

# PRIVATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS No longer an apathetic entity?

MUBASHAR HASAN

THE recent series of protests, initiated by private university students against the government decision of imposing 7.5 percent VAT on tuition fees, indicates a profound change in the alleged apathetic nature of private university students.

It would not be an exaggeration to argue that a common perception about private university students used to be that they, unlike students of public universities, are not interested in politics or the political affairs of the country. This was proven wrong when students of Brac University, North South University, Independent University and East West University alongside other private universities staged what can be described as civil disobedience to press their demands.

The protests came as a surprise to the wider society. In particular, the case of police spraying rubber bullets upon some East West University students and staff has stunned many. Even though the NBR sent a mass SMS stating that private university authorities, not students, need to pay the VAT, it is unlikely to quash the protests since many have argued that it is the students who would ultimately have to pay the extra cost of their education.

Like other tax payments, VAT is an agreed upon economic contract between a state and its citizens. Surely the state too has its own logic. However, the wider impacts of these protest movements are worth investigating for a number of reasons.

Firstly, these movements indicate that private university students are joining the political stream. What this means is that these apparently apolitical students of private universities are exercising their

economic and political agency by defying a proposed contract between the state and an individual. In this context, not only are private university students protesting a state decision but private universities as an establishment have also mounted criticism against the state. It may be noted that the economic management of the state is a political decision as opposed to an economic one about who has to bear how much responsibility and in what context.

Secondly, these protests are adding a new dimension to our political spectrum by setting a non-violent standard. By doing so, these protests highlight that authorities can be challenged in a peaceful manner, at a time when opposition political parties have failed to exert pressure on the government through their violent demonstrations. However, one should not rule out a distant possibility of political elements manipulating the prevailing situation.

Thirdly, these protests have instigated an old debate about whether higher education is a right or a privilege which comes at a price. Public university students receive government subsidies for their education, while private university students don't. On the other hand, little is known publicly about the logic of framing tuition fees of various private universities. Tuition fees differ from institution to institution, and many students of private universities and their parents have exhausted their economic limits by paying the fees, against the backdrop of rising cost of living. So it seems that higher education is a right for some, but a privilege for many. Where, then, is the solution of this paradox?

Finally and most importantly, these



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

protest movements have exposed a lack of trust between citizens and the state. While civil disobedience in the form of protest is a right of citizens, provocative writings such as "Shoot us" is a manifestation of staunch

criticism of law-enforcing agencies, even though, thus far, except for one or two instances, the latter has not used lethal force to remove the protesters from the streets. What is needed at this stage is to find a new

way to rebuild trust and resolve this issue constructively.

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## A remembrance of things past and present

A similar gesture is needed by Pakistan again. These are self-confessed murderers who did not spare even pregnant women and children. They have been found guilty and sentenced. Let the Bangladeshis deal with them.

GHAZALA SCHEIK AKBAR

When sorrows come, they come not single spies but battalions.  
— William Shakespeare, Hamlet

AUGUST, the month just past was a period of remembrance in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. And in the Asian sub-continent, the consequences of the past are all too present. Revered for the Independence and the creation of the two states of India and Pakistan, August recalls, all too sadly, the horrors unleashed as millions were violently uprooted in a desperate scramble to be on the other side of the ill-conceived and hastily drawn 'international border'.

Nobody is sure how many perished but the bitterness that the killing produced has soured India-Pakistan relations for more than six decades now. Periodically it has turned to war.

And if jingoistic media are to be believed it is threatening to flare up once again as hawkish elements on both sides up the ante on the LoC amplifying the chest-thumping rhetoric on the 50th anniversary of the Indo-Pak War, 1965.

Memories of other August events fade but their consequences remain. A year before Partition, on August 16, 1946, 'Direct Action Day', a peaceful protest declared by the Muslim League leadership, was considered a provocation by its rivals. With hot heads on both sides determined to show who was 'boss' in the city of Calcutta, this degenerated quickly into the 'Great Calcutta Killing,' a four

day orgy of murder, rape, arson and loot between Hindus and Muslims. Estimates range between five and a thousand dead. Most importantly, it put the final nail in the coffin for preserving the territorial unity of Bengal setting the seal of Partition on religious lines a year later. East Bengal became East Pakistan and then Bangladesh.

There is another grisly August episode. It concerns Bangladesh.

On the night of August 15, 1975 a group of army officers in the new nation of Bangladesh took it upon themselves to murder not just the founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, but also his wife Begum Fazlunnesa, his sons Kamal and Jamal, their wives and his youngest son Russell aged 10. In all, 20 members of his immediate and extended family were gunned down at four different locations in a planned and systematic manner. This was an act of cold-blooded savagery matched only perhaps by the killing of the Tsar's family in post-revolution Russia or in more recent memory by the fratricide of the entire Royal family of Nepal by its Crown Prince.

The writer Salil Trepethi in his book, *The Colonel Who Would Not Repent*, describes it thus:

"When we met a decade after those killings, I asked Farooq: 'And the 10-year-old boy: did he have to be killed? It was an act of mercy killing. Mujib was building a dynasty; we had to finish off all of them', he told me with a degree of finality, his arm slicing ruthlessly in the air, as if he was chopping off the head of someone

kneeling in front of him. There was no mercy in his eyes, no remorse, only a hint of pride."

In a stunning reversal of fortune, Sheikh Hasina is now the reigning Prime Minister of Bangladesh into her third stint of office. But it hasn't been plain sailing for Hasina. She has shown determination and courage. There have been several attempts on her life, the most dastardly one on August 21, 2004 when a grenade attack at a public meeting nearly killed her. Scores were injured and maimed. She did not give up.

And what of the 1975 killers? Where are they now? How did they escape justice? Why weren't they court-martialled? In arguably the most shameful legal licenses ever given in sub-continental history, these self-confessed killers who expressed no remorse or regret were given a blanket 'immunity' from prosecution by the then acting President Khondokar Mushtaque Ahmed. Adding insult to injury, some were promoted in rank and rewarded with plum diplomatic assignments. Their indemnity remained unchallenged by successive regimes that benefited from their actions giving rise to a culture of impunity for a class of people who were simply above the law. Colonel Farooq Rahman audaciously stood as a candidate for president in 1986!

The sheer brazenness of this extraordinary exemption and the freedom with which they were allowed to travel overseas has caused much speculation as to the real motives in removing Sheikh Mujib. The murders, as initially projected, were not

impromptu acts of irate army officers settling personal scores. Nor were they patriotic soldiers saving the country from corruption, mismanagement and one-party rule. It was murder most foul, a brutal regime change executed at the behest of vested interests. Just like the engineered coup against the Marxist Salvador Allende in Chile 1973 or the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951, someone, somewhere decided that Sheikh Mujib had to go.

Instead of constitutional government and parliamentary democracy, after the removal of Sheikh Mujib and his senior party leaders (four of whom were murdered in their cells in Dhaka Central jail three months later) martial law was declared ushering in a period of military rule peppered with putsches and counter-coups until finally in 1991 a people's movement forced the then ruler General Ershad out of power. This paved the way for elections and parliamentary democracy. Sheikh Hasina came to power in 1996. Although weak politically, she was able to cancel the blanket immunity the killers enjoyed. The legal process of bringing the killers to justice began, slowly and surely.

In a recent statement to Parliament Sheikh Hasina was critical of the role of three countries in shielding the remaining convicted killers, the USA, Canada and Pakistan. Her government, she said, had information that two of the accused, Major Dalim and Colonel Rashid, were reportedly in Pakistan. "But the Pakistan government never admitted it. And the country is not cooperating with Bangladesh on the matter." This is a cause for serious

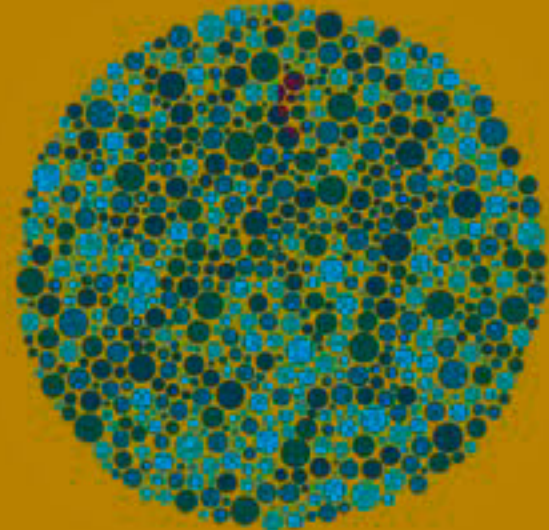
concern. The USA and Canada may have their own reasons for shielding fugitives but certainly the Pakistan government should offer all possible assistance in locating these men. There is a precedent for this.

In 2006, as a 'goodwill gesture' the Pakistan government returned the body of Flight Lieutenant Matiur Rahman to Bangladesh where he was buried with full military honours as a hero. It was a symbolic gesture but deeply significant. Matiur Rahman was the Flight Instructor who had attempted to hijack an aircraft, fly to India and join in his country's war. He was thwarted by his trainee pilot Rashid Minhas. In the ensuing struggle, the plane crashed and both died. The two men were awarded the highest military awards in their countries: Nishan-e-Haider and Bir Sreshtho. Both were heroes. Uncannily this episode occurred on August 20, 1971.

A similar gesture is needed by Pakistan again. These are self-confessed murderers who did not spare even pregnant women and children. They have been found guilty and sentenced. Let the Bangladeshis deal with them. Whatever the country's misgivings about the events of 1971 or its selective remembrance of things past, Pakistan cannot sweep this under the carpet. It must recognise the sensitivities of Bangladesh on this issue. It must feel their pain. Most importantly it cannot and must not be a sanctuary or apologist for self-proclaimed child killers. Find them, return them.

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### A WORD A DAY



### A CHROMATOPSIA [ey-kroh-muh-top-see-uh] COLOUR BLINDNESS

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- |                                   |                              |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>ACROSS</b>                     | <b>DOWN</b>                  |
| 1 Maze choices                    | 1 Favorite                   |
| 6 Rocker setting                  | 2 Copying                    |
| 11 "The Waste Land" poet          | 3 Video editing aids         |
| 12 Moscow setting                 | 4 Worked the garden          |
| 13 Circus performer               | 5 American bass              |
| 14 Tag line?                      | 6 Wine grape                 |
| 15 Paper worker                   | 7 Stench                     |
| 17 Quirk                          | 8 Sewer rodent               |
| 19 Lobster trap                   | 9 Letter before psi          |
| 20 Pointer                        | 10 Very popular              |
| 23 Devotee                        | 16 Transport to Oz           |
| 25 Old Italian coin               | 17 Lightning setting         |
| 26 Charlie Chaplin film           | 18 Pop stars                 |
| 28 Entreated                      | 20 Global strips             |
| 29 Passionate                     | 21 Tony winner Worth         |
| 30 Braying beast                  | 22 Art class staple          |
| 31 Footfaraw                      | 24 Roulette bet              |
| 32 Last letter                    | 25 Top                       |
| 33 Cave                           | 27 Russian Revolution leader |
| 35 Mexican money                  | 31 Fiery crime               |
| 38 Goes under                     | 33 Kind of boot or dancer    |
| 41 Baja buddy                     | 34 Fork feature              |
| 42 Prepare to propose             | 35 Golf goal                 |
| 43 Ungrammatical type of sentence | 36 Outback bird              |
| 44 Like some questions            | 37 Sermon subject            |
|                                   | 39 Writer Kesey              |
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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

P	I	E	C	E	S	P	A	S
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L	E	V	E	L	I	N	G	
T	A	B	Y	E	S	T	A	R
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T	E	E	N	B	E	A	T	S

### BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BEETLE'S CUT FASTBALL CAUSES A LOT OF BROKEN BATS

DOES HE THROW IT THAT HARD?

NO, IT'S WHEN SARGE STRIKES OUT

GREG: NOT WALKER

### BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

ZOE, WILL YOU BRING WREN IN HERE?

I HAVE A POLICY OF NOT PICKING UP ANYBODY WHO COULD BE WEARING A LOADED DIAPER.