

SPOTLIGHT

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After a gap of two years due to the military-backed interim government, *Chhatra League* returned to power after the Awami League won the 2008 general elections. The extent of the RPSO's domination has increased over time. With the erosion of a democratic environment, the power of RPSO leaders have increased further and the condition of educational institutions deteriorated sharply.

In recent years, newspaper reports have shown how RPSO workers are engaged as mercenaries in grabbing land and shops, snatching tender documents to ensure contracts, and harassing dissenting students. Even the university administration has used them to suppress student unrest against fee hikes, corruption, sexual harassment or other anti-student policies. In return, RPSO leaders and followers gained extra power to do whatever they wanted, including mugging, looting, sexual harassment, and forced rent collection from businesses, transport, and ordinary citizens.

Moreover, the appointment of vice chancellors has been reduced to

associates, mainly the ruling party student organisation. As a result of these protests in public universities, many vice chancellors have come under public scrutiny—two of them had to resign in Barisal and Gopalganj. The VC of Jahangirnagar University has been accused of high corruption and is facing a strong demand to resign.

It is not just in the universities. Since last year, we have seen students revolting against many issues—they have occupied streets and institutions and shaken the government's peace in autocratic rule. Last year, students looking for jobs—frustrated and deprived because of the quota system and corruption—blocked streets across the country demanding reform of the existing system. After that, much younger students shook the country again by capturing command on the streets. Thousands of school girls and boys came onto the streets after continuous killing of their fellow students by an anarchic road transport system. Teenagers in school dress occupied the streets in an angry but organised and peaceful way. They built a disciplined traffic system by controlling and challenging undisciplined VIPs, ministers,

STUDENT POWER—NEW FORMATION

As democratic institutions and practices are far from real in Bangladesh, a space for the healthy growth of student political and cultural activism in these institutions is still a dream and a source of continual struggle. Nevertheless, under every regime there have been sparks of protest against the RPSO violence and injustice sponsored by the state.

Many wonder how these movements could come into being despite the autocratic environment in campuses and everywhere else. It is noticeable that all these student mobilisations had a similar composition. Although left student organisations played a crucial role, these were not led by any single student organisation or their alliance. On the other hand, in every case new leadership emerged from spontaneous revolt against injustice and domination. In fact, the ruling party student wing's control of public universities has been so overwhelming that there remains little space for other student organisations to resist the misdeeds of the university authorities and the ruling party student organisation. At this stage, a new

organisations were consistent participants in the movement.

In the following years, similar movements appeared on other campuses to address different issues: against sexual harassment in Dhaka University (1998-9), against violence and terrorising the campus in JU (2000), and against police atrocities in one of DU's female dormitories (2002). These movements have had a significant impact on the student body politic. Other movements against rising tuition fees also occurred in the following decades by alliances of general students and leftist organisations. The mobilisations against sexual harassment had some notable results including high court directives to introduce a 'policy against sexual harassment' in every university and educational institution. Student protests against imposition of VAT on tuition fees in private universities changed the apparent non-political, passive image of these students.

Therefore, we have seen many new banners of the students around the country in the last few years to fight fear and injustice—such as 'general students' unity', 'nipironer biruddhe amra' (students against oppression), 'nipironer biruddhe jahangirnagar' (Jahangirnagar against oppression), 'durnitir biruddhe jahangirnagar' (Jahangirnagar against corruption) 'nipiron o boishomya birodhi chatrasomaj' (students against oppression and discrimination), 'beton-fee briddhi biroddi chhatra oikyo' (student alliance against fee hike), 'dhorshon protirodh moncho' (rape resistance platform), 'sundarbaner jonyo amra' (students for the Sundarbans), 'jatiyo sompob rokkha torun somaj' (youth for the protection of national resources), 'quota sonskar andolon' (quota reform movement), 'nirapod sorok andolon' (road safety movement), 'no vat movement' etc.

TWO STRANDS OF STUDENT POLITICS

Therefore, we find two major strands of student politics in Bangladesh: one that perpetuates ruling class politics and social relations, and the other that challenges and strives to change them. The first strand is evident in the RPSO, which represents the ruling party, carries its mode of accumulation, and behaves like mercenaries and lobbyists of the grabbers, looters and corrupt state machine. In fact, the RPSO phenomenon indicates the degeneration of youth power.

The second strand voices for public interest—youth interest in particular, does not enjoy support from the administration (of either the state or educational institutions), and suffers hostility from the police and other people in positions of power. But this strand represents the regenerative power of the society. Although new alliances under this strand do not have any permanent organisational structure, they have a proven ability to attract significant participation from the student community and are a source of hope not only for educational institutions but also for the socio-political struggles for emancipation, democracy, equality and dignity. In the time of repression, fear, injustice—these youth rebellions give us strength to hope.

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appointing an official in the universities to support this RPSO and ensure the dominance of ruling party interests. Therefore, the nexus between corrupt 'teachers' and 'students' and their vested interests became stronger in recent years.

RECENT STUDENT MOBILISATION

Nevertheless, in recent months, we have seen student agitation in various universities against corruption, irregularities, sexual harassment, and violence. All complaints of the agitated students have been against top officials at these institutions, including the vice chancellors and their close

and police bosses. They stopped buses and VIP cars to check licenses of vehicles only to find that most of them were being driven by people without proper licenses and training. At one point, this teenage revolt raised slogans to repair the state. The state responded with its official and unofficial goons, creating terror and beating teenage students mercilessly. The police began to arrest not the terrorists, but the students who were exerting their public rights. In the last month, we saw thousands of school students raise their voices against climate change and to save the environment from disastrous projects.

formation of student mobilisation has emerged. This formation can be traced back to the late 1990s and we see an effective role of this formation till today.

In 1998, a new alliance was formed by (mostly) female students in Jahangirnagar University to protest sexual harassment and rape on campus. Since the accused rapists and sexual harassers were ruling party leaders, no single student organisation could dare protest against them. But the participation of the female students in agitation was so powerful that their voice couldn't be silenced. The main force came from non-party general students, although leftist student

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