The rise, the fall, and the future of student politics

Rumi Ahmed takes a closer look

IT was the weeks after the 1991 cyclone that ravaged coastal Bangladesh. Although international relief had just started pouring in, there was an intense demand for oral re-hydration salt (ORS) and ready-made dry food in the flood-affected areas.

This prompted the student union leaders of Chittagong Medical College to organise a mass ORS-making project. A group of students first started making ORS on a row of tables at the student union office and, within a day, the line of students willing to volunteer became so long that the project capacity had to be increased 10-fold, and oral saline packet production ran non-stop 24 hours a day.

As the news spread through the town, an amazing thing started happening at the campus. Students from other schools, colleges and universities started pouring into the campus to volunteer for the ORS work and a newly commissioned bread making project.

And one week on, a different kind of crowd started pouring into the campus. They were a bus-load of students who had traveled all the way from Rangpur to volunteer, bringing with them loads of raw material for making bread, and other relief material. Like them, students traveled from all corners of the country to take part in the relief and rehabilitation efforts after the catastrophic cyclone.

I mention this story in such detail to present the contrast with the current time. The nation is going through another natural calamity, but students are nowhere to be seen these days.

The same students who led the ORS-making effort were at the epicenter of the public resistance against a dictatorship only four months earlier. This specific period of 1990-91 is now considered as a turning point in the history of student activism in Bangladesh.

If the successful anti-Ershad movement and the all-out response during the 1988 flood or the 1991 cyclone mark the high point in Bangladesh's student politics, they probably also mark beginning of the downfall that ensued with the establishment of democracy.



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The current state of student politics is the epitome of apathy, lack of integrity and morality, and lackluster organisational activity. It is not only during the recent floods that the students have been missing, because, during the last 15 years, no national political or social movement could attract spontaneous student participation.

It is difficult to find one single glorious moment of student activism during the last 16 years. Students turned into money and power-driven, loosely-knit outfits, with the main focus on extortion and tender grabbing. The waning of student power in national politics was evident in the 1996 agitation that led to the fall of the first Khaleda government. In sharp contrast to all previous political agitations, the 1996 one was led by government officials, not students. Even during this current post-democratic time, there is no sign of re-invigoration of ideology driven student activism.

It would be unfair if, along with the commentary of its downfall, the collective contribution of student political activism is not mentioned. There is no other country that is more indebted than Bangladesh to her student community. The 1952 language movement was solely a student movement.