

One of the most trending quotes shared by the activists of the ongoing quota system reformation movement is Italian poet Dante Alighieri's "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality".

An interesting aspect of the social media posts of the quota reformists—mostly students of different universities—is that many of them think the country is going through a moral crisis where no one cares about elections, good governance is a far cry, the media is influenced by the government and thus rendered inept and the rule of law is a luxury.

A mandatory course for students enrolled in the University of Dhaka is 'Introduction to Bangladesh'—usually taught in the very first semester. The course is about the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation-state, the liberation movement, and the current political scenario of the country.

In 2013, when I was attending the course, the teacher said: "No other university in the world has ever given birth to a nation. It is only Dhaka University that ignited the fire of liberation and emancipation that led us to independence."



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Dhaka University students at a sit-in at TSC on the first day of the quota reform protests.

HEADING TO THE HOTTEST PLACE IN HELL?

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From the Language Movement of 1952, the 1969 mass uprising, to the Liberation War of 1971, when it comes to defending rights, Dhaka University's students and teachers were the ones who leveraged popular support and sentiment.

When it came to the anti-quota movement of 2013 and the quota reform movement of 2018 demanding reforms in the existing quota system in public services, it was once again mostly Dhaka University students who poured onto the streets, but the results were very different in spite of popular support.

Divide and rule

The last successful student protest was the 1990 mass uprising against Hussain Muhammad Ershad who, according to a High Court verdict, was a usurper who came to power by force. The final blow of the movement started following the death of Chhatra Dal activist Naziruddin Jihad who was shot in front of Ershad's Jatiya Party office.

To protest his death, pro-democracy activists decided to unite against the autocratic rule of Ershad on October 10, 1990, and fight until his fall. Sarbadaliya Chhatra Oikya Parishad was formed comprising all the student organisations except Jamaat's Shibir, and Ershad lost power within two months.

The recipe for success for this student movement was the unity of all forces, which is largely absent today thanks to the non-performing Dhaka University



PHOTO: ISTIAK KARIM

Police fire teargas shells on the protestors in the Dhaka University campus on the night of April 8, 2018.

Central Students Union (DUCSU) on one hand and the ruling party student groups on the other.

The Bangladesh Chhatra League has avidly opposed the quota reform movement from the very beginning. In July 2013, when a group of protesters tried to occupy the Shahbagh intersection to demonstrate, they were brutally beaten by the Awami League's students' wing in front of police.

The same happened in 2018, when a large number of protesters rallied inside the Dhaka University campus demanding reforms to the quota system. According to media reports, a group of BCL men in the presence of DU unit General Secretary Motahar Hossain Prince

swooped on the protesters on April 8.

However, at least three DU unit BCL leaders have resigned from their posts during the movement to protest their organisation's excesses towards the students.

The 'Guardians'

August 21, 2007—Military personnel assaulted university students at the central field. The Dhaka University Teachers' Association protested the assault and demanded that the caretaker government give way to democratic elections.

The demand was, however, followed by army raids in their homes, and detention of a number of university

professors within a week. Regardless of recriminations, they did not shy away from fulfilling their duty as the guardian of the students.

Much has changed in the space of a decade.

This January, when a student movement was launched in the university campus demanding the university to disassociate itself from affiliated colleges, one of the coordinators was beaten up by BCL men, handed over to the university proctor who later handed him to the police. This was a completely unprecedented incident.

In the meantime, female activists of the movement were sexually harassed by the BCL men under the very nose of the university's Vice-Chancellor while protesting outside his office. The victims even demanded safety from their teachers, but to no avail.

Instead of justice, they were rewarded with criminal cases because university property was destroyed during the scuffle. The DU Teachers' Association held a human chain to demand 'formidable' punishment for the protestors.

This time, when protestors—mostly DU students—were assaulted by the police during a sit-in demanding reform of the quota system, the DU Teachers' Association initially did not come forward to save the students, let alone listen to their demands. As I write this article (on April 11), the Association has issued a statement in support of the student movement, and one can only hope that this support is not only on paper.

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