

Reforming student politics

A pressing agenda that must be squarely addressed

A roundtable conference on the degenerate state of student politics and the need for regaining the glory once associated with such politics, organised by this newspaper on Saturday, threw up a number of insightful recommendations that merit serious consideration by way of reform priorities. At the outset it was made clear that doing away with student politics is not an option. What is needed is to reform it in a comprehensive fashion so as to create conditions for the restoration of its old glories.

The sad truth for us today is that the idealism and sense of ideology which once characterised student politics is now only a memory. In its place has emerged a sinister shadow of what student politics used to be. The integrity and sense of commitment which underscored the role of students in the past has now been supplanted by a degeneration that leaves the nation bewildered. Images of student violence over the years have aroused grave concern among citizens. This, in essence, was what emerged from the round table which brought stakeholders in national politics -- general students, student leaders, politicians, media people -- together on Saturday. The conclusions drawn from the conference, we believe, ought to give everyone, from the highest levels of the state to the lowest, a pause.

And what are those conclusions? Most fundamental is the crucial role the political parties must play if student politics is to recover its old sense of purpose. The criminalisation and confrontation today underpinning national politics have naturally impacted on student politics. In short, no matter how much of an outcry there is about today's degenerate student politics, unless the political parties are bold enough to delink themselves from student organisations, we cannot expect much of a change in student politics. As we await such untangling, we expect more such steps to follow in the shape of elections to student bodies as well as the inner councils of the student organizations. This is important since in the absence of a representative body of students, both in the students' union and in student organizations, it is the party which takes over and hand-picked elements rise to the top.

It must be made clear, however, that elections by themselves to the student bodies will not solve problems unless the two pre-eminent figures in national politics, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, simultaneously proclaim that student politics as it is being played out today must be discarded. They must assure the nation that student organisations will no more serve as adjuncts to national political parties and that student politics will be based on the standards followed by student organisations in the outside world. It is for our politicians and indeed everyone else to bear in mind that the dark nature of student politics today is a positive risk not only to academia but to the overall democratic process. It is ironic that where our students have played hugely constructive and unified roles in opposing military or autocratic rule, they go their separate ways in times of democratic governments.

A drastic change in student politics is thus in order. The political parties may feel enthused about the strength or campus dominance of their student followers. But that attitude must be eschewed and replaced by the urgent necessity of creating a knowledge-based society through having a reservoir of expertise and academic excellence at the institutions of higher learning. Our students, our youths must be transformed into credible, strong mechanisms geared to national development.

Plane disaster in India

We are deeply saddened by the huge loss of lives

PROFOUNDLY shocked as we are by the Air India Express Boeing tragedy in Mangalore, the worst aviation accident in India since 1996, we express our heartfelt condolences for the families of the deceased. So, stupendous was the impact of the accident that as many as 160 human lives were lost. Seven persons including a Bangladeshi medical girls student survived miraculously on being ejected as the pilot applied the emergency brake.

The southern Indian city has, what is called, 'table-top runway' allowing little margin of error in regulation landing as the edges of the runway drop sharply off to gorges. And as it so happened, as the first reports suggested, the plane landed at a distance from where it was supposed to, thus skidding out of the runway crashing down on the forested land.

Air safety has been a matter of debate in India being credited with fast-paced economic development increasing demand for air travel. With a sprinkling of 'close brushes', as reported, concern over the state of infrastructure and aviation safety vulnerability has been interminably expressed over the Indian media. So it is of utmost importance that the accident is probed thoroughly both by the Boeing and Indian authorities to establish precise causes for the disaster. In this context, the prompt recovery of the black box sounds as good augury.

Finally, we share the grief of the Indian government and people over the tragic incident. Our heart goes out in sympathy for the bereaved families. No amount of compensation can ever lessen the magnitude of their sorrow and grievous sense of loss. But if with each such accident, the aviation authorities learn the right lessons throughout the world, it will be that much helpful in strengthening the safeguards for a higher level of air safety.



Appraising our MDGs

Most regions of Bangladesh have primary enrolment ratios above 85 percent, and many even above 90 percent, in comparison to the base year percentage of 60 this is a great leap forward. However we must also keep an eye on drop out rates even though in 2009 the primary completion rate was close to 80 percent, there is little scope for complacency.

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NINE years have passed since the United Nations adopted the Millennium Declaration, which gave rise to the Millennium Development Goals. Since then, countries around the world have worked tirelessly to reach these goals. A few countries in Asia have been very successful in implementing these goals; others have made satisfactory progress and a few are still lagging behind the rest. Using a few different sources one can begin to understand what's going on in Bangladesh with regard to the MDGs.

Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger: With regards to poverty, Bangladesh is on track. But when it comes to achieving full, productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people, we have made slow progress. That figure has gone up from 48.5 percent in the base year to 58 percent (current status). When it comes to removing hunger our progress has been satisfactory. But the issue of child malnutrition, which is disturbingly still high in Bangladesh, needs closer scrutiny and is one area where we can still do a lot to improve the situation.

Achieve universal primary education: This is a sector where progress has been commendable. Most regions of Bangladesh have primary enrolment ratios above 85 percent, and many even above 90 percent; in comparison to the base year percentage of 60 this is a great leap forward. However we must also keep an eye on drop out rates even though in 2009 the primary completion rate was close to 80 percent, there is little scope for complacency. Adult literacy is also on the rise and that bodes well for our future with rates going up from 37 percent in the base year to 75 percent now.

Promote gender equality and empower women: Here the target is to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005 and in all levels of education no later than 2015, while also empowering women. The ratio of girls to boys in primary education, secondary education and tertiary education shows that we have succeeded quite well. Though the proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament has increased, our target remains for it to one day eventually be 33 percent. On the flip side the share of women in wage employment in the non-agriculture sector is quite low. We should try our best to even the playing field for them.

Reduce child mortality: Here the picture is mixed. We have to consider the target from three different positions. They are under five mortality rates, infant mortality rate and proportion of one-year-old children immunized against measles. There were 146 mortalities per thousand live births in base year and in 2009 that number was down to 69. But our target of 48 is still to be achieved and only five years to do so. The number of one-year-old children immunised against measles is up from 54 percent in the base year to 88 percent in 2006, the last year the information was readily available.

Improve maternal health: Here progress has been slow. The target is to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three-quarters between 1990 and 2015, but the ratio in Bangladesh has only declined from 547 to 348 per lac in 2008. Achieving this target will be very challenging, but not out of reach. We have the structural facilities and just need to develop a system to properly use it. Most of these deaths could have been avoided if care and access to emergency obstetric

care was more readily available. **Combat HIV/AIDS and others:** This sector is also an area of great concern. Many Bangladeshis aged 15 to 24 have no comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS. Malaria is also a worry although there is insufficient data to track our progress there. It has been said that the death rate associated with malaria per lac population was 0.37 in 2000 and now it is 0.11, if that is to be believed then we seem to be on track there.

Ensure environmental sustainability: We have not really taken this issue to task and there is much that we can do differently. The first being putting on our list of national priorities along with education and health, because it is just as important.

Development a global partnership: Bangladesh seems like it is not sufficiently active in developing global partnerships. At present we are trying to forge regional partnerships and while that may be a good sign there is still much left to be done on the international scale.

The Millennium Development Goals that have to be achieved by 2015 respond to the world's main development challenges. The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the Millennium Declaration that was adopted by 189 nations and signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000. To reach those targets will be a great challenge for Bangladesh, but one that we are no doubt up to.

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The crash of expectations

While every politician dreams of having his cake and eating it too, problems pile up on the table when you breakfast like a hawk but dine like a dove. When a high-flier indulges in split-personality aviation, the people soon give him the bird.

M.J. AKBAR

THE coincidence should be humbling: The stark tragedy of an Air India crash occurred on the day when UPA2 was due to announce a grand list of achievements in its first year of office. For at least half of this time the only vibe emerging from this administration suggests that it is an accident waiting to crash. More sleaze has been smeared over its reputation in the last five months than in the first five years of Dr. Manmohan Singh's prime ministership. If A. Raja is today synonymous with corruption, then civil aviation has become the epitome of waste, glad-handing, smarmy middlemen and self-destruction.

The news is not particularly good from any department, with the sole exception of finance, where Pranab Mukherjee has restored balance to a ministry that seemed to budget only for the wealthy. Defence is moribund; external affairs has not been able to find its feet as it trips towards an unknown deal with Pakistan; railways have been jettisoned; and whoever is in charge of food prices should be exiled to a hostile country. A sense of

disarray hovers like a cloud that will not be dispersed by claims and statistics. Predictably, home has become the highest profile ministry, and not just because of Naxalites: P. Chidambaram tends to raise the media profile of any office he occupies. The report card from home is confused.

Our muscular Chidambaram has not yet summoned the Navy in his war against Naxalites, but with hurricanes on the move and monsoons on the way, nothing can be ruled out. You never know when Dantewada could get submerged, and the CRPF was never taught to swim.

Tough guys are generally the last to know when their rippling biceps have become a parody. If a statement-a-day Chidambaram does not watch out, he could soon turn into a caricature. Cartoonists are already putting cowboy boots below his mundu. His familiar tactic, deflection of failure to someone else, is losing steam. How long can you be head of the queue when credit is being distributed, and make way for chief ministers when the blame game starts? While every politician dreams of having his cake and eating it too, problems pile up on the table when you breakfast like a

hawk but dine like a dove. When a high-flier indulges in split-personality aviation, the people soon give him the bird.

When a minister becomes larger than his allotted role in Cabinet, then his performance has political consequences. One question is not yet being asked in the concentric circles of the Congress, either at the head, midriff or base: How will voters in his state, Tamil Nadu, rate him? The first genuine test of Chidambaram's value to his party will come within less than a year, in the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. Tamil Nadu has no Naxalites -- as yet -- but it would be foolish to believe that the poor are not listening to the national discourse. They dissect events with a single scalpel-question: Is the government on our side or with the rich?

Objectively, the situation in Tamil Nadu is tailor-made for a Congress revival. The Congress lost power there in 1967, ten years before it vanished from Bengal. In both states, the Congress was in the hands of what were called the Syndicate leaders, Kamaraj Nadar and Atulya Ghosh, rather than the young men and women who led a party coup under the leadership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, but this did not prove a problem in Bengal, where Siddhartha Shankar Ray brought the Congress back to power in 1972. In Tamil Nadu, the Congress was hindered by a powerful and cohesive Dravida movement and party, as well as by its own abysmal, faction-driven provincial leadership. When the DMK became victim of the Indian disease and split, it deprived

the Congress of yet another opportunity for revival. The anti-incumbency sentiment was mopped up by the alternative DMK instead of transferring to Congress.

But after four decades, the credibility of both DMKs is heavily strained. Very few political parties can claim a record of corruption as brazen as the DMK led by the Karunanidhi clan. The bitter family feuds over succession -- the patriarch is very obviously and visibly ill -- would be dismissed as incredible even in the screen scenarios that the leader loves. This opens up possibilities that Chidambaram is perfectly positioned to exploit. But the opportunity will pass him, and his party, by if his language continues to be belligerent and hostile towards the underprivileged. The Naxalites may be wrong in their methods, but they are a product of hunger and exploitation of inhuman proportions. Yes, they must be suppressed; but repression is a different story.

As Finance Minister Chidambaram identified himself with the rich, does anyone remember a single effort he might have made to tackle the enormous misappropriation of wealth by greed-fuelled Indians? His heart is with "rising" India even when his mind says it should concentrate harder on "flattened" Indians.

People are patient. They do not expect high drama, but they are not going to tolerate low life either.

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