The student-led anti-Ayub mass upsurge of 1969 helped shape the geo-political aspirations of the people and nationalistic identity. The spirit of 1952 and the 1969 victory helped create an intense desire for independence among the masses of the then East Pakistan. During those glorious days of March 1971, the fire that was ignited by the students in 1952 finally grew into a full flame, and spread throughout the country. The rest is history. In independent Bangladesh, it was the students again who first started raising a voice of dissent against Bangabandhu by breaking away from the mainstream party to form the Jatyo Shamajtantrik Dal (JSD). During the post-Mujib era, the tradition of defiance continued. We all know of Ziaur Rahman's popularity among students throughout the 1980s and beyond. But Zia, the all-powerful military chief, was physically pushed by protesting students when he visited Dhaka University.

And the dictator Ershad could never even make it to Dhaka University campus. When he sent his prime minister, Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury, with floral wreaths and full security detail to the Shaheed Minar at midnight of Ekushey, a bare-bodied Mr. Chowdhury was chased off, with his clothes including white punjabi torn to shreds. After Ershad's capture of power, student protests needed only one year to gain momentum. By 1984, Selim and Delwar would be crushed to death under a police truck.

Questions can be raised about the causes of the fall of student politics. There is, in fact, no single answer to this question. Many factors jointly caused the students' disillusionment with politics:

- Student politics has mainly flourished in societies with restricted freedom. Although there was a failure of leadership in post-1990 Bangladesh, the society enjoyed most democratic privileges, including the freedom of expression and politics. Student politics, which is traditionally anti-conformist, didn't have much to protest against.
- Post-independence student leadership failed to stand up to the expectation created by pre-independence activists. The moral bankruptcy of the new generation of leaders may have played a major role in pushing the students away from politics. Even in the desperate search for a leader to look forward to, when students tried to idolize armed cadres, the meaningless loss of life in intra-party conflicts sealed the door to any further trust in the leadership.
- Global trends have played a role too. The anger in the West in the 1960s hit our part of the world in late 1960s and the 1970s. But by 1990, the global trend was not at all conducive to student activism. Students traditionally leaned towards leftist politics, and the fall of communism didn't help. In some respects, religion based politics has tried to fill this vacuum.

In addition, more basic changes in society may also have contributed:

- The exodus that started in the 1980s grew in proportion in the nineties, and continues today. A student devotes his sole focus on ways to leave the country, thus totally missing the passion that may drive him towards political activism.
- The current social trend that permits more male-female interaction in campuses may have also helped to keep male students away from violent activism.
- Politics probably didn't get a good breeding ground also, as collective student efforts like drama and other cultural activities are not commonplace in educational institutions during these days.

The question that remains is whether the current state of student politics can be thought of as a sleeping giant, or a skeleton with some decaying flesh still attached to it. A heated debate is going on in our society today on whether or not to allow student politics. It is worth mentioning that over the last decade, students in general kept away from politics, suggesting that they have already spoken in this debate and, as of now, they are not favouring politics. However, if circumstances move them enough to bring them back to politics in the future, no ban will be able to keep them out of the streets.

Will there be a totally different kind of student activism in the future? Who says that student politics must take place in Dhaka University only? Why not the internet, or Columbia University in New York, or SOAS in London? Contrary to the trend in Bangladesh, Bangladeshi-origin students all over the world are gearing up with Bangladesh-related issues. A plethora of blogs is updated round the clock. Fierce debate goes on over every single development in Bangladesh, influencing local and global public opinion. There was definitely more immediate buzz in the global student "blogosphere" than in DU after Sheikh Hasina's arrest. Are we already getting a glimpse of the future in the form of SMS activism, facebook socials, blogs, and email campaigns?

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[Editor's Note: This piece was written before August 20 and subsequent events.]