

Overdue uniform grading system

Its time-bound introduction needed now

WE are heartened by the fact that as many as 75 vice-chancellors of universities, both public and private, have agreed, in principle, to implement the University Grant Commission (UGC)'s recommendations for introduction of a uniform grading system. The marks upon which grades are based differ from university to university. For instance, the marks that win A+ grade for a student in a particular university would simply make A grade in another university. The same happens down the ladder. The net result of the differentiated marking is that students of similar merit are being evaluated differently in the job market and in terms of accessing higher education overseas. Not only are the students subjected to different marking systems, the exam results too are published in different ways. The upshot of all this is discrimination in the name of so-called independent marking systems.

The confusing grading systems sent a wrong signal to overseas university authorities about our standard of higher education itself, although in our view, marking system and standard of education are not one and the same thing. But it is understandable that in determining equivalence between degrees, foreign universities may be confused by the different markings. Our students could be at a disadvantage and sometimes they are. Even for the sake of the local corporate job market, it is highly essential that there is uniformity in the grading system.

Let's face it, even after uniformity is established in the grading system, we would still have the big agenda of bringing uniformity in the academic standards.

The UGC draft proposal has an important recommendation for having an "external examiner" evaluate the examination script to which some VCs have had objections on the ground that it might create sessions jam. The nine-tier grading system has evoked some criticism as well. They are yet to decide on the timing of the introduction. The academic councils of different universities will now submit their draft proposals vis-a-vis the UGC's set of recommendations. It's encouraging for all stakeholders that a consultative method has been adopted to arrive at a consensus on these issues. We would urge them to complete the process in good time for the uniform grading system to be introduced in the next academic session.

Stop the effluence, save the rivers

Relocating the tanneries is imperative

RIVERS are the lifelines of the people of Bangladesh. Thus, to see the inaction on the part of the government while some of these rivers face veritable demise due to continuous poisoning as a result of dumping of industrial wastes is unacceptable. These rivers can be saved by only one way, which is by shifting those industries that are producing the poisonous wastes and dumping these into the rivers; and while that is being done, making it mandatory on these industries to treat the wastes before running them off.

Three of the major rivers that skirt Dhaka city have been polluted beyond description resulting in severe damages to the fauna of the area in particular. The dry season brings about the biggest damage since the run off through the Buriganga, Turag and the Balu is greatly reduced at this time causing severe stagnation, and the problem is further aggravated by the dumping of the thousand of cubic meters of lethal industrial wastes. While the environment is being damaged beyond redemption the people are also being deprived from a rich source of protein, fish.

One is at a loss to understand why these tanneries are not being shifted to a more suitable place away from the major habitat, where the industrial wastes could be managed efficiently? In spite of the plan that is more than a decade old and in spite of the concerns raised by the environmentalists to prevent pollution of the rivers, no action is palpable. The PM was heard several times talking about the matter but that was all; people of the area continue to suffer.

It is difficult to rationalise the inordinate delay and the insensitivity in handling a matter of such serious environmental concern. One is given to understand that the main obstacle to shifting of the errant industries is acquisition of land or more exactly the process of acquisition that has become a veritable mega corruption enterprise.

It is time the government move fast before it is more than fish that ended up dead in these rivers.

MANZOOR AHMED

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The development of higher education for the next two decades has been initiated by the Ministry of Education. A strategic planning committee representing academia, the government, and the civil society has been formed to guide this process. Six committees with their secretariat at the University Grants Commission have prepared draft reports on the vision of higher education, its future shape and size, quality and governance issues, and financing and resource requirements. The six reports have been summarized into a consolidated draft which has been the subject of consultation with academic groups. This is a welcome initiative. The consultations held so far have repeatedly emphasized three general points: (a) Quality of higher education has to be defined in terms of its relevance to national development objectives and reducing inequities in society and educational opportunities, (b) Quality and governance issues are inextricably connected, and (c) The government has to demonstrate its good faith in pursuing genuine reform and

Suicide bombers in Bangladesh and beyond

Islamic scholars and thinkers who assembled in Dhaka at a regional seminar held in September, negated categorically all kinds of violence and intolerance in Islamic faith. The alem-ulema, who invariably look upon themselves as the successors of the Prophet (SA) for preaching the religion of Islam through exhortation and admonition, should take the leadership in upholding the real teachings of Islam. The media may also play a strong role in unmasking those who are misinterpreting Islam to execute their evil plans.

ANM NURUL HAQUE

THE term suicide bombing dates back to the 1940s, when it was used in reference to certain German and Japanese war tactics, but did not gain its present meaning until 1981. This tactic became widely known during the Second World War in the Pacific as Allied ships were attacked by Japanese kamikaze pilots who caused maximum damage by flying their explosive-laden aircraft into military targets.

Suicide bombing has become a favourite with guerrillas, rebels, and especially terrorist groups, notably in the Middle East and Sri Lanka since the 1980s, for its high lethality. According to Yoram Schweitzer of the Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Israel, the Tamil Tigers were the most effective and brutal terrorist organization ever to utilize suicide terrorism. Since the Tigers signed a cease-fire in 2001, suicide bombings by Islamist terrorists, mostly in the Al-Qaeda infitadah and the Iraqi insurgency, have been the most frequent and cumulatively destructive. The September 11, 2001 attacks in New York using hijacked airplanes became the largest and most destructive individual suicide bombings.

The doctrine of asymmetric warfare views suicide bombing as an imbalance of power, in which groups with little significant power resort to suicide bombing as a

response to actions of a group with greater power. Suicide bombings are only common when one side in a violent conflict lacks the means for effective and conventional attacks. The cost-benefit analysis of suicide bombing, expressed by Al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, is: "The method of martyrdom operation is the most successful way of inflicting damage against the opponent and the least costly to the mujahidin in terms of casualties." The strategic rationale may be military, political, or both. The target may be military, in which case the bombing is usually classified as an act of war, or civilian, in which case it is usually considered terrorism.

The suicide bombing has also become a favourite with the Islamic militants in Bangladesh in recent days. Two senior assistant judges were killed and four others were injured on November 14 at Jhalakathi district town when a militant member of a JMB suicide squad hurled a bomb on the microbus carrying the judges. The suicide bombers also hit Chittagong and Gazipur courts killing 10 persons and injuring more than 70 people. The horrific bombings occurred on the court premises on November 29, just two days after the Supreme Court judges received death threats from the JMB suicide bombers. The bomb attacks targeting the lawyers in the courts of Chittagong and Gazipur, killed three advocates, policemen, and litigants.

The suicide bombers of JMB are mostly young madrasa students from poor and lower middle-class families with rural backgrounds. They usually hold strong religious beliefs though some may have had difficult childhoods. The ritualistic communion of the Islamic extremist groups to which they belong, in addition to their strongly-held religious beliefs, helps motivate their decision to commit suicide for religion, the rewards of an afterlife may provide additional impetus. It has been learnt that the youths undertaking suicide bombings are simply following what they are taught to be their religious duty, and regard their own lives in this world as less important compared to the next eternal life. The radical schools of Islam teach that martyrdom is rewarded in the afterlife. So they are willing to sacrifice their own life in the hope of becoming a martyr, though the difference between suicide, which the Qur'an condemns, and martyrdom is not known to them.

The first modern suicide bombing involving explosives deliberately carried in 1981, perfected by the factions of the Lebanese Civil War and especially by the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka. The tactic had spread to dozens of countries by 2005. Those hardest-hit were Lebanon during its civil war, Sri Lanka during its prolonged ethnic conflict, Israel and the Palestinian Territories since 1994, and Iraq since the invasion in 2003.

Lebanon, during its civil war, saw the first modern suicide bombing: the Islamic Dawa Party's car bombing of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut, in December 1981. Hezbollah's bombing of the US embassy in April 1983 and attack on United States Marine and French barracks in October 1983 brought suicide bombings international attention. The Tamil Tigers perfected the tactic of suicide bombing and inspired its use elsewhere. Their Black Tiger unit committed at least 168 suicide bombings since 1987, using more than 240 attackers. Their victims included former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and many prominent Sri Lankan leaders.

Various alternate terms have been used to frame the act of suicide bombing. The militant Islamist groups like Al Qaeda, lionize suicide bombers as shaheed or martyr. The Islamist use of shaheed for the bomber or martyrdom operation for the bombing emphasize the self-sacrificial aspects, while the term "homicide bombing" has been preferred by the George W. Bush administration and some right-leaning media outlets, as the bomber kills others.

According to Professor Charles A. Kimball, chairman of the Department of Religion at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, the vast majority of Muslims believe that the holy Qur'an forbid suicide. He said, "There is only one verse in the Qur'an that contains a phrase related to suicide, Verse 4:29 of the Qur'an reads: 'O you who believe! Do not consume your wealth in the wrong way-rather through trade mutually agreed to, and do not kill yourselves. Surely Allah is merciful toward you,' but some commentators believe that the phrase 'do not kill yourselves' is better translated 'do not kill each other,' and some translations reflect that."

Mainstream Islamic groups such

as the European Council for Fatwa and Research use the Quranic verse Al-Anam 6:151 ("And take not life, which Allah has made sacred, except by way of justice and law") as further reason to prohibit suicide. In addition, the Hadith unambiguously forbid suicide.

Some mainstream Muslim clerics, while condemning the July 7 London bombings, have stated that under certain circumstances Islamic suicide bombings are justified. For example, Sayed Mohammed Musawi, head of the World Islamic League in London, insisted "there should be a clear distinction between the suicide bombing of those who are trying to defend themselves from occupiers, which is something different from those who kill civilians, which is a big crime." Furthermore, some Islamist militant organisations including Al Qaeda, Hamas and Islamic Jihad argue that martyrdom operations are justified according to Islamic law, despite Islam's strict prohibition of suicide and murder. However the vast majority of Muslims believe suicide attacks are generally forbidden by Islam.

Since four suicide bombings occurred in London on July 7, there have been many scholastic refutations of suicide bombings from Sunni Muslims. Insanic Intelligence, a London-based Islamic think-tank, published their two-year study into suicide bombings in the name of Islam, titled "The Hijacked Caravan", which concluded that, "The technique of suicide bombing is anathema, antithetical and abhorrent to Sunni Islam. It is considered legally forbidden, constituting a reprehensible innovation in the Islamic tradition, morally an enormity of sin combining suicide and murder and theologically an act which has consequences of eternal damnation." The Oxford-based Malayist jurist, Shaykh Muhammad Affi al-

Akili, issued his landmark fatwa on suicide bombing and targeting innocent civilians, titled "Defending the Transgressed, by Censuring the Reckless against the Killing of Civilians", where he states suicide bombing in its most widespread form, is forbidden: "If the attack involves a bomb placed on the body or placed so close to the bomber that when the bomber detonates it the bomber is certain to die, then the more correct position according to us is that it does constitute suicide."

In his book entitled "The Road to Martyrs Square: A Journey into the World of the Suicide Bomber" the US writer and researcher Anne Marie Oliver has suggested the motives of the suicide bombers. These are religion, nationalism, grievance, fame, glory, and money. But money and religion are the main motivating factors for suicide bombers in Bangladesh. The poverty-stricken innocent youths become easy prey as recruits who are indoctrinated to believe that their sacrifice will be rewarded by Allah.

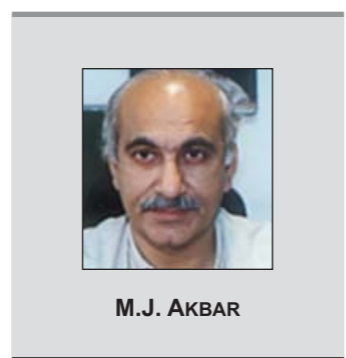
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The writer is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

The Bush fade

BYLINE

Let me suggest an alternative scenario. Once Bush and Blair get out of Iraq, if they do it on their watch, the insurgency will end. There will be some residual violence, because this messy war will have left deep sectarian wounds. But, sooner rather than later, the insurgency will be absorbed into Iraqi life, mostly into its politics and partly into its armed forces.



M.J. AKBAR

THE best thing about 2005 is surely the fact that it has reduced one year from the term of President George Bush. The wisdom of limits has sometimes been questioned, particularly when a sensible President like Bill Clinton comes along. But a George Bush always turns up to reinforce the merits of the law.

George Bush is not malevolent. I have this sneaking suspicion sometimes that he might even mean well. He certainly wants a theoretical democracy to prevail all over the world, for the commendable reason that with all its faults it is the most honest system of governance yet devised. He is simply a man of little understanding, which makes him a victim of the last thing he has understood. Sometimes this is in harmony with previous logic, sometimes in

direct contravention, but once he is convinced about something it becomes a conviction, until the next thing he chooses to understand comes along.

His views are a slide presentation of shifting certainties. Because he is well-meaning he is totally sincere about each slide. He was as certain about the need to use torture in America's war against terror before December 10, as he was sure on the 11th that torture should, pace the John McCain amendment, never be a part of American policy. He does not abandon a past position; he simply forgets about it and seizes ownership of each defeat by reformulating it as victory.

He is not simple. That would be an underestimation. You cannot win two elections in America by being simple. But he is simplistic. He defers easily to those who prey upon his weaknesses with a simple ruse: they win his trust by applauding his horizon, and then map out highways that have little to do with objectives. Having led him to the centre of that inflammatory maze called Iraq, they are now charting non-existent escape routes booby-trapped with death. When a proper history of his years as the most powerful man in the world is written, it will be a long story of some success, substantial failure -- but most

of all a narrative of unintended consequences.

Bush was elected in 2000 to take America away from the problems of the world. Those were the innocent days during which he mispronounced "Musharraf." He was re-elected in 2004 to make America safe from the problems of the world. He will leave, in 2008, America more vulnerable to the problems of the world than it has been in a long while.

On paper, he wants to change the Middle East by changing Iraq into a democracy. In practice, Iraq is heading towards what might be called a radical-democracy, where popular support has shifted decisively towards those who oppose American policy as well as American values. The one thing that Shias and Sunnis are now agreed upon in Iraq is that Americans must leave their land. Kurds support the Bush White House in the hope of achieving independence, or near independence, and that is not an option that anyone in the neighbourhood wants to hear about. Unless matters are managed with tact and intelligence, they could suffer the fate of the South Vietnamese. The radical-democracy syndrome is visible in Egypt as well, where President Hosni Mubarak opened a vent, possibly so that the West could see who would crawl out from the democratic woodwork. The only

surprise when the Muslim Brotherhood got 88 seats in the legislature was why they did not get more.

George Bush and his fawn Tony Blair have now come to the end of their list of reasons for staying in Iraq. They now say that they must stay to train the Iraq army so that it is able to fight the insurgency. In other words, they cannot pull out because of a problem that did not exist before they came. There was no insurgency before the Occupation. (The average death rate, by the way, is 30 per day; Iraqis also die, although there is reluctance to recognise this.) So we have the classic conundrum. American and British troops will not leave until the insurgency is controlled; and the insurgency will not end unless the Anglo-American armies go. Welcome to the near future.

Sometimes I wonder if policymakers in Washington and London know what they are talking about. Every day you hear and read, from sources both civilian and military, that the Occupation forces must arm and train an Iraqi army that can fight the insurgency after the Occupiers depart. This is the civil-war theory: after us, the deluge. This is a familiar of history: empire is always justified in terms of the good that it is doing (civilisation, trade, economic growth, et al), and there is always going to be chaos after they leave, if the slaves have the temerity to ask them to leave. Winston Churchill kept harping on the chaos that would descend on India once the Haileybury and Oxbridge Sahibs left.

Let me suggest an alternative scenario. Once Bush and Blair get out of Iraq, if they do it on their watch, the insurgency will end. There will be some residual vio-

lence, because this messy war will have left deep sectarian wounds. But, sooner rather than later, the insurgency will be absorbed into Iraqi life, mostly into its politics and partly into its armed forces. We have already seen how Shia militias have become an element in Iraq's politics and emerging power structure. Space will be created for the Sunnis as well, since common sense suggests that sectarian domination does not work. What, however, about unintended consequences? Will George Bush, over the coming two years, help create an Iraqi army which could become the strongest Arab force in the region? Could such an army become a formidable counterweight to Israel, particularly if it works in alliance with Iran? The days, incidentally, of the Iraq-Iran conflict, which brought such legitimate joy to Washington and London, are over.

Bush is doing Iraq's Shias a favour they will never forget; has given Iran's government a lifeline it will never acknowledge; and might have weakened Israel to an extent it will never admit.

It is remarkable that the Bush fade began so soon after the Bush pinnacle. Normally, a re-elected President has two years for a cruise towards history, free from the sinews of political compulsions. By the third year of a second term a President begins to look like the past rather than the present or the future, and starts his farewell visits around the world. In the case of George Bush, the American voter began to ask the very questions that he had ignored when sending him to the White House to continue his war. At the heart of this questionnaire was the most basic of all questions: Every war has a point, what is the point of the Iraq war?

Having admitted that all past answers were wrong, Bush is struggling to find a new answer. If all he can offer is a genie called an imagined Caliphate, then there is very little hope for sanity.

There was a poignant moment in the Bush year of 2005, widely publicised when some embedded but obviously disobedient camera captured a scrawl on a notepad. I can imagine the scene: a worthy but never-ending conference at the United Nations where protocol is in command. At some point, Bush sent a note to Condoleezza Rice wondering if there was any chance of a "bathroom break." I daresay nature doesn't change its rules for the high and mighty. Presidents and Prime Ministers need a break as often as you and I. Bush surely wasn't the first eminence to need one. Would Bill Clinton have sent such a note to Madeleine Albright? Somehow, I don't think so. I rather see him as getting up, making a small but meaningful joke, and promising to return as soon as he could.

Television news channels would not have interrupted their broadcasts to telecast this. George Bush has confidence; you can see it in the arms that loop over on either side, rather than fall down straight, and there is just a hint of swagger in the stride and the eyes. But I am not too sure that he has self-confidence.

M.J. Akbar is Chief Editor of the Asian Age.

OPINION

Another private Islamic university!

The unchecked growth of religion-based educational institutions, without a strategy for defining clearly their place and role in the national education system, has even more far-reaching and irreversible consequences than the misguided moves on the undersea cable link or the Asian highway network.

MANZOOR AHMED

THE decision reported in the press to grant permission for setting up a new private Islamic university puts a bold question mark on the government's good faith about its educational goals and strategies. The decision casts doubt on government intentions regarding its proclaimed desire to improve the quality of education, including higher education, and pursue strategies for educational development that serve national goals and aspirations in the 21st century.

The development of higher education for the next two decades has been initiated by the Ministry of Education. A strategic planning committee representing academia, the government, and the civil society has been formed to guide this process. Six committees with their secretariat at the University Grants Commission have prepared draft reports on the vision of higher education, its future shape and size, quality and governance issues, and financing and resource requirements. The six reports have been summarized into a consolidated draft which has been the subject of consultation with academic groups. This is a welcome initiative. The consultations held so far have repeatedly emphasized three general points: (a) Quality of higher education has to be defined in terms of its relevance to national development objectives and reducing inequities in society and educational opportunities, (b) Quality and governance issues are inextricably connected, and (c) The government has to demonstrate its good faith in pursuing genuine reform and

take the lead in depoliticizing education issues and forging a consensus through open dialogue.

Questions arise at several levels. What do we know about the educational missions and goals of the new university under the sponsorship of Delwar Hussain Saidi, a person with a highly controversial and allegedly criminal past and "four Saudis" as funders? There are larger issues about madrasa education, partly under a thin government oversight, and the quomi madrasas without any public accountability. How should the education program in these made relevant to modern life and their graduates made productive citizens? There are already five public and private Islamic institutions claiming the status of university. What is their performance and output? Do we need one more?

Over two dozen private universities have been authorized by the government during its current tenure. There is concern that these have been allowed to be established without applying the government's own criteria and procedures under the Private Universities Act and that they are giving a bad name to the term university. A University Grants Commission enquiry recommended closure of at least eight private universities for serious defaults, but this recommendation is yet to be given effect.

Another set of questions is about the decision-making process regarding setting up of new private or public universities. Press reports suggest that the University Grants Commission had no role in the recent decision. Apparently the Ministry of Education did not have much of a say either. How was the decision made? Was the due pro-

cess followed? And why should not the process of approval be more transparent to the public?

Decisions of momentous importance have been taken through an opaque process without due public scrutiny, dialogue, and transparency at great cost to the nation. A case in point is the rejection in 1995 of the offer to be linked to the undersea cable backbone for the internet that is now costing Bangladesh hundreds of millions of dollars extra and has set us back by at least two decades in exploiting the potential of digital communication technology. We are about to commit another monumental blunder by not joining the Asian highway network, thus foreclosing the opportunity to turn Bangladesh into the hub of communication and trade within South Asia and between South and East Asia.

By design, inertia or apathy, religion-based education from the primary to the tertiary level has been growing. Some events and decisions, like the proverbial genie in the bottle, are intractably difficult to undo. The Pandora's box of religion in state affairs, a settled issue in the national constitution, was opened by the military rulers in their desperate quest for legitimacy and support by appealing to common people's religious sentiments. We are now reaping the whirlwind. (Apologies for the mixed metaphor.)

The unchecked growth of religion-based educational institutions, without a strategy for defining clearly their place and role in the national education system, has even more far-reaching and irreversible consequences than the misguided moves on the undersea cable link or the Asian highway network.

On decision-making about setting up universities and other educational issues which are of public concern, why not make the process of consideration and approval more open to the public by placing the relevant facts and arguments on the website of the University Grants Commission and the Ministry of Education and invite public comments?

This is not the whole answer to the problem, but at least a step forward in looking at policy issues in daylight. As Mr. Kamal Siddiqui, the Principal Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office said recently in a seminar on right to information, sunshine is the best disinfectant.

Dr. Ahmed is Director of Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University.