Cleaning the Campus

Last week, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has rightly distanced herself from her student wing for some of its members' involvement in extortion and hooliganism; now is the time for a national consensus to be forged to decide the fate of student politics

THE STAR DESK

It is an old story, which has to be retold every time a new government assumes power. Immediately after the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) won the general elections in 2001, Jatyatabadi Chatra Dal (JCD), students wing of the BNP took control of all the educational institutions across the country, evicting its Chatra League (BCL) counterparts. In Khaleda's last term in office we have seen a shameless display of hooliganism in the streets and on the campus. Student dormitories were forcibly occupied by armed cadres of the JCD, forcing many students to sleep in shabby, over-crowded rooms. Even though before the last general elections Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina has promised to bring change if voted to power, change is yet to come to different campuses in the country.

Sheikh Hasina's second coming to power has so far been tainted by her student comrades' illegal activities, which include extortion and intra-party feuds that have so far claimed the life of a BCL leader in Dhaka Medical College and maimed about a thousand in many universities and colleges.

In the last 100 days of Hasina's office, some BCL members have used guns and other violent weapons to grab different dormitories of government-run educational institutions. The level of extortion and other nefarious activities that some of the members of the BCL has indulged themselves in is reminiscent of the forlorn days of Khaleda's rule when JCD and Islami Chatra Shibir (ICS) members extorted ordinary students who wanted to get admitted to the colleges to further their higher secondary studies. A Daily Star report has unearthed such a syndicate of BCL cadres, who are brokering illegal admissions into government colleges in lieu of Tk 20,000 to 100,000.

Faced with a string of criticisms that her government has to swallow for the activities of the BCL, which may also give her three-month-old government bad press, Sheikh Hasina has taken the right step of giving up the position of the 'guardian' of the errant organisation. But when the situation is so grave, a mere distancing act is not enough. Her government needs to curb the illegal activities of the BCL with a strong hand. One of the many follies that Khaleda made is that she had no control whatsoever over her student wing, worst still, whenever she came across any criticisms about her student cadres, she termed it a conspiracy to tarnish her government's image.

> Sheikh Hasina must know that photos of machete-wielding young men chasing each other on the campus make a mockery of her dream of digital Bangladesh. Her dream of bringing about a change in our social and political life will turn into a nightmare if the police do not launch a crackdown on some of the BCL leaders who have turned universities into battlefields.

Hasina's first 100 days in office is an exception; unlike Khaleda, she has identified the cause of the problem and has acknowledged that some BCL members are involved in illegal activities. However, it will turn futile if her actions are not backed by a firm conviction to clean the campus of the goons, who have been plaguing our educational institutions for the last couple of decades.

Our student politics has a glorious past of leading the mass uprising against despots; it has produced national leaders who have led a life of sacrifice, thinking of only the people of this country. Once upon a time, leaders like Matia Chowdhury, Rashed Khan Menon and Mujahidul Islam Selim used to lead student organisations; only best students used to become leaders. The