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Rotten Politics At Fault, Not Students

When the Prime Minister declared last Sunday that the government would ban student politics, if need be, to restore the academic environment of our educational institutions, we are sure she did not mean contentious politics but the kind that has, over the years, become the bane of Bangladesh. It is the mercenary, self-seeking, violence-and-crime-loving kind that no right-thinking citizen would want condemned. We hope the government would make an effort to suppress the difference. Positive student politics is an alternative for the national good and the sooner we suppress the delinquents within it the better for Bangladesh.

Once upon a time, student politics was full of idealism and hitched to the stars, as it were. But then, with the general decadence all around us, the idealism has been effectively elbowed out while street-wise elements have come to be favoured for their nuisance value. And in this, political mentors of all hues, including the party in power, have had a role to play in promoting trouble-mongers and sustaining an essentially symbiotic relationship between the parties and their student fronts.

Under the circumstances, no single party can clean up student politics. A national consensus on the issue, with all parties and the apolitical student community at large, is an imperative if we are to gradually undo the damage that years of rotten 'national' politics has done in the educational arena.

In a bid to contain the post-election spate of violence between ruling and opposition party student fronts Begum Zia had recently suspended the activities of the Chhatra Dal Central Committee, which is full of in-fighting as are the fronts of every party, testifying to the virtually intractable nature of the problem of present-day student politics. But it seems to be convinced that Begum Zia means what she says. Clearly, it needs much more than an unilateral declaration of intent from the Prime Minister, especially when some of her own party's chosen 'student' leaders are dubious, with regard to their age and occupation.

The gap between rhetoric and reality is wide, but not too wide that it cannot be bridged. If political will is strong enough and other key players cooperate in the interest of the nation, say the optimistic optimists. Debate and discussion across all fronts are necessary and all student fronts must be taken into confidence to work out a strategy whereby the intractable elements can be eased out and student politics restored to its former glory. Fond hopes, cynics say, knowing full well the utter criminalisation of politics in the country, indeed throughout South Asia.

Can a clean-up of student politics be achieved without a sea-change in the way the national political game is played—using all the money, muscle and wickedness available to capture power? If so, all the various fronts are just a reflection of the political parties whose immediate goals have nothing to do with grabbing power and enjoying it while it lasts. The people in whose name politics is played are more or less excluded, just as the students are in the matter little to the 'leaders' who capture halls, run late business bids, hoard benefits and climb the economic ladder—including even seats in Parliament.

The only hope out of this ignominious and corrupt people state of affairs may lie in the ordinary hands of the ordinary students, who suffer because of the politicised activities of both national and student politics.