

Student Bodies And Social Movements

In 1948 Jinnah, while addressing the students of the Dhaka University, announced that Urdu and only Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan. He did not foresee that this would anger the students or that they would take to the streets. Prior to this there was no formal student organisation in the university as neither Nazimuddin or Nurul Amin were in favour of student politics, but once the students had been roused, there was no holding of them. When the Awami League came to power along with the Jukta (Joint) Front in 1954 and the Chhatra League and Chhatra Union were formed, students began to play a role in politics. But in 1958, when Ayub Khan declared martial law, he banned politics but later on he too tried to use the students for his own ends, but it was this that was his undoing and ultimately the students forced him to step down. Since then, those at the helm of affairs have in turn, tried to use the students for their own ends with varying degrees of success, so who can we say is responsible for the current impasse? None other than the politicians themselves, those who now seek to ban politics on campus. But students have demonstrated their importance in bringing changes that contribute to national well-being, and the chances are they will continue to do so, no matter what as they see themselves as the saviour of the nation.

The difference between pre-Liberation and post-Liberation student politics is that prior to 1971, student bodies were free from direct political influence. As such they were always able to organise movements around important issues like the Language Movement. After 1971 things began to change when the Chhatra League found itself in a position of power and though technically, it was still free from party control, it was managed by the Awami League but after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and when the martial law government suspended politics, things quietened down until Ziaur Rahman reintroduced politics and political parties, even to the extent of forming his own, student organisations gained legitimacy and student leaders were elevated to positions of power by party leaders. That the consequences for the academic institutions would be severe was not immediately recognized and when it was, it was too late. In fact it may well be too late to prevent them from mounting movements against what they view as an injustice, but so long as politicians are pulling their strings, we can expect no peace on campus. But whether this problem can be solved by enforcing a ban remains to be seen as people depend on the students to perform in their role as the conscious section of society, and as they have always played their role well they will surely do so again. Ayub Khan was warned not to "poke up the students." This is a warning that should be taken to heart by today's politicians.