

# Student wings of political parties: At what price?



MANZOOR AHMED

IN April 2010, when the draft of the National Education Policy 2010 was under discussion, five of the most distinguished and respected academics of the country issued a joint statement titled "Banish mal-politics from the education sphere: Take definite steps to implement the education policy with adequate resources."

The signatories of the remarkable statement, published in national dailies, were Prof Anisuzzaman, Prof Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Prof Kabir Chowdhury, Prof Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, and Prof Jamal Nazrul Islam. The last three are no more with us. But their call is as relevant and urgent today as it was a decade ago.

Among the nine points the professors had made, the first one was to keep students and the youth away from malignant politics and to preserve the learning environment on campus—direct and indirect connections between Awami League and Chhatra League should be severed. At the same time, all heads of educational institutions and local administration should be directed to control strictly criminal activities and breaches of regulations by students and non-students on campus. The government should assure full support for these steps. These decisions are essential to restore the glorious tradition of student political activism.

There has been spontaneous student activism recently (related to civil service job quotas, road and public transportation safety, and sexual violence against girls). In these instances, the role of the student supporters of the ruling regime has been to disrupt activities of common

students and detract public attention from the issues—all in the name of defending the regime.

Sit-ins and demonstrations had been going on for weeks revolving around the formation of the central committee of Chhatra League by its disaffected members. They felt deprived of rewards they were entitled to for their service to the party.

The composition of the central committee of over 300 itself is unusual, comprising mostly vice-presidents and secretaries and only a few members without posts. The spectacle has brought to the fore once again the problems with student politics as it exists today.

The committee has been formed apparently with the guidance of Awami League pointsmen designated by the party rather than through a democratic process within the student body. The dissatisfied factions alleged that the selection was not in accordance with the rules of the organisation regarding student identity, age, marital status, etc.

Moreover, quite a few of the appointed people are alleged to have been engaged in unlawful activities including physical assault on opponents, extortion, arson, drug dealings, exam question leaks and other criminal activities. The complaints have been vindicated in a way because some of the people named for organisational posts were dropped from the list and investigations against others have been promised.

Earlier in the year, the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducusu) election held under court orders after a pause of three decades displayed again the ugly side of student politics today. There was hope that a new beginning in student political activism was possible with a genuine election of student leaders to carry out campus extra-curricular activities; exercise citizenship rights of students as they saw fit; and nurture future



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

The long-awaited election to Ducusu, which was marred by protests and irregularities, was boycotted by all panels except that of the ruling party.

social, cultural and political leadership within the student body of the most prestigious and the largest university in the country. That hope was rudely dashed.

Unless and until the umbilical cord of student organisations to their political parents was cut, the election of student unions was not likely to bring a positive outcome. This indeed proved to be the case. The Ducusu election was marred by widespread complaints about vote-rigging, ballot-box stuffing, and obstruction of voting which the university officials ignored or in which they were complicit, according to media reports. It was a replay of managing election outcomes on a miniature scale of the national parliamentary election.

The toxic influence of political party-directed student bodies has spread to dormitories, campus life, admission of students, question leaks, tenders

and contracts for university business, safety of female students, and even the appointment of staff and teaching personnel.

There was a glorious history of students' involvement in national politics. One may recall the state language movement and the 1960s and 1970s when students showed the way to political leaders at critical moments. As a general rule, students were concerned with their extra-curricular campus activities conducted through the elected student union. But the elected unions, with their elected representatives leading the way, also became platforms for venting and articulating the views of students on critical national concerns.

Would the sky fall if the ruling regime did not have a pliant student body at its beck and call to do its bidding, or to disrupt and suppress

any expression of ideas or display of discontent by students, which irks the ruling party or the government? What kind of society and nation would it be if the young people, especially university students, are so docile, unadventurous and timid that they are afraid to express themselves about matters they feel strongly about, even if it displeases the ruling regime?

If the founding ideals of Bangladesh are to be fulfilled, a change in our political culture is called for and the politics of inclusiveness, tolerance and consensus must be fostered. This is precisely what is prevented and discouraged by the present "patron-client" relationship between political parties and their affiliates among students. The student wings have become the spawning ground for the politics of cronyism and corruption—a means to acquire and exercise power for the party and its leaders at any cost.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, head of Shujan (Citizens for Good Governance), conveying a consensus from citizens' consultation throughout the country, wrote recently: "We must reform our political parties to ensure their internal democracy, transparency in their nomination process and financing, and the end of 'partiarchy'. They must renounce extremism, communalism, identity-based politics, and inter- and intra-party violence. Their associated and affiliated bodies must also be disbanded" ("18 reforms that would change Bangladesh," *The Daily Star*, June 3, 2019).

Higher education—or for that matter, all types of education—needs to be out of bounds of political interference motivated by short-sighted views and factional or individual interests. A first step would be for the ruling political party to seriously rethink what to do with its affiliated student body.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed is Professor Emeritus at BRAC University.

# We need to roll up our sleeves for South Asia's children and we need to do it now



JEAN GOUGH

THESE situations never cease to impress and move me: a girl who has never had the chance to go to school before, deep in concentration, learning how to



PHOTO: AFP

Out of all new babies in South Asia, 2.7 percent die in the first 28 days of life. This is the same figure as sub-Saharan Africa.

best healthcare possible, safe water to drink and nutritious food. Children also have, among many other rights, the right to play and the right to be protected from harmful punishment and sexual abuse.

One third of the world's children and adolescents live here in our region. If we can get it right in

South Asia, we will have impacted a huge part of the globe's youngest generation for the better. We have seen powerful and positive changes in children's lives in the eight South Asian countries over the past 30 years. Nevertheless, there is no time to waste if we truly care about every single child and genuinely wish to give each

one the best possible start in life. It is a core principle of children's rights that every child has the right to life, survival and development.

Nevertheless, the issues that we are facing in South Asia are daunting: data on nutrition shows us that the region is lagging behind sub-Saharan Africa in low birth weight, stunting and wasting. In some of our countries, diets that are high in sugar and fat are increasing the risk of overweight and obesity in children which can result in lifelong health problems.

A harrowing number of newborns never get the chance to live. Out of all new babies in South Asia, 2.7 percent die in the first 28 days of life. This is the same figure as sub-Saharan Africa. There are many reasons for this, but the lack of clean water—which often leads to child malnutrition and serious disease—is certainly one of them. The lack of investment in the nutritional care of women during pregnancy also has dire consequences for survival rates and the well-being of newborns: one in four infants in South Asia is born small and weak, often as a direct result of maternal undernutrition.

When we look at education, we also see a major prospect for change: 10 million children are not enrolled in primary school and almost half of those who are do not learn the basics of reading and mathematics. When we look at secondary school, a staggering 18 million do not have the chance to

enrol. And one-third of all children will not set foot in a pre-school even though this gives them the very best foundation for learning.

Then we have emerging issues such as air pollution and climate change—both of which demand an urgent call to action. Millions of children breathe toxic air every day and that can have a serious impact on their lifespan and even their intellectual capacity. The effects of climate change are undermining children's right to survive and thrive—and we have only seen the beginning of these unsettling developments.

I know I am not alone when I say that we as adults can and must do better. We have no excuses but we have plenty of opportunity to act.

We know for a fact that societies improve for everyone when we invest in children. All evidence tells us that for each dollar spent on, for example, education and health, a society will benefit manifold.

So that is the great and uplifting news: if we ensure the fulfilment of rights we have promised the youngest generation, and if we protect and invest in our wonderful and talented children, South Asia as a whole will thrive.

It is very simple: when we, as adults, do good for our children, we do good for our world.

Jean Gough is Unicef's Regional Director for South Asia.

### ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

**June 17, 1928**  
Amelia Earhart begins the flight that made her the first woman to successfully fly across the Atlantic Ocean

Amelia Earhart and two other pilots took off from Newfoundland, Canada, in a Fokker F7 airplane. Twenty-one hours later, Earhart became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic as the plane landed near Llanelli, Wales.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

- 1 Texas player
- 6 Dries, in a way
- 11 City on the Po
- 12 Ham's need
- 13 Let up
- 14 Book section
- 15 Moved quickly
- 17 Need to pay
- 19 Clumsy fellow
- 20 Biol. or geol.
- 23 Burglar alarm part
- 25 Yemen neighbour
- 26 Specialty
- 28 Money machines
- 29 Buck topper
- 30 Reuben base
- 31 Powerful people
- 32 Auction buy
- 33 Attend without a date
- 35 Under
- 38 Stockpile
- 41 Place of action
- 42 Full range
- 43 Inexperienced
- 44 Rival

**DOWN**

- 1 One-time connection
- 2 Sonar user
- 3 Part of a brand ID
- 4 Singer Coolidge
- 5 Like old schools
- 6 Short
- 7 Hit the runway
- 8 Strange
- 9 Even score
- 10 Boston team, familiarly
- 16 Kilt patterns
- 17 Film trophy
- 18 Writer Eudora
- 20 Squirrels, grouse, and the like
- 21 Unbilled role
- 22 Sluggish
- 24 Pop's daughter
- 25 Many a time
- 27 Before the audience
- 31 Hawkeye
- 33 Departed
- 34 "Walk Like —"
- 35 Do a checkout job
- 36 Mess up
- 37 Writer Harper
- 39 Bottom-line figure
- 40 Messy room

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### BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

**BEETLE BAILEY**  
I DON'T THINK LT. FUZZ SHOULD BE AN ARMY OFFICER  
WHY? WHAT DID HE DO?  
HE TOLD THE MEN TO BEHAVE OR SANTA CLAUS WOULDN'T BRING THEM ANYTHING

**BABY BLUES**  
by Kirkman & Scott

**BABY BLUES**  
BAM!  
PANG!  
THOCK!  
WHACK!  
DID A HOCKEY PUCK JUST PLY THROUGH HERE?  
NO.  
I'LL KEEP LOOKING.  
AND I'LL KEEP THE STICK.

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

S	C	A	L	E	C	U	S	P
L	O	D	E	S	S	A	N	T
O	L	D	I	E	E	L	T	O
W	O	E	S	E	R	M	I	N
U	R	N	A	L	E	L	E	S
P	I	D	D	L	I	N	G	
N	A	I	L	A	E	R	O	
C	O	B	M	I	D	D	L	I
A	P	E	M	A	N	H	E	L
R	E	G	A	L	P	E	N	A
T	R	I	L	L	I	R	E	N
S	A	N	E	C	E	D	E	D