

Overseas labour markets shrinking

Address malpractices, explore new destinations

IN the first eight months of the year, Bangladeshis got 4,17,084 jobs abroad, 2,08,536 fewer than the government's projected number for this period. The traditional labour markets in the Gulf are on the decline and the reasons are multifaceted. Although we are all aware of the irregularities in recruitment practices, there is also the emerging case of restrictions being placed on our workers. For instance, Saudi Arabia which is the largest destination for Bangladeshi workers reopened its market in 2015 after a break of seven years. But the Kingdom is enforcing a Saudization policy, which means reducing dependence on foreign workers. When we look at the second largest market, the UAE, that country imposed a ban on our workers back in 2012 because, apparently, Bangladeshi recruiting agencies have been found to be involved in corruption and irregularities.

The situation is more or less the same with other countries in the Gulf and South East Asian nations, which have either frozen access of our workers to their markets, reducing the numbers of Bangladeshi migrant workers—or their numbers have remained stagnant. Nepal for instance successfully negotiated and struck a deal with Malaysia for their workers whereas we have not. This highlights procrastination on our part, which is hardly acceptable given the warning signs.

Besides tackling the obvious irregularities associated with recruiting agencies, Bangladesh needs to move into high gear on a number of other issues. We signed our MoU with Japan on recruiting skilled workers recently. Migration researchers believe that efforts need to be expedited in language training so that skilled workers are made language-proficient in a fast-paced manner, because Bangladesh is not the only country that will be vying to get a share of this lucrative market. Similarly, we have to wake up to new ground realities that the Middle East market for our workers is on the wane and we need to earnestly explore new markets for both unskilled and skilled workers, because inward foreign remittance brings in about USD 15 billion a year and we cannot take foreign labour markets for granted. Every country that has large overseas migrant populations is moving fast and unless we do the same, Bangladesh may miss the opportunities with disastrous impact.

Bank robbery over four years!

No trace of BASIC Bank's 4,500 crore taka

IT is mystifying that nobody knows what happened to the Tk 4,500 crore that was swindled out of BASIC Bank between 2009 and 2013. The investigators of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) have not been able to find any clue as to what happened to this astronomical amount and has not submitted any charge sheet in the 56 cases filed in 2015 over its disappearance.

There is little justification for such a slow investigation. It is a tragedy that a bank that was once healthy had to fall from grace because of some unscrupulous individuals who transferred this huge amount of money in phases no doubt, in cahoots with the senior management of the bank. But what is even more disappointing is that the ACC has not been able to trace a single one of these illegal withdrawals.

It is also strange that the investigators have not found anything on the former chairman and the directors of the bank despite a central bank probe report that has detailed how loans were approved and then withdrawn in clear violation of bank rules. This was done through fake companies and suspicious accounts. Even the bank's branches had expressed their concern regarding a number of loans yet they were all approved at the headquarters. Why did the bank's board and credit committee approve of such loans without vetting them properly? According to the same probe report, the then management and board headed by the former chairman recruited a huge number of employees violating the rules and increased the number of branches to maintain them.

Even the High Court has expressed its disappointment at the snail's pace of the ACC investigation. It is hard not to wonder whether this delay will serve to ultimately protect those officials who have been complicit in this horrendous scam that has practically robbed the bank of huge amounts of money, destroying its goodwill and reputation as a healthy, successful bank that it once was. The finance minister has said that the culprits involved in the scam during those four years will be brought to book. We urge the government to put pressure on the ACC to jumpstart this lethargic investigation and identify the individuals involved in this systematic bank robbery that has affected other banks too.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stress can trigger suicides

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death amongst the youth in Bangladesh. The rate of teenage suicides has gone up in recent years, according to reports. There may be various reasons, but stress is definitely one of them.

Our society has a habit of comparing students with one another throughout their academic years, ignoring the harmful effects it tends to unleash. Constantly students are reminded, mostly by their parents, that they have to do better than their peers. And at times it seems when they do, it is not enough; thus, the cycle continues. There are many cases where a young individual, unable to meet the "expectations", decided to end their life.

It is high time that we realise that each individual is unique. So, instead of burdening the youth with high, and at times unrealistic, "expectations", guardians must acknowledge their unique abilities. School authorities too, should ensure the wellbeing of the students by nurturing their talents and also provide counselling sessions to prevent suicides.

Ramisha Rawnak Khan, East West University

Is banning student politics the solution to campus criminality?



ZOBAIDA NASREEN

THE death of Abrar Fahad epitomises the need for tolerance towards dissenting voices. He is a martyr to the cause of free speech. Employing his brutal death to silence political dissent and to eliminate political rights on campus is wrong. He did not deserve such betrayal.

The choice before the administration was to create more space for political dissent or to shut down oppositional voices. It went for the second option.

It is no secret that the student leaders sponsored by the ruling parties have been routinely abusing and torturing not only rivals but also ordinary students. No doubt we must wipe out the reign of terror on campus. But as long as the roots of the problem—ruling party's desire to control universities and erosion of institutional autonomy—are not addressed, we would not be able to scratch beyond the surface.

Abrar's murder has exposed the failure of the institution in its basic duty to protect its students. It is impossible to run "torture cells" without the knowledge of the university and hall administrations. After being tortured many students had reported the incidents but to no avail. If the ruling party's students could routinely commit such crimes, it was because the authorities remained silent or patronising. The Buet administration has failed to accept its responsibility for the crime committed against one of its students and to recognise its inefficiency and complicity. Instead of taking steps to bring any systemic change or to dispel concerns about student safety and security, it has washed the blood of one of its own by banning organised political activities on campus.

This ban provided an easy way out for the administration when students could demand and even realise institutional autonomy, democracy, end of unlawful government control, and much more. This ban has effectively snatched away the students' rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association and peaceful assembly. Not only the organisations accused of committing serious crimes (murder, rape, and maiming) were banned, but also the ones whose peaceful expressions put forward a vision of democratic campus and offer a defence against administration behaving autocratically. Even if such organisations are weak in terms of the number of members, their views are important to consider. It is sad that the university producing future leaders of Bangladesh cannot show them that their institution can be run competently and democratically.

The ramifications of this ban could be huge. It is a real possibility now that many other universities would feel encouraged to follow Buet's path in denying student organisations the rights to exist and to campaign. In a country where student organisations have always been important entities of civil society and have consistently offered the public sphere, not only for students but also for the people in general, to take up matters of common concern, banning student politics would

be a huge blow to our democratic aspirations.

What good will it bring if we suppress the spirit of students to come together and build political imaginations? Surely it will further alienate conscientious students from getting involved in emancipatory struggles and lead to a society in which people are more self-centred and careerist. As a practical matter, students would also be pressured to support dominant political views.

Many people argue that the ban will not come in the way of students launching movements. While this is true, the limitations of non-organisational student movements are that they are situational, spontaneous, and temporary and can rarely go beyond daily affairs. The achievements are usually short-term. They rarely build on legacy of previous

party's student wings can only be understood in the national historical context of those parties' desire to control universities. The current trend of student organisations—student wing of ruling party enjoying control and being allowed to commit crimes with apparent impunity while oppositional student bodies are marginalised or silenced—started to take this definitive shape in early 1990s. At the heart of it was a great betrayal of the ruling class that took up destruction of democracy in universities as an insurance for their lasting rule.

Earlier, the military regimes of 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in their quest for establishing brutal control pushed students towards anti-autocratic struggles. Soon the military regimes tried to suspend universities' autonomy and adopted the strategy of co-opting student leaders.

and were forced to leave educational institutions without completing studies. Independent student organisations got weakened.

That power grab and the attempt to avoid elections had implications far beyond campuses. Soon it became a common story of our national politics too.

Much of these current problems stem from the basic question of university autonomy. It has been under attack not only in the shape of state interventions, but also through government-sponsored student and teacher associations.

Of course, far-reaching reforms within the student wings of the ruling parties is a must. But no matter how deep reforms are made they will not be enough to end criminality and abuses on campus unless the ruling parties show the political will



PHOTO: RAFIUL ISLAM

At a time when politics is effectively in exile, banning student politics would only serve the purpose of the rising totalitarian tendency.

movements and thus fail to create a political imagination that could go beyond the walls of a campus and build a lasting change.

We should not forget that in our history of democratic struggles, student organisations have always been at the forefront of countering hegemonic thoughts. The role of student vanguards has been crucial to show how their demands relate to broader struggles of the people. Without student organisations, it is difficult to imagine student movements actively raising questions of human rights and democracy.

It is very important not to allow any authority to deny or repress political rights and freedoms. It is true that many students are not benefitting directly from those rights. For some, those rights do not even exist. Still we must protect those rights if we want democracy to flourish.

On the other hand, the deterioration in student organisations has not been solely their own making. Rather the external influence of the ruling class had a dominating role in creating and backing an atrocious system that turns some students into "monsters".

The political criminal turn of ruling

Many leaders caved in and created loyal student organisations. Still they could not silence the independent voices of student organisations.

When the BNP government came to power after Ershad's autocratic regime, it imported a disastrous governance culture: it stopped holding student union polls providing its student wing Jatyaatabadi Chhatra Dal and its ally's student wing Islamic Chhatra Shibir control over campuses across the country. The new system of campus power neither required participation of student organisations other than the one affiliated with the ruling party nor any election. It was a permanent settlement that handed full control to a stable system of thuggery, which sought to destroy oppositional groups.

Later governments found it beneficial too. Consequently, the student wings of the ruling parties were able to suppress movements by imposing political control and dispossessing the students of their social and political rights. As a result, hundreds of students were forced to join political events of the ruling parties, abused, tortured or killed on campuses,

to abolish government sponsorship and abandon the ideology of controlling academia. There is no other way to break the normalisation of thug regimes on campus.

Student politics no longer remain in the hands of the students alone. Collective student actions may bring short-term cultural change, but it will revert to its previous state unless the political parties recognise the right of students to organise and govern themselves according to their own free will. For that matter, the ruling parties must stay out of student politics.

Banning student politics is no solution to the problem we are facing on campuses today. At a time when politics is effectively in exile, banning student politics would only serve the purpose of the rising totalitarian tendency. Therefore, politicians and educational policymakers should not abandon students coming into political consciousness and should widen the space for them to engage, educate, and agitate. Not just culturally, but politically too.

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What creates these criminals?



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THE recent barbaric murder of a second year BUET student, Abrar Fahad has left all of us appalled and unsettled. While most of us are left traumatised after the incident, more than that, everyone

seems not to fathom how some fellow students could commit such a ruthless act in cold blood. While this heinous crime is ubiquitously being condemned by all, it is equally important to comprehend what made criminals in the first place; what have been the motivations and push factors compelling these young students to take the life of an innocent person. Over the past week, a lot has been said and written regarding the growing prevalence of a culture of impunity and lawlessness that has eroded our political institutions and law enforcement system. While all of these factors play an enabling role in this pattern of criminality, we also need to pay heed to the deriving process through which these university students become so inhumanely deviant.

In criminal psychology, criminals can be classified into five distinct groups, including individuals who have compulsive criminal drives, psychological deficiencies or simply antisocial tendencies due to developmental aberrations. But one type of criminal also belongs to groups of ordinary individuals who become criminals due to external sociological or sub-cultural influences. All of the criminals in the Abrar murder case are above average students studying in the most prestigious engineering institution of the country, so it is improbable that they had precursory psychological deformities. Also, the

father of one of the key suspects, Anik Sarkar, claims that his son has always been a meritorious and distinguished boy from their locality and he fails to fathom how or why his son got involved in such murderous activities. Thus, it is more likely that the culture of dirty politics and violence in campus took him down that path.

The culture of pro-government student bodies beating up regular students at campus is not new. This disturbing

to be anti-establishment or allies of Chhatra Dal and Chhatra Shibir.

The Chhatra League has become the so-called protector of the campus from insurgency or anarchy, which in reality has only smothered the voice of dissent and democracy at large. It also must be noted that while it is undeniable that Chhatra Dal and Chhatra Shibir had their share of criminal records, it is not up to Chhatra League to penalise them for who they are. But members of the former



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practice has been observed since the regime of BNP and Jamaat with their student wings, Chhatra Dal and Chhatra Shibir adopting these same means of control and supremacy n campus. This squalid legacy has ever since been kept alive as a tool of exploitation by consecutive regimes. On the other hand, over the past few years, it also has become a reality that anyone who criticises the establishment is considered

groups have been dehumanised to such an extent that it has become normal to "teach them a lesson" through whatever means possible: ragging, battery or even murder.

The golden epoch of student politics at campus has waned to non-existence. Corrupt practices like bribery, favouritism, sycophancy and intolerance have taken over collective and democratic values. People who do not even believe

in Bangabandhu's ideologies can today become an ardent member of Chhatra League by means of sycophancy and preferential treatment. However, it also must be remembered that fear and insecurity at campus compelled these students in the first place to take refuge under the umbrella of Chhatra League. When they get over their own fears and insecurities, it is their turn to instil the same fear and insecurity among hundreds of other students.

Fear is one of the most powerful motivators of behaviour. Power, on the other hand, gives an individual control over their environment and over their fears. Dictators like Stalin, Hitler or Saddam Hussein, all had fearful and abusive parents that sowed the seeds of desire for fear inducing power in them.

Similarly, when the vulnerable students at campus are left with options between fear and power, most make their way to power through whatever means necessary including, blind obedience to authority.

Today, students have developed so much resentment and abhor against Chhatra League that they are protesting for the ban of this and all other forms of party affiliated student political organisations on campus. Years of torture, exploitation and injustice have pushed students to believe this to be their only way out. But will this ban really result in a healthy and safe campus, in the face of the prevailing malady of detrimental social, cultural and political practices? The root issues that turn meritorious students into criminals: culture of impunity, lawlessness and strangulation of freedom of speech are yet to be addressed. And until then, Abrar's will be just another name in the growing list of victims.

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