

# The cost of politicising VC appointment

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Arafat Rahaman



**Is involvement in politics a crime? Education Minister ANM Ehsanul Hoque Milon posed that question while defending the government's decision to appoint vice-chancellors to seven universities and a new chairman of the University Grants Commission on Monday. The answer is no. A scholar does not surrender the right to political belief by entering academia. Nor would it be fair to dismiss the new VCs simply as political operatives.**

However, that is not the question these appointments raise. The real question is whether a public university can remain autonomous when its highest offices are handed to academics closely tied to the ruling party's political structure.



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The new VC of Dhaka University is also the education affairs secretary of BNP central committee. The new UGC chairman sits on the party chairperson's advisory council. At Dhaka University, such appointments do more than fill offices; they show whom the state considers trustworthy enough to run its oldest and most sought-after university.

And the concern is not only political—it is institutional. Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong, and Jahangirnagar universities are supposed to have VCs appointed from senate-elected panels. But that structure has repeatedly been delayed, bypassed or drained of meaning, now even under an elected government.

The government says it reviewed research output, publications, citations, and academic credentials before making the appointments. That may well be true. But the public has not been told what criteria were used, whether there was a shortlist, who else was considered, how partisan office was weighed against academic independence, or why these names emerged as the best choices. If merit truly guided these decisions, the government should make the basis public. The fact that every successful candidate is linked to Sada Dal, Zia Parishad or the Nationalist Teachers' Forum makes one conclusion hard to avoid: that political comfort came first, merit later.

To understand why this is problematic, we need only look at recent history. The first casualty is recruitment. A VC who arrives through patronage is often expected to reward the network that helped secure the post. Rajshahi University under former VC Prof M Abdus Sobhan remains a clear example. In 2021, this daily reported that he publicly said Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) men would get the highest priority in university jobs. On his last day in office, defying a government embargo, he oversaw the mass appointment of 137 teachers and staff.

The second casualty is campus governance. A partisan VC often comes to rely on ruling party student cadres to maintain control. At Jahangirnagar University, former Awami League-backed VC Prof Farzana Islam facéd allegations of distributing money from a major development project to BCL leaders to keep them pacified in 2019. The result was protest, violence, and institutional paralysis.

The practice of partisan appointments is bipartisan. Under the Awami League, the Blue panel, a teachers platform backed by AL and allied bodies, became a pipeline to vice-chancellorships. A 2022 report by this daily found that 39 of 48 VCs had held posts in pro-government teachers' organisations, and that 12 teachers associated with DU Blue panel had become VCs elsewhere.

Then came the July uprising in 2024. The interim government took charge, with the promise to break away from this culture, among others. But that promise did not last. As The Daily Star reported in December 2024, the interim administration quickly gave in to the same political logic, appointing 30 VCs and 18 pro-VCs and treasurers with links to pro-BNP and pro-Jamaat teachers' bodies. Instead of dismantling the machinery of patronage, it merely changed the list of beneficiaries.

When the interim did form a search committee in May 2025, they did so after the top administrative posts in at least 47 public universities had already been filled. Reform arrived after the spoils had been distributed.

The latest appointments suggest that the BNP government has now dropped even that limited pretence, returning openly to executive selection through partisan comfort.

As a result, Bangladesh remains trapped in a cycle in which successive governments rely on politically driven appointments because no credible system has been built to restrain them. But warnings have existed for decades. The 1991 interim government's education task force, the 2003 education commission, and the UGC's Strategic Plan for 2006-2026 all recommended an independent, legally empowered national search committee.

More than five decades after independence, Bangladesh still has no uniform policy for appointing VCs. Even where the law envisages a senate-based route, the process is too easily delayed, bent or bypassed. Elsewhere, the space for executive discretion is wider still.

So, why has reform failed for so long? Because the current arrangement serves governments too well. It gives them manageable campuses, loyal administrators, and leaders less likely to resist partisan recruitment, challenge student violence, or defend dissent when it becomes inconvenient.

That is why this issue is bigger than the names announced this week. VCs shape recruitment, promotions, procurement, discipline, research culture, and the moral tone of a campus. Once the office is politically captured, the damage spreads through departments, halls, and classrooms.

If the government is serious about building a merit-based administration, it must prove it where it matters most. It must establish a legally binding and uniform appointment framework for all public universities, publish clear eligibility criteria and shortlists, ensure that senate elections are held on time where required by law, and introduce meaningful performance reviews for the sitting VCs.

This is the real test of the post-uprising era. The question is not whether a teacher's involvement in politics is a crime, but whether the state is willing to stop treating universities as conquered territories, to be managed through blind loyalty.

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**Arafat Rahaman** is a journalist at *The Daily Star*. He can be reached at [arafat.mcj@yahoo.com](mailto:arafat.mcj@yahoo.com).

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