

BAN ON STUDENT POLITICS

# Buet has launched the call. Other universities should follow.

OF MAGIC & MADNESS



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

**T**O say that Chhatra League is in crisis presupposes that Chhatra League, too, can be reduced to facing a crisis, a fact that would have been unthinkable even a few weeks ago. Yet this might be the case after two events tipped the scales slightly

against the frontier warriors of the ruling Awami League: first, the unceremonious removal of its president and general secretary from their posts last month, and second, the very publicly played out humiliation of Chhatra League after the brutal killing of Buet student Abrar Fahad. For those who have followed Chhatra League's "gravity-defying" ascendancy in the past 10 years despite all its misdeeds, this is a new experience. In these 10 years, what we know as "student politics" has been basically "student politics by Chhatra League"—so complete has been its control over our public universities that the two became one and the same.

But the more erudite of us will remember that before Chhatra League, there was Chhatra Dal. Since 1991, when democracy was restored in the country, these two organisations have basically ruled public universities with the central power of government alternating between their parent organisations: Awami League and BNP. This makes you wonder, surely there is something amiss in this brand of student politics that makes it possible for the political parties to interfere in universities through their student wings?

On a practical level, it makes sense that a government that funds a university would have a stake in how it is being run. But using students (and even teachers) to do its bidding and take de facto control of the university suggests a sinister motive. And this is exactly why it would be a mistake to support student politics, as some pundits are now doing, from a purely ideological point of view as it plays into the rhetoric of the beneficiaries of this corrupt system.

The debate over student politics took a sharp turn after the Buet administration, on October 11, banned all forms of student

politics on its campus. The decision came in response to demands raised by students protesting the murder of Abrar. It was not an organic development born of a politico-academic consensus, as one would have expected, nor much can be made of it at this stage before the directive is fleshed out to give a more comprehensive guideline. There are doubts whether this will actually be effective or at least draw down Chhatra League's involvement in the university. But the novelty of the decision and its potential should be acknowledged. Buet has set a precedent, and other universities should take note.

There are important questions that need to be addressed first, however. Since the announcement of the decision, there has been an unlikely pairing of the left-leaning thinkers and mainstream political parties (particularly the ruling coalition). Both of them opposed the move, albeit for different reasons. The reaction of the ruling coalition was somewhat predictable: it sought to weaponise people's fondness for the glorious history of student politics in our country to justify the existing system, with a few words of advice thrown into the mix, although one doubts it has any real interest in the political expressions of general students. It's strange that a sitting government would be so enamoured with the concept of student politics which is historically known for its disruptive influence on the state. When did it ever happen before?

On the other hand, the leftists and other pro-student-politics voices have offered more profound thoughts: how will the future leaders be created in the absence of student politics? How will the students protest injustices if there is no student politics on the campus? Is this part of a plot to depoliticise the masses?

There seems to be some confusion over the use of the term "student politics." "Student politics" and "partisan student politics" or "(political) party-based student politics" are being used interchangeably, although they are different. Buet's students have made it clear that they want a ban on the latter but the administration chose to put a blanket ban on all forms of political activities, leading to the confusion. But there is no point in arguing over semantics when the implication is obvious, and one expects that Buet will issue



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

**When students say they don't want (partisan) student politics on their campus, they don't mean to forsake their constitutional right to protest, assemble and express their opinion.**

a clarification on this in due course.

When the students say that they don't want partisan student politics on campus, they don't mean to forsake their constitutionally guaranteed "right to assemble and to participate in public meetings and processions". Their right to have a political opinion and to express it without fear. It's a right that no one can take away. The Abrar murder was an assault on this right and the students are actually protecting their right and honouring Abrar's legacy by demanding the removal of barriers posed by, among other things, today's partisan student politics.

Can a student grow to be politically conscious without being affiliated with one of the political parties that have student wings in public universities? To say they can't would be an affront to their intellect, and a gross misreading of our glorious history of student activism. The best days of student politics in our history were in the Pakistan period and during the rule of military governments in independent Bangladesh, when students

organised on their own and fought and sacrificed for their country without being spoon-fed by a parent organisation. They did so despite the fact that there were threats and barriers galore (one may recall that in the 1960s, Monem Khan and the NSF actually set a precedence of punishing oppositional students at Dhaka University).

Today's student politics has become the very threat that those torchbearers of our pro-people, pro-country student politics had struggled against. Today, in the mind of an ordinary individual, the term "student politics" comes coded in dread-filled premonitions that reflect just how far have we gone off that hallowed tradition. And Chhatra League is the public face of this terror at this juncture.

If Awami League thinks that the movement against "student politics" is aimed at its student wing, it is precisely because it is. Chhatra League has perfected a form of politics in which intolerance for dissent gives license to violent acts. For too

long, it has been allowed to commit all sorts of crimes: killing, extortion, tender manipulation, vandalism, illegal drug trade, illegal enrolment in universities, terrorising general students and rivals alike... you name it, Chhatra League has done it. In a climate of impunity, the commission of one crime triggered the commission of another, an endless ribbon of crimes all coalescing to form the dreaded Chhatra League brand that reasserts itself with ever more ferocity.

Naturally, the essence of this brand—abuse of power to keep public universities under government's control—has accounted for the unconditional support from ruling party leaders as well as for the opprobrium of those who regard with distaste the triumph of unbridled brawn over brain, brute force over intellect. Over the years, Chhatra League has demonstrated an inexhaustible capacity for causing controversies and basically antagonising anyone with above-average intelligence.

Those who support the continuation of this brand of politics are suffering from a hereditary nostalgia for something that is no longer there. The advocates, before asking about how future leaders will be created in the absence of student politics, forget to ask how many it has actually created in the past three decades. Chhatra League is the tip of the iceberg of this problem. We are talking about a system that has been abused by all major parties. It has plagued our entire public tertiary education system, and will continue to do so as long as outside forces like the political parties, whether in power or opposition, are allowed to interfere in the universities through their student wings.

Since independence, there have been at least 151 killings on various campuses, and not once was a perpetrator punished for their crimes. The rot has clearly reached a stage which is beyond cure. We can continue to fool ourselves into thinking that things will somehow change, and our political parties will somehow grow a conscience and leave the universities to their own devices. But as Albert Einstein has said, "we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."

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## The 'seditious heart'

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

**I** often wonder about the psyche and motivation of people who choose to resist unfairness, inequity and tyranny at a great personal cost. And I don't mean luminaries like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr., but the unsung heroes who feel it their bounden duty to act in the public interest and ensure that future generations benefit from their selfless acts of moral valour.

The question seems to have gained a new relevance in the context of the high political drama being enacted as part of US President Trump's impeachment

for the "favour" as a quid pro quo for releasing military aid to Ukraine.

The US president's request comes as no surprise. Ever since assuming office, he has brazenly misused his executive authority to intimidate his opponents, shield his cronies, and abuse his privileges, often blurring the distinction between his business and his presidential role. He managed to do all this with impunity and a hubris hitherto unknown in the annals of the American presidential history. In the face of the bullying, intimidation and bluster, it only took one brave person with a strong moral conscience to report a presidential misdemeanour that prompted the Congress to start an impeachment enquiry.

It might be useful to take a short detour here and elaborate on the culture

process, whistleblowers are protected by law from repercussions such as removal from office, threats or physical harm. Needless to say, the system is designed as a check and balance for the abuse of power by men and women in positions of authority. Although the protection is not always airtight, individuals continue to display exceptional courage to come forward and expose wrongdoing.

The impeachment inquiry against President Trump has generated multiple debates and discussions leading to speculations about what the final outcome might be, especially in the context of a Republican-majority Senate. While the investigations are moving at a fast pace, I am equally interested in what motivates whistleblowers to come forward, risking collateral damage to their life and career. Why are they

are subjected to political injustices.

I believe that there are primarily three ways in which people react if and when they witness or confront a wrongdoing. Some choose to remain silent, unless the problem hits them directly. The majority prefers to discuss and debate the issue within the comfort of their living rooms. Only a few make the daunting decision to "act" either individually or in collaboration with fellow citizens.

Making a choice of whether or not to act when faced with oppression and injustice is not alien to many Bangladeshi citizens. The Bangladesh Liberation Movement is a living testimony of people's protests against tyranny. Having lived through that experience, I too have learned the importance of making my voice heard when faced with social or political injustices—no matter how feeble the voice may be. Thus, while watching the democratic institutions and people's rights being attacked by the Trump administration, I opted to join a group of like-minded activists involved in educating voters about issues as well as convincing them that only their votes can bring about change. Admittedly, what we do in our group may be a drop in the vast ocean, but it still is a drop. What I discovered in the process is that there are numerous small groups like ours that are adding to the ocean.

Many people ask why I canvass in the Washington summer heat or spend hours making phone calls and writing postcards to voters, when the election results will not make a big difference in my personal day-to-day life. How can I explain to them that the sheer thought of people "accidentally" killed by policemen because of their race or colour, children separated from undocumented parents and put in cages, and citizens waiting to die because they cannot afford the cost of health care, torments me and I cannot remain a silent spectator? The fieldwork has not only channelled my frustrations in a positive direction, but it has also enhanced my understanding of why whistleblowers risk everything to help their community or country. I am convinced that they are compelled by an inner calling motivated by intense distress at watching the democratic system disintegrate, or just a compassionate desire to relieve another's pain. It cannot be articulated in plain words—you either feel it or you don't. Author-activist Arundhati Roy captured the idea in a single, evocative phrase: it's the "seditious heart" that rebels against injustice, inequity and discrimination!

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US President Donald Trump holds a campaign rally in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, on October 10, 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS

inquiry by the Congress. As most of us know, the case against the president mainly rests on a complaint filed by a "whistleblower" who reported that, in a telephone call, Donald Trump solicited help from the Ukrainian president to investigate Joe Biden, his leading Democratic rival for next year's presidential elections. To compound the illegality of his request, Trump asked

of whistleblowers in the context of the United States. Whistleblowers are individuals who disclose institutional or governmental "illegality, waste, and corruption", with the purpose of apprising the public as well as appropriate authorities of actions that may result in adverse consequences for the country or the institution in question. However, to maintain the neutrality of the

prepared to confront the legal, ethical, financial and personal challenges that they face in their arduous journey to reveal the truth? Is the motivation purely altruistic? History tells us that in most cases, the answer is "yes". The majority of whistleblowers are men and women who put up a heroic resistance when institutions are under assault, democracy is under threat and the disempowered

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



October 15, 1959  
FINAL CONFERENCE ON ANTARCTIC TREATY

On this day in 1959, a final conference on the Antarctic Treaty convened in Washington, D.C., and after six weeks of negotiations, the treaty was signed by 12 countries, preserving the continent for free scientific study.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 "Beauty and the Beast" beauty
  - 6 Elevator stop
  - 11 Wise saying
  - 12 T-shirt size
  - 13 Some combo musicians
  - 15 Guitar blaster
  - 16 Smoked salmon
  - 17 Ready to go
  - 18 "Wheel of Fortune" buy
  - 20 Track race
  - 23 Neighbor of Tibet
  - 27 Resting on
  - 28 Carry on, as war
  - 29 Hayride need
  - 31 Like some jackets
  - 32 Ceremonies
  - 34 Had dinner
  - 37 Old horse
  - 38 Air conditioner meas.
  - 41 Parachuting daredevils
  - 44 Spare
  - 45 Have a spat
  - 46 Deceitful people
  - 47 Rocket parts
  - 14 Depressed
  - 18 Mist
  - 19 Narnia's creator
  - 20 Unrefined
  - 21 Seventh Greek letter
  - 22 Piece of lumber
  - 24 Skillet
  - 25 Grow older
  - 26 Went ahead
  - 30 Japanese assassins
  - 31 Errand runner
  - 33 Nineteenth Greek letter
  - 34 Cain's brother
  - 35 Fare carrier
  - 36 "Como—usted?"
  - 38 Pleads
  - 39 Factual
  - 40 Avails oneself of
  - 42 Go wrong
  - 43 Course employee



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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