

# Death of the Ducusu Dream?

And what it means for our student politics

THE March 11 election to Ducusu, or Dhaka University Central Students' Union, marks a moment in the history of student politics that is at once tragic and cathartic. Tragic, because of the way it was conducted, and cathartic, because it confirmed our

suspicion that it couldn't have been conducted in any other way. And so, after 28 years of being marooned in a fantasy bubble, here we are, waking up to the reality that a fantasy bubble feels good to be in while it lasts but it is not meant to last forever.

That fantasy—or as I like to call it the "Ducusu Dream"—had basically two components: 1) that Ducusu would be revived to protect the interests of the students; and 2) that it would play the role that it had historically played until 1990, when the last Ducusu election was held. It was a beautiful dream, an innocent dream. Over the decades, that dream was valorised and passed through generations like hereditary nostalgia. There were some practical reasons for it too. Ducusu was, after all, not just one university's claim to fame because of its historic role in many socio-political movements of this nation, or its endearing label as the "second parliament of Bangladesh" or the fact that it produced future leaders. It was, quite frankly, a beacon of hope for everyone, a touchstone in any campaign against injustices anywhere in the country.

But while we held on to that dream, the world outgrew us. Bangladesh found itself trapped in a peculiar model of democracy in which power is completely centralised and sycophancy is the norm. The continued erosion of democratic values, intolerance of dissent and diversity, politicisation of democratic institutions, growing divisions and moral decay in society, and the post-modern distrust of any central narrative or established views/platforms meant that—even if Ducusu is

revived through an election—it is unlikely to ever be restored to its former glory. The March 11 election only served to prove that point.

On the more mundane issue of why the ritual of an election could not be held all these years, there is plenty of blame to go around: for the political parties, which wanted to manufacture a vacuum so they could plant their own people and establish control over the university; for the DU administration, which cavalierly dismissed all demands for an election, secure in the knowledge that its authority would not be challenged; for the teachers, who failed to stand up for the students' rights of representation; and for the media, which demagogued the crisis. Everyone seemed to benefit from a no-Ducusu situation—everyone except the students.

#### What now?

There are a number of ways to read the recent Ducusu election and assess its impact—and the most practical one is, naturally, the most frustrating. This is not just because of the "shameful" manner in which the election was held. The new Ducusu VP, Nurul Haque Nur, is one of only two students elected to the union's 25-member executive committee; the remaining 23 posts were filled by candidates from Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the ruling party. Nur's successful bid is in no way an accurate reflection of what happened during the election, which was rejected by most contesting parties and candidates including Nur himself, alleging widespread irregularities. Nur and his Ducusu colleagues have already made their mutual distrust known publicly. What can be expected from such a divided camp?

At its most basic level, this election is guilty of corrupting our historical memory of Ducusu. Living the Ducusu Dream year after year was exhausting, but seeing that dream shredded and stomped into the dust, metaphorically speaking, was quite painful. The election, besides leaving an aftermath of uncertainty, also reflected a paradigm shift in student politics: it served to "legalise", according to an associate professor of DU, Chhatra League's control over the campus. With the de-facto

and de-jure powers both in the hands of Chhatra League now, except in a few halls where non-BCL candidates won, it is likely to make life far more challenging for the general students and the activists of opposition student wings.

Meanwhile, assaults on Nur on the election day and the subsequent demonisation campaign launched against him by Chhatra League have set a corrupting precedent for Ducusu, and indicate what lies ahead for other non-BCL winners and candidates. If anyone is to benefit from this compromised situation, it is the teachers loyal to the ruling party and the

tactics fashioned to weaken the opposition from within." The Ducusu 2019 Model has also proved to be quite effective; it showed that Ducusu can be turned into an advantage rather than an embarrassment. It also showed that Ducusu doesn't have to be a threat to the powers that be. In the foreseeable future, we are probably going to see more such elections in other student unions and even in Ducusu.

#### Future of student politics

As we read last rites over the Ducusu Dream, let us remind ourselves that part of the Ducusu hype in recent times was due to the supposed revival of



Students demand a fresh election to Ducusu, March 12, 2019.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

already compliant university administration. Is it any wonder that the DU VC was "delighted" after the election was over?

The 2019 election has also set a model for Ducusu which may be emulated in the coming days. It's like the "Khulna Model" of controlled election, which was followed last year during the Khulna City Corporation election and subsequently in Gazipur and other elections, including the 11th parliamentary election. As I explained in another column, this model "seeks to prevent elections from getting messy through a shift towards more subtle and non-violent

student leadership. The role that students played in recent years—organising several "successful" movements including the quota reform movement, the road safety movement and the VAT movement in private universities—drew a comparison with the historical role that students played both before and after the 1971 war of liberation. Ironically, these movements, largely taking place outside DU or without a central role played by its students, represent the shifting ground beneath the enduring appeal of DU-based student leadership. With the students of private universities and even schools and colleges

becoming increasingly vocal, it also signals a gradual distancing from the traditional dependence on students of public universities to initiate or lead such movements.

It is, therefore, time to discard our past-bound mentality, look beyond the nostalgic trappings of Ducusu revivalism, and brace for the fast unfolding realities. It is time to consider the fact that Dhaka is expanding—and with that its tertiary education landscape and the potential of divergent leadership. Today's reality is vastly different from the reality in 1990, when the space for leadership was significantly small and centralised and when there was not one single private university. Not to mention, the idea of using social media to initiate social movements, which reduced dependence on the need for an organised platform, was still an unknown concept. That being said, Dhaka University is still a force to reckon with and its potential to serve the students and the country in general is unmatched. But it is no longer the only force.

It's important to note that the benefits of having a Ducusu of the kind that was just formed may be far outweighed by the disadvantages. The March 11 election marked the beginning of a new trend in student politics; only, it's not the trend that the students would have liked to see. For nearly a century—since it was first formed in 1923-24—Ducusu has been championed, quite correctly, as a model for pro-student, pro-people politics by the students. Even after it was kicked into the long grass by pro-democratic governments after 1990, its example has been used to justify the existence of the brand of student politics that has developed afterwards. That brand of student politics, which didn't produce leaders but only sycophants, saw students being used as pawns in the bigger political game. What will its advocates say now—after the death of the Ducusu Dream?

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## Post-Christchurch social reconstruction: Global the message, local the onus

IT is not enough to alert the public of social cracks; how they can be repaired must be part and parcel of any de-constructing exercise.

Righteously labelled

Christchurch must have been insulted thrice last weekend. The first was preplanning the murder of 50 innocent worshippers. Second, by fouling the city's namesake: Jesus Christ would have been most abhorred. Finally, by unleashing the kind of hatred that even the most rebellious church preaches against.

Reconstruction must proceed accordingly: reassuring Muslims they are part and parcel of the very society they belong to (unfortunately and increasingly, even in their own Islamic-majority countries); bridging stubbornly diverging pockets, beginning with Christians and Muslims, but urgently extending to Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews; and equally urgently, building a collective-mindedness for a change, since, on that same fateful 3/15, school children the world over reprimanded their pompous, braggadocio, silver-accumulating adults for buggering up their own environmental future.

How New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern got the ball rolling promptly and pointedly serves a lesson for her male counterparts. Talking about "migrants," "refugees," and "Muslims," among other threatening groups, she prosaically merely reiterated what New Zealanders knew:

"they are us." She categorically closed up on perpetrators: "they are not us." Contrast those words contextually with a similar post-9/11 occasion, when US President George W Bush warned: "Either you are with us. Or you are with the terrorists." His words exposed Muslims, since 9/11 was executed by referencing Islam, while Ardern's embraced them. His summoned other countries to follow the United States; hers diffused responsibility, invoking all New Zealanders, including refugees, migrants, and Muslims against the perpetrating mindset. His played the Manichaean game (interpreting only through white versus black prisms) to its hilt; hers shaded interventions with gray hues. His ultimately energised political and militant audiences, while hers encouraged the broader social and cultural groups.

One off-shoot was the newly created Department of Homeland Security. Serving as the "be-all" and "end-all" US arbiter (especially in the initial post-9/11 years), it restructured the entire US administration, while Ardern's government made gun-control the first parliamentary duty after the 3/15 shock. Humming about guns or controlling them suddenly has huge civil society and accountability consequences within democracies.

Just as Bush's nationalistic message resonated globally ("We are all Americans," France's *Le Monde* headlined just after 9/11), so too did Ardern's, more humanely: "they are us." It is not just the former's exclusiveness contesting the latter's inclusiveness, but with Muslims victimised in both cases for quite different reasons, the top-down dissemination of the former encourages keeping Muslims at bay, while the bottom-up, protocol-free Ardern response

of mixing, grieving, sobbing, and praying with Christchurch Muslims promotes the unity solutions need. She unwittingly leaves students of negotiations, diplomats, and leaders worldwide with more practical learning than all the well-stocked libraries and classroom pulpits in "great power" countries.

This first, and most pivotal, reconstruction work began straightforwardly. New Zealanders did what they rou-

must remember: one does not have to have blonde hair, or come from the west to be "angelic faced". But clearly treating a Muslim as an automatic terrorist, unless proven otherwise, inflicts grievous, long-lasting pain. This is the cardinal break every country must make to live in what will become a tempest-torn twenty-first century, when instinctual individualism (evident most glaringly in how



Messages written in chalk are seen on a pavement in Christchurch on March 18 after 50 worshippers were killed on March 15, 2019, in two mosque attacks.

Christianity has long projected secularity, going back to the 1648 Westphalia Treaty: temporal power has long been wielded by Caesars (rulers), spiritual by the Church, in a relationship which elevates the former over the latter, making it flimsy to speak of Christianity being at arms today, at least across West Europe. With Islam, on the other, though spiritual and temporal powers have always been institutionally intertwined, princely power has almost always over-ridden the priestly, whether caliphs (after the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs), rajahs, sultans, or kings. Fundamentalism, a historically minority view, capitalises on this to shape majority views today, whether in Islam or Christianity, or Buddhism, Hinduism, or Judaism. More Arderns will be needed, in each country in its own way, to tackle this scourge. The goal need not be the "perpetual peace" Immanuel Kant spoke of in late eighteenth century, which flows from democracy, a fading practice today. Nor does it have to necessarily be the Mahatma Gandhi version of practicing non-violence. It must, first, facilitate bridge-building locally, then transcendentally, to come to terms with the second reconstruction task more resolutely today.

Two groups needing this the most, Jews and Muslims, expose both the broken order and the yearn to fix it. Palestine's unfolding holocaust horrifies even some of the few remaining victims of Adolf Hitler's Holocaust of the 1930s, yet it continues under the very eyes of the entire world without a meaningful murmur. Nowhere else can an Ardern make more mileage than here and right now, like the Pittsburgh Jews have done. Facing a similar white supremacist, David Bowers, in an

identical attack in the Tree of Faith Synagogue last October (with 11 fatalities), they have reached out to aggrieved Christchurch Muslims. That heeded message is sinking in was also evident through Australia's "Eggboy", William Connolly: for a youth to chastise Queensland Senator Fraser Anning for finger-pointing Christchurch and other Muslims out for terrorist acts is a positive future signal. That he simultaneously diverted some of the donations to fight the legal case against him for throwing the egg towards Christchurch relief, is heart-warming. Whether the Christchurch terrorist's Israel visit had anything to do with his actions or not, more than any other groups, Jews and Muslims, need fence-mending the most, since their own feud fuels the larger anti-Muslim fundamentalist fire.

Graver still are threats against, not race, religion, or nationality, but humanity. This third reconstruction arena also has a 3/15 connection (see Saleemul Huq's March 20 *The Daily Star* piece on this): 16-year-old Greta Thunberg's Climate (In)Action protest against adult inaction was hijacked from Christchurch schoolchildren by the terrorist shooting. If children feel abandoned by adults, while the #MeToo Movement exposes other discriminations, and a half-trillion-dollar illicit-drug industry emaciates our youth (seven million in Bangladesh alone, half on yaba pills), surely problem-solving demands more collective attention than lone-wolf hatred mongering.

This must be the ultimate hurdle, and we may be near the final call. Whether we are equal to the challenge or not will be the key twenty-first story that Christchurch alerts us to.

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### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

- 1 Gung-ho
- 39 Old hand
- 5 Jazz dance
- 10 Muscularly fit
- 12 River vessel
- 13 Spree
- 14 More than sufficient
- 15 Pub staple
- 16 Commuter group
- 18 La Brea sight
- 20 Mineral suffix
- 21 TV award
- 23 Sign of approval
- 24 Granny
- 26 Airing
- 28 Sandwich choice
- 29 Company symbol
- 31 Ear: Prefix
- 32 "Wild, man!"
- 36 Lawyer's hurdle
- 39 Old hand
- 40 Full of energy
- 41 Baja buddy
- 43 Out of bed
- 44 Principle
- 45 Colorful fish
- 46 Capone's foe
- 48 Lawyer's hurdle
- 49 Old hand
- 50 Full of energy
- 51 Baja buddy
- 53 Out of bed
- 54 Principle
- 55 Colorful fish
- 56 Capone's foe
- 57 Ready to hit
- 58 Magician's cry
- 59 Mineral suffix
- 60 TV award
- 61 Sign of approval
- 62 Granny
- 63 Airing
- 65 Sandwich choice
- 66 Company symbol
- 67 Ear: Prefix
- 68 "Wild, man!"
- 69 Lawyer's hurdle
- 70 Old hand
- 71 Full of energy
- 72 Baja buddy
- 74 Out of bed
- 75 Principle
- 76 Colorful fish
- 77 Capone's foe
- 78 City of Australia
- 79 One-- kind
- 80 Central
- 81 Speculate
- 82 Ready to hit
- 83 Magician's cry
- 84 Mineral suffix
- 85 TV award
- 86 Sign of approval
- 87 Granny
- 88 Airing
- 89 Sandwich choice
- 90 Company symbol
- 91 Ear: Prefix
- 92 "Wild, man!"
- 93 Lawyer's hurdle
- 94 Old hand
- 95 Full of energy
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- 98 Principle
- 99 Colorful fish
- 100 Capone's foe

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