

Student politics: How to restore its glory

A roundtable on, "Student politics: How to restore its glory." was held at The Daily Star seminar room on 22 May 2010.

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Mahfuz Anam, Editor, The Daily Star
At first I offer my heartfelt greeting to all. Today's topic is, 'Student politics: How to restore its glory.'

We really think that our student politics has a glorious past. Students have played a significant role in different democratic movements.

But there are a number of questions regarding student politics at the present time. Some talk of banning student politics and some are against it. But we all agree that there should be an elaborate discussion on the issue.

There is no question that at present student politics has lost its past glory.

We want to look to the future and to find out ways of resolving the problems related to student politics and how to restore its lost glory. It's one kind of constructive evaluation of the matter.

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I am myself a product of student politics. Though I didn't continue in politics, an important part of my insight about society, patriotism I acquired from my involvement with student politics.

In my personal life, am a beneficiary of student politics, and I know how positive a thing student politics can be. From that spirit now as editor of a newspaper I would like to pose the question that why student politics, which created patriotism in me and motivated me to join the liberation war, is not working for the development of the country.

I want to divide the issue into two parts. One, the quality of student politics and the other is involvement of students in commercial ventures while being involved in student politics.

We hear about the involvement of student leaders in tender bidding in the universities, and a new term has emerged - admission trade. As journalists we can firmly say that this is true.

For those who are involved in student politics right now, for those who were involved in it in the past, and for us who love the country, it is our national duty to address the issue seriously.

I think we need to use our youth power to combat the challenges facing the country including impact of climate change. Why can't we expect that like other countries our students will go to the doorsteps of the villagers and make them aware of their rights? Why can't our students participate in building a modern democratic society? I think that we are losing a gigantic resource because of lack of direction and because of lack of vision.

Unfortunately, it is true that the quality of student politics has deteriorated a lot in the past 20 years. Why did the deterioration take place during the democratic period? Why did they become corrupt? Why did they not become more modern and tolerant? Why do we have to see pictures in the newspapers of students moving about with sharp weapons? I personally feel insulted as a former student of Dhaka University when I see dangerous weapons in the hands of our students.

Kajal Abdullah, Dept. of Finance, Dhaka University

Portrait of Kajal Abdullah with a text box: 'The topic of this roundtable is student politics: how to restore its old glory. Before we can think of restoring the old glory we need to know its history correctly. I can guarantee that if you conduct a survey among the student leaders you will see that most of them don't know about the old glory.'

The type of student politics we are seeing at present is not derived from any ideology. A person does politics from an ideology and a sense of patriotism. I can give examples of Dhaka University; as you all know that 'seat politics' exists there. Here many students fall victim to politics for only a seat in the dorm. Student politics is being imposed on them. Spirit and ideology comes from within a person, but here ideology is forced upon him or her.

Those who can display proficiency in fighting get better seats. The general students cannot protest the torture perpetrated on them because they don't have any collective voice and they are afraid of those who carry dangerous weapons in their hands in the name of student politics.

Kaniz Fatema Chowdhury, student, Dhaka University

Portrait of Kaniz Fatema Chowdhury with a text box: 'The most important thing is that we don't know what the character of student politics was. We only see the present state of student politics. The political leaders want to ensure their control over the student bodies. I have heard that after independence, students had prepared seedbeds in the Suhrawardi Udyan and had sent those to the farmers to help them fight famine. But now the situation is such that as a student I cannot speak about my rights or place my demands to the university authorities.'

We, the general students, cannot forge any movement. In 1971, students carried arms to fight the occupation forces, but why there should be arms in the hands of students now?

Mujahidul Islam Selim, General Secretary, Communist Party of Bangladesh

Portrait of Mujahidul Islam Selim with a text box: 'There is a problem in student politics now that the student organisations are being over-politicalised in the partisan sense. The political parties think that their student organisations should be powerful enough to control the educational institutions. They think that if they don't control the campuses they won't be able to remain in power for long.'

Today's topic is related to an issue which has been the most discussed in the past few days. One thing I want to stress that if we can't identify the old glory then we won't be able to restore it. Unfortunately, the glory is not properly projected.

politics'. I prefer to call it 'student movement'.

Normally we identify politics as activities centering on power structures, thus when we talk about student politics a straight equation emerges. Where is the linkage between the political parties and the student organizations? One of the discussants has said that the chaos in the educational institutions is because of the connection between the student bodies and the political parties. So how can we de-link student politics from the political parties? For that, a sense about the glorious past of the student movement should be imbued in the students.

Secondly, the intolerable situation that is prevailing in the campuses is not an isolated issue. It's really a part of the overall national politics. This picture of the educational institutions reflects the character of politics and society. Sometimes there is a tendency to blame the students for all the havoc being created in the educational institutions. Some say that all the problems start from there. I don't want to think like that. The cause of this problem is related to our economic system. The economy of the country is based on a trend of looting; it has given birth to the politics of looting. The main political parties have been afflicted by this tendency, and it has affected student politics as well. Healthy politics has been marginalised and criminalised politics is unfortunately the dominant culture now.

The element of real politics in the criminalised system is very little. Its main preoccupation is worshipping of the leaders and control of power. During the time of politicians like Maolana Bhashani, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other national leaders, debates took place on political issues. Current issues concerning various countries, history, etc, used to be discussed, but now only hero-worshipping takes place in the political debates. The parties are concerned only with how best they can provide more benefits to their cadres. This evil politics is spreading out day by day and polluting the student movements.

Now the question is from where should the change start? Do we start to change the whole structure of politics in the country or bring the positive changes in student politics first? The immediate measure would be to de-link the student organisations from criminalised politics.

Some try to counteract this trend of politics with 'de-politicalisation'. I am opposed to this kind of moves. The situation that is prevailing in the educational institutions is not due to too much politics but due to too little of it. To overcome these problems we need to introduce healthy trends in student politics.

Another point that I want to make is the students are young. At this age they want to express themselves, so they need to be given a platform where they can express themselves freely.

If teaching in the educational institutions is an essential part, then holding regular elections to the student unions is also essential. If the academic calendars can have the specific exam dates then why not the elections dates.

Md. Imran Miah, ex-BCL leader, Supreme Court Lawyer

Turmoil in the educational institutions, tender manipulation, extortion etc, come from a sense of uncertainty. What will the student politicians do who drop out of politics? That should be understood and something should be done about it.

There was a vision of the student politicians in the past, which was to establish democracy, to bring independence. Now there is lack of vision. Students should now fight for strengthening democracy in the country.

There is a question as to what extent student politicians of the present time are practicing politics basing on ideology. How much are meritorious students getting involved in student politics? These are important matters.

Another important thing is that in Dhaka University, elections of fourth-class employees, officials and teachers are held, senate elections are held, but there is no election to choose student representatives.

Another thing that I want to bring to focus is that student politics should be restricted to the educational institutions only. There is no need to have ward, union, upazilla and district units of student organisations, because those who reside in a ward of a union must be enrolled in an educational institution to get involved in student politics. Only regular students should get involved in politics and the political parties should ensure this

Dr. Asif Nazrul, Professor, Dept. of Law, Dhaka University

Portrait of Dr. Asif Nazrul with a text box: 'Why the student leaders, who have killed people, engaged in extortion, committed criminal offences, should be set free? They should be punished. The government should formulate campus crime trial act and the guilty should be tried under the act.'

There are four differences between the past and present student politics. We have lumped criminals and student politicians. Student wing leaders commit 17 different types of crime. The least serious of which is fighting in public places, for which there is provision for one month confinement. The highest offense they commit is murder.

Why the student leaders, who have killed people, engaged in extortion, committed criminal offences, should be set free? They should be punished. The government should formulate campus crime trial act and the guilty should be tried under the act. Student wing leaders are the main obstacles to DUCSU election. They decide who should get nomination. If one gets, another hinders it. Most of the Chhatra League leaders will hinder the DUCSU election now.

Democracy should also be practiced within the political parties. The measure taken by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to fix the age limit of student politicians is good, but the other parties should have followed her lead.

When a student from a village gets admitted in First Year, he becomes helpless and even agrees to be a servant of a cadre only to ensure an accommodation in the hall. I have seen abroad that First Year students get top priority in seat allocation.



Dr. Syed Anwar Husain, Professor of History, Dhaka University

Portrait of Dr. Syed Anwar Husain with a text box: 'It should be ensured that no non-students stay in the university. Seat allotment in the university dormitories should be on the basis of merit. The administration should not bow down before any muscle power. It seems that there is no administration in the universities. I think the vice chancellors and pro-vice chancellors are helpless.'

Firstly, I want to say that 'stop student politics' is an unacceptable expression to me. Secondly, whatever we think about student politics, it is linked to the two student wings of the two mainstream political parties. One of them is in power and the other is hopeful of assuming power.

The direct link between the mainstream political parties and student bodies is unwarranted, but that is what is happening now in student politics. We do not see such type of student politics in other countries.

Every political party will have to cut all direct and indirect relationship with its respective student wing. But this should not happen suddenly because it might create social fallout, as student leaders may get involved in extortion and violence due to frustration.

We need to define students and politics separately. The person who has books, pens in his or her hands, attend classes, goes to the library, takes part in examination regularly, will fall under the definition of 'student'. Those who have a sharp knives and firearms in their hands, take food without paying, and are involved in admission trade, should not be defined as students.

The vice-chancellors should not hold meetings with any non-student leader.

When I was student of Dhaka University, my seniors wanted to know about my CV. Then they asked me to deliver a talk. After examining those, they took the decision whether I should be allowed to be a member of any party. But now if you ask a student leader about the meaning of Bangladesh, they will not able to answer. Their academic qualification and record is very poor.

To resolve the problem, at first the national level leaders will have to take a decision as to what they want- development or decline, of the country? But my apprehension is that the two mainstream political parties will not be able to de-link the student bodies, because, during the national elections they make the best use of the youth force.

It is not enough to fix the age limit of student leaders. Rather it must be ensured that he or she is actually a student. Nowadays, female students are also engaged in clashes.

Nowadays, students identify teachers as blue, red, pink and white teachers. Teachers' involvement in politics must be stopped, and they should not be allowed to act as advisers of any political party. Teachers should be impartial. Amendment of the University Ordinance, 1973 has become an imperative in this regard.

We should also form campus police in line with the renowned universities in the world. The campus police would work under the administration and special trial or tribunal system should be introduced.

Shanta Tawhida, student, Dhaka University

Portrait of Shanta Tawhida with a text box: 'My question is that why the expressions such as 'political students', 'general student', 'shelter' 'protocol' are getting popular day by day? What is the difference between a 'political student' and a 'general student'? Under the present system of allocation of student dormitories it seems that most of the university students get involved with politics due to force exerted by the so-called political leaders. One is compelled to join the political programme only for the sake of arranging ones shelter. Besides, some get involved in politics in order to get a job or other facilities.'

I have talked with some grassroots level political activists. They dream of having a job or other favours on the basis of their political performance. My classmates also throw challenge at me that they will have a better future compared to the most brilliant student of the class, with the blessings of politics.

We do not see participation of female students in politics in the same degree as that of the male students. We should create opportunities for female student to participate in student politics.

The relevant authorities should ensure participation of real students in the student bodies.

Mahmud Hasan Ripon, President, BCL

Portrait of Mahmud Hasan Ripon with a text box: 'There are some problems in student politics. Regular elections to the student unions in the educational institutions can be a probable solution. All the elections, including elections of employees, officers, teachers, senate and the syndicate are held in the university; only the DUCSU election is not. Nothing will be gained by banning student politics.'

In reality, students have always played a vital role in all the democratic movements in Bangladesh. Not very long ago, during the 1/11 period, the students had played a very important role. Teachers and students had jointly protested the emergency rules that time. During the emergency we got inspiration from our teachers. All the student bodies including Chhatra League, Chhatra Union, Chhatra Moitry, etc, had jointly launched a vigorous movement.

After the declaration of emergency, series of movements took place in the country and the student organisations had participated in all those. They had helped organise the students, directly and indirectly.

After the national election, there was no such major incident in the Dhaka University campus for which the authorities were forced to suspend classes or examinations. There was a major clash in Jahangirnagar University, and we dissolved the JU committee a day after the clash. The Dhaka College committee has also been dissolved following an incident there. We had also urged the law enforcement agencies and the concerned administration to take stern action against the culprits. But everyone blames the Chhatra League after any incident in the country, irrespective of whether Chhatra League leaders or activists are involved or not.

I have repeatedly requested our vice chancellor, to hold the DUCSU election immediately. But even after 16 months of the national election, the university administration could not hold election. It will have to take the responsibility for this.

I urge the university administration to declare the election schedule, and see who participates in the election and who does not. If we reject the election, then we will be responsible for that.

Rashed Khan Menon, MP & President, Workers' Party

Portrait of Rashed Khan Menon with a text box: 'In the past, DUCSU was the center point of different student issues. The DUCSU election must be held without delay. I am surprised to hear that while the students want election, the university authority is reluctant. There has been a campaign since long to stop student politics. Since the time when we were in student politics there was a campaign to keep the students detached from politics.'

There has been a campaign since long to stop student politics. Since the time when we were in student politics there was a campaign to keep the students detached from politics. During that time, the ill-motivated section tried to divide the student and formed terrorist groups to divide them. Now they are moving with knives and firearms, at that time they moved with snakes. But that was never the main trend.

The student bodies have no goal or dream in front them. During our time as students we had dreams like the language movement, establishing communism. Even after independence, the students had launched vigorous movement to resist the autocratic rulers.

Student politics has been polluted in the last two decades. The main cause of this is the free market economy. It has blown away our ideology, thoughts, and views.

Why the students do not dedicate themselves to build the country? I would like to ask the Chhatra League leaders why they do not work for implementing Vision-2021.

The student movement should be run independently. I think vice chancellors of different universities and principals of different colleges pamper the students.

The students will have to do their work from their own point of view and own platform. And only an elected student body can do that.

Dr. Sharif Enamul Kabir, Vice Chancellor, Jahangirnagar University

Portrait of Dr. Sharif Enamul Kabir with a text box: 'Perennial student leaders still involved in student politics even after completing their studies should be ousted from student bodies. Besides, it is also necessary to hold election of student bodies on a regular basis according to respective constitution. I will be able to give a surprise by holding election of the central students union in my university soon.'

Ideology and intrusion of outsiders into the student organisations are the major reasons for the proliferation of firearms and unrest in the educational institutions.

I, myself, was a Chhatra League leader. I could never imagine making the JU campus free from outsiders. But now there is not a single outsider in the campus. I have expelled 35 students belonging to Chhatra League since I took charge.

Besides, the hall administration of JU directly handles seat distribution. But I think the whole situation is yet to be brought under control.

Only criticism will not help resolve the present problems related to student politics. Showing a caring mind is also important. There is bound to be some unpleasant incident