

Complexity over so-called student politics

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OUR debate over student politics, was originated by former President Shahabuddin Ahmed during 1997 and revived recently, for a permanent resolution, by the current interim government. The UGC, in its 20-year plan, has recommended banning of politics by students' and teachers' organisations. Then, at the request of the law adviser Barrister Mainul Hossain, the EC raised the issue in its meeting with the members of civil societies on April 26. These suggestions have elicited sharp reactions from leaders of both, the students (current as well as former) and the teachers. Even the celebrated members of our civil society could not provide any constructive suggestions to the EC on this burning issue. Finally, on April 29, Barrister Mainul Hossain outlined government's plan to reform our political system by severing the link between political parties and student and other professional associations. In this regard, the law ministry has sent a note to the Election Commission to incorporate four points in the Representation of People Order (RPO): (i) political parties will not be allowed to form students wings in any educational institution, (ii) they will not be allowed to form teachers wings in any public educational institutions or private educational institutions receiving public funds, (iii) they will

not be allowed to organise party forums in any public or private financial, commercial and industrial institutions and (iv) in case any political party violates these restrictions its registration will be cancelled. Apparently, this so-called student politics is most controversial and confusing. To make some fresh inputs, this writeup will examine two aspects of the debate. First, it is important to examine the meaning, or perceptions, of so-called student politics to unearth the nature of controversy. Second, a criterion or principle needs to be developed to analyze the problem. The term "student politics" has entered into ordinary vocabulary. This does not mean that everyone uses the term in the same sense when engaged in argumentation. For the sake of simplifying the analysis, we may divide student politics into two periods. The first refers to the Pakistan period, or the pre-liberation period. The second is obviously the post-liberation, or current, period. The history of student politics during Pakistan period is all glorious. The student organisations provided leadership role in all national movements: 1952 language movement, 1962 anti-education policy, 1969 11-point movement and, eventually, the liberation war. However, this glorious history gradually got tainted after liberation. During this period, students' organisations became front units of different

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political parties, and their leaders' main job was executing the agenda of their parent political parties. These agenda included promoting their own party programmes as well as preventing the programmes of other parties. Besides, they became associated with different unsocial and criminal activities -- terrorism, illegal payments etc. Those who are in favour of banning student politics define the activities of the latter period as student politics, while those who oppose the move refer to the earlier activities of student organizations. To understand this debate we must appreciate these differing perceptions of student politics. What is really encouraging here is that the government has made its perspective abundantly clear. For example, the law adviser Barrister Mainul Hossain told journalists (DS April 30) that the government simply wants to end the political parties' current practice of opening front units in the premises of educational institutions and other private and public establishments. In other words, the government wants to free non-political associations from political parties by cutting out the current linkage. This brings us directly to the sec-

ond point: what principle or criterion can we use to justify this legal action? In this regard, we can get guidelines from the UN's Universal Declaration

of Human Rights. Regarding the formation of non-political or professional associations, the document says: "Everyone has the right to form

and join trade unions for the protection of their interests. These unions or associations must be formed according to laws of their institutions and



operate accordingly. They can also form federations with similar unions to promote their professional interests." (For details, interested readers might look at the document). This principle has been developed on the basis of the fact that a state is composed of innumerable associations, which are organised around specific institutions. Three points are worth noting here. First, the nature of institution defines the nature of association. For example, three kinds of associations can be formed in an educational institution - student, teacher and employee. On the other hand, government is a political institution. Therefore, an organisation which is concerned with its activities, must be of political nature, i.e., a political party. Second, the activities of an association are limited by the scope of the institution around which it is organised. Thus, the teacher or the student association of one university cannot interfere or get involved with the activities of another university. On the other hand, the scope of a political party is the entire country. They cannot open their office on the premises of any institution. Finally, the main objective of an association is to protect and promote the interests of its members within these institutions. For example, the main purpose of a students' association is to promote the interests of students; while the main purpose of a teachers' association is to look after the interests of teachers. In the same way, it can be said that the main

purpose of a political party is to get its members elected, and to control government. In examining the connectivity between the two types of organisations, the point to be looked at is whether this connection conforms to, or is in conflict with, their objectives. If the connection conforms with the objectives of the colluding parties, then this relationship must be supported because it is socially desirable. In case the objectives are in conflict, this connection must be prohibited through legal procedure. The Election Commission has already adopted this principle in proposing the electoral reforms. If the EC applies the principle here, it will find the desired answer. And since this is a general principle, it can be applied to examine the relationship between all kinds of organisations, including political and non-political associations. Finally, some people, particularly some teacher leaders of Dhaka University, have castigated the law adviser and the EC for initiating this important reform agenda. However, because organising elections is the constitutional responsibility of the EC, it also has the responsibility for determining the code of conduct of our political parties. In other words, the EC is the right government institution to frame this law.

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Reform -- yesterday and to-day

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HE who reforms himself, has done much toward reforming others; and one reason why the world is not reformed, is, because each would have others make a beginning, and never thinks of himself doing it." -- This was how in the early seventeenth century Thomas Adams looked at 'reform' as an instrument to achieve progress. The word 'reform' has a universal manifestation of 'something better' than the present. Curiously enough some highly acclaimed historical personalities had been associated with this radical term. The most noted among them had been the great German Reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546). He was ordained a priest in 1507 and later became Professor of Theology at University of Wittenberg and until 1517 was an orthodox Roman Catholic. His first idea of revolt occurred when he saw indulgences being sold, a practice which he openly condemned. For this he was excommunicated. Yet he made a memorable defence of his stance. He then separated himself from the Roman Catholics and began to preach the Reformed Religion, his doctrine being formulated in the confession of Augsburg. He lived to see the princi-

ples of the reformation widely established. In essence, reformation doesn't ordinarily convey any proposition for disintegration of a compact entity. But, Martin Luther's historic venture was indeed the first major dent to pave way to a new branch of Christianity, namely, Protestantism in 16th Century. After much controversy, the reformers (followers of Martin Luther) boldly propounded the principles of the new doctrine, and the struggle for religious supremacy grew bitter. But the reformation principles spread, and ultimately a great part of Germany as well as Switzerland, the low countries, Scandinavia, England, and Scotland were won over to the new faith. So, from our first experience, a historic one, we know that 'reform' can be a highly potent agent for creating division among people of the same belief. Rightly or wrongly it happened not only with the believers of Christianity but also with other religions and their followers. But systems obtaining for a certain period of time are most likely to outlive their effectiveness in the changed situations. It can be true in all the conceivable fields of human lives, be it religious, social, political, economic or technological. The area of technology and the massive advances

The clarion call for reform of the political parties, the two major ones in particular, comes now from the present government. It insists that the big parties should take up radical reform programmes so as to enable emergence of new, honest and duly tested leadership. It also tacitly discourages family-based leadership. New rules are also stated to have been in the offing to forbid/prohibit student and labour politics as part of the mainstream political parties.

it has made so far or the further strides ahead it is poised to make, is likely to rock all other areas. Consequently, each of those segments shall have to sustain rapid change as would suit human needs and that of time. However, religion or religious faith, being a very sensitive area, any proposal for radical reform will have to be cautiously pursued. Meantime, we have substantial evidence on record corroborating changes or reforms in some of the fundamental religious obligations hitherto in vogue. At the instance and initiative of a group of highly noted authority on Islamic laws and rules, some of the controversial provisions in marital laws have now been amended to suit the present time. There have been too a good number of instances where political reforms based on mutually contradictory ideologies took place in the preceding century. We can cite the examples of post World War II eastern European countries under the hege-

mony of the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republic. In very recent times, all the eastern European countries broke through the socialistic pattern of governments based on communistic principles and voluntarily opted for democracy of the western world. Here, Poland took the lead. Even USSR of the Leninist regime disintegrated into several independent states to rim on democratic lines. The age-old confederation of Yugoslavia also broke into a number of independent states. The Berlin wall making a forced division between the people of Germany crumbled to reunite them. These have indeed been historical episodes conveying massive national reforms, apparently for the greater benefit of the people. In the Indian sub-continent, even during British days and after, we have had instances of activities related to socio-political reforms. Among them we can cite the crusade launched by none other than Mahatma Gandhi

against mal-treatment and social discrimination of the 'low caste' Hindus known as 'Dalits' by the 'high caste' Hindus. His movement assumed tremendous momentum during his life time and contributed substantially to reforming the attitude of the Hindu hardliners. The context of reform we are talking about in Bangladesh has been the abhorring mischiefs of large scale corruption born of unending greed at the political level. For five successive years this poor country had been rated as the number one corrupt country of the world. The root of such corrupt practices would owe its origin to institutional lapses and handicaps. For instance our election commission till mid nineties used to be ruled and controlled by the government in existence till election. Constitutionally, this body would be independent but in actual practice its secretariate till date is accountable to the secretariate of the Prime Minister. In order to contain undue inter-

vention and underhand manipulations of the election results an innovative mechanism in the name of caretaker government was invoked in 1996. This could be taken for a sort of 'reform' in the system of election, the first of its kind. The last retiring Chief Justice would form the caretaker government as the Chief Adviser. Here too, and as was evident this time, the 4-party alliance government was alleged to have taken to a queer plan to ensure that one of its beneficiaries would take his place as the head of the caretaker government. The situation turned out to be all the more complex due to the role played by the President. Uncertainties further compounded. Parallel to these awful events the role of the election commission was also under introspective scrutiny. The CEC MA Aziz and his two aids / ECS kept on muddling the situation to a point of no return. Things were almost going out of control. Yet the belated wisdom displayed by the President by

way of relinquishing the other position of care-taker government head and appointing a new such government with Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed as its head saved the situation the reform proposition of the entire administrative machinery took a newer dimension with the clamping of emergency rule. The massive exposure of individual corruption at the highest level of the two contesting major political parties and the intervention programme initiated by the present caretaker government shall have more than justified the urgent need for reform and reshuffle of the Anti-Corruption Commission. The present re-organised body of ACC at long last, is taking itself to the right and desired direction at salvaging the emaciated national image from further deterioration. Here, the import of reform in its true sense appears to have been on track. Meantime, the election commission has also been reorganised and revitalised to hold national election in 18 months or by the end of 2008. The separation process of the judiciary from the executive, has been augmented and hopefully by the end of the current year the nation will have a totally independent judiciary to be proud of. Though it sounds a bit funny and

somewhat preposterous to receive close attention, the clarion call for reform of the political parties, the two major ones in particular, comes now from the present government. It insists that the big parties should take up radical reform programmes so as to enable emergence of new, honest and duly tested leadership. It also tacitly discourages family-based leadership. New rules are also stated to have been in the offing to forbid/prohibit student and labour politics as part of the mainstream political parties. Due stress will be reportedly given on the students to pursue their studies in right earnest at the first instance. The political parties will have to obtain registration from the Election Commission to contest in any election, national or local. The major political parties, namely Awami League and the BNP, have, by and large, been in agreement with the reform proposition. They are awaiting the formal withdrawal of restriction on in-house politics to thrush out concrete proposals in this regard. The major shift may be in a provision to disqualify one person from holding the position of prime minister and that of the party chairman/president concurrently. Let us hope for the best.

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Land reform can change the lot of the landless

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ALTHOUGH land reform appeared to be an important agenda item to the political parties in Bangladesh immediately before and after independence, it started to lose appeal in the eighties and thereafter for apparently unknown reasons. To say that the issue has almost been lost in oblivion now may not be an exaggeration. Political parties working mainly to acquire power perhaps have removed the matter from their thought much before. However, the left parties fighting for land right are still holding it high in their plan of action; they have kept their interest up for pro-people land reform. It is true that there being no land reform ever we could not materialise optimum utilization of land in this land scarce country and thus could not effect its positive impact on national life. Even we could not effectively follow the rhetoric on rules and regulations for land use in public welfare in the past nothing has materialised for reasons not known. There had been much talk on equity distribution of khas land, increasing land productivity, implementation of settlement act, acquisition of ceiling excess land, recovering absentee ownership land, modernisation of land administration, improving land management but in reality nothing has happened. Although some spot works have been done under government project here and there, that has no visible impact on development in national life. Rather some rules and regulations

have caused further complications. After independence the first initiative towards land reform was taken in 1972. The notable aspects of the proposed reform were: a) Reducing the maximum limit of land ownership to 100 bighas per family; b) distributing khas land among the landless poor; c) making upto 25 bigha land tax exempt; d) Withdrawing to government some authorities given to farmers in matters of taking possession of newly accreted shoals and abolishing lease of sairat mahal and khas land, haat-bazar, water bodies, ferry ghat etc. and prohibiting mortgage of agricultural land under exploitative terms. But although it was proposed to introduce Ceiling Act, the Bangabandhu government backed off from doing that on political and social grounds. The assassination of Sheikh Mujib on 15 August 1975 and assent of Ziaur Rahman to power later on pushed the issue of land reform under carpet. However, during Ershad's rule the issue again drew attention of government and land reform ordinance 1984 was issued. Matters like contract agreement and reducing ceiling on agricultural land were given due importance under this ordinance. But nothing was implemented in reality and the deprived marginal mass remained far from enjoying any good result. But the issue of land reform is too important to be overlooked in the overall socio-economic reality. It's an imperative now for Bangladesh from whatever angle -- social, economic, political -- you look at it. Because to reduce the endless disparity and non-equity that dangerously exist among the people of Bangladesh there is little

Our experience of Ghughudaha, Beel Dakshi, Beel Pakuria, Beel Kuralia shows how a piece of khas land could greatly change the standard of life of the landless poor. However, this requires thorough review of the old existing land laws and land use rules and making them more practical and pro-poor as well as proper implementation of earlier existing pro-poor land laws and rules.



option to ignore the issue. A glance at the income-expenditure and lifestyle of sections of society reveals how deep and sharp this disparity exists to the detriment of the society itself. Specially this is further aggravating the very survival of the land and agriculture dependent masses. No doubt resources are too inadequate vis-a vis population in

Bangladesh. Besides, there exists a wide gap in matters of ownership of and right to the resources. The agricultural survey '96 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics showed that there was no land for cultivation for 10.18 per cent agriculture dependent thanas of rural Bangladesh. This share of people are the ultra poor and most deprived of facilities and are the real

landless population. They even fall out of the jurisdiction of microcredit business so much in operation in rural areas. On the otherhand, the major share of the income from land goes to the one fifth land owners in the country. That this disparity is increasing the poverty and widening the rich-poor gap in the country doesn't need

further proof. Although land is the main ingredient (base) in case of crop production but it being inadequate in Bangladesh, there is little or just no scope of bringing more land under cultivation. Total land area in Bangladesh is 14.4 million hectares of which 13.3 per cent is forestry, 20.1 per cent permanent water bodies, housing settlements, industries, roads etc and the remaining 66.6 per cent is under agricultural use. Topographically the landmass is one to 50 meter high from sea level. There are hills (12%), high plains (8%) and flood plains (80%). During monsoon vast areas of the plains go under water. The land is classified as high (20%), medium high (35%), medium low (20%), low (8%) and too low (1%) depending on the level of flood. On the basis of natural conditions related to land use, the land is divided into 30 zones and 88 sub-zones agriculturally. The amount of above 170 per cent productive farm land is 14.0 million hectares. The amounts of one-crop, two-crop and three-crop lands are 3.5, 3.7 and 0.99 hectares, respectively. Only rice is grown in 80 per cent of the total cultivable land, of which 50 per cent is dedicated to high yielding variety. But because of existing anomaly in land distribution, all khas lands not being recovered and handed over to the landless, and share croppers and small farmers having little or no share in produc-

tion, the ultra poor and the deprived and the actual landless are suffering most. But just in our neighbouring country where in the state across the border the people speak the same language and share the same cultural heritage could engrave their name in world atlas only because of land reform. In fact, in West Bengal, their political will worked behind the success more than the ideology of govt. officials. The Panchayet system operated by committees constituted with left front leaders and activists successfully run many a poverty alleviation programmes. Two aspects of land reform in West Bengal bear significance: patta land i.e. distributed land and barga land i.e. the land registered for share cropping. In West Bengal they operated other welfare programmes along with land reform with a view to helping the poor masses. One of such programmes is IRDP credit programme extending credit to certain section of people 95 per cent of whom are small and marginal farmers and the landless. Besides this, the poor villagers are provided with employment under JRY employment programme. Land reform programme and panchayet system have strong positive impact on agriculture. Land reform in West Bengal unlike earlier green revolution works in favour of small and marginal farmers. It strengthens the social bondage through miniature irrigation, land distribution, local government accountability etc. On the whole the land reform in West Bengal has given agriculture an institutional character and ensured productivity and profit distribution. Now in the light of West

Bengal's land reform programme and its positive results, we can certainly assume how imperative this land reform is to remove the traditional economic disparity in our society and the rich-poor gap as well as to establish right to land of the landless and ensure food security. Our experience of Ghughudaha, Beel Dakshi, Beel Pakuria, Beel Kuralia shows how a piece of khas land could greatly change the standard of life of the landless poor. However, this requires thorough review of the old existing land laws and land use rules and making them more practical and pro-poor as well as proper implementation of earlier existing pro-poor land laws and rules. At the same time it is necessary to recover the huge amount of existing agricultural khas land, vested property, railway and WAPDA land, acquired land, abandoned water bodies, charland, forest land, court of wards land, swamps, including other govt. khas lands, and distribute that among the landless poor for optimum utilisation. It is also necessary to review the dormant Ceiling Act adopted in 1984 and make it further practical and effective and bring the urban lands too under ceiling. Such initiatives, if taken and implemented, shall, the researchers feel, ensure economic and social security and mental peace of three crore landless people of the country as well as add remarkably to the poverty alleviation efforts in this land of enormous potentials.

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