

## BCL's torture in Buét dormitories

*Abdication of duty by university authorities*

THE killing of Abrar exposes a grim picture about the quality, more exactly the absence, of administrative control in the running of the university, particularly of the students' halls. It would not be wrong to suggest that what we find in Buét is fairly representative of the state of affairs in most other public universities.

It is unthinkable that torture and harassment by BCL leaders could go on all these years in all the residential halls of Buét without the university administration taking any notice of it or taking any measure to stop the heinous practices.

Understandably, the victims did not report it to the authorities for fear of further harassment and torture and many of them also feared that if they revealed their ordeals to the authorities, they might be ousted from the halls. However, it is clear from the news reports that the existence of BCL's torture cells inside the dorms was an open secret to the students. But what prevented the university authorities from taking up the matter with the higher authorities? And we wonder whether the education ministry has any role in ensuring a congenial atmosphere in the university.

This murder is a glaring example of the indifference of the Buét administration who did nothing to look after the wellbeing of their students inside the campus. While it was the BCL leaders who tortured Abrar to death, it was also the university administration's inaction about all the wrongdoings that had been going on inside the halls for so many years, that led to this gruesome murder. And Buét is perhaps not the only university where such wrongdoings are going on.

## Is it ignorance or incompetence?

*BCBL's top defaulter given remittance award*

WHEN the Bangladesh Bank (BB) hands over the remittance award to a known loan defaulter and money launderer, we must take a moment to reflect on the irony of the matter! By failing to verify properly the nominated persons and institutions before announcing the awards, and then embarrassing the finance minister who handed over the prizes, BB's management has illustrated a level of incompetence unheard of. We would like to know precisely how is it that the BB management was unaware of the investigation conducted by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) where it found the awardee's complicity in a money laundering case? Again, how can BB be ignorant about the same person being involved in an export scam that was unearthed by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC)?

Feigning ignorance does not suit central bank's management. For instance, the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (a unit of the central bank) investigated this person who has been a top defaulter of Bangladesh Commerce Bank Ltd. (BCBL) and found him involved in embezzling Tk 200 crore abroad in the name of exporting terracotta. And yet here we are, despite all the proof of wrongdoing, he has been given a remittance award. By doing so, the central bank has destroyed the prestige of the award and sullied its own image.

Such an act is unthinkable because we are not talking about a public or a privately-owned bank sponsored award. This is the Bangladesh Bank that is supposed to be the guardian of all financial transactions. And it has failed miserably to do what it continually advises the financial sector to do—verify and cross-check records and information to detect and stop fraudulent practices. We now await to see if the responsible people at BB and those involved in the selection process will be called up for disciplinary action. Failure to do so will be an endorsement of such incompetent behaviour and convey the message that it is alright to bungle up at the highest level without fear of punishment.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

### Sexual harassment in educational institutions

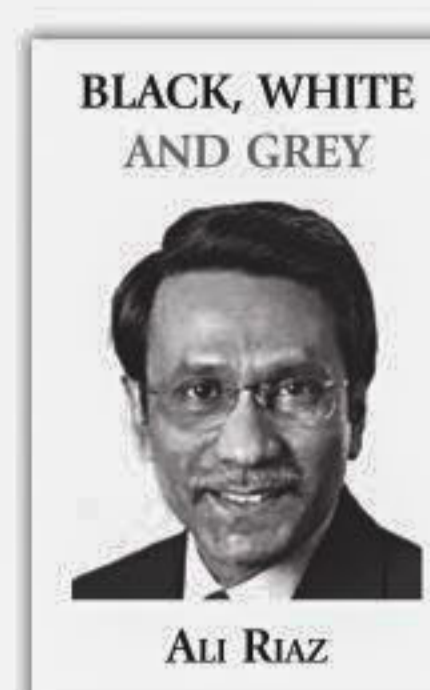
Sexual harassment is becoming a common problem in educational institutions across our country. The harassment exists from primary levels to university levels, but is rather severe in the latter. Some unethical university teachers are involved in sexually harassing female students, who continue to suffer silently.

Many of the abusers use Facebook as a means of approach. They send friend requests to the female students and intimidate them in several ways. They even set traps, luring the girls with a promise of better grades. Even worse, they at times threaten to fail the students if they refuse to oblige. Many of the victims avoid talking about the issue, as the perpetrators are often well connected with those in power.

Even though many brave students have protested against such crimes, many more have suffered. Despite the existing laws, most of the victims tend to stay silent, suspecting that the stigma attached to the issue will further worsen the situation.

I urge the respective authorities to take stern action against the molesters and enable the victims to report such matters with ease and discretion. I also hope that they will ensure a healthy atmosphere, free from predators, in the educational institutions and beyond.

Akib Sumon  
Bangladesh Agricultural University



BLACK, WHITE AND GREY

ALI RIAZ

“B AN student politics” has become the rallying cry for the past few days, in both the social and mass media. The chorus is not new; we have heard this too many times. Each time there has been a violent incident on a campus, or a promising life is lost in some fight among or between student activists of political persuasions, the issue comes to the fore. Notwithstanding the shock and grief due to the unfortunate incidents, and the sincerity in the emotional plea to save young lives, the argument to ban student politics as a panacea is misplaced and signals a worrying development. The arguments for the proscription sound like an argument for getting rid of journalism altogether to address the problem of “fake news”.

The background to the current reincarnation of the discussion is well known to the readers. The brutal murder of Abrar Fahad, a student of the BUET, by student activists of the pro-government Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) on Sunday night, has prompted the debate. In this instance, we must be cognisant of the fact that Abrar was not killed in a clash between two student organisations, neither did he do anything that involves student politics. The undisputed fact is that he was killed by BCL activists without any provocation. He was asked to see the BCL leaders of the BUET, escorted to a room of the same dorm where he was living, for “interrogation” for his Facebook post criticising the recently concluded treaties and MOUs between India and Bangladesh during the India visit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Abrar was killed while being tortured, and his body was left in the landing of the stairs where he was found in the wee hours of Monday.

Painfully, the incident is not an aberration. There have been many incidents of killing and maiming of student activists throughout the history of the nation. Innocent students with no involvement in politics have been killed too. A report by this newspaper counted at least 151 incidents of killings since independence, and almost none was solved. Save one exception, no perpetrators have been held accountable. The nature of these killings has taken a gruesome turn in the past decade since the current Awami League government came into power and its student wing has enjoyed carte blanche impunity. For example, the room where the victim was tortured is infamously known as “the

torture cell” of the BCL. Such so-called “torture cells” are allegedly existing in many dorms of almost all public universities. Let us forget, the public university campuses have been under the complete control of the pro-government student wing since 2009 and all other student activists have been driven out, sadly with the knowledge and support of university authorities. Additionally, the BCL activists—rank and file—have become engaged in extortion, tender manipulation, and mugging within and outside campuses throughout the entire country. The attacks on their rivals have become too normal to be reported

too many. But it is imperative to ask why nobody has been brought to justice? The failures of the law enforcement agencies in apprehending these perpetrators cannot be masked by shifting the blame to the students who have been on the receiving end and who want to exercise their fundamental rights of assembly and organisation enshrined in the constitution. The politicisation of law enforcement and impunity of pro-government activists, irrespective of who is in power, are to be blamed. We must ask, has the judiciary failed too? The killing of Biswajit in broad daylight and the verdict seem to be inconsistent

activists, contrarian voices within the student community be targeted and silenced? Why should they bear the burden? The unbridled control of the ruling party activists on campuses has been established with the connivance of the university teachers, many of whom are keener on becoming a tool of a political party, especially the ruling party, than becoming a teacher. Becoming an administrator at the expense of basic integrity and commitment to the students' welfare is very common. Will the teachers be barred from partisan affiliation and behaviour?

Student politics has undergone a dramatic change since 1990, for worse. Thanks to the political parties, especially the ruling parties, for turning the student activists into pawns for the party's gains. They have been used to capture the campuses and thrash the opposition student activists and unleashed against non-partisan student and youth movements. It is too early to forget the behaviour of the BCL activists against the quota reform movement and road safety movement in 2018. Without exonerating the individuals for their criminal act, we must acknowledge that the responsibility lies with the political parties. Yet the suggestion of interdiction of student politics accompanies no punitive measures for the political parties.

Discussions on the relevance of student politics tend to take an emotional journey back to history. The importance of the role of the students in the making of Bangladesh notwithstanding, I argue it is far more relevant today than ever before. With the shrinking of democratic space in politics, absence of tolerance in society, almost non-existence of accountability in governance, and abuse of power all around, and at a time disagreement with the government is labelled as unpatriotic, it is imperative that students have the opportunity to stand up and shape the future they will have to live in. This is where my concerns about the proposition come.

In the past years Bangladeshis have lost a fundamental tool of democracy—the right to vote; election as an institution has been ruined by design. As I wrote a few months ago, politics has gone missing: “politics, above all, is about the citizens' right to speak freely, without fear. The freedom of expression, enshrined in the Constitution of the country, has now become elusive” (*The Daily Star*, February 25, 2019). This is what depoliticisation of a society looks like; peeling off one institution at a time, taking away the fundamental rights of one segment of society at a time.

Ali Riaz is a distinguished professor of political science at Illinois State University, USA. His recent publication is titled, *Voting in A Hybrid Regime: Explaining the 2018 Bangladeshi Election* (2019)

# Is banning student politics the solution?



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN/STAR

Teachers and students of the Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering (EEE) at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buét) bring out a silent procession on the campus demanding punishment of Abrar Fahad's killers.

in press. At times intra-organisation warlike battles on the streets have killed bystanders and didn't spare unborn children. According to *Prothom Alo's* count, between 2009 and 2014, at least 54 people were killed by the BCL, 39 of them their own.

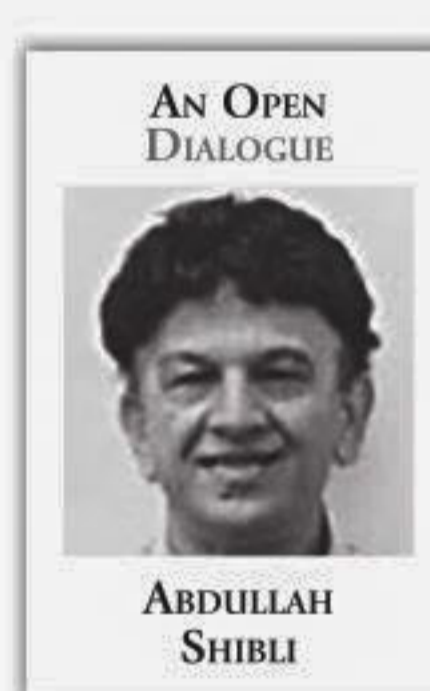
Understandably, the grim picture was in the mind of everybody as they heard the news of the killing of Abrar—another family has lost their loved one, another father had to carry his own child's dead body to the grave, and another grieving mother asked, why did my son die? Those who favour proscription point to these incidents and argue for immediate action. They make three arguments—too many promising lives lost; activists of student politics have become the foot soldiers of the political parties and fodder of partisan clashes; and the relevance of student politics has been lost in contemporary Bangladesh.

Of course, too many have died, one

to many. The case of Abu Bakar, an innocent student who was killed during the BCL intra-party fight in 2010 at Dhaka University, is a telling example. While ten BCL activists were charged for the murder, eight years later they were acquitted. The most apt headline of a newspaper was—“Nobody Murdered Abu Bakar!”

The impunity goes far beyond the campuses; there are several high-profile cases which have remained unsolved. The killings, whether within the campus or outside, in the name of the ruling party have received a different treatment. University authorities, in equal measures, should be held responsible for being derelict in their duties. In each instance of a death, the University authority appointed an enquiry committee, most of which never produced a report. While the ruling party activists are terrorising the campuses, and everyone else is shirking their responsibilities, why should the feeble voices of opposition

# Why a no-deal Brexit may spell disaster for Britain



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

different fronts, and was completely torn apart by industrial and social unrest with slowing economic growth and rising unemployment. Then on January 1, 1973, UK joined the European Union (which was called EEC then) and ever since, times have been relatively good. In McEwan's novel which I am reading now, I can get a good sense of what it was like in UK before 1973. Some of my readers might recall the strikes by coal miners and public servants, bomb blasts by the Irish Republican Army, the oil crises, cold war escalation, and almost a shade of anarchy. As UK struggles now to get out of EU, one can sniff the smell of fear and uncertainty augmented by vague memories of the pre-EU days.

When Boris Johnson was handed over the reins of power as well as the role of Brexiteer-in-Chief by the Tories in July, he reassured the country that Brexit was happening on October 31 and UK was going to leave with or without a deal. At this juncture, it appears that both of his promises are at risk of failure. There is more than a 50-50 chance that UK will be staying in EU, at least for a few more months. And there is only a slim chance that Johnson will leave on October 31 with a deal and a zero probability that the much-discussed No-deal Brexit will happen.

Unfortunately, I cannot predict what else might occur between now and October 31, when the Americans and the rest of the world celebrate Halloween. The next general election in UK is scheduled to be held in 2022. However, an early election is possible if a majority of lawmakers in Britain's 650-seat parliament vote to hold one and it is very much in the works. But the earliest

it can happen is in November after the UK leaves EU with a deal or otherwise if the EU and UK negotiate a three-month extension.

Why do I say that Johnson will fail to deliver on his most important promise or his scariest slogan, “Leave on October 31 without a deal”? Even as late as October 3, he said that if EU were to reject the latest offer made by UK, “we shall have to leave on October 31 without a deal”. But, to make his life difficult, the British Parliament passed a law, known as Benn Act, which outlaws any attempt to pull UK out of EU without a deal. The Benn Act requires Johnson to ask for a Brexit

17, and thus Friday October 11 is seen as a formal cut-off point for talks.

To answer the question that I pose in the title, even the diehard supporters of Brexit are aware that a no-deal departure would be costly. Various studies have made some plausible estimates of the consequences of crashing out of EU. In view of the fact that a no-deal Brexit has always been a possibility, UK businesses and economists have been aware of such an eventuality since 2016. Some have characterised the option to walk out of EU as “jumping off the cliff” and the implication was the UK would certainly meet its death, metaphorically. Obviously,

Worst Case”, should UK leave without a deal. First of all, let me mention that there is a lot of misconception about the deal. Even if there is a deal, there will be a transition period during which both parties will work towards a trade agreement and other regulatory rules which will allow UK and EU to continue as partners. Similarly, a no-deal simply means that UK and EU will not be special friends but they will treat each other like any other nation. UK will revert to “third country” status.

The document, nicknamed Operation Yellowhammer, forecasts protests and counter-protests across UK which may absorb a significant amount of police resource. It also warns of an increase in public disorder and community tensions. The document, aware that even short-term or localised shortages of fuel, food and medicine could trigger panic, offers some scenarios of price hikes and tightening fuel supply in London and the South-East. Or, as Yellowhammer discreetly puts it, “customer behaviour could lead to local shortages.”

The most important reason why a no-deal Brexit could spell disaster is the possibility that some sections of the government could find itself dealing with the crisis that could ensue and be overwhelmed in case of a serious breakdown similar to what happened in the seventies. And the economic costs including staggering government debts, slower economic growth, and a log jam at ports and borders, will be felt by Britain for many years to come.

UK's Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) said that borrowing would be almost 60 billion pounds annually if the UK leaves without a deal—up from 29.3 billion pounds if it does get a deal. According to the accountancy giant KPMG as well as Standards and Poor (S&P), a forecasting firm, UK will suffer a major economic downswing in case of a no-deal Brexit. According to S&P, income will be lower by 2.8 percent in 2020 and by 4.7 percent the following year as compared with the base case scenario with a deal.

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works in information technology. He is Senior Research Fellow, International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI), a think-tank in Boston, USA.



To deal, or not to deal, that is the question?

PHOTO: HANNAH MCKAY/REUTERS

delay by October 19 and this will push the deadline back from October 31, 2019 to January 31, 2020.

While Johnson earnestly desires to leave on October 31 and go down in the history books as the premier who delivered on the Brexit Referendum, it is obvious that time is running out on him. Any Brexit deal needs to be approved by the EU Council. The final council summit of EU starts on October 17 and will discuss any deal agreed upon by the two parties on October 17 and 18. An agreement between them has to be reached by October 11. The EU is reportedly keen to avoid last-minute discussions at an EU Summit on October

the country will not cease to exist or its citizens face the same consequences as the blanket bombardment by Nazi Germany during the Second World War, but the doomsayers are talking about a collapse of the economy, food riots, and total chaos. For example, even the Conservative Party Home Secretary (i.e., the Home Minister) Sajid Javid is reported to have said that a “no deal with the EU could cause a sharp rise in crime and widespread protests escalating into weeks of chaos”.

A few weeks ago, a secret planning document created by the UK Treasury Department laid out the worst-case scenario, or what it calls the “Reasonable