

# The politics of anti-politics: Corruption, democracy and the universities



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I am fortunate, indeed blessed, to have been a part of Dhaka University (DU) as a student and a teacher from 1967-75. I had received a superb education from talented and dedicated professors, and I was inspired by the moral values they represented, the enlightenment principles they professed, and the individual dignity and social courtesies they exemplified. Moreover, DU provided an enabling environment for us to develop qualities of courage, integrity, patriotism and intellectual eagerness.

I was a student here when we experienced our thrilling emergence as an independent country. On December 16, 1971, as I re-entered Dhaka after seven months, with other Freedom Fighters from Sector 2, we felt we had "done it". Fifty years later, we ask, what have we really done? That question haunts us.

This is not the place for an elaborate stock-taking. But apparently, the ideals we fought for—the democracy we had imagined, the socialism we had envisioned, the secularism that we had embraced, and even the issue of

practiced openly and boldly. There is no better metaphor for the state of corruption and its subversion of democracy in the country than the photograph of a female journalist (of *Prothom Alo*) peering out plaintively from behind the grilles of a prison van because she had bravely exposed the fraud and incompetence in the Health Ministry.

This essay is a cursory glance at corruption's impact on politics and higher education.

Corruption has typically involved extracting payments in exchange for services provided. This is a rather restrictive and legalistic definition since it only refers to official and institutional malfeasance for personal gain.

Historically, the notion has been broader. For example, Socrates was accused of "corrupting the youth", St. Paul warned the Corinthians of the "corruption of the flesh", and literature is replete with references to the "corruption of the soul". It is also apparent that corruption has become more complex, innovative and more organically rooted in society. It may encompass personal, cultural and moral components, and include acts that may be destructive of the public good.

The notion of corruption and politics has always been considered to be intimately related and co-dependent. Hence, the idea of "politics" is considered to be synonymous with cunning, hypocrisy and opportunism. The phrase "dirty politics" is considered an exercise in redundancy, a "crooked politician" a tautology. Thus, it is frequently argued that corruption can be better contained in an autocratic regime—through "strong man" tactics which are simple and direct—than under arrangements that allow the pursuit of open politics where the effort becomes messy and futile.

But this relationship that is hypothesised is not only unfortunate, it is mischievous. First, it is clear that the freest and most democratic countries in the world (according to Freedom Watch) are also the least corrupt (according to Transparency International), and that free speech, competitive elections, constitutional guarantees, institutional checks and balances, and an informed and engaged citizenry remain the best antidote to corruption. Second, an attack on politics inevitably becomes an assault on democracy. It may be possible to have politics without democracy, but not democracy without politics. Authoritarian efforts not only

cost freedoms and rights, they are also counter-productive in terms of controlling corruption.

Unfortunately, corruption may affect politics with irregularities in campaigns, balloting and vote counts. It may erode the institutional salience and moral authority of the parliament. It may problematise the rule of law, a fundamental right of citizens in a

democratic (dis)temper of our times?

Didn't such embarrassments become more manifest during the time when elections to student bodies were not even held for several decades, and a stultifying atmosphere of cynicism and fear was inflicted on campus by successive regimes?

Didn't the students create the context—and make sacrifices in blood, sweat and tears—to pave the way for

Bangladesh?

Doesn't this uncomfortable situation provoke questions about whether the governmental/bureaucratic classes still retain a stake in our public universities? Does the quality or reputation of these universities even matter to them since their own children will be sent to pricey private universities and/or abroad for higher studies?

Similarly, do the members of the corporate/financial elite have any interest in research and scholarship in our universities? Or do they narrowly focus on the instrumental and utilitarian aspects of education to provide skilled manpower as grist for their economic mill?

This concern is nested within a wider structure of the devaluation of education itself. Previously, education was prized because it provided us with professional identity, upward mobility, and social respect. Those "middle-class" values and inspirations are becoming increasingly irrelevant in a psycho-social environment where wealth has become the dominant marker of status and power, and its pursuit the overriding obsession. This is perfectly compatible with the selfishness inherent in a de-politicised culture.

The right to investigate, contest and propose alternative ideas, explanations and policies based on logic, evidence and moral clarity, the right to vote, speak or organise without fear, and the right to seek an education that enlightens—rather than one that merely imparts skills—can only come through an open, inclusive, tolerant environment which not only allows but also encourages politics in the best sense of the term. There is nothing that autocrats fear more than free speech and accountability. And it is the universities that nurture that sentiment, practice and courage.

Those who seek to de-legitimise politics today, perhaps unknowingly, disregard the foundational values, historical compulsions and constitutional guarantees that define this country. The universities were in the forefront of the struggle through which our democratic ideals were pursued. We must inspire them to regain that mantle. Otherwise, education will suffer, democracy will suffocate and, without those challenges, corruption will triumph.

(The article is partially based on a talk at DU in May 2021.)

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PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

democracy.

Even more unfortunately, the corruption of politics and the concomitant loss of democratic values can also happen in the universities, where it is least expected. How can the widely reported "scandals" which include allegations about teachers who allegedly plagiarise, disregard their teaching responsibilities while seeking "consultancies" and additional teaching assignments elsewhere, and ignore research and professional development to pursue party loyalties for material benefit; VCs who do not attend office, hire people for personal and partisan advantage, arrange "pay-offs" for student leaders out of development funds, threaten legal action against critics, and face various investigations for procedural and ethical transgressions; students who gang-rape a woman in a dorm, or torture a fellow student to death for a Facebook post, or demonstrate arbitrary, often cruel, dominance in residential halls, or provide muscular support for party leaders in exchange for various rewards and favours—how can these signs of moral chaos not reflect, or affect, the

country's independence and the ideals it fostered? Didn't the debates and discussions, the interrogations and contestations, the frisson of ideas and the jostling for political space, the wall magazines and pamphlets, the cultural platforms, the study circles and the student organisations pursuing diverse ideological and national goals help to create tolerance and broad-mindedness, an engagement with public issues, and a respect for the democratic process? Isn't the right to think, question and challenge part of education? Isn't taking away that right tantamount to an attack on democracy as well?

Is it merely coincidental that the most glorious periods of Dhaka University's history coincided with the period of its most intense political activism, and its most awkward years (including progressively lower rankings in international comparisons) overlap with authoritarian efforts at establishing control?

If that lofty tradition is now perverted by the politics of anti-politics (even leading to talk of "banning politics in universities"), what does it portend for the future of democracy in

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national identity we had thought we had settled—all appear to have been a bit rudely shaken later. Even our *alma mater* gradually began to lose its lustre, and sometimes its way.

There are various causes, and many excuses, that may be offered as explanations. But one of the biggest challenges which we did not understand, confront or defeat was corruption. It did not remain a set of discrete criminal acts; it gradually became a way of life that engulfed us,

## Tribal rights activist's death: A wake-up call for India



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

IN May this year, India's veteran tribal rights activist Stan Swamy had told the Bombay High Court—where he was being tried after being arrested under the stringent

anti-terror law Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, or UAPA, for his alleged links with Maoists—that he would die if "things were to go on this way".

How apocalyptic he was about himself! The frail 84-year-old, suffering from cancer, Parkinson's disease and post-Covid complications, finally lost the battle for life on July 5 while in judicial custody, where he had been since his arrest in October. His death came shortly before his appeal for bail on medical grounds was to be heard.

The Elgar Parishad case against Stan Swamy was related to inflammatory speeches allegedly made at a conclave held in Pune on December 31, 2017, which, police claimed, triggered violence the next day near a war memorial for tribals located on the outskirts of the western Maharashtra city. The state police claimed the conclave had been organised by people with alleged Maoist links.

Born "Stanislaus Lourduwamy" in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu in 1937, few people remember how his real name mutated into Stan Swamy while working for decades among the tribals in the remote areas of the eastern state of Jharkhand. Swamy studied theology and did a Master's in sociology at the University of Manila after joining the Jesuit order. Later, he studied at Brussels where he struck up a friendship with Archbishop Helder Camara, whose work among Brazil's poor influenced him.

While working among them, he took up the causes of tribals marginalised after their land had been taken over for construction of dams, mines and townships, often without their consent. He fought for the tribals'

constitutional rights, rights to land ownership and forest produce, labour and representation of the community members. He was equally vocal about the release of young tribals arrested by security agencies accusing them of being Maoists. He also founded an NGO for this cause. This may have made Stan an icon among the tribals, but it also made him a reviled figure among powerful political forces. When



People hold a banner during a prayer meet for 84-year-old Indian Christian priest and activist Stan Swamy, after he died in a hospital on July 5, 2021 while awaiting bail since his arrest in October last year.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Stan launched a movement for the enforcement of a Supreme Court order that said, "owner of the land is also the owner of sub-soil minerals," he earned the wrath of mining barons in mineral-rich Jharkhand.

India's top counter-terrorism body, the National Investigation Agency (NIA), had claimed its investigations had established that Stan was actively involved with the Maoists and that he was in touch with "conspirators" to further their activities. Besides, he was convenor of the Persecuted Prisoners Solidarity Committee (PPSC), which the authorities dubbed as a frontal organisation of the CPI (Maoist).

Even while denying his links with Maoists, Stan had reportedly said in a video before his arrest: "What is

happening to me is not something unique or happening to me alone. It is a broader process that is taking place all over the country. We all are aware how prominent intellectuals, lawyers, writers, poets, activists, student leaders are all put into jail because they have expressed their dissent or raised questions about the ruling powers of India." He said he was part of "the process" and in a way happy to be so,

The death of Stan Swamy has once again brought to the fore the issue of the pace of India's criminal jurisprudence. In the nearly nine months of his stay in jail till his death, the ailing activist repeatedly sought bail in the trial court and the High Court but nothing happened. Since the charge sheet in his case has already been filed, the question arises as to what purpose Stan's stay in detention would have served. After all, an octogenarian with such debilitating diseases could not have possibly tampered with evidence, threatened witnesses, or fled.

Stan's death also calls into question the handling of old, ailing accused in custody and underlines the importance of making special provisions for their release unless it is absolutely essential for investigation and justice delivery. When Stan's lawyers asked for a sipper and a straw for him in prison, as Parkinson's disease had made it impossible for him to drink water from a glass, the hearing on the plea was adjourned for three weeks. The Bombay High Court was yet to begin hearing the second of Swamy's bail pleas filed on merit. Some legal experts have called for broadening the definition of the term "custodial death," which is usually associated with the physical torture of undertrials in prisons by police or jail authorities.

Stan's death has also triggered a fresh debate about whether the Indian judiciary should be more sensitive and show greater urgency to the issue of liberty of citizens, particularly those with age and ailment issues, who have been arrested under tough laws relating to dissent. Not that there have not been examples where the judiciary put personal liberty on top. All rights activists welcomed the recent Delhi High Court order granting bail to three activists—Natasha Narwal, Devangana Kalita and Asif Tanha—who were arrested under the UAPA for their alleged role in agitations against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and north-east Delhi riots. Another development welcomed by the rights activists was the release of anti-CAA activist Akhil Gogoi in Assam. He too was arrested under the UAPA and

accused of having Maoist links.

The issue of prisoners languishing in jail without trial or due to slow pace of the trial is nothing new in India. The huge backlog of cases is a familiar story, and there is an urgent need for more courts and judges. This is where both the administration and the courts have to step in. While the administration should create the necessary infrastructure, the courts should expedite decisions on pending cases, including the important ones relating to constitutionality of the abrogation of Article 370 which conferred a special status to Jammu and Kashmir, the division of Jammu and Kashmir, the Citizenship Amendment Act, and the law relating to sedition which is often misused to curb free speech.

The issue of political dissent and civil liberty was also flagged by India's Chief Justice N.V. Ramana recently, when he spoke about an expansive idea of democracy beyond elections and political fault lines. His unambiguous message to those who seek to crush dissent or criticise policies could not have been timelier. It was encouraging to see Justice Ramana stressing the need for the judiciary to keep a check on "governmental power and action" by remaining independent of any control, direct or indirect, by the legislature and the executive.

However, what is also worrying is that every time court decisions uphold the executive policies or actions purely on legal merits, there is a tendency among a section of society to frown upon or at times slander the judiciary. The sole yardstick of an independent judiciary cannot be how many times it has gone along with or brought into question the policies or actions of the executive or the legislature. The uppermost criterion is whether these policies or actions are in conformity with the law and constitution of the land.

All in all, Stan Swamy's death served a wake-up call for India in terms of criminal jurisprudence, political dissent and civil liberty. It should take notice.

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