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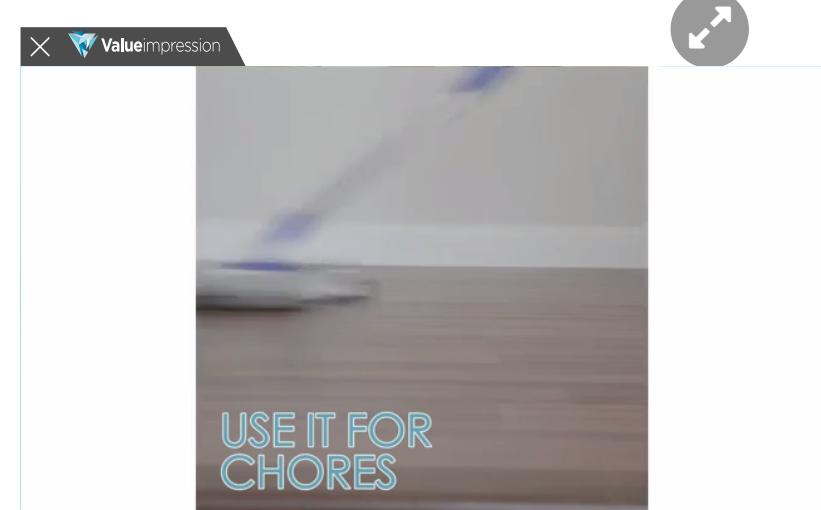
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Is banning student politics the solution to campus criminality?

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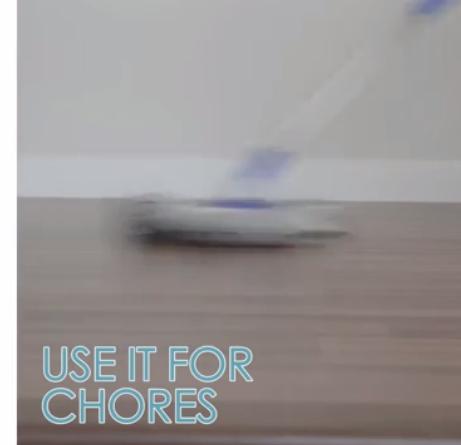




At a time when politics is effectively in exile, banning student politics would only serve the purpose o

Zobaida Nasreen

The death of Abrar Fahad epitomises the need for tolerance towards dissenting speech. Employing his brutal death to silence political dissent and to eliminate voices that do not deserve such betrayal.



The choice before the administration was to create more space for political dissent or to shut down oppositional voices. It went for the second option.

It is no secret that the student leaders sponsored by the ruling parties have been routinely abusing and torturing not only rivals but also ordinary students. No doubt we must wipe out the reign of terror on campus. But as long as the roots of the problem—ruling party's desire to control universities and erosion of institutional autonomy—are not addressed, we would not be able to scratch beyond the surface.

Abrar's murder has exposed the failure of the institution in its basic duty to protect its students. It is impossible to run "torture cells" without the knowledge of the university and hall administrations. After being tortured many students had reported the incidents but to no avail. If the ruling party's students could routinely commit such crimes, it was because the authorities remained silent or patronising. The Buet administration has failed to accept its responsibility for the crime committed against one of its students and to recognise its inefficiency and complicity. Instead of taking steps to bring any systemic change or to dispel concerns about student safety and security, it has washed the blood of one of its own by banning organised political activities on campus.

This ban provided an easy way out for the administration when students could demand and even realise institutional autonomy, democracy, end of unlawful government control, and much more. This ban has effectively snatched away the students' rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Not only the organisations accused of committing serious crimes (murder, rape, and maiming) were banned, but also the ones whose peaceful expressions put forward a vision of democratic campus and offer a defence against administration behaving autocratically. Even if such organisations are weak in terms of the number of members, their views are important to consider. It is sad that the university producing future leaders of Bangladesh is run competently and democratically.

The ramifications of this ban could be huge. It is a real possibility now that to follow Buet's path in denying student organisations the rights to exist as organisations have always been important entities of civil society and have for students but also for the people in general, to take up matters of common huge blow to our democratic aspirations.



What good will it bring if we suppress the spirit of students to come together and build political imaginations? Surely it will further alienate conscientious students from getting involved in emancipatory struggles and lead to a society in which people are more self-centred and careerist. As a practical matter, students would also be pressured to support dominant political views.

Many people argue that the ban will not come in the way of students launching movements. While this is true, the limitations of non-organisational student movements are that they are situational, spontaneous, and temporary and can rarely go beyond daily affairs. The achievements are usually short-term. They rarely build on legacy of previous movements and thus fail to create a political imagination that could go beyond the walls of a campus and build a lasting change.

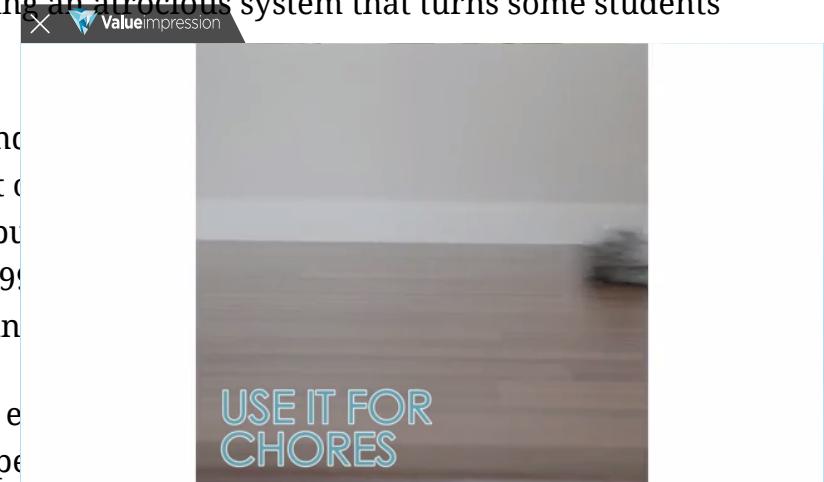
We should not forget that in our history of democratic struggles, student organisations have always been at the forefront of countering hegemonic thoughts. The role of student vanguards has been crucial to show how their demands relate to broader struggles of the people. Without student organisations, it is difficult to imagine student movements actively raising questions of human rights and democracy.

It is very important not to allow any authority to deny or repress political rights and freedoms. It is true that many students are not benefitting directly from those rights. For some, those rights do not even exist. Still we must protect those rights if we want democracy to flourish.

On the other hand, the deterioration in student organisations has not been solely their own making. Rather the external influence of the ruling class had a dominating role in creating and backing an atrocious system that turns some students into “monsters”.

The political criminal turn of ruling party’s student wings can only be understood in the context of those parties’ desire to control universities. The current trend of student organisations not only enjoying control and being allowed to commit crimes with apparent impunity but also marginalised or silenced—started to take this definitive shape in early 1990s. The ruling class that took up destruction of democracy in universities as an instrument of control.

Earlier, the military regimes of 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in their quest for economic development turned towards anti-autocratic struggles. Soon the military regimes tried to suppress those movements.



strategy of co-opting student leaders. Many leaders caved in and created loyal student organisations. Still they could not silence the independent voices of student organisations.

When the BNP government came to power after Ershad's autocratic regime, it imported a disastrous governance culture: it stopped holding student union polls providing its student wing Jatyatabadi Chhatra Dal and its ally's student wing Islamic Chhatra Shibir control over campuses across the country. The new system of campus power neither required participation of student organisations other than the one affiliated with the ruling party nor any election. It was a permanent settlement that handed full control to a stable system of thuggery, which sought to destroy oppositional groups.

Later governments found it beneficial too. Consequently, the student wings of the ruling parties were able to suppress movements by imposing political control and dispossessing the students of their social and political rights. As a result, hundreds of students were forced to join political events of the ruling parties, abused, tortured or killed on campuses, and were forced to leave educational institutions without completing studies. Independent student organisations got weakened.

That power grab and the attempt to avoid elections had implications far beyond campuses. Soon it became a common story of our national politics too.

Much of these current problems stem from the basic question of university autonomy. It has been under attack not only in the shape of state interventions, but also through government-sponsored student and teacher associations.

Of course, far-reaching reforms within the student wings of the ruling parties is a must. But no matter how deep reforms are made they will not be enough to end criminality and abuses on campuses unless the ruling parties show the political will to abolish government sponsorship and abandon the ideology of controlling and normalising of thug regimes on campus.

Student politics no longer remain in the hands of the students alone. Collective political will is the only way to bring about cultural change, but it will revert to its previous state unless the political juntas and governments govern themselves according to their own free will. For that matter, the solution to campus politics.



Banning student politics is no solution to the problem we are facing on campuses today. At a time when politics is effectively in exile, banning student politics would only serve the purpose of the rising totalitarian tendency. Therefore, politicians and educational policymakers should not abandon students coming into political consciousness and should widen the space for them to engage, educate, and agitate. Not just culturally, but politically too.

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