

Cleaning The Campus

The Prime Minister is not alone in declaring that the campus must be rid of terrorism at all costs. Nor is it the first time that such a statement has been given by the country's chief executive. But when the Vice Chancellors of the universities called on the Prime Minister on Tuesday, we were once again to hear the self same words.

Words, words words ! The despairing public can hardly be blamed for losing faith in statements that never amount to anything, no matter how forcefully they are reiterated. Without any definitive action following such statements, both the perpetrators of terrorism on campus, and those at the receiving end, feel their respective positions would remain unchanged.

Cleaning the campus means cleaning the entire body politic. It is a tall order that political leaders alone could not, or rather would not, carry out, for the knife-wielding, gun-toting mindless mafia are but the creation of political godfathers who have been patronising these groups for their nuisance value. Indeed, even criminal proclivity in these people is protected, if not promoted, because it serves the purpose of their mentors.

Soon after the much-lauded fair and free elections in 1991, key leaders of both the opposition and ruling parties did seem to present a refreshingly united front as far as campus terrorism was concerned. An all-party conference was also called to find a lasting solution. There was talk of disbanding all student fronts to eliminate terrorism. With admirable candour one of the leaders admitted that student troublemakers were the creation of the prevailing political process; but that it had grown out of all proportion, much like Frankenstein's monster, and needed to be put down.

Unfortunately, all those pious intentions came to nought. Neither the ruling party nor the major opposition leaders could rise above their short-term interests, which they believe, are served more by belligerent student fronts than by peace-loving ones. While every political party agreed that something had to be done, none was willing to be drastic enough with its own troublemakers.

Thus, the chance to turn a new leaf and let student politics reclaim its lost glory as a wholesome front for national politics was lost. And with it was lost the opportunity to cultivate democratic norms of conduct in all spheres of life—the academic, the social and the political.

Political patronage of questionable elements in the country's educational institutions inevitably have spill-over effects outside the campus as well. Rarely is an anti-social element, otherwise known as a 'mastaan', without some big or small political godfather protecting him. Clearly, what our politicians in general are promoting today is far from democracy and respect for law and order, judging by what their followers are allowed to do and get away with. It is indeed a depressing state of affairs.

Under the circumstances, can the general body of students who have resisted the money, arms and what-not of campus power-politics, do anything to resist terrorism ? In a campus culture where even the most trivial of problems are solved through bloody violence leading to death or disability, would anyone but the foolhardy stick his neck out ? Clearly it is an issue that the political leaders must address in earnest, and this includes those at the helm as well as those voted to form the opposition. Politicians must first heal themselves. And pressure must come from civil society to help them find the road to health.