

# ‘The culture of impunity bedevilling public universities must be dealt with firmly’

Eminent academic and UGC Professor Dr Fakrul Alam talks to Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star about the allegations of corruption against some vice-chancellors of public universities, questions over university autonomy, politically influenced recruitments and the shrinking space for student activism

What are your thoughts on the UGC probe committee’s recommendation to withdraw the Vice Chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University in Gopalganj, following which he resigned on September 30?

My immediate response would be to say “better late than never”. I am certainly happy to see UGC finally taking firm and decisive action. This is what it should be doing from now on in all such cases and what it has been lax in doing. For far too long, VCs of public universities, especially those outside the media spotlight and located in far-flung regions, have gotten away with all kinds of transgressions.

Even those public university administrators operating close to the capital and subject to more media scrutiny have acted at times with impunity. The thing to do—as UGC has done in this case—is to first listen/record/investigate cases where accusations of wrongdoing of university administrators have been too insistent to be denied or not examined, and then act quickly to control the people guilty. The relatively short time UGC took to act in this case is exemplary. Makes me wonder: why the UGC did not act as resolutely and swiftly in the past?

Nevertheless, I can’t help wondering too: what is the education ministry going to do now—keep the investigation report in the freezer as bureaucrats in ministries so often do with such reports? Why does someone like the seemingly deposed VC get selected for a job for which he (it is now clear) is morally unqualified? What criteria led to his selection? We must remember that a VC of a university—public or private—is chosen after his or her application is filed and made to go through many stops (from UGC to the ministries and secretariats). So how come the detailed and lengthy selection processes in such cases do not take into account a person’s eligibility for the job from all angles? Or should we conclude that such investigations are at times dispensed with for party or other considerations or given cosmetic treatment for venal purposes?

Also, much more remains to be done in this and other cases and the powers that can’t afford to be complacent anymore.

Exemplary punishment must be meted out. Wrongs done must be redressed in favour of the victims. Procedures must be set up to avoid repetitions of such ignoble actions. The culture of impunity bedevilling public universities must be dealt with firmly to prevent a bad situation worsening. After all, UGC exists to not only allocate funds, but to see that they are being spent properly by proper persons put in proper positions.

The bureaucratic tangles in which our public universities operate mean that the education ministry must have the final say. Let’s hope that they too will act decisively and soon in this case and then do a proper post-mortem to make the Gopalganj imbroglio a test case and eventually a model for taking swift, positive action to deal with negative elements in public university administration as a whole—whether elected, selected or handpicked by coterie within the administration, or taken in line with the desires of regional politicians.

This is part of a larger inquiry as the UGC is reportedly investigating allegations of irregularities and corruption against the Vice Chancellors of 14 universities, including Dhaka University and Jahangirnagar University. What should we make of this broader investigation?

I am not sure about the number that you cite. Newspaper reports seem to me to indicate far fewer investigations than that.

But in the last analysis, it really does not matter whether there are only a few or a dozen or so universities whose VCs are being investigated. Things are in a bad shape in many of them and far too many cases of abuse are being reported in public universities year after year. Clearly things have gone from bad to worse in recent months and years.

Ordinary students are clearly unhappy with the way they are being treated by some of their administrators and students who belong to the party in power who work in tandem with such administrators. It is not difficult, therefore, to conclude that there is a malaise afflicting the public university system from the selection of vice chancellors, to the recruitment of staff and teachers, to the way public money is being spent there, to the people dictating the kind of “student politics”

more women were filing for divorce.

Some will go to the extreme: A nice, calm and respectable lady went into the pharmacy, right up to the pharmacist, looked straight into his eyes, and said, “I would like to buy some cyanide.”

The pharmacist asked, “Why in the world do you need cyanide?”

The lady replied, “I need it to poison my husband.”

The pharmacist’s eyes got big and he exclaimed, “Lord have mercy! I can’t give you cyanide to kill your husband! That’s against the law! I’ll lose my license! They’ll throw both of us in jail! All kinds of bad things will happen. Absolutely not! You cannot have any

contact, etc.” There you go. He is not talking about animals.

Prothom Alo (August 2018) quoted the two Dhaka City Corporations that at least 50,000 divorce applications were filed in the city in the past six years, meaning “on average about one divorce application was filed every hour.” The matter is of grave concern, especially if children are involved.

Under the unhappy circumstances, happily though we are not alone in the world. Globally there seems to be no economic logic or religious judgement working behind the divorce-to-marriage ratio. Some of the most peaceful and economically vibrant countries have a high ratio. The relation (different year in different countries) gives the number of divorces in a given year to the number of marriages in that same year.

While in Cuba, Denmark, Finland, and France 55 percent of wedding bells end in silence, Portugal (71 percent) and Luxembourg (66 percent) top the list of countries recorded for divorces against marriages in a year. At the lower end of the table are Vietnam (seven percent), Tajikistan (10 percent), Syria (12 percent), Malta (12 percent), Bosnia and Herzegovina (13 percent), and Ireland (15 percent). Bangladesh’s percentage is 34, and I can already see hands being raised that many cases in the remote rural areas are not recorded.

Sociologists consider positively the rising number of divorce applications and successful petitions because “it means that more women are willing to overcome their fear of social stigma in order to build a better life for themselves”. (Dhaka Tribune, May 2017)

Awareness among women about their rights, opportunities to be more well-read, increasing scope of justice (although not always ensured or delivered) and desire for independence as opposed to being shackled meaninglessly in a disturbed wedlock will continue to pave the way for more married women to seek legal annulment of their vowed relationship.

While no one will advocate either partner to live in “hell”, if it comes to that, but for the sake of the children, if any, both partners should try to find happiness despite their differences. Opposite poles attract, come on!

For the sake of growing old together after finding each other through love or ledger, sacrificing attitude of both, sometimes more by one than the other, can indeed blossom into a lasting wedlock. A marriage is finished if it is taken in the spirit of a competition. If it works, there are two joint winners. No one wins if it fails.

Mutual tolerance should be the vehicle to find joy among each other. No one human being is perfect. Little gestures of affinity and forgiveness can become beads to sew a wreath made in heaven; and marriages are.

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Dr Fakrul Alam

PHOTO: STAR/FILE

that should go on in campuses, to the way a culture of impunity seems to have settled in.

In many cases, even within a political party or its student wing, a faction seemingly dominates by marginalising faculty members or students of another faction by force or by covert and illicit means. Also, student wings of the party in power seem to have too much of a say in the way universities are run. How can that be?

Ultimately, I think the malaise afflicting our universities are part of a crisis in values in our whole society. Surely it is not a coincidence that the news about corruption, irregularities and immoral acts perpetrated in our universities appear next to news items about corruptions, irregularities and immoral acts being perpetrated in politics, administration and business dealings, and in society as a whole on a scale hitherto unseen.

It seems that public universities have all but lost their autonomy and are being overly influenced by the government. Most of the recruitments today, for example, are politically influenced. Is there any way to exit this cycle?

It is a question of funding, whether in most public or, let me add, private universities. Those who fund them are mostly into power

politics. They feel they must have a say in the hiring or firing of teachers, especially the administrators amongst them. I would not, however, agree with what you have just said completely, for I don’t believe that most recruitments are politically influenced.

How do I know? I myself and quite a few of my senior colleagues who are known for being fair and objective are in Selection Boards of quite a few of the leading public and private universities. We do try to be fair and have not been forced to acquiesce to teachers being chosen on purely political promptings. And there are quite a few of us! As always, media tend to report sensational cases of blatant violations and ignore the fact that most Selection Boards have people of integrity in them, who are not coerced or amenable to coercion.

As for government interference and curbs on university autonomy, you must remember that we have a long tradition of such government interference. In the 1960s and during the Six Point Movement, the East Pakistani lackeys of the military government in power chose the DU VC to curb oppositional students. There was a similar attempt—though on a smaller scale—when in the 1980s a military government came to power. In between, we have had relative autonomy. Let us remember here that Bangabandhu gave DU the University of Dhaka Order in 1973 to ensure democratic order and autonomy on campus. I think the 90s began well as far as autonomy is concerned, but it is painful to see successive democratic governments whittling away at the principles behind the order.

Recently, we have seen many examples of university administrations punishing students for their dissent. Aren’t universities supposed to promote independent thought and encourage students to freely speak their minds in order to develop their intellectual capacities?

Once again, a little acquaintance with history will make it abundantly clear to all that university administrators (backed by undemocratic and authoritarian rulers) in our part of the world have exhibited considerable intolerance far too often and have resorted

to using strong-arm tactics with dissenting students on too many occasions.

We know that in the 1960s, Monem Khan and the NSF set a precedence of attempting to punish DU students that came to be unfortunately emulated by later governments every now and then. Successive military governments tried to use force or cunning to stifle campus protests in independent Bangladesh. And successive democratically elected governments have veered away from autonomy and have resorted to dubious means to control free speech and curb autonomy on campuses indirectly.

Of course universities should be a place for free thinking and debates—ideas should circulate in them and students must be able to negotiate through political cross-currents and choose student union leaders themselves without being forced to do so. What we need is to mature as a democracy—our leaders need to understand that we can have dissenting voices and in the end, true democracy is the best option. The best minds should be engaged in the common pursuit of values that need to be arrived at dialogically. Our campuses must be revisited in the light of new ideas.

The problem ultimately is for democracy to circulate at every level as freely as possible. Teachers as well as students must be free to speak their minds in an ideal world. Unfortunately, the world we live in is far from an ideal one!

But I refuse to despair. The students of DU have shown again and again that they will protest and not be cowed down by brutal, repressive and undemocratic people in power. The Shamsun Nahar Hall protests at the end of the last century, the Shahbagh movement, “quota andolon” and the road safety movement recently have all shown that students even now are willing to challenge abuses strongly and oppose wrongs on campuses vigorously. Our student activism tradition tells me that our student activists can’t be repressed indefinitely. As they say in wisdom literature worldwide—“this too shall pass!” I know, because I have seen this process happen again and again at the University of Dhaka!

## Till an argument do us apart, no!



CHINTITO SINCE 1995

NOWADAYS while meeting someone after a lapse of a few months, and with a gap in updated information, following the customary exchanges there is hesitation to pop the question, “How is the wife?” If he is alone, she could be somewhere around or at home or abroad or, unlike you, minding her own business.

“Jamai koi?” one usually asks after quick looks sideways and a high-necked shot of the eye behind her. Men will be men. The wide grin fizzles when the husband’s guffaw is heard from the next room. Or, to further intensify his unsolicited interest, the lady may reply sardonically, “You should know about your friend”. He wants to shout, “He is not my friend any more”, but considers walking away safer, the woman’s gaze burning the nape of his neck.

For many of us busy on the social networks, it is not difficult to ascertain the status of most relationships. Well, we think. (Imagine here an emoji of your choice.) A picture tells a thousand words, but then a few worlds also spill the beans. However, whether a couple is happy despite sticking together and big pouty smiles is another matter.

It appears that a large section of the social structure has been falling apart gradually over the past several years. The situation is frightful by the old school yardstick, but welcome from the freedom point of view of the empowered and learned woman.

In May 2017, Dhaka Tribune carried a story, “Divorce rising in Dhaka as women seek way out of troubled marriages”. Well, other urban areas were not lagging behind. Yes, by far

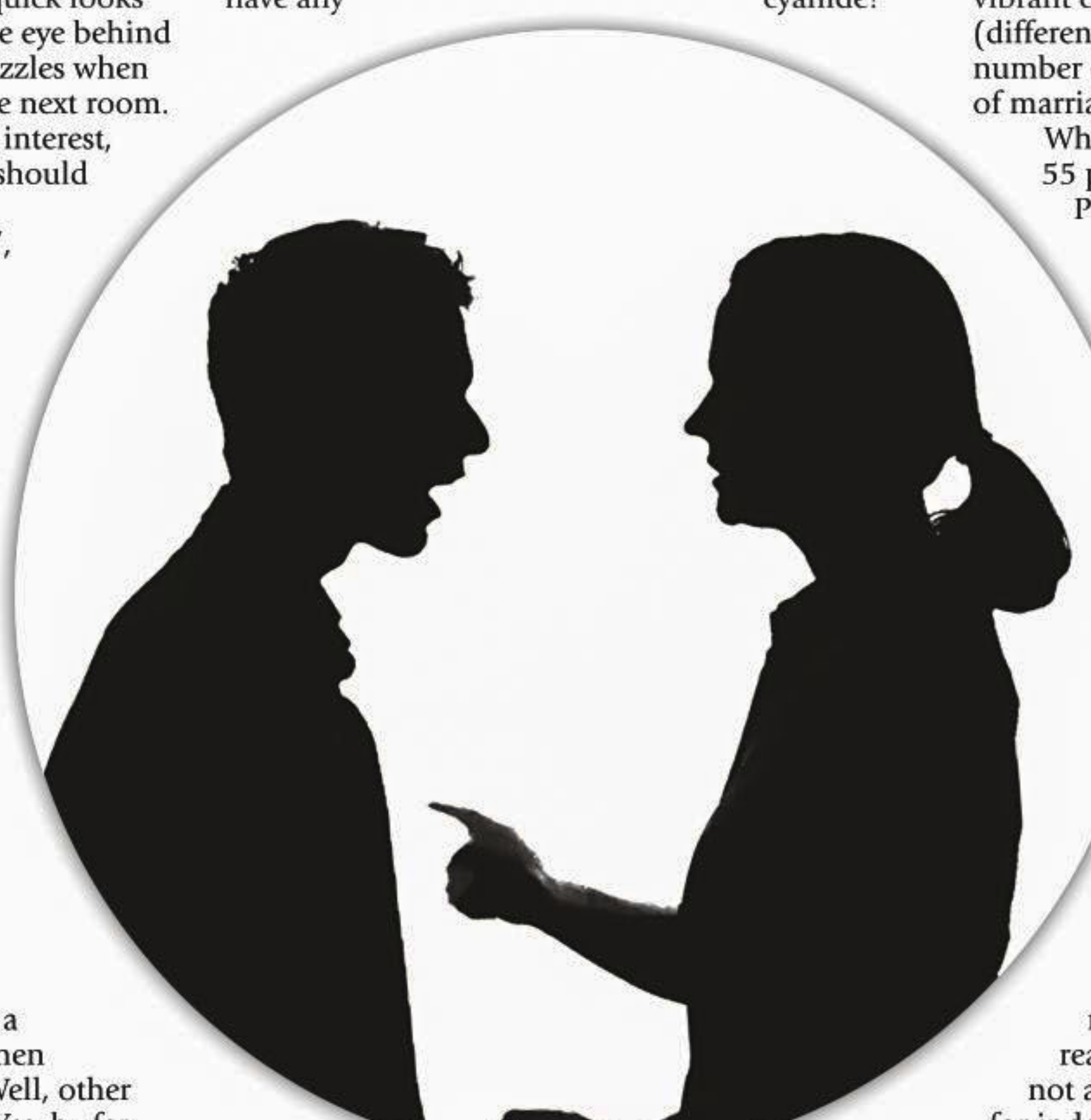
Awareness among women about their rights, opportunities to be more well-read, increasing scope of justice (although not always ensured or delivered) and desire for independence as opposed to being shackled meaninglessly in a disturbed wedlock will continue to pave the way for more married women to seek legal annulment of their vowed relationship.

The lady reached into her purse and pulled out a picture of her husband in bed with the pharmacist’s wife.

The pharmacist looked at the picture and replied, “Well now. That’s different. You didn’t tell me you had a prescription.” (unijokes.com)

The Daily Star reported mid-2017, “Divorce doubles, separation triples in one decade”. Living separately is perhaps not a solution, at best it is a painkiller. One may regard staying in two districts and in two countries also as a form of separation despite technology facilitating daily aural and visual contact. Not everything can be heard and not all is in view of the camera. They rarely do 360 degrees. Apologies for sowing seeds of doubt.

According to psychologist Dr. Wyatt Fisher in USA’s Elite Daily (October 2018), “We all have certain things we need, to feel loved and satisfied in a committed relationship, such as quality time, affection, emotional intimacy, adoration, sexual



### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

- 1 Identified
- 6 Cram
- 11 Stomach
- 12 Bert’s buddy
- 13 Doorstop shape
- 14 Core group
- 15 Siestas
- 17 Monopoly card
- 18 Comfy home
- 20 Jury member
- 22 Work unit
- 23 Normal
- 26 First Indian prime minister
- 28 Not available
- 29 Like Swift stories
- 31 Carnival city
- 32 Role for Craig

- 33 Muffin choice
- 34 Level
- 36 Shrek, for one
- 38 Cake unit
- 40 Singer Ronstadt
- 43 Creamy color
- 44 Victorious
- 45 Brief rest
- 46 Plague

- 9 Forest danger
- 10 Flow into
- 16 Mole, e.g.
- 18 Camera part
- 19 Vicinity
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- 25 Writer Urís
- 27 Mob makeup
- 30 Courtroom oath
- 33 Salty water
- 34 Impertinent
- 35 Hot flow
- 37 Dollop
- 39 Reuben base
- 41 Fawn’s mother
- 42 Fitting

#### DOWN

- 1 Slangy denial
- 2 Japanese prime minister
- 3 Nora Roberts book
- 4 Painter Degas
- 5 Profound
- 6 Brief time
- 7 Car price reducer
- 8 Nora Roberts book

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9-20

### YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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