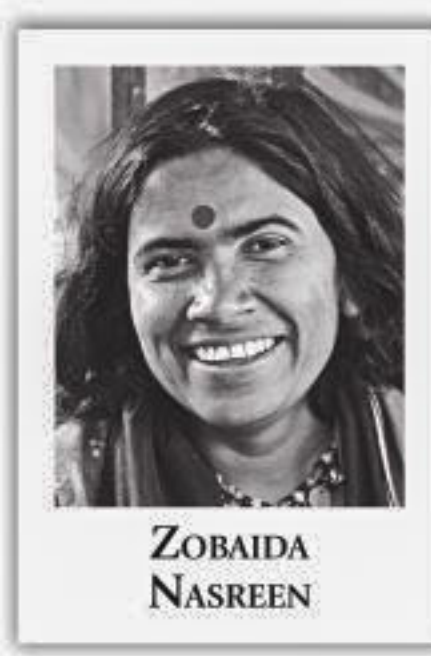# We must protect academic freedom and democracy in universities

"Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties." — John Milton in Areopagitica (1644)

ZOBAIDA NASREEN

LAST week some students of the University of Science and Technology Chittagong (USTC) physically assaulted Professor Masud Mahmood and poured kerosene on him in an attempt to set him on fire after dragging him out of an academic office. That day, he returned to campus after a probe committee formed by the university found the allegation of his delivering "obscene" lecture to be false. Earlier in mid-April, some students felt that they would have to compromise their moral beliefs listening to the lecture by the English literature professor about male-female relationship and Freudian psychoanalytic theory. They attempted to shut down discussions about topics they disagreed with by demanding his removal. When it was not possible through due process, they threatened him with dire consequences.

In May, Maidul Islam, an assistant professor of sociology at Chittagong University, sought security after at least 10 young men took position outside his apartment at night and threatened to harm him. Eight months earlier, Maidul was arrested in a case filed by a leader of the student wing of the ruling party, for a "defamatory" post on Facebook. The university also suspended Maidul on the same grounds.

In the last week of June, an Islamic organisation reiterated its demand for the removal of a chapter on evolution from all textbooks. In this context, it is worth mentioning that during our school days, we saw our teachers find it challenging to give lectures on love, sexuality and reproductive issues and they would cautiously set aside these topics due to often uninformed and misleading cultural and religious taboos.

These are only a few recent instances in a wave of events that signal a growing climate of intolerance against intellectual inquiry and freedom of thought—the core concerns of academicians all over the world. There are also pro-government student bodies that routinely use force and intimidation to thwart protests on campus. So, there are clear threats to academic freedom from non-state actors, who are increasingly trying to enforce censorship and thought policing through physical assaults, public shaming and so on.

But, more effectively, it is the government and the university administrations that are limiting both academic freedom and democratic dissent on campus by using repressive state apparatus. Laws like the Digital Security Act 2018 have been enacted to criminalise dissent. A number of teachers were arrested, interrogated, suspended or sent on forced leave for Facebook posts critical of the establishment. Curbs on student protests have created a climate of fear and so they cannot speak freely even when they see injustice or inequality.

Last year was a tumultuous year for student protests. So it was no surprise that there was an increase in administrative and police actions against students. On April 18, *Prothom Alo* reported that the police could not yet find any evidence against the students detained during last year's movement for road safety for their alleged involvement in street violence. Yet, harassment of the students continued. This is a direct form of control that puts the lives and academic careers of protesting students at risk, and ostracise them socially.

But the university administrations are using subtler forms of control, like serving show-cause notice, taking disciplinary action, and suspending studentship to deter students from dissenting against the ruling class. This is an indirect way of intimidating the students into submission.

A brief account of the administration's handling of recent student protests at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University (BSMRSTU) in Gopalganj could be useful to understand how a simple mechanism such as that of serving show-cause notice was manipulated to crush student activism against sexual harassment. The BSMRSTU administration issued show-cause notices to 19 students in May alone and suspended the studentship of another student. Five of them were served the notice on May 9 for their status update on Facebook and sharing newspaper articles on their timelines. Those five took part in protests demanding justice for two of their classmates who had filed sexual harassment complaints against a teacher. Though the students shared news reports and opinion pieces published in national dailies, the administration interpreted it as an attempt to destroy its "image" and an "act of instigation". It took the disciplinary action to send a message to the students that they should not dare to raise their voice against the authorities.

A few days later, the same administration issued show-cause notices to 14 more students. This time the students were campaigning for ensuring a fair price of rice for the farmers. The official reason given to justify the notice was that the students formed a human chain without permission and carried placards critical of the government. Why did these issues command such a response? The disciplinary action against students for protests over a non-academic issue goes to show how narrow the focus of the university has become and how ideologically compromised it is that it can so easily attempt to silence critical voices.

Such indirect forms of control are normalised using a language peculiar to our broader political culture. We are moving dangerously towards a totalitarian situation in almost every sphere of our social life. The three magic terms that have been making the rounds over the years to shut down anti-establishment thoughts are: "image of organisation/country", "popular sentiment", and "instigation". These terms were used countless times to discredit and silence voices from within a community against regressive practices. Such an anti-intellectual ploy has taken deep root in our academia. We are putting our students and teachers in a tight corner where they cannot even voice their frustration over an injustice or inequality without fear.

The suppression of protests is counter-productive, which only makes the spring of freedom inevitable. A side-effect of this might be the flourishing of extremism.

The gradual erosion of autonomy of the universities over several decades is partly to blame for this situation. Increasing government interferences, concentration of too much power in a few hands that are willing to sacrifice the principles of self-organisation and self-governance on the altar of the ruling class, and trampling of freedom of speech—all have contributed to it. However, we have learned to recognise the value of autonomy of the judiciary, the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the National Human Rights Commission. It is an irony that we are abandoning the ideals of autonomy within the domain of higher education in favour of bureaucratic institutions that are driven by economic value. We have now developed a peculiar higher education system where not all of the taxpayer-funded universities are "public"—the newest ones are known as "government" universities. Since 1998, the number of state-funded universities has increased six-fold (currently 54). But none of the 45 new universities is autonomous; they are all government-controlled.

Our higher education is in a mess right now. It is, as Raymond Williams put it, neither "free play of the market" nor "a public education designed to express and create the values of an educated democracy and a common culture." So in an increasingly globalised world, where Bangladesh (of course, as a peripheral country situated at the receiving end of the bargain) occupies a significant place by supplying cheap labour in large quantities, we have to seek to recuperate autonomy and academic freedom if we are to build a free and democratic society that would broaden our scope of generating knowledge and innovation.

The students and teachers who are struggling against fear need solidarity. We need an initiative to return universities to their democratic nature which would produce enlightened individuals embodying the values of democracy. To achieve this, we must have campuses free of fear.

Zobaida Nasreen is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Dhaka.
Email: zobaidanasreen@gmail.com

Students and teachers should be allowed to express their views without fear.   PHOTO: STAR

Prioritising e-government procurement for vision 2021 and beyond

HASANUZZAMAN and BJORN LOMBORG

TRANSPARENCY, fair competition and accountability are three defining features of an efficient public procurement system. Until 2011, the Bangladesh procurement process was paper-based and plagued by corruption and malpractices. Short bidding periods, nondisclosure of the selection criteria, pre-tender negotiation with bidders were some of the defining features of guiding Bangladesh's public procurement activities.

Although the World Bank recommended introducing e-Government Procurement (e-GP) system in 2002, it was not until the current government's Digital Bangladesh agenda that gave fresh impetus for the use and adoption of technology in public procurement. The e-GP system, implemented in 2011, has largely eliminated corruption and malpractices previously attributed to the traditional paper-based procurement system.

As a result of e-GP's implementation, Bangladesh has accomplished target 12.7 of the SDGs which focuses on advancing public procurement practices. The government has made commendable progress in implementing e-GP and it has designed some indicators to assess the rolling out of e-GP. At present, e-GP is being used by 50 percent of procuring agencies (PAs) and procuring entities (PEs). The time required from tender opening to contract awarding declined from 51 days in 2012 to 29 days in 2015, which has significantly reduced the cost of doing business in Bangladesh.

New research evidence for Bangladesh Priorities by Copenhagen Consensus and the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University, indicates that for each and every taka spent towards scaling up e-GP, benefits worth Tk 755 can be generated. Such returns are anticipated as a result of increased competition and transparency in public procurement.

This would mean better spending of the Tk 72,000 crore that the government spends each year on everything from Padma Bridge to pencils in government offices. However, at present, the e-GP system has reached 50 percent of its targeted usage level. It is generating a phenomenal Tk 400 of benefit for each taka that has been spent so far, which can be almost doubled if e-GP is scaled up across the government.

Although e-GP has been embraced by many users, there are some PAs which have been delaying e-GP implementation, preferring to carry on with the traditional paper-based procurement system. The lack of willingness to implement e-GP by such groups of officials and bidders (especially those who have vested interest in terms of rent-seeking), is hindering the wide-scale adoption.

A World Bank project—Digitising Implementation Monitoring and Public Procurement or DIMAPP—was introduced in 2017 to increase the usage of e-GP and improve capacity of public procurement personnel for e-GP's management and implementation. Under the DIMAPP initiative, which is expected to last until 2022, e-GP system will be deployed in 23 large government organisations. DIMAPP also aims to enhance citizen engagement in monitoring the quality of procured goods and services under the e-GP by government organisations.

There are some e-GP implementation issues such as bidders facing financial transaction complication for failed bids, certain PAs, PEs and bidders being unable to properly navigate e-GP, no mechanism for post-contract monitoring and bidders under-pricing resulting in low quality of goods and services procured. In the absence of monitoring mechanisms, it was found that bidders can incur overrun costs and provide low-quality outputs.

The government is poised to implement the e-Contract Management System (e-CMS) as a monitoring mechanism for post-awarding contractual activities and responsibilities. Prioritising implementation of e-CMS would ensure bidders are using quality inputs and delivering tendered outputs on time. Although the latest budget has not made any specific reference to e-GP, probably due to it being already prioritised under DIMAPP, implementation of e-CMS simultaneously with e-GP's scaling can do immense good for Bangladesh's economy.

Our latest research reaffirms earlier Bangladesh Priorities findings that e-GP can do huge amounts of social and economic good by promoting good governance. It is important that the government implements e-CMS and enhances e-GP's scope to include large-scale projects. These ought to be key priorities under the eighth Five-Year Plan which will drive the economy beyond Vision 2021.

Hasanuzzaman is Outreach Manager for Bangladesh Priorities. Bjorn Lomborg is President at Copenhagen Consensus Center.

PHOTO: MERCADO ELECTRONICO

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

JULY 8, 1497

Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama departs on his first voyage, becoming the first European to reach India by sea.

Da Gama's discovery of the ocean route to India opened the way for an age of global imperialism.
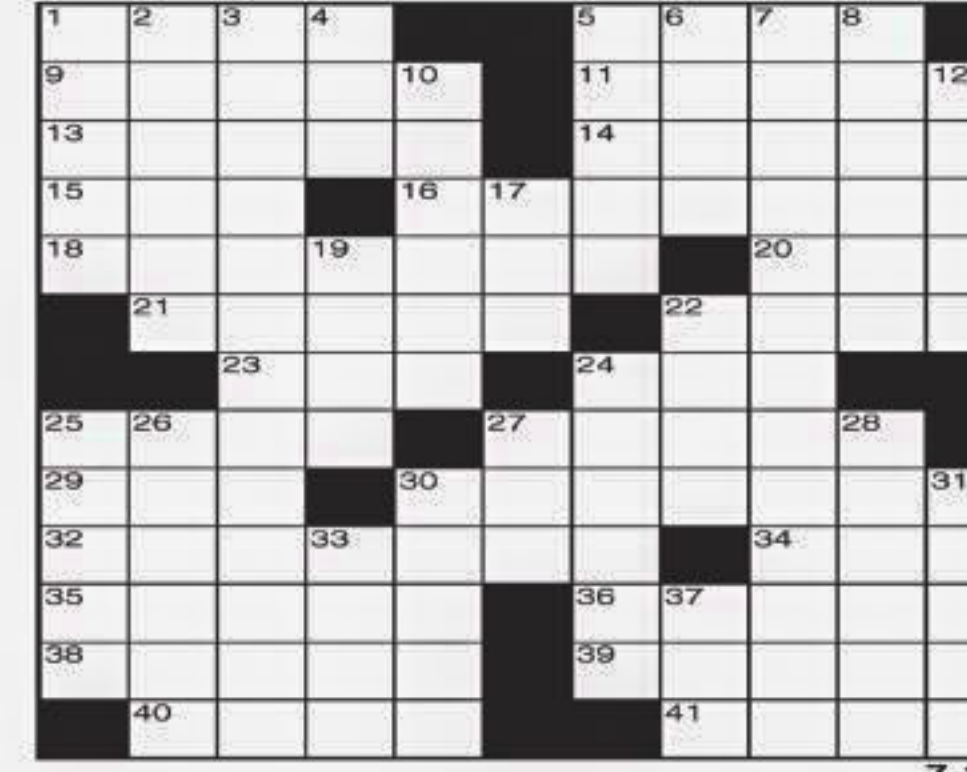
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Hound's hands
5 Congress creations
9 Segregated
11 Benefit
13 Tint
14 King march site
15 Moose's kin
16 "In my opinion," in dialect
18 Surprise hit
20 Complete
21 In a strange way
22 Some poetry
23 Golf need
24 Scoundrel
25 Paul's collaborator
27 Hebrew letters
29 King Kong, for one
30 Drawer fresheners
32 Mixture
34 Miniature
35 Salty water
36 Barbershop offering
38 Annual visitor
39 Cube or cone
40 Hunt for
41 Squeezes (out)

DOWN
1 Duel count
2 Brother of Artemis
3 Behaved
4 Hit show letters
5 Focused beam
6 Opposite of "sans"
7 Did what one said one would do
8 Philosopher Weil
10 Diamond feat
12 Touches down
17 "The rise of Sky-walker" heroine
19 Perfect place
22 Solemn promise
24 Class break
25 Door parts
26 Met shows
27 Chips buy
28 Wonder of music
30 Be furtive
31 Canary chow
33 Pot start
37 Weed whacker

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

L	I	L	T			P	A	G	E	S
I	D	E	A	S		I	C	A	N	T
B	I	N	G	E		C	I	S	C	O
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A	M	Y	T	A	N			U	S	E
			A	T	O	M		M	E	D
	R	I	P	E		A	M	P	S	
F	O	R		D	A	T	E			
E	L	K			T	I	N	C	A	N
A	L	S	O	R	A	N		A	G	E
S	T	O	V	E			E	A	V	E	S
T	O	M	E	I		E	V	E	N	T
S	P	E	N	D		A	R	T	S	

BEETLE BAILEY   by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES   by Kirkman & Scott