses. One must not forget that students at the institutions of higher education—at universities and degree-awarding colleges—are adults having constitutional rights to participate in politics. Solution to campus violence does not lie in banning campus politics or tightening of security arrangements. It rather lies with appropriately designed positive mechanisms to channel students' time and energy to productive, nation-building purposes.

First of all, such an environment will depend on revamping of our age-old education system into a job-oriented and cost-effective one. The whole education system should be redesigned so that it will guarantee employable future to everybody—to doctors, engineers as well as liberal arts graduates. Students, after successful completion of their studies, must be employable—either by the state or by the private sector or by himself or herself. Successful completion of education must train individuals with the right kind of skills and abilities needed for success in practical life. Gone are those days when education could be for the sake of education itself. The nation is sick and tired of watching English graduates running the chemical industries or chemistry graduates messing up in the ministry of finance or banking institutions.

Establishing a linkage between education and job prospects will require updating of university courses and teachings to meet challenges of constantly changing outside world of trade, commerce, industry, public service, etc. The universities must strive hard to link each and every student with their future employers by providing opportunities for part-time employment, paid or unpaid internships, and through seminars and workshops. Students must understand that their time, toil and energy are aimed at transforming themselves into productive human beings. Besides generating confidence and optimism among the students, such a productive relationship between universities and prospective work-places will substantially reduce number of students to be available for abuse and misuse by self-seeking politicians and university teachers. Moreover, universities must understand that the nation needs politicians too.

With linkage of education to jobs, and emphasis on cost and benefit of education, few, perhaps, only genuine ones, will be interested in active politics. Universities must take the responsibility to train these future politicians. University authorities must understand that the student leaders are integral parts of the system—they must be rewarded for their positive contribution to the system—to society. Elected student leaders, for example, may be given free studentships, free university

accommodation, that is, a room in university halls, free dining facilities, etc. Some of the clashes in the universities are now centered around efforts to obtain such facilities by muscle power.

The benefits of such measures will be enormous. Besides demonstrating positive attitude to constructive student politics in the country, legalization of such benefits to the students will electrify the student politics itself in this country. Few doubt that much of the present trouble with student politics in Bangladesh stem from our nation's negative attitude to them.

A positive role of students in campus life will involve giving them a say in the promotion of university teachers. Although our university professors are well aware of Western practice of student evaluation of faculty performances, never any university teachers' associations in Bangladesh has demanded such a provision for themselves. Such a provision, at the least, will compel the teachers to come to class in time, with preparation of subject materials, and spend appropriate amount of time in campuses. Under existing system faculties alone grade students; in the proposed system students will also give grades to teachers at the end of semesters. Such student evaluations will be one of the important criteria for personnel decisions involving the faculty concerned. The teachers remains accountable to students for his teaching materials, personal behaviour as well as grading policies. What could be more democratic? What could contribute more to improve faculty performance and academic standards in our campuses.

Last of all, in order to curtail, if not eliminate, episodes of campus violence, the government as well as the university teachers must also consider the role of the University Ordinance, 1973. It has been labelled by many—by government as well as opposition leaders, university teachers as well as non-teachers—as the harbinger of many problems in our campuses. By making lucrative positions in university administration elective, the Ordinance, at the least, has succeeded in overpoliticizing our campuses. Almost everything in the universities are decided on the basis of political considerations.

The Ordinance needs to be repealed in order to ensure a system of academic integrity and discipline in the campuses. Otherwise, bad money will continue to drive good money out of circulation, universities will continue to lose status as centres of education and learning, and instead will be transformed, more and more, into hubs of violent politics. An overhauling of student politics is impossible without a thorough reorganization of our education system and recasting of rules of business in the universities. The task is arduous—may be extremely difficult too. Still—somebody—some government must do it. The more it is delayed, the uncertain becomes the nation's dream to achieve rapid industrialization, social modernization or political stability.