

Research & Application

The Bangladesh Jute Research Institute sits astride the nation's most pricey land — just opposite the Jatiya Sangsad. And all 27 acres of it. Successive governments must have been overly respectful to the organisation to house it and keep it there. But the story of its chequered — and bizarre — existence over the last 47 years speaks a completely different tale. It says plainly that the governments never gave a damn — for what BJRI did or did not, or for that matter, whether it existed or not. Why this appalling gap between appearance and reality?

Alternative use must be found for jute, if it is to continue as a national asset. It must give us things besides sacking and carpetbacking. And HYVs. Set up a research institute and burden it with everything other than trading in jute, the governments thought. There subsequently came into being very similar research institutes, the BCSIR and the Rice Research Institute. From research to industrial-commercial exploitation of the exertions of the scientists — the rate is frustrating in all cases. But not as saddening as it is in the case of jute research institute. A Daily Star report put it at one in 47 years. Why this poor rate? And why BJRI be a failure extraordinaire?

It cannot be that our people are not innovation-friendly. Look at shallow engines powering all our country boats, heavy-bulk freighters included. It was innovated by a faceless village blacksmith in Bogra and we could not care to remember his name.

If inventions and innovations made by these institutes were only made by private initiative, many of these would have affected our society radically. The governments have a way of going for things grandiose and then sabotaging these into worse than nothing. If the government wanted to fulfill all of its needs for blankets — for armed services and BDR and police etc — by buying the BJRI jute-blanket, manufacturers would have mobbed BJRI for the stuff, competitive as it is in both price and quality with the material government buys from abroad.

The government must look into BJRI with both earnestness and seriousness. By the way, what happened to green jute paper? Was the thing plagued with insurmountable technical flaws? If not, why the paper isn't here? Because it is a government baby?

Preparedness Chink

It is perhaps coincidentally symbolic of our helplessness against natural disasters that at a time when most parts of the country are struggling to retain their spatial identity by nosing above the expanse of onrushing flood waters, the Disaster Management Bureau wears a deserted look. No, the Dhanmondi office of this emergency agency of the government has not been marooned by flood water forcing its staff to perch themselves up in some safer place elsewhere. But, as a report published in a leading Bangla daily informs us, eleven of the fourteen of its officials are out of station either on leave or training courses abroad.

Now, that anonymous official at the Disaster Management Bureau might have not done any disservice to logic in saying that all those training stints were scheduled beforehand and, therefore, any last-minute change was not on and also that they have no role to play in rescue or relief operations. But the fact of the matter is this has become a pattern in almost every government office. People go on leave, go abroad and almost invariably overstay as if they could not care less. In other words, accountability is in such short supply that it really does not matter who is where at what time. Right from the top to bottom it is such a vicious cycle of unscrupulousness, a total lack of sensitivity to service norms. We believe some order, some element of accountability has to be injected into the public sector administration. Going by experience, no hell will break loose if things are not changed immediately but the gap between people and government will only increase. And that will help the cause of neither governance nor democracy.

Workers' Management

The government's lackadaisical privatisation programme is about to take a different route. The high-powered committee on loss-making industries, headed by the Finance Minister, has decided to make over nine sick textile mills to the workers and employees of those units. Inputs to this radical decision-making came from a number of labour leaders who sat on that committee along with the ministers, state ministers and secretaries of all the relevant ministries: finance, industries, textiles, jute and labour. Five MPs from the ruling party also participated in it. An operationalisation committee has been duly formed with the state minister for textiles as its head to complete the process of handover expeditiously.

This move augurs well from the practical point of view, not to mention the high principle involved in workers' management of industries which has come in limited vogue in Europe. When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina declared early in the day that workers and employees of sick industries would be given the first preference to pool their resources and take them over before others were considered, many people tended to keep their fingers crossed over it. But we welcomed the resurrection of an idea that had been toyed with earlier on but never seriously attempted by any government. We see in the high-powered committees' decision a potential for breaking the disinvestment stalemate. Labour resistance has been the most virulent against privatisation and they should now feel assuaged on that score. And cooperate with the government in addressing the unfinished disinvestment agenda.

The workers ought to have some stake in the mills through equity participation. And, the long-term credit that they are almost certain to receive from the banks should oblige them to run the industries with top-gear efficiency and professionalism.

Nobody is looking for old wine in a new bottle.

By-poll: Victory May Lie in Defeat!

A single seat in the Parliament can never be a gate-way to success to the next general election. Rather, the sense of non-interference and rigged-free polls that dawned on them could prize heavily in future.



Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

Maneuverings' to rig the election and when came the first reports of a favourable trend, a scheduled press conference, apparently set to reject a presumably rigged poll result, had to be hurriedly cancelled.

The post-poll reaction by BNP the spokesman appeared as more mocking: "If there were no 'rigging' the margin of victory would have been larger than 10 thousand votes." We can, perhaps, humbly ask the spokesman: "Does a student copy in the examinations hall to pass or to narrow the gap between pass and fail marks? We expect BNP to get over its myopic mind-set that considers every win a rascal and every defeat a rig. And the sooner, the better.

Perhaps, the spectre of Magura by-poll is always haunting the BNP. As the wearer knows where the shoe pinches, so does BNP what and what not' a government in power can do in by-polls. But each experience so far should have taught them the lesson that gone are, probably, those days when you could repeat

Magura variety exercise. People have become much more aware now than before — and so is government — to glean the truth that massive rigging for a single seat might cost all the seats through mass upsurge.

Thanks to AL that it continued with past policies on many fronts excepting the one relating to the by-polls. And here lies the realisation and the victory. Rightly said that a single seat in the Parliament can never be a gate-way to success to the next general election. Rather, the sense of non-interference and rigged-free polls that dawned on them could prize heavily in future.

The opposition is there and should be there for movement against the government. The opposition-led movements

should put its house in order following the disarray caused by the resignation. We want that the strong opposition in the Parliament posit its most positive performance in the sphere of national socio-economic and political issues. Apparently, from CHT peace treaty to Ganges water treaty to by-polls, no move seems to be right. The miserable failure in mobilizing countrymen against these steps and thus cause a mass upsurge should signal a different strategy to face the government.

As far as the present moment is concerned, the only way that BNP can regain some of its lost opportunities is to regularly participate in parliamentary deliberations. It should, at the same time, brush aside the idea of a mid-term poll.

A recently-concluded household survey in seven villages in Bangladesh tells us that about 60 per cent of the respondents consider the treaties done by the government as harmful. More importantly, about 70 per cent of the respondents think that both ruling and opposition

parties failed in keeping their pre-election pledges. And almost three-fourths informed that hartals should not be used by the opposition to press home its demands. The reported government inabilities include: failure to provide fair price to farmers, rising toll collections and law and order situations.

Given the above information, both government and opposition should re-arrange their strategies to meet people till the next general election. Time is very scarce. To catch the train towards 21st century, the old-style politics and governance should be shelved to give place to innovative approaches to the socio-economic and political ills pervading the society.

The opposition should also take note of another important consequence. Their failure to float genuine issues before the public, creating unnecessary panic and by-passing democratic route to power might cause more harm than good for BNP as well as for the country. It is simply because a sensible and strong opposition is very much needed at this nascent stage of our democracy. One should keep in mind, some defeats are more valuable than victories.

Tension Mounts as Democrats Press Shaky Junta

Myanmar's pro-democracy movement is alive but has scarcely been kicking in recent years, with the military maintaining its grip on the country. But now, 10 years after protesters spilled onto the streets, Gemini News Service reports that an atmosphere of unrest is again building. Satya Sivaraman writes from Bangkok

TENSION is growing in Myanmar as the 10th anniversary of the pro-democracy uprising approaches amid distinct signs that the military junta and opposition are squaring up for confrontation.

The atmosphere of instability if fuelled by popular discontent over severe economic problems and by persistent rumours that General Ne Win — the ageing former dictator who remained a powerful force after he stepped down — is seriously ill and possibly close to death.

Reports from Rangoon say more troops have appeared on the streets recently, and several members of the main opposition party are said to have been arrested.

We are quite confident that there will be another uprising soon because the feeling among many activists is that it is a do-or-die situation now," says Moe Thee Zun, a leader of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front, currently in exile in Thailand.

It was on 8 August 1988, that students led thousands of people onto the streets of Rangoon, Mandalay and other major cities in Myanmar (formerly Burma) in demonstrations against the military government headed by long-time ruler Ne Win. The movement led to Ne Win's resignation, but only for him to be replaced by a State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) composed of his hand-picked military men.

In recent weeks, the atmosphere in Myanmar has been worsening as the anniversary draws near. Alarmed by devel-

opments, two south-east Asian neighbours, Thailand and the Philippines, made the unprecedented move in early July of calling for a peaceful settlement of differences between the government in Rangoon and opposition forces.

The junta complained that the statements were 'unwarranted and an act of interference in internal affairs'. However, the foreign ministry in Bangkok justified its stand by pointing out that any violence in Myanmar would affect Thailand, which shares a 1,700-kilometre border.

Myanmar's opposition leader and Noble Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, has put pressure on SLORC by demanding a convention of parliament by late August.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won a landslide victory in the 1990 general election, but the results were never accepted by the military, which continues to cling on to power.

In late June, during anniversary celebration of the 1990 poll victory, Suu Kyi — who has so far advocated patience and dialogue with SLORC — challenged the junta to allow elected MPs to meet in parliamentary session. Many people saw her call as a long-awaited signal for mass agitation.

The military has responded by threatening to take legal action against her. The warnings were carried in commentaries in state-owned newspapers, saying: "The government and its people can no longer tolerate the acts of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who ignores the interest of the nation and people."

Similar warnings appeared in the media before Suu Kyi's 1989 house arrest, which lasted for six years.

Burmese pro-democracy activists based in Thailand say the military may be planning to re-arm her.

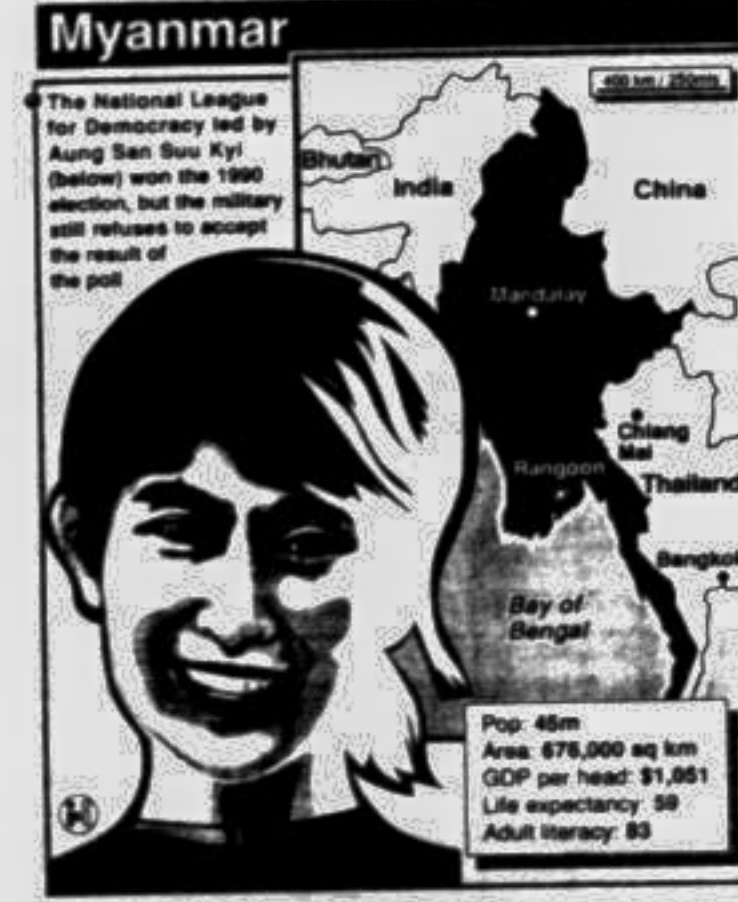
"If the military attempts to arrest Suu Kyi again or harm her in any way, the action will certainly trigger a mass protest from the public," says one Rangoon-based political analyst.

He argues that frustrations among various sections of Burmese society have reached a peak, and that the mood is similar to that before the 1988 street protests, when people were fed up with unemployment, rising prices and lack of basic freedoms.

The economy has slumped in recent months. The country, which ventured down the path of economic liberalisation in the early Nineties, has been hit hard by the East Asian financial crisis, which has dried up the trickle of foreign investment into Myanmar and undermined the currency, the kyat.

The economy was already in bad shape due to dwindling foreign-exchange reserves high inflation, chronic budget deficit and poor agricultural performance. The huge deficit, estimated to be equivalent to nearly 81 per cent of gross domestic product in 1997, has prompted the government to print more banknotes — pushing the currency down and prices up.

Officially valued at six to the US dollar, the kyat has fallen to 300 or more to the \$ on the



The writer is a Bangkok-based freelance journalist who specialises in the South-east Asian region.

OPINION Concurrence on Planned Projects

A Husnain

While the media is full of the problems of over-congested Dhaka metropolises, and the government is touting the future grandeur as a result of mega Master Plans on paper, with some initial funding lined up tentatively, it is a fact that things are neither moving nor micro schemes are put into immediate implementation, not on ad hoc basis, but on the basis of the first phase of the integrated master plan.

This first phase may be put on implementation stage of operation immediately to provide some relief to the 10 million residents. This cannot be done unless the coordination between the affected sectors and groups to the screened project concept outline.

The affected apex bodies are most of the time opposing some aspects of the Plan, and stall the operation. We are familiar with the threats of 'greater movements' if things do not go the way the vested groups desire; the government's decision take a second priority.

We have a peculiar style of doing things in this country: all vested groups take upon themselves the role of master planners, and dictate to the government what should be done, and in what way. Then what is the use of having a central government full of experts, supported by outside experts, and the plans and projects duly coordinated by the Planning Commission? Why is professionalism being challenged at the lower levels? There is only one basic

objective: public interest — any other viewpoint is subordinate. We are languishing for decades beating about the bush. How much have we advanced or developed project-wise since 1971? The plan/implementation ratio is poor. This is a huge waste for an economically backward country.

Are we suffering from too much freedom in the formal sector? Some top level body has to take the final decision and accord the approval, and that body is the government. What is unfortunate is that the administration's authority is being challenged at the retail lower working levels.

The political differences are supposed to be sorted out in the Parliament. There are too many forms of protests from all and sundry, and there is hardly any respect for Authority. Discussions and debates eat up a large part of our daily lives. We cannot agree on the approach to a problem, and no consideration is shown to the problems at the national level. This gesture of intolerance, based on self-centred interest (of groups) delays the start and completion of a project.

The spirit of working together is missing most of the time. There are political and sociological reasons for such backgrounds, but these are not new problems, and have been existing for decades. These have to be seriously addressed for reducing the systems loss. This 'approach' mentality has to be sorted out, before we can bite into project implementation.

Justice Zakir Ahmed: A Tribute

by Zagul Ahmed Chowdhury

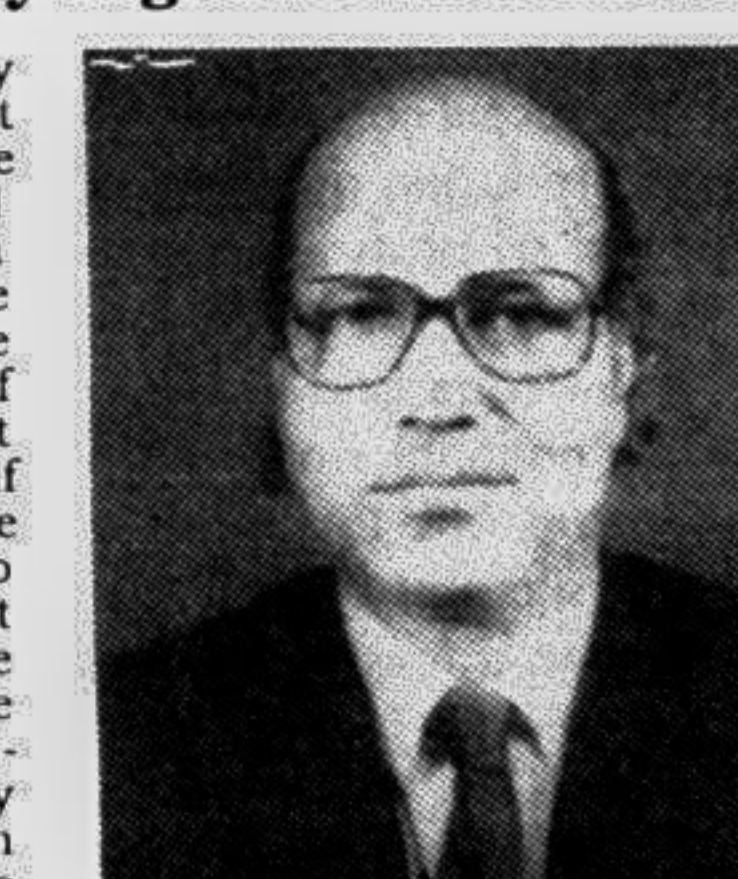
QUIETLY unobtrusively as he lived the last years of his life, Justice Zakir Ahmed slipped out of life. He joined the High Court division of the Supreme Court as an Additional Judge not long ago. Dying at the age of 56 for a Judge of the High Court is indeed very sad. The age itself will indicate that one cannot be a Judge for long since one has to attain an age for occupying that position in the Judiciary. He had although led an active life politically, socially and culturally till he became seriously engaged in the law profession during the last few years before joining the bench last year.

A killer disease crippled a relatively young Justice Zakir Ahmed. He was back to the bench after a treatment at the All India Medical Institute in New Delhi. He was looking happy and hearty when I met him at a marriage ceremony last March. It was during the 70th birthday celebration of a friend in New Delhi and the last medical treatment there, from where he never came back alive.

When I asked him how he was physically, Justice Zakir Ahmed whom I called 'Zakir Bhai' like many of his younger brother like friends replied enthusiastically "quite well," and then he added "I enjoyed the kachchi biryani — possibly I should not have eaten to my hearts content — after all I have returned from difficult medical treatment."

I thought to cheer him up, saying it would not affect if he had been in a while. Zakir Bhai, wearing his familiar smile, remarked, "you are right — who knows how long will I live!"

It was the last time I met him. The occasion was the marriage ceremony of the daughter of political figure and leftist leader Saifuddin Ahmed Manik at the Officers' Club. Since Mr Manik and his wife Dr. Fauzia are quite well-known in different circles, it was an occasion where people from different walks of life cutting across political and other lines were present. At the main table, there were Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia, Foreign Minister and senior Awami League leader Abdus



Samad Azad, some prominent local and foreign guests including Indian Deputy High Commissioner A K Basu and Justice Zakir Ahmed. After the meal, Zakir Bhai was mentioning about his medical treatment and the progress made.

But his conditions deteriorated soon and he had to go for treatment again in New Delhi for bone-marrow cancer. This time only his coffin returned home.

I had the privilege of knowing Zakir Bhai for three decades. Not that we met very frequently but he would greet with a broad smile no matter how long was the gap of seeing each other. At one stage, I knew him very closely but later I used to come across him only occasionally and that too in most cases after relatively wide gap as is the case these days with most us life being quite busy for obvious reasons.

I knew Zakir Bhai as a student leader turned progressive person who used to be seen in the cultural, literary, political and other occasions. His younger brother Professor Zakir Ahmed of political science at the Chittagong University was my class friend during the Dhaka University days — and that is how I knew Zakir Bhai closely and he would treat me as a younger brother-like friend. We had similarity on views on political and international affairs and I would enjoy talking to him. A freedom fighter, Zakir Bhai witnessed the human affairs with the impatience of a rebel and at the same time with the dispassion of a rebel as he

would thought of a society where disparities among people would be much less, and a more happy and contented society is created. As a moderate person, he would always espouse the need for integrity and honesty towards the end of changing the social pattern for the larger benefits of mankind. And he used to use his unrivalled skills as a good conversationalist to convince others for these needs.

When I was living in New Delhi as a Bangladesh journalist for few years in the early '80s, his younger brother and my friend Zahir (Badal) went there for his PhD. Zakir Bhai sent a number of letters introducing his brother to some friends there, and Zahir and I reached them to the recipients. When I returned home, he would insist visiting his house which I did from time to time. "You have not come to my official residence — please drop in at 37 Minto Road — now I am leading a quiet life as a judge," he said at the marriage ceremony.

Zakir Bhai was known to many people. His untimely death caused an avalanche of shock here. "He was at the same time gentle and lively," said a fellow judge when his namaz-e-janaza took place at the Supreme Court premises. Ministers, politicians, officials, journalists, writers, lawyers and many others attended his 'kalkhwan' (braving inclement weather). I attended it but it was my misfortune that I could not visit his official residence when he was alive. I will always miss his sage counsel and soft affection.

"Padakkhep" an organisation of the old Dhaka University students of 1964 of which Zakir Bhai belonged to, be-moaned his death as a great loss to his fellow batch mates. "He was loveable and prime figure of our time" — that is how Justice Zakir is seen by his batch-mate Dr. Farashuddin, the Vice-Chancellor of the East-West University and such sentiment echoes the minds of others as well.

Truly, he died young as a judge. Many of us will miss him but he will remain alive — his ever smiling face — in the minds of many.

To the Editor...

"Agro-based Leap" Sir, The lead editorial — "Agro-based Leap" — published on Sunday, July 19, 1998, thanking the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who has resurrected this obvious economic development option (i.e. agro-based industries) from the annals it had gone" deserves some comments. You are right in reminding your readers that you once called this sector "the potential golden geese". I cannot agree more with you.

Over the last three years, I have written about eight articles in my own column in the DS emphasizing its vital role in economic development of Bangladesh. To wit, the development of this sector meets five most important national economic objectives in one stroke: employment generation, least-cost industrial expansion, export growth, poverty alleviation and reduction of rural-urban migration.

Let me reproduce the titles of some of these articles: "The Agro-processing Sector: A Late Bloomer", March 15, 1998, "Agro-processing Sector and its Potentials", March 8, 1998, "Sources of Export Growth in Bangladesh", October 5, 1997, "Strengthening Export Supply Capacity of Bangladesh", September 28, 1997, "Bangladesh's Gold Mine and Agro-Industrial Development", October 20, 1996, "Agro-processing Sector, Growth and Poverty Alleviation", October 13, 1996, and "Dispersal of Industries Needed for Full Employment Growth", October 2, 1996.

Further, I think for the sake of objectivity and fairness, it would be right to say that this sector was among the "Thrust Sectors" of the previous government also the proof of which could be seen in the reductions of tariff in the budgets of 1992-95 on various imported inputs needed for stimulating productions in this sector. There is also a substantially large USAID funded technical assistance project known as the Agro-based Technology Development Project (ATDP) beginning in early 1995 and has

been doing fair amount of work in the areas of development of machineries, seeds, agro-processing and marketing. One should also note that over the last six years or so some large-scale and efficient agro-processing industries as well as fruits and vegetables exporting firms have successfully established themselves in the market. People have been taking advantage of tariff reductions and financial incentives given in the previous budgets.

However, it is good to see that the present government has begun to treat it as a "Thrust Sector" now. Just talking about it and holding seminars will not be enough, they will have to take some hard decisions to effect reallocation of resources to boost productions and exports of this sector.

Kabir U. Ahmad Dhaka

"How to Influence People and Loose Friends" Sir, I am really charmed to read the above mentioned subject and really surprised how Mr A Husnain has read my mind and stated what I wanted to say.

I think he has missed just one sentence without which the article should not be completed i.e. "What you say don't do it and what you do don't tell it".

I think Mr Husnain will not mind to include this simple one sentence. Tafur Dhaka

Tuition fee increase Sir, I was very happy to hear that Dhaka University has increased its tuition fees. This is a must for maintaining (if not for increasing) whatever standard of education our dear University have right now. This step should have taken a long time ago. Better late than never. One consequence of this will be that when the so-called political worker-students have

to pay through their noses, they should a little bit more concerned about their University education. As a matter of fact, the tuition fee should have increased a lot more. The more expensive a commodity is the more quality it has. Because the government is paying for most of the expenses, the students do not realize exactly what it is like to pay for education. This in turn does not cause enough respect to be generated for the University education.

One of the two places where politics should be completely banned is at the education sector. The student do not need to be politically involved (maybe concerned only) any more because it is not like that of Bangladesh is not independent or that our language is facing a threat of extinction. If anything the cultural Bangla language has evolved for the worse than it was even ten years ago. A few of the reasons for this are: students are getting involved in politics are, either to show off or to bully other students, cafeteria workers, University administration and once in while getting killed in the process by their colleagues (!). And the main reason that they are able to do that is because the tuition and boarding expenses at the University are very low. They do not have to worry about where their next meal is going to come from. It is usually that all they have to do is go to a Residential cafeteria and order for the food. Paying for the food is the least concern on their mind. After all they are the political workers. This has generated a vicious circle which is being exploited primarily by the political parties, the teachers and the so-called student leaders who either brandish arms or about 40/45 years old and still could get over their LOVE of the University.

So congratulations to the administration for raising the tuition expenses. This should be welcomed by the students. And the government should extend whatever support the University needs for the country's higher education benefits. Mahhubur Rashid LA, California, USA