

Comrades in the woods

To make the future even bleaker, the Communist movement in Bangladesh lacks a visionary leadership. The weakening strength of the left is also directly proportional to the rise of rightwing politics.

CLEAR AS MUD



AHMEDE HUSSAIN

LAST month's mayoral elections in the three city corporations have exposed some serious fractures in the country's politics. The most crushing defeat that the mayoral candidates have suffered in the city polls belonged to the country's left, all of whom have seen their deposit forfeited. Not only that, they have fared so miserably that given the votes that they have received, it is difficult to tell whether they would have won even the post of a ward councillor if they had contested for such a post. Even if the polls were considered relatively fair till midday, it can never be justified how all the three left candidates, the product of almost over a hundred years of the Communist movement, failed to earn even 11,000 votes together.

Abdullah Al Kafi Ratan, Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and Bangladesh Shomajtantrik Dal (SPB)'s joint mayoral candidate could not even get 5,000 votes (2,475 votes). This is surprising as Ratan was a popular student leader of his time and he was the President of the Dhaka University unit of Bangladesh Chhatra Union (BSU), which held the Assistant General Secretary post of Dhaka University Central Students Union at that time. Now a city leader of the CPB, Ratan had the backing of the SPB, whose student wing Bangladesh Student Front boasts some significant fan-following among the students in the city. The same goes for CPB-SPB's another joint mayoral candidate Bazlur Rashid Firoz (1,029 votes), who had also seen his deposit forfeited. The total number of voters in DCCS, where he contested, was over 1.9 million.

The same goes for Gono Songhota Andolon (GSA)-backed Junaid Saki who, despite a favourable media coverage, bagged 7,370 votes in the DNCC, where the total number of voters stand

at around a whopping 2.4 million. Saki, a student leader himself, earned a name in being a known face as one of the leaders of Oil and Gas Protection Committee. Unlike Ratan and Firoz, Saki invested a lot of energy in his campaign and his posters could be seen hanging even in the remote corners of the city. On top of it all, he has been a rather popular face in chat-shows where he aired his opinions on the ways an array of problems that the city is facing can be solved.

The total number of votes that the three Communist leaders combined have scored is much less than Chormonai pir's Islami Andolon Bangladesh-backed candidate Abdur Rahim (14,784 votes) got in the DCCS poll. To make matters even more ignominious for the country's left and equally worrying for those of us who believe in progressive politics, Ratan, Feroz and Saki's total number of votes is 6,005 short of little known Kawsar Jahan who, backed by Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) that is facing an impending ban for war crimes against humanity, success-

fully contested for the Ward Councillor (Wards 29, 30, 32, Reserved Female). There is no denying that over the last few years, ordinary Bangladeshis have tilted heavily towards the right and Jahan and a few more JI councillors' election is a testimony to that. Having said that, the only time the Communists became a force to reckon with was in the 1991 general election when the CPB won five seats and secured 5 million votes across the country. And that is more or less what AL-backed candidate alone has got in the last month's DCCN election.

Bangladesh lives in a left neighbourhood--on its South is Communist Party of India (Marxist) dominated Tripura; in Nepal Communists wield mass popular support; West Bengal is known as a bastion of the Left Front. There is no denying that, like Bangladesh, the power of money and muscle play a decisive role in the elections in India and Nepal too. In that background, some of the perennial excuses that Bangladesh's Communists give to justify their lack of popular support do not stand. The left in Bangladesh has never

even been able to become an alternative to the two bourgeoisie parties. It is easy to blame the latter two and their power-centric politics, but the Communist leaders never explain why and how they have let hundreds of issues slip out of their hands, especially those that the masses have been plagued with. The SPB is a relatively new party, the GSA is at its infancy; and compared to them the CPB is a rather old and bigger party. But its mass organisations, especially the BSU and the labour and farmer's unions are a skeleton of its previous selves. To make the future even bleaker, the Communist movement in Bangladesh lacks a visionary leadership.

The weakening strength of the left is also directly proportional to the rise of rightwing politics. There are reasons why Kawsar Jahan with mortar and pestle symbol has got more votes than Ratan, Firoz and Saki combined, and it's none other than the latter three who should be blamed for this.

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Research: Academia's Achilles Heel

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

ON a flight from Melbourne to Kuala Lumpur, I picked up a Malaysian newspaper. The title of an op-ed caught my attention: "Driving research in higher education." Laili Ismail, the writer, started out by saying, "Malaysian research universities (MRU) are boosting economic growth by being solution providers to society, industry and government....The purpose of establishing MRUs is to produce more PhDs to drive the industry and move towards a knowledge-based economy." Ismail went on to claim that Malaysia now has 97,000 international students (a significant revenue earner) and that the MRUs have increased twofold the number of international PhD students. The faculty in collaboration with the PhD students produce solutions for individuals, the community, small and medium enterprises and NGOs. Based on models at Cambridge and MIT, the purpose of the MRUs is to help surrounding areas flourish and create jobs for the community by providing solid research support. With education being a powerful path to development, higher education in Bangladesh requires serious thinking. Many changes have come to this arena to influence its ethos and character. The growing number of private universities is a case in point. The fundamentals of what constitutes a university, however, need a critical re-examination.

Two serious weaknesses stand out immediately. One is in the prevailing teaching environment. According to a fellow Vice Chancellor, "Bangladesh's tertiary teachers are completely deprived of professional development. The notion of taking teaching as a career is [ill-conceived]. The workplaces of teachers are usually not supported by [the] required learning environments. [And] the culture of meaningful and productive interaction among the teachers for their learning and development are very much absent."

My focus here is on the other fundamental weakness: the quantity and quality of research produced by these institutions. A cursory examination of the research they produce suggests that much of it does not fall in the category of good scholarly work! To be considered as such, the faculty must produce solid research and publish in recognised outlets that will attest to their work.

Research, unfortunately, is the neglected child of the universities in Bangladesh. The fundamental role of research is knowledge creation, followed by its dissemination, use, and extension. Researchers around the world, in fact, have created a broad array of knowledge products which continue to impact humankind in multifaceted ways.

Developed countries have long understood the role and value of research and a considerable amount of resources and effort have been employed by these countries to enhance research productivity and credibility. In developing coun-



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

tries, especially in Bangladesh, serious attempts to understand the role and impact of research have been sorely lacking. Knowledge production is thus feeble and its relevance and impact rather trivial. A colleague overseas recently commented, "There is hardly any original research, at least in institutions I know. In Urbanisation Studies, for instance, people are simply relying on outdated data or continuing the trite topics that we have seen forever. There is good activism, but no good research."

Kitamura encapsulates the problems surrounding research in higher education institutions. The problems he identified nearly a decade ago still persist. According to him,

"Many of the faculty members in Bangladeshi universities appear unmotivated to conduct their own academic research due to such problems as a lack of research funding, absence of a staff development program, heavy teaching load, and an unclear system of recruitment and promotion. At majority of the universities, many faculty members do not hold doctorates, and those who have finished their master's program are generally hired as new teaching staff."

Among other critical observers, Rehman Sobhan points to the "lack of effective demand for research within the policymaking establishments [with] a strong demotivating influence on the social science research community." As a consequence, he suggests, "... the research agendas in the social sciences have been effectively re-colonized. The development agencies now largely determine the terms of reference of such research, the methodologies to be used, and quite often

the outcomes to be attained." In an exploratory study of several higher education institutions, my colleagues and I found some extraordinary gaps in academia's research environment, especially among business schools in the private universities: they seemed to be all about teaching, teaching and more teaching. We found that 65 percent of the teachers taught more than four courses per semester, some up to six courses. Clearly the incentives in these universities are disastrously misplaced. It raises the burning question: When will the faculty have time to create knowledge? Lecturing from Power Point notes cobbled together from a variety of online sources that are not even shared with students does not a university make!

When asked specifically about cumulative publications, the numbers told a very unflattering story. In national journals, that are often innocuous, 40 percent of the faculty had zero publications. In international journals, 50 percent of the faculty had none and 22 percent had only one publication.

Given the growing size of the higher education industry and the resources poured into it by the government, some NGOs, a few private organizations, and a bulk of it by parents of aspiring students, the knowledge creation function of the private (and assuredly) the public universities is much below par. I must concede, however, that our findings need to be validated by additional research. Until that is done, our findings will remain the benchmark.

I also wanted to share a part of my exchanges with a professor at the University of Cambridge

(UK). At one point the professor wrote: "I am utterly convinced that teaching excellence at the university level is not possible to sustain for long without a research-active faculty involved in 'knowledge creation'." I hope academic leaders are taking note.

Research must become the mainstay and hallmark of at least "some" of our universities if they are to attain international recognition. The role of research is to generate contemporary knowledge and serve communities that often face tremendous adversities. Research is the instrument for harnessing knowledge, addressing the adversities, and transforming economies and nations.

The role of research is indispensable for the advancement of any society, especially because things around us are constantly changing. Research is thus about re-conceptualisation, re-imagination, and re-packaging of knowledge that best fits evolving contexts. Assuming a static world and delivering stagnant knowledge to our students will not only debilitate them, it will halt the progress of society and stunt its future in irreparable ways.

A final thought for contemplation: In the community of nations, the question I raise is which ones are ahead and which ones lag behind? The difference is in which ones value knowledge, use them consistently, and produce new knowledge constantly, especially in their universities and knowledge centers. I rest my case.

The author is Vice Chancellor of BRAC University and Distinguished Professor Emeritus, Pennsylvania State University.

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QUOTABLE Quote

Accept who you are. Unless you're a serial killer.

Ellen DeGeneres

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Not free
- Vegas game
- Door sign
- Metal fastener
- Biting
- Slacken
- Soak up
- World series org.
- Gloss target
- Affectedly cute
- A ton
- Italian cheese
- Libertines
- Norwegian cheese
- Hold power
- Slacken
- Little laborer
- Stock holder
- Tell tales
- "Keen!"
- Give an address
- Mystic deck
- Birth-related
- Evicts

DOWN

- Critter
- Free, as hens
- Dazed state
- So far
- Shore crawler
- Umbrella part
- Arthur's resting place
- Dress size
- Dance units
- Eviction
- Quick inspection
- Baseball's joe
- Finishes last
- Syria neighbor
- Northern state capital
- Church sights
- Feel empathy
- Band need
- Cost
- Banana waste
- Cook's needs
- Youngster
- Fan sound

42 Towel word

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

CRYPTOQUOTE

AL OXI PXF PZXH ZG VYKZH HV RG, ZG PVYBE RG XEVUGE RM HZG XIAOXB. - ZGIUA XOAGB

YESTERDAY'S CRYPTOQUOTE: THE DETAILS VANISH IN THE BIRD'S-EYE VIEW, BUT SO DOES THE BIRD'S-EYE VIEW VANISH IN THE DETAILS. - WILLIAM JAMES

Yesterday's answer

BEETLE BAILEY

THIS FOG IS SO THICK I CAN'T SEE ANYTHING

CAN'T YOU SEE ME, SARGE?

NO, BEETLE, I CAN'T SEE ANYTHING!

HENRY

I WILL BE GOOD I WILL BE GOOD I WILL BE GOOD I WILL BE GOOD

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

HENRY by Don Trachte