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The President—And Campus Politics

People in the relevant quarters have reacted in a guarded manner to the presidential idea that there be a moratorium on student politics in the country. That is as it should be, considering the fact that many people have many opinions on the issue. Indeed, over the years, the issue of students being in the thick of national politics has been much debated, owing particularly to the many mishaps such activities have caused in the academic region. And by mishaps we refer to those traumatic incidents which have quite disturbed our collective sensibilities in a way powerful enough to lead us into questioning the whole proposition upon which politics is these days conducted. Briefly, the situation is this—that in the higher educational institutions, student politics has become more of an extension of politics at the national level than anything else, meaning that what our politically active students have been doing is represent the policies and programmes of their parent organisations on the campuses. There is hardly any argument with that, seeing that as conscious individuals students have all the right in the world to shape their opinions about the way things are conducted in the country.

And yet the bigger question over the years has been one pertaining to the question of how judicious our students have been regarding the pursuit of politics on the campus. It is a question whose answer is to be detected in the casualties which from time to time have been made of young lives in the colleges and universities of the country. For far longer than logically acceptable, student disputes have led to the closure of educational institutions. That has in turn led to chaos insofar as examinations and setting and following of class schedules are concerned. Worse, lives that could have progressed to happy and fortuitous circumstances were laid waste through deaths of the most sordid kinds. Therefore, it is pretty much understandable why President Shahabuddin Ahmed should be concerned about the far-reaching consequences of the kind of student politics in operation in the country today. The obvious truth about student politics in these times is that it has not succeeded in achieving its objectives, the focal point of those objectives being the attainment of students' welfare. But let there be no doubt about the thought of what student politics has historically been for this country.

The story of independent Bangladesh is essentially a tale of the bravery and ingenuity of its students in resisting the onslaught of undemocratic forces against the nation's heritage and political well-being. Beginning in 1952, the nation has been the proud recipient of ideas that are an offshoot of progressive student politics. The war of liberation proved in all finality how an educated class of citizens can pave the way to dignity for a people. That being the legacy, we complain today. And there are reasons why we complain. Suffice it to say that in recent times, the quality of student politics has degenerated to the point that talk of politics on the campus generates a good degree of fear among citizens, guardians and others alike. That captures the mood in general. And if that is the way in which the country perceives student activities on the campus, it goes without saying that something is terribly wrong with the concept of student politics today.

It is not a question of whether one agrees with the president in his assessment of conditions. But it is true that when the head of state decides to make his feelings known on a matter that has kept the country worried for years, there are strong reasons behind that attitude. And those should be given the kind of seriousness they deserve. For politicians as well as their student followers, the need is a dispassionate weighing of objective conditions. One may not agree with the president when he suggests that the pursuit of student politics is not a fundamental right. There are two sides to the question here. But of greater import should be the thought that student politics should be made to redirect itself to the pursuit of students' welfare and concomitant academic excellence. A set of conditions where educational institutions are kept hostage at the hands of elements intent on casting the long shadows of their political mentors on young minds and on the overall ambience of education is fraught with danger. Which is why the presidential expression of concern should not be taken lightly, or amiss.