

Time for a course correction in JU

A controversial VC serves no one's interest

It is the responsibility of the government to undertake that all-too-important task. From a pragmatic point of view, the government's most responsible step should be to launch an investigation into the corruption allegations.



IT'S been 10 days since Jahangirnagar University went into lockdown after the activists of Bangladesh Chhatra League attacked protesters demanding the resignation of Vice-Chancellor Professor Farzana Islam. The dormitories remain shut, classes and exams postponed, and all academic activities put on hold. The protracted shutdown, however, has done little to quell the agitating students and teachers. According to our JU correspondent, the protests rage on, defying a ban on rallies and processions on campus, despite the news of cops harassing the families of student protesters. One student has been sued under the Digital Security Act for her comments on Facebook. There have also been warnings of dire consequences, including withdrawal of funds for public universities, if the protesters don't fall back into line.

Strangely enough, these diktats, threats and scare tactics seem to have only strengthened their resolve that what they are doing is the right thing. The question, therefore, is not if the VC can retain her position—which she can, unless instructed otherwise—but if she should, given all that has transpired in the past few weeks and her own role in it. The question over her moral authority arises for a number of reasons.

Exhibit A: Allegations of corruption against her. Set aside the fact that for over two months, the protesters have been demanding an investigation into her alleged involvement in corruption and mismanagement of a Tk 1,445-crore campus development project. It can be recalled that the now-deposed Chhatra League President Rezwatul Haque Chowdhury Shovon and General Secretary Golam Rabbani had in September admitted to demanding their “fair share” from the VC. Rabbani also accused the VC of giving Tk 1.6 crore to the JU Chhatra League unit, a claim that both the VC and the JU BCL president dismissed. But the fact that an allegation *was* levelled against her

compromises her position as an administrator, and she should have stepped aside to make way for an enquiry into this—which is a universally accepted normal practice. Also, doesn't the confession by Rabbani, which apparently led to his removal, at least merit an investigation?

Exhibit B: The VC's unabashed public display of affection for Chhatra League, which is ironic given that it was Chhatra League that tied her name to the corruption scandal. Having repeatedly sided with one group of students, hasn't she lost her moral authority to represent the ordinary students and teachers who have been routinely terrorised, hectorated and forced to conform to suffocating diktats by the members of the same organisation?

Exhibit C: Exposing the protesters to danger. Her weakness for power, her inability to handle a crisis, and a stunning lack of empathy were all on display when she publicly thanked Chhatra

League that unleashed terror on the protesters on November 5. Prior to that, the VC had been confined to her residence for nearly 18 hours by the protesters demanding her resignation over the corruption allegation, which is something the students should not have done. In the ensuing attack, at least 20 teachers, students and journalists present on the scene were injured. Not one to apologise for her failure to handle the situation, she later defended the attack and put the blame squarely on the protesters.

For over two months, Jahangirnagar University, the country's only fully residential public university and traditionally a hotbed of pro-student activism, has been plagued by a crisis because of one person who, by her own admission, was reluctant to take the job for a second term. In an interview with *The Daily*

Star last week, Professor Farzana Islam said, “Fortunately, or unfortunately, I have completed my four years [tenure]. I tried to leave, but the government thought that it would be wise to keep me here as I did not give any trouble to anyone. And that brought me trouble.”

She then defended her role in the ongoing crisis and highlighted how this was nothing new in the history of JU, saying none of the “vice-chancellors belonging to the Awami League”—apart from her—could complete their tenures in JU. “What we see in the cases of Awami League VCs is pathetic. Prof Alauddin could bring independence to the country, but he could not do anything at JU,” she said, adding that even an influential VC like Shariff Enamul Kabir was forced to step down from his post.

It's bad enough to admit that her job as a VC in the second term was not her first choice. But aligning her failures with a trend to remove JU VCs midway through their tenures, without providing any context to their particular cases, speaks of someone unsure of herself and her legacy. Instead of engaging in the hard graft of evaluating her situation and the current moods and needs in the university that she is responsible for, she finds herself deriving legitimacy from her own interpretation of a questionable past.

By all indications, it is evident that a controversial and reluctant VC serves neither the government, which needs a strong administrator in the university—and one with a cleaner image—nor the general students and teachers, who need a guardian and leader that they can trust. The time has come for a course correction in JU. It is the responsibility of the government to undertake that all-too-important task. From a pragmatic point of view, the government's most responsible step should be to launch an investigation into the corruption allegations. The question here is also of moral authority and whether the present VC has it. We need to think of that if we're to find a solution that will be acceptable to all.

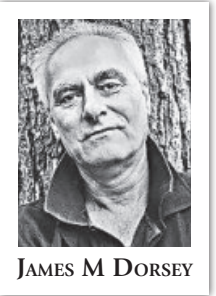


A faction of teachers and students of Jahangirnagar University form a human chain demanding the removal of the VC on September 30, 2019.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Email: badiuzzaman.bd@gmail.com

Salvaging international law: The best of bad options



THESE are uncertain times with trade wars, regional conflicts and increased abuse of human and minority rights pockmarking the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world. What may be potentially the most dangerous casualty of the transition is the abandonment of even a pretence to the adherence to international law.

Violations of international law and abuse of human and minority rights dominate news cycles in a world in which leaders, that think in exclusive civilisational rather than inclusive national terms, rule supreme.

Examples are too many to comprehensively recount.

They include semi-permanent paralysis of the United Nations Security Council as a result of big power rivalry; last month's Turkish military incursion into northern Syria in a bid to change the region's demography; ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar; disenfranchisement of millions, predominantly Muslims, in India; and a Chinese effort to fundamentally alter the belief system of Turkic Muslims in the troubled north-western province of Xinjiang.

It's not that international law was adhered to prior to the rise of presidents like Donald J Trump, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Victor Orban of Hungary, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey or Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

It wasn't. Witness, as just one instance, widespread condemnation of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq as a violation of international law.

The silver lining at the time was the fact that international law was at least a reference point for norms and standards by which leaders and governments were judged. It still is, at least theoretically, but it no longer is the standard to which leaders and governments necessarily pay lip service. Today, they do so only when opportunistically convenient.

Instead, violations of territorial sovereignty, as well as human and minority rights, has become the norm.

It also is the de facto justification for the creation of a new world order, in which a critical mass of world leaders often defines the borders and national security of their countries in civilisational and/or ethnic, cultural or religious terms.

The abandonment of principles enshrined in international law, with no immediate alternative standard setter in place, raises the spectre of an era in which instability, conflict, mass migration, radicalisation, outbursts of popular frustration and anger, and political violence becomes the new normal.

Last month's killing of Kamlesh Tiwari, a Hindu nationalist politician in Uttar Pradesh, because of a defamatory comment about the Prophet Mohammed that he allegedly made four years ago, reflects the deterioration of Muslim-Hindu relations in Mr Modi's increasingly Hindu nationalist India.

Perhaps more alarming is the recent declaration by Oren Hazan, a Knesset

member for Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's Likud party, that China's incarceration of at least a million Muslims in re-education camps, or what Beijing calls vocational education facilities, was a model for Israel in its dispute with the Palestinians.

Equally worrisome is last month's revocation by Mr Putin of an additional protocol to the Geneva Conventions related to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts. Mr Putin justified the revocation on the grounds that an international commission, set up in order to investigate war crimes against civilians, risks abuse of the commission's power “by the states, which are acting in bad faith.”

Russia alongside Iran and the government of President Bashar al-Assad have been accused of multiple war crimes in war-ravaged Syria. So have anti-Assad rebels, irrespective of their political or religious stripe.

Russia's withdrawal from the Geneva protocol, Mr Hazan's endorsement of Chinese policy and Turkey's intervention

The problem is that stabilising Syria by restoring legitimacy to an alleged war criminal may provide temporary relief, but also sets a precedent for a world order, in which transparency and accountability fall by the wayside. It almost by definition opens the door to solutions that plant the seeds for renewed conflict and bloodshed.

best of a horrible situation,” said prominent US political scientist Stephen M Walt.

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International law was and is no panacea. To paraphrase Mr Walt's argument, it is the best of bad options.

Abandoning the standards and norms embedded in international law will only perpetuate flawed policies by various states that were destined to aggravate and escalate deep-seated grievances, discord and conflict rather than fairly and responsibly address social, cultural and political issues that would contribute to enhanced societal cohesion.

Identifying the problem is obviously easy. Solving it is not, given that the players who would need to redress the issue are the violators themselves.

Ensuring that nations and leaders respect international law in much the same way that citizens are expected to honour their country's laws would have to entail strengthening international law itself as well as its adjudication. That would have to involve a reconceptualisation of the United Nations Security Council as well as the International Court of Justice.

That may not be as delusional as it sounds. But leaders would have to be willing to recognise that criticisms of the application of international law, like Mr Putin's objections to the way the Geneva protocol is implemented, have a degree of merit.

In other words, like national laws, international law will only be effective if it is universally applied. Western legal principles insist that no one is exempt from the law. The same should apply to states, governments and leaders.



The UN Security Council.

PHOTO: DON EMMERT/AFP

in Syria in an environment that legitimises abandonment of any pretext of adherence to international law as well as ultra-nationalist and supremacist worldviews are indicators of what a world would look like in which laws, rules and regulations governing war and peace and human and minority rights are no longer the standards against which countries and governments are measured.

The fact that Mr Al-Assad, a ruthless autocrat accused of uncountable war crimes, is increasingly being perceived as Syria's best hope after more than eight years of brutal civil war aggravated by foreign intervention, drives the point home.

“As depressing as it is to write this sentence, the best course of action today is for President Bashar al-Assad's regime to regain control over northern Syria. Assad is a war criminal whose forces killed more than half a million of his compatriots and produced several million refugees. In a perfect world, he would be on trial at The Hague instead of ruling in Damascus. But we do not live in a perfect world, and the question we face today is how to make the

QUOTABLE Quote

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
(1809-1865)
16th president of United States who preserved the Union during the American Civil War and brought about the emancipation of the slaves.

Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Eats in the evening

5 Rotisserie

9 Of the kidneys

10 Humidor item

12 Mumbai's nation

13 "Tomorrow" show

14 "Welcome" site

16 Hold

17 Before, in a ballade

18 Marsh rodent

20 Bacon slice

22 Coop group

23 Bakery come-on

25 River to the Severn

28 Track athlete

DOWN

1 Lady of Spain

2 Takes apart

3 Skating group

4 Clink

5 Sings like Ella

6 Wrestling win

32 Typographical symbol

34 Radio's Glass

35 Perfect serve

36 Fierce fighter

38 Turkish governor

40 Lasso loop

41 Court event

42 Floor squares

43 Hawk

44 Winter glider

7 Disregard

8 Asian island

9 Contract add-on

11 Budget amounts

15 Colorful sky phenomena

19 Asian chieftain

21 Put up

24 The X-men, e.g.

25 Make suitable

26 Chapel figures

27 Infant outfit

29 Kidman of "The Others"

30 Made blank

31 Merits

33 Hoops

37 Muddy up

39 "2001" computer

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	P	A	T		S	C	A	M
P	I	P	E	S		N	O	S
E	X	P	E	L		A	I	S
A	I	L	E	A	G	L	E	T
K	E	E	P	E	R	S	T	I
S	T	O	V	E		S	T	E
D	I	R	T		S	P	A	R
I	N	N		H	A	I	R	N
S	T	O	R	A	G	E		O
C	A	V	E	S		L	O	V
S	C	E	N	T		S	P	E
T	R	O	Y			T	R	E

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott