

Politics-free campus: Good or bad?

Bangladesh is an independent country today because of student activism; Bangladesh got rid of autocracy because of student activism. Just because we now temporarily have a seemingly "benevolent, just and honest" government does not mean that we will always enjoy such privilege. And when we don't, it will have to be the students who will

MRIDUL CHOWDHURY

ARE you someone who has been a powerless "victim" of a highly politicized and, in many ways, decaying public tertiary educational system of our country? I suspect that many of you are -- a victim of a system where university administrators get appointed based on subservience to ruling party rather than on academic and administrative merit, where teachers get selected or promoted on the basis of party affiliations, where students have to sign up as a party member in order to get hostel seats, and where on-campus gun-fights between students wings of opposing political parties (typically over issues of campus dominance) is a phenomenon that university-goers have to grow accustomed to.

A typical foreigner coming into Bangladesh for the first time is shocked to find out that the coun-

try's main centre for learning and research -- Dhaka University -- is also a "red zone" for political violence.

It is encouraging to see that the UGC has recently taken a long-due responsible role in drafting a law to de-politicize university administration and develop strict guidelines regarding on-campus politics. This is something that only a powerful caretaker government can implement since the elected political parties will never have the incentive to do it.

However, we have to be careful about the extent to which these restrictions are set in place. We have to differentiate between "political mobilization for a cause" and "political mobilization for self-interest and power." The UGC's efforts have to ensure that the first kind of mobilization is not restricted.

It is true that the nature of on-campus politics has fundamentally changed over the years (except for a few exceptions such as left-inclined political activism) -

- pre-liberation was a period of ideology-based politics, the 1980s was a period of movement against autocracy; however, since the early 1990s, the nature of student politics took a dramatically different turn.

Throughout the 1980s, during the process of student mobilization against the autocratic government, the seeds of powerful, destructive and armed student politics were taking shape behind the scene.

Ironically, since 1991, when so-called pseudo-democracy was established in Bangladesh, student politics largely ceased to be about causes or ideologies but more about shameless sycophancy towards the leaders of the mainstream political parties with a single-minded goal of power and wealth.

The parties have also gained significantly in letting this perpetuate since the rule of today's political game in Bangladesh has become terrorism against the political opponents -- and stu-

dents wings have become the main lathial bahini (the militia wing) for that purpose.

Despite the fact that student politics has become polluted over the years, we still have to realize that university campuses are the havens for freedom of expression and political mobilization if needed. If you take away the right to engage in free thinking in universities, you root out the heart of what "democracy" is all about in a country.

In that light, UGC's recent attempt to "ban campus politics" needs to be supported with caution. If they ban the right to form student wings of mainstream political parties inside the campus, it is acceptable. But if they ban the right to congregate and discuss what is right and what is wrong with the country's politics and mobilize around certain political causes, then we have an issue to speak out against.

I hope that the UGC and the caretaker government focuses not on banning political mobilization in campuses altogether but on the real issues that pollute the academic environment, including increased accountability of UGC itself. Some recommendations for rules regarding on-campus politics include:

Make illegal all causes of session jams, such as internal



strikes by students or teachers and teachers' non-accountability regarding grading or exams.

University administrators cannot be political appointees.

Active party politics among university teachers must be eradicated.

Activities of student wings of mainstream political parties may not be allowed on campus.

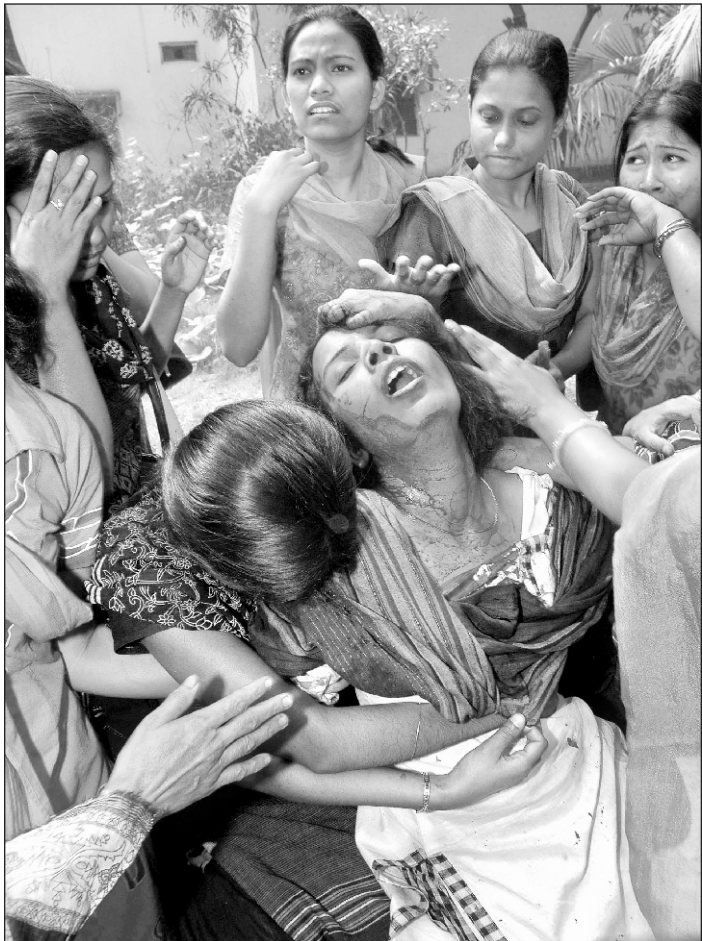
Strict rules/laws against appointment or promotion of teachers based on party affiliation.

The control of hostel seats and other administrative matters by student political leaders has to be completely eradicated.

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activism; Bangladesh got rid of autocracy because of student activism. Just because we now temporarily have a seemingly "benevolent, just and honest" government does not mean that we will always enjoy such privilege. And when we don't, it will have to be the students who will come forward to change the way things are.

Students are the most important conscience of a society; they fill a role that no other institution or group can -- since all the rest are bound by some agenda or the other. If today, we make or support laws that can potentially be misused by any authority to squelch the voice of students, we



may be setting ourselves up for yet another round of unstoppable 'force' from taking control of the country for a long time to come.

Mridul Chowdhury is a graduate student at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

I'm sorry, Choles Ritchil

I'm sorry, because I'm a citizen of a nation that after 36 years fails to see you as anything more than a nuisance. My class, ethnicity, and religious privilege (and army family) gives me insurance to write these words. You don't have any such protection -- naked to the world, to Eco Park, and to our vengeful fury.

NAEEM MOHAIEMEN

I'M sorry, Choles Ritchil. I didn't believe the evidence of your body. I kept thinking the torture report was a hysterical invention. So much damage to one corpse, it seemed impossible. No, it is impossible. Isn't it? It must all be lies. Those human rights groups, we know they always exaggerate -- just to get foreign funding and create a bad image for Bangladesh.

I'm sorry, because I couldn't find the courage. We're all so invested in getting out of the AL-BNP strangle corridor, we're so

euphoric that the godfathers are being arrested, we don't want to upset the process by drawing attention to your case. Must be an aberration, somebody got a little too enthusiastic. Anyway, let's move on. For heaven's sake, don't make a fuss.

I'm sorry, because I couldn't find tears. How easy it was to dismiss your face on that poster. You look nothing like me. You have what my classmates so crudely called "chinky eyes." No one in my family has ever married anyone who looks like you, and even if we did we would make sure you converted to our reli-

gion. You see, you don't really exist. This is a country for Bengalis, not anyone else. Now you realize that, slowly, surely.

I'm sorry, because I read Nirmalendu Goon's poem with a stony heart. Then I busied myself with translating it. E-mailing friends and asking: "What is Chuniya village"? Is Goon being sarcastic about March and "freedom"? Is "elegy" a better translation than "requiem"? Distracting myself with aesthetics, anything to blank out the memory of those pictures.

I'm sorry, because when a blogger posted the report, somebody else complained about the



gruesome picture. The picture was quietly removed to page 2. A nice disclaimer was added: "Warning: Graphic Photo." Anything to protect our delicate sensibilities. How inconsiderate of you to die with so many wounds.

I'm sorry, because I said to a

Pahari friend the other day: "Welcome to shadhin Bangla," and she replied: "Ami tho Bangali na, how am I shadhin?" I laughed and dismissed her. Oh, these people! They will never be satisfied. What do you want anyway? Land rights? Your language? Parliament seats?



Ministries? Quotas? Autonomy? Come on, that was for us, that was 1969. It's 2007 now. Don't you remember what Sheikh Mujib said? "From today you are all Bengalis." And some of you are now dead Bengalis, that's equality.

I'm sorry, because I know how

this will go down. There will be outrage. NGOs will issue memorandum. Bloggers will buzz. Newspapers will write. Thrithio Matra will debate pros and cons. Seminars will be cranked out. And always, some "hero" filmmaker will make a documentary and win awards. Then, just as quickly, we will forget. Amnesia is our gross national product.

I'm sorry, Choles Ritchil. You lived and died protecting the Adivasi people and Modhupur land you believed in. You were gentle and non-violent, and we paid you back in a different coin.

I'm sorry, because I'm a citizen of a nation that after 36 years fails to see you as anything more than a nuisance. My class, ethnicity, and religious privilege (and army family) gives me insurance to write these words. You don't have any such protection -- naked to the world, to Eco Park, and to our

vengeful fury.

But don't think you're an agacha on our national boto brikkho. When there are visiting dignitaries or sports events, your people are very useful. You sing, you dance, you wear exotic, colourful clothes. A readymade National Geographic tableau. "Hill people of CHT." "Gentle people of Modhupur forest." Ah, the permutations are endless.

We want to keep all of you in a museum vitrine, and bring you out on special occasions -- when we need a dash of colour. But please don't demand your rights. And don't even think of raising your voice. Etho boro shahosh! You see what happened to Choles. Don't make us be sorry again.

Naeem Mohaiemen wrote the chapter on ethnic minorities for ASK's 2003 Human Rights Report.

A desert's lion in winter

As if by default, the old son of the desert is now trying to lead on virtually every sensitive issue from the peace process to Darfur. Bush administration officials have yet to decide whether Abdullah's new activism ultimately will support US policy or undermine it, and some privately suggest they're baffled.

CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

SAUDI Arabia's King Abdullah often has the weary air of a simple man who's lived long enough to see it all, and in many ways he has. When he was born more than 80 years ago, his father had yet to found the nation Abdullah rules. No oil flowed from beneath the sands, and Israel didn't exist. And yet, senior Saudi princes tell NEWSWEEK, Abdullah is surprised and angered by the disastrous turmoil that now afflicts the

region. He's grown disillusioned with Saudi Arabia's long-time ally, the United States. He is frustrated with the fecklessness of a divided Arab world.

As if by default, the old son of the desert is now trying to lead on virtually every sensitive issue from the peace process to Darfur. Bush administration officials have yet to decide whether Abdullah's new activism ultimately will support US policy or undermine it, and some privately suggest they're baffled.

Why would Abdullah tell the

summit of Arab kings and presidents he convened in Riyadh that "in Iraq blood flows between brothers in the shadow of an illegitimate foreign occupation?" While the Saudis opposed the 2003 invasion, they've insisted the United States should stay and fix what it broke. But by distancing himself from Washington, Abdullah gains credibility in the vital fight against Tehran for Arab hearts and minds.

The Saudis see President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's incen-

diary rhetoric against Israel, his backing for Hizbullah and his support for Hamas as crass bids to win support not only among the region's Shiites but also among the Sunnis. At the same time, Tehran's race to become a nuclear power is a threat to Saudi Arabia's influence, if not its survival, and a provocation to George W. Bush. "Do you think those US warships are out there on vacation?"

Abdullah warned Ahmadinejad when they met recently, according to sources close to the royal family. Abdullah's sense of urgency about the Iranian threat goes back at least to September 2005, when "Iraq (was) being presented to the Iranians on a silver platter" by US policy, says Turki al-Faisal, then

ambassador to Washington.

His brother, Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, met with Bush last May to press Saudi concerns. "We have two nightmares," Saud told the president, according to Turki. "One is that Iran will develop a nuclear bomb, and the other is that America will take military action to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear bomb."

Over the summer, however, US officials started getting what seemed to be very different signals. Word spread that Saudi Arabia secretly supported a much more aggressive line against Tehran and its clients: that it would undermine Hamas; encourage Israel's efforts to take out Hizbullah; maybe even facilitate strikes on Iran's nuclear installa-

tions. But when Dick Cheney flew to Saudi Arabia last Thanksgiving weekend to meet directly with the king, Abdullah didn't support military action. Instead, his policy has been to talk to Iran, Hizbullah and Hamas -- using money, diplomacy, even religion to defuse each regional flashpoint, push for peace and block Iran.

The biggest test so far came earlier this year when clashes erupted between Hamas and the Fatah party, threatening full-blown civil war in the Palestinian territories. "He just couldn't take that," Foreign Minister al-Faisal told NEWSWEEK. Summoning Palestinian leaders to Mecca, Abdullah successfully pressured them to form a unity government. When the Bush administration and



Israel criticized him for undermining efforts to isolate Hamas, the king was "furious," said a source not authorized to speak on the record.

But Abdullah was on a roll. He used the Arab summit to relaunch a

peace initiative he first proposed five years ago. It promises full peace for Israel with all Arab states if the Jewish state withdraws to its 1967 borders and an equitable solution is found for Palestinian refugees.

Far from dismissing the plan, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has left the door open to further talks. "Saudi Arabia is the country that in the end will determine the ability of the Arabs to reach a compromise with Israel," he said. To Abdullah, who has seen so much, peace now looks like the best way to revive the beleaguered Arab world -- and stifle Iran's ambitions.

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The real tax problem

On the one hand are small farmers who form the cultural fabric of our society, the vast numerical majority. On the other are the industrial minority who are legally responsible for the entire tax burden of the government. It should be repeated that in no democratic nation in the world is such a small number of people expected to support such a large number through taxation.

SAAD HOSSAIN

IN his op-ed, "Representation without taxation is tyranny" (Daily Star, February 19), Mr. Jens Stanislawski suggests expansion of the tax base -- and this is absolutely a step in the right direction. Rich or poor, citizens must pay tax, and consequently must then demand full accountability from their elected government.

However, forcing the poor to pay taxes does not address both sides of the issue. What of the people who pay the bulk of the taxes right now? Who is looking out for their best interest? The level of their representation is certainly not commensurate with their tax burden.

The national board of revenue (NBR) currently levies the following taxes: excise duty, customs duty, supplementary duty, infrastructure development surcharge, vat and income tax. In the budget of 2006-07, the last government expected to raise over 41,000 crore from these sources, with the bulk of the money coming from income tax, customs duty, and vat. (Source: NBR website)

An analysis of NBR policy reveals that the entire tax system is targeted at a single, small group of people: businessmen. This class, from shopkeepers to traders to industrialists, can be characterized as legally underprivileged. They are routinely extorted by bureaucrats, terrorized by politicians, hounded by social workers,

deprived of basic utilities such as gas, electricity, and water, and yet still expected not only to continue producing their vital goods and services, but also to shoulder the entire nation's tax burden.

According to the NBR, a private limited company must pay 40% income tax on profits, whilst the owner must pay a further 25% personal income tax on all salaries, capital gains, or earnings from his profession, provided his income is over Tk 350,000 per year. Thus, the only people falling in this tax bracket are businessmen and a small percentage of highly paid private employees. It is not difficult to conclude that the income tax racket, estimated at BDT 8,500 crore in the 06-07 budget, is aimed entirely at

extracting money from the country's employers.

Certain taxes are only collected from importers. These include infrastructure development surcharge, supplementary duty, and customs duty. Customs duty is the number two earner for NBR, with an estimated 9,485 crore collection for the 06-07 budget.

Vat is the largest revenue earner, weighing in at a whopping 22,615 crore of the 06-07 budget. According to the NBR website: "Vat is imposed on goods and services at import stage, manufacturing, wholesale and retail levels. 15% vat is applicable for all business or industrial units with an annual turnover of less than 2,000,000 BDT are exempt from vat.

In terms of customs duty and vat, it can be argued that the cost is simply passed on to the consumers in the end. How far is this true, however? The fact is, the tax is

collected from businessmen by the government. How they subsequently recoup this money is left entirely up to them. By loading domestically sold items so heavily with these taxes, the government essentially puts unbearable pressure on businesses already operating in a fiercely competitive, price-sensitive market.

In order to sell to the extremely price sensitive local consumers, businessmen are forced to cut corners, resulting in tax fraud and poor quality. The reality on the ground is that most businesses are not profitable if: a) Quality is maintained. b) Taxes are fully paid, and c) Employees are given decent living wages, given that utilities are highly unreliable, transport and port facilities are poor, extortion is rampant from government employees and elected officials alike, and local banks charge usurious interest rates.

Most businesses cannot afford to pay full vat, simply because the market does not allow it. The end result is that the full vat amount cannot be passed off to the con-

sumers, and businesses must make up the shortfall by other ways and means.

How vital is this small group of people to our nation? The natural progression for development is to move from an agrarian economy towards industrialization. This is an established paradigm, and perhaps needs no further argument. Mr. Stanislawski suggested that we should move away from donor dependency and try to balance our government expenditure against taxation.

The truth is that the majority of farmers are incapable of paying taxes and unless we rapidly promote industrialization, we will never achieve any kind of fiscal independence. It is a flawed system, indeed, that depends on a sliver of the population to support the remaining masses through taxation. This model of democracy and taxation, built on western economies, is only viable if the tax base is far larger than the tax exempt. This is clearly not the case in our country.

The fledgling industrialists of the

nation, therefore, are a critical force in development, and, as we have seen, are already bearing most of the tax burden. So where, then, is the drive towards industrialization? Who is looking out for the best interests of these employers, innovators, and producers?

The majority of the population, who pay little or no tax, have no concern for the fiscal policy of the country, nor for the pressing needs of the nation's industries, such as efficient transport, port services, and utilities, to name a few. In turn, officials elected by these people also put a very low priority on the needs of industrialization, evinced by the fact that to this day our country's industries are crippled by problems discussed ad nauseam by all manner of experts, but still unsolved by any elected government.

Yet Bangladesh needs rapid industrialization, since the agricultural economy is incapable of sustaining employment of our citizenry. Growth in the business sector will not only reduce poverty through employment, it will also generate

tax revenue for national development. Today, only a small percentage of the people, employed in industry, are expected to support a government that, from a democratic point of view, cannot have their best interest at heart.

On the one hand are small farmers who form the cultural fabric of our society, the vast numerical majority. On the other are the industrial minority who are legally responsible for the entire tax burden of the government. It should be repeated that in no democratic nation in the world is such a small number of people expected to support such a large number through taxation.

Clearly, an evolution of the democratic system is required for our country, specially given the spectacular failure of the experiment over the past three terms. In this evolution lies a chance to tie representation more closely to taxation, and offer a glimmer of hope to those struggling under an unfair system.