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Window On Asia

Time Is Running Out For Saving Our Educational System

S.M. Ali

IN one form or another, student activism remains a factor, often dormant but seldom dead, in the politics of most Third World countries.

In Southeast and Far East Asia, the situation varies from country to country. In recent days, university students first in South Korea and then in China took up aggressive positions against the status quo. In both the countries, it may be a long time before normalcy returns in place of the superficial calm that now prevails in their academic life.

In the region covering the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the home of some 350 million people, it is a different scenario. The single most spectacular student upheaval here was in Thailand in 1973 when massive rallies staged by the students of the Thammasat University in Bangkok shook the military government of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn and helped in the installation of a civilian parliamentary regime. Since then, the involvement of Thai students in the country's political life has been largely academic.

Compared to the Thais, students in the Philippines and, to a lesser degree, in Indonesia have a longer tradition of political involvement, but its manifestation has been largely sporadic, seldom violent. In the case of the Philippines, one exception was the participation of university students in Manila in the popular upsurge that brought Corazon Aquino to power in 1986. Since then, their role in the leftist agitation against the government of President Aquino is said to be of limited nature. The academic life in the country remains undisturbed.

Politicians' Role

In all these countries, politicians often seek the support of selected student activists and that too, not too openly, but they do not go for large-scale participation of the student community in their activities. One assumes that to many of them, the continuity of the academic life is just too important for the nation to be disrupted. In their infinite wisdom or shrewdness, as the case may be, they have also realised that any extensive use of the student community in their political campaigns would, in time, alienate the middle class parents who, as in Bangladesh,

carry a heavy financial burden for their children's education.

The same realisation is probably shared by politicians of all ethnic groups in Malaysia. But the scenario here is somewhat different. Almost all political groupings based in Kuala Lumpur including the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), have their youth wings as well as women's wings. These wings help the political parties to involve the younger section of the people as well as the female population in their activities, but not as tools in agitation. What's more, the wings serve as the training ground for future politicians, giving them an opportunity to take part in serious deliberation on national and international issues. Not surprisingly, the present Malaysian Education Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who is often tipped as a possible successor for Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, is a former President of the Youth Wing of UMNO, while its present head, Naguib Razak, serves as the Minister for Youth and Sports in the present government.

The real power base of, say UMNO Youth lies with the young professional class, not so much with the student community. This does not mean that when passions run high on any national issues, university students in Kuala Lumpur remain uninvolved. In such a situation, there is inevitable tension in the campus of the country's prestigious University of Malaya, but it never leads to a call for boycott of classes or erupts into violence. The result: A student who has entered a four-year degree class gets his degree four years after his admission.

Bangladesh Situation

Compared to the situation in Southeast Asia, student activism in Bangladesh, especially at the university level, has followed a different — many would say, a disastrous — course. True, what is happening today can be traced back to the sixties, if not earlier, when political alliances were formed and superimposed on the activities of student unions. It is also true that the history of student activism in Bangladesh is not without its own glorious periods, the most important one being the Language Movement of the early fifties. However, as many would say, this legacy of the fifties has been washed

away by incredible, almost frightening, distortions of the whole process involving student activism. We have reached an impossible situation.

Violence

Through strikes and violence, hundreds of hours, if not days, are lost during every academic year. From time to time, the authorities are forced to suspend all classes and put off examinations, often indefinitely. A course that is meant to be completed in four years often drags on for as long as six. Violent in-fighting among student wings of major opposition political groupings leads to injuries, even deaths, with a reign of terror prevailing throughout various campuses of different universities. The authorities, unable to enforce discipline, are forced to accept the situation in a mood of resignation, like a majority of students whose sole interest lies in the pursuit of their studies. Generally speaking, the academic atmosphere is virtually gone. Not surprisingly, the relations between students and teachers as well as among teachers themselves have also come under severe strains.

Thousands of middle class parents, many with pathetically meagre means, watch the situation with a mixture of anger and dismay, either unwilling or too scared to speak out against the offenders. They blame the government, the university authorities and student activists for creating an untenable situation. They count their losses in silence.

There are other kinds of losses. When a four-year course drags on for six, it is the nation's tax-payers who pay the additional fifty per cent cost in salaries of teachers and other overhead expenses. Another loss is invisible. With the frequent interruptions in the university classes and the disappearance of the academic atmosphere, teaching standards are bound to fall. What kind of graduates are our universities producing now? How are our degrees being rated by institutions outside?

These are only some of the dimensions of a national crisis of immense magnitude.

Where To Start

How do we tackle this crisis? Where do we start?

Some time ago, the ruling Jatiya Party took a welcome step of dissolv-

ing its student wing. This has helped a great deal, although some mastans, formerly associated with the Jatiya Chatra Samaj, are said to be still active under new covers. There is also an unconfirmed report that the Jatiya Party is planning to revive its student wing. Let us hope, the report is without any substance.

Unfortunately, the lead given by the ruling party has not been followed by other political parties. In fact, in recent weeks, the situation has turned more serious due to in-fighting among different opposition student factions, resulting in violence, gang warfare, injuries and deaths.

To outsiders, it is far from clear if opposition leaders of national stature appreciate that the situation has gone out of control. What they regard as their power base is, in effect, an extremely volatile, explosive situation which they are unable to handle.

Yet, in most of their speeches, the leaders of both Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) continue to call upon their student followers to help in toppling the present regime. But they seldom say how this should be done. Student activists take these calls as signals for the continuance of their present "struggle" whatever it may be, not a plea to discard violence or to go back to the classes.

One must say that on this point, seasoned and moderate politicians inside both AL and BNP take a different view. Generally speaking, they remain sceptical of the ability of the student community to help much in toppling the regime and that it can only continue to destabilise the education system, regardless of the cost of the nation.

If the leaders would just listen to these moderate politicians, they would see the urgent need for taking a close look at the whole situation from a national perspective, rather than from their own partisan viewpoints. When they do so, they may also join the ruling party in dissolving their respective student wings and thus take the first step towards restoring normalcy to our educational life.

Then, other steps can follow, including, perhaps, an all-party national conference in search of a broad consensus on saving our educational life from a total disaster. It is just a wishful thinking of an anguished Bangladeshi writer? One hopes not.