

Abrar murder and campus violence

Address root causes instead of symptoms



ABRAR Fahad was made to pay the ultimate penalty for sharing his thoughts. In a Facebook update posted on the eve of his brutal killing Abrar critiqued some of the recently concluded agreements between Bangladesh and India on the use of Mongla port, water sharing and gas export. In doing so he was merely exercising his constitutional right to express his opinion. Little did Abrar realise it would be his last communication with his FB friends. Little did this brilliant student know that his views and concerns on the issue were too unpalatable for the quarters that be, and little did he know that the posting would rattle a powerful section who has little respect for tolerance of differing opinions, let alone dissenting ones.

Within a few hours of posting, Abrar was summoned by the leaders of the Buet wing of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), an affiliate of the ruling party. BCL leaders reportedly took away his cell phone, checked his Facebook and messenger, and started “questioning” him over his alleged involvement with Shibir, the student front of Jamaat-e-Islami. He was brutally tortured during the interrogation and subsequently succumbed to his injuries. At night, on receiving information, a contingent of police from Chawkbazar police station went to the spot. They were made to wait for some time at the reception area by the general secretary of Buet BCL. Police officials admitted that the team “was not allowed to enter” to rescue the victim right away after their arrival.

The bruises on his body spoke of the cruelty that he endured in his captors’ hands. A CCTV footage that had gone viral showed Abrar being carried by three youths with seven others following them. Later that evening, 11 leaders and activists of the Buet BCL unit were expelled by the student body for their involvement with what was noted as

an “unfortunate” incident.

Abrar’s killing has stunned the nation. The grief-stricken mother of the deceased has warned against any effort to console her and demanded her son be brought back alive. The death has raged a firestorm on campuses across the country. A number of political, social and cultural organisations, human rights activists and student bodies have condemned the savage killing. Demands to arrest the killers and make campuses free of violence are getting louder by the day. The likelihood of yet another round of youth protest (a la’ quota abolition and road safety movements) has driven the authorities to act quickly. Till October 8, law enforcement agencies had arrested 13 persons in connection with the killing.

The secretary of the ruling Awami League (AL) has promised his government’s firm organisational and administrative stand “against any criminal activities regardless of the perpetrators’ affiliation”. He claimed that the prompt arrest and expulsion of about a dozen Buet BCL activists is a testimony of that commitment. He further stated that during this government’s tenure, nobody was spared for their misdeeds and “BCL’s good accomplishments of the past cannot be tarnished by some individuals”.

The AL secretary is gravely mistaken if he wants the nation to believe that the dastardly murder at Buet on October 6 evening was the act of a few errant student activists, a symptom that can be fixed by political diktat. He is way off the mark on the claims about the government’s action and BCL’s image. Citizens weary of political violence will remember umpteen number of killings such as those of Moyeen Hossain Raju (DU, 1992), Sabequn Nahar Sony (Buet, 2002), Zubair Ahmed (JU, 2012) and Diaz Irfan Chowdhury (CU, 2016), the well publicised murder of Twaki and hundreds of cases of involuntary disappearances and alleged extra-judicial killings that remain pending for years because of mysterious reasons. The ruling party leaders need to come to terms with the fact that the image of the BCL based on glorious achievements of the past is being quickly



Carrying an empty coffin, Dhaka University students protest the killing of Abrar Fahad near the Buet campus.

PHOTO: STAR

consumed by the fire of unrestrained acts of violence, corruption and highhandedness. “Enough is enough” is the dominant mood of the common folks on the streets.

There is an urgent need for the high ups in the ruling party and administration to acknowledge that the butchery demonstrated in the Abrar case is only symptomatic of the reckless use of muscle power by BCL, backed by political patronage that is near pervasive across the campuses of public universities. And this situation must change.

Details are emerging about the systemic nature of torture on Buet campus perpetrated by BCL activists. Room 2011, located in the first floor of Sher-e Bangla Hall of Buet, has been termed by the students to be “a torture cell and party hub”. It is in this room where Fahad was grievously bodily harmed by BCL activists wielding cricket stumps and bamboo sticks and died of “internal bleeding and excessive pain”, according to the doctors

conducting his autopsy. Buet students have claimed to have found empty bottles of liquor, knives and cricket stumps in the room. Quoting some of them who wished not to be named, press reports inform that Room 2011 was a meeting place for Awami League and BCL activists and was the site for regular parties. Despite it being a nuisance to other residents, no one, including those in the hall administration and proctor’s office, dared to take action against those responsible. “The room was treated as a political room of Chhatra League. Students were picked up from the campus and tortured here,” a Chhatra League leader wishing anonymity reportedly told *The Daily Star*. His statement was corroborated by an assistant provost of a Buet hall who stated that BCL had rooms, known to be torture cells, in all halls of the university. This culture of designated rooms for BCL “has returned in the last five years... It is their [the BCL] domain and no one else is

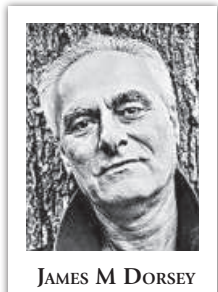
allowed there,” he said. In 2018, BCL members branded another student Daiyan Nafis Prodhan as Shibir activist and roughed him up before handing him over to the police. No one took them to task for their acts of unlawful detention and torture of a fellow student.

During the quota movement, the issue of physical and mental abuse of general students in the Gono Rooms (aka Common Rooms) by stewards of the student wing of the ruling party was a much talked about phenomenon. In those rooms, students are forced to greet *boro bhaais* (senior BCL leaders), perform various tasks at their command and whims including sing, dance and recite dirty poems and attend meetings hastily called at odd hours (sometime at 2 am in the morning). They are also forced to offer senior leaders “protocol” when they encounter them anywhere on campus and join rallies. Those disobeying orders are physically punished, verbally abused or forced out of the dormitories. Abolition of the Gono Room practice was one of the key demands of the university students. Both the government and the university administrations promised to bring an end to the practice. Years have passed by, the abuse of general students in Gono Rooms continues unabated.

Abrar Fahad is not the victim of the acts of a bunch of unruly student activists. He has been the casualty of campus politics that is vitiated by intolerance and violence that are the hallmarks of current day national politics. Instead of granting student organisations autonomy to run their affairs and making the concerns of students as their priorities, instead of nurturing young leaders by instilling values of mutual respect, tolerance and plurality of opinion, the myopic political leadership across the party spectrum finds it convenient and opportune to retain control over campuses for their own vested interest. It does so through harbouring their very own apparatchiks, granting them impunity. As long as this senseless phenomenon persists, students like Abrar will continue to shed blood on campus.

CR Abrar is an academic and rights worker.

Learning lessons: Protesters stay one step ahead of rulers



THERE’S a déjà vu feeling to this year’s wave of protests across the Arab world.

It’s not that this year saw the toppling of the leaders of Algeria and Sudan as a result of popular revolts, a harking back to the 2011 protests that overthrew the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

It’s that it’s the protesters in Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco rather than illiberal or autocratic regimes that have learnt the lessons of 2011.

Had illiberal and autocratic leaders learnt the lessons, they would not have been taken again by surprise by mass protests, often sparked by a black swan.

Lessons learnt would have meant putting their ear to the ground, hearing the groundswell of anger and frustration boiling at the surface over lack of economic opportunity and basic services, widespread corruption that benefits the few and complicates life for the many, and a clamouring for the ability to vent those grievances.

Lessons learnt would have meant addressing those concerns before it’s too late and spill into the streets in massive votes of no-confidence in the political and economic system and its leaders.

It’s a lesson that is valid beyond the Arab world with similar protests, like in 2011, erupting across the globe in countries such as Hong Kong, Russia, Peru, Haiti, Ecuador, Indonesia, and world-wide climate change-



PHOTO: STRINGER/EPA

Protesters in Cairo calling for the removal of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

related demonstrations.

For their part, demonstrators in Algeria and Sudan concluded from the 2011 protests that toppling a leader was the beginning not the end of the process.

In Algeria, protesters remain in the streets six months after President Abdelaziz Bouteflika stepped down, battling the army for a political process that will guarantee structural change rather than enable an electoral process that ensures that the military and its aligned business interests remain the power behind the throne.

Sudanese demonstrators surrendered

the street only after agreement had been reached with the military on a three-year-long transition towards civilian rule.

The Sudanese and Algerian experiences, like the lessons to be learnt from the 2011 revolts, suggest that the playing field in the wake of the fall of an autocrat is striking a balance between protesters’ demands for fundamental change and the determination of elites and the military to preserve their economic interests, and some degree of control of security and safeguards against being held accountable for past abuse.

What demonstrators have going for them,

beyond the power of the street, is the fact that popular discontent is not the only thing that mitigates against maintenance of the pre-protest status quo.

Countries across the Middle East and North Africa, characterised by youth bulges, can no longer evade economic reform that addresses widespread youth unemployment, the need to create large numbers of jobs, and inevitable diversification and streamlining of bloated government bureaucracies.

Algeria is a case in point. Foreign exchange reserves have dropped from USD 193.6 billion in 2014 to USD 72 billion in 2019. Reserves cover 13 months of imports at best in a country that imports 70 percent of what it consumes.

“If the state can no longer deliver goods and services, socio-economic discontent will rise further...In order to avoid such a situation...the state and its citizens will have to renegotiate their relationship. In the past the state provided, and Algerians abided. This is no longer economically feasible today, nor is it what Algerians appear to want as they seek more transparency, less corruption, and better governance of Algeria’s resources,” said Algeria scholar Dalia Ghanem.

Attention in the past years since the 2011 popular Arab revolts has focussed on the consequences of the Saudi-UAE led counterrevolution that brutally rolled back protesters’ achievements in Egypt and contributed to the Iranian-backed military campaign of Houthi rebels in Yemen and the devastating subsequent military intervention in that country as well as civil wars in Syria and Libya.

Yet, the past eight years have also been characterised by issues-oriented protests that often involved new, creative forms of

expression of discontent.

Iraq, Algeria and Sudan rather than Egypt contain lessons for the future.

Egypt’s field marshal-turned-president Abdel Fatah al-Sisi may have squashed recent protests with mass arrests and security force violence, but his conspiratorial depictions of a plot engineered by the repressed and weakened Muslim Brotherhood are unlikely to dampen widespread discontent with his failed economic policies that have benefited the elite and impoverished many.

Mr Al-Sisi may have ended the protests for now, but continued refusal to address grievances makes Egypt an accident waiting to happen.

The demography of protesters in Iraq proves the point. The protests could have been avoided had the Iraqi government focused on tackling corruption, ensuring the delivery of basic services, and creating jobs for university graduates and opportunities for those who returned from defeating the Islamic State to find that they were deprived of opportunities.

One lesson of the protests in Iraq and Hong Kong is the fact that repressive government responses, the killing of more than 100 demonstrators in Iraq or the banning of face masks in Hong Kong, fuel rather than calm public anger.

Said Hong Kong pro-democracy law maker Fernando Cheung: “This is adding fuel to the fire. This will mark the beginning of riots in Hong Kong.”

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MARK TWAIN
(1835-1910)
American humourist, journalist, lecturer and novelist

I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	nothing	15 Draws
1 Hardly a neatnik	36 More fluffy	17 Guernsey, for one
5 Woolly ones	39 Atlas section	18 Woodland
10 Undiluted	40 Coves	resident
11 Missouri motto	41 Goneril’s father	19 Alimony payers
12 Astronaut	42 Comes down in buckets	20 Swift horse
Shepard	43 Secluded valley	21 Prom transport
13 Wrap, as an ankle		22 Bank offering
14 Christmas season	DOWN	25 Put together
16 Warm spot	1 Neuter	26 Green stone
20 Axis foes	2 Humdinger	28 Strata
23 Scandal subject	3 Advanced exam	30 Following
24 Prison problem	4 Charity event	31 Stews
25 Brawl	5 Parasol offering	33 “Got it”
27 Dr’s org.	6 Aspirations	34 Tuning knob
28 Circus stars	7 Lamb’s mother	35 Rank above
29 Genuine	8 Outback bird	viscount
32 Something for	9 Vitality	36 Tentative taste
	11 Mixes	37 Lennon’s wife
		38 Winter worry

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

C	L	A	M		C	R	O	W
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	B	E	D		V	E	E	P
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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott