

Campus Violence—An Answer Is Overdue

Thursday noon the worst that could be thought of happened on the Dhaka University campus. A two-hour long shoot-out left more than fifteen injured including two teachers and some departments and the Arts Faculty office ransacked in a free-for-all violence-charged atmosphere. Thank goodness the cost of the gun-battle was limited to limb rather than life. It could have been quite heavy in both life and limb, if the reported 250 gunshots were meant to kill. It is this benumbing hypothesis that we feel grateful about.

Yet the first shot to kill or injure, like the first murder committed, is what has to be taken most seriously. A repeat may turn out to be exceptionally devastating. Even if you succeed—university authorities in collaboration with the administration—in preventing another battle occurring soon, may at best be a stopgap, while the problem remains. Something realistically acceptable to the people, (outside those who may have a vested interest in keeping campus violence going, namely the political parties) who have the biggest stake in a university in the country and that for the obvious reason that their children are there to study and are now mortally afraid to do so any longer with the guns exploding into shoot-outs every now and again and the insecurity it creates for them.

The simple fact about campus violence, continuing with tensions rising between two or more incidents of shooting, is that, as long as arms together with those with their fingers on the trigger, are about, the violence will continue, may be with cynical intermissions. In this context the question that the general public want to put point-blank to the authorities concerned: why not make the campus arms-free, to let students and teachers function in an atmosphere of full peace and security? If the answer to the question, from the university authorities themselves is: we cannot guarantee a campus free from arms because the question is almost cent per cent political rather than academic, or one having to do not even peripherally with the administration of a given university, and that it has to be solved politically.

And therefore it is the political leaders of the country, those in office as well as those in the opposition, who owe an answer to the people. And all, excepting those who have a political axe to grind, in the country in one voice ask for the answer, because it is more than due, i.e. after nearly two decades of unrest on university campuses, specially after so much lost in terms of interrupted studies, session jams, delayed examinations, delayed results, ruined employment prospects and so forth, let alone the agony and strain that these have caused to guardians, parents and families.

It is also time for all concerned to acknowledge in public that higher education in Bangladesh has been disastrously affected by campus violence digging in with no signs as yet for it to be dug and thrown out and that the universities need to be reorganised as places of study, research and stabilised levels of higher education.

To make sense of democracy which we say we have established, to uphold the rule of law about which a lot is said every now and often, to prevent a whole generation being educationally and intellectually irreparably crippled, the most immediate need is to create conditions for the universities to function as institutions completely free from violence, once and for all. Since the issue is a political one and quite recognisably so, people demand of the political leaders to please resolve it, separating it from the political rivalries that have put in jeopardy much of the country's possibilities, specially in its most vital sectors, higher education in special.

As for Dhaka University, it is at the very centre of the country's educational culture—and, because its role in the country's political past has been so pronounced; also of political culture. It sets the model—and pattern—for the rest of academic campuses to emulate.

How long will this state of thing be allowed to go on? The spiralling decline is happening beneath the eyes of political leaders of the two major parties. Campus violence that has become the despair of the country will never get solved unless the two major parties—i.e. the government as well as the opposition—make a joint bid to call it off, as a duty they both owe to the nation. We have said this before time and again. We say it again with a new sense of urgency, hoping the latter is shared by both party leaderships. There are and ought to be certain issues which require to be kept above party politics. Violence on academic campuses is at the top of them, for us in Bangladesh.

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