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STUDENT POLITICS: A PLEA FOR A MORATORIUM

The ruling BNP high command suspended the activities of its student wing in Dhaka University following bloody infighting that took the lives of two JCD boys on the campus last Friday. It was a drastic measure but perhaps the party had no option. The determination to weed out terrorism and establish a democratic code of conduct has been repeated over and over again by the BNP government ever since it came to power.

In July last year the Prime Minister herself convened a grand conference of nearly forty political parties in an effort to reach a consensus on how best to handle the campus crisis and weed out violent and mercenary political activities to restore the academic atmosphere and inculcate in the youth respect for democratic norms. Though almost everybody agreed that effective actions should be taken there was precious little on how to snap the lifeblood of the trouble makers.

The opposition, needless to say, was, and still is, generous with the blame on the government, claiming that it has failed and therefore should be "brought down". All parties claim they are devoted to democracy yet most of them are not even willing to allow the BNP a chance to establish democratic norms.

The government-in-waiting, from the very start, could not accept the mandate of the people. Is that not the same mindset that plagued Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who refused to accept the victory of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the 1970 elections? And to what consequence, to his country and to himself is known to all.

Over two decades have passed and we still have not learnt to be democratic in either politics or our day to day lives. It is the same mindset that had led to the killings of Ashraful Azam Mamun and Khandaker Mahmud Hussain on Friday.

Rhetorical allegiance alone cannot ensure that in the years to come we would be more democratically inclined than today unless we practise what we preach and make tolerance, reasoned debate and respect for law a habit from the top to the bottom of the political ladder.

Democracy cannot be grafted like a skin nor can the demon of intolerance and acquisitiveness that hounds political aspirants be ousted overnight. But we can together destroy this in the bud if all political parties refrain from doling out favours and take ruthless action against delinquents no matter whose blessings they enjoy.

The reasons behind the flagrant disregard for democratic principles are deeply rooted in the psyche of the aspiring "leaders" and in the entire body politic. Everyone is looking for a short-cut to power—through dubious means, through cheap and immature politicking and everything else but honest, hard work that puts patriotism above the party.

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A high-powered committee assigned to find out the root causes of campus unrest and recommend remedies identified 16 direct and indirect causes of which partisan student politics and factionalism abetted by equally partisan teachers and poor university administration top the list. The committee report suggested 33 possible measures for curbing terrorism, such as: fair distribution of seats in the halls, barring guests who have no prior permission from the authorities to use the hall facilities, creation of an autonomous campus police force, formulation of a code of conduct for student politics, adherence to academic discipline, banning teachers participation in politics, stamping out corruption in the university management, stern action against extortionists and musclemen, and curing session jam and many other steps.

The cooperation and sincerity of all sections of society are indispensable for cleansing the blot that student politics has earned. There have been occasions in the past when some of the other political parties in the country had also found it convenient to suspend the activities of their student wings on the campus. But that lacked security of purpose and was really meant to serve as an eye-wash and they had no lasting impact. Another party suspended campus activities for some time. Thus all the major parties took some measures at one or the other time. We wish the leading political parties would seize the present opportunity to sit together and decide to put a medium-term moratorium on the activities of their respective student wings. The measure is warranted most urgently in view of the continuous gun-toting games on the campus and the loss of valuable lives, particularly of the students, the future of the nation. There should not be any difference of opinion on the issue. The experience of the parties is almost identical and all have a common stake in the future.