

# We must stand firm against threats to academic freedom

CR ABRAR, JYOTIRMOY BARUA and REZAUZ RAHMAN LENIN

**W**HAT is academic freedom? Why is academic freedom a necessary condition for educational institutions? What role should the education administrators play in ensuring academic freedom? What have been the experiences of academic institutions in Bangladesh, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic? These are some of the questions that were confronted by students and teachers of several academic institutions at a webinar recently organised by the human rights organisation Nagorik.

Given how crucial academic freedom is, we will present a brief summary of their observations below, with the expectation that it will lead to a greater awareness of this issue. Unesco defines academic freedom as "the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship, and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies."

However, in Bangladesh, there have been mounting incidents of faculty members of universities being sent on forced leave or leave without pay, being suspended and not being fairly assessed for research grants and scholarships, and being subjected to various forms of harassment and intimidation for expressing their opinions through articles and social media posts. Though, in most cases, the faculty members claimed they were just exercising their right to free speech, the authorities of the universities—instead of standing up for their academic freedom—exerted pressure on them to retract the opinions expressed. In a few instances, explanations or even expressions of regret did little to assuage those who claimed to have been "aggrieved." In several instances, the wrongfully treated faculty members secured relief by moving the High Court.

Over the years, instead of transforming into a space that promotes free thinking and pluralism through debate and discussion, university campuses appear to have become a hotbed of conservatism promoting and patronising particular narratives. This

perpetuates a condition in which academics feel hesitant to express freely and share and facilitate views on history, politics, society and culture, for fear of retribution from religious bigots on the one hand and intolerant partisan zealots on the other hand. Sharing of scientific research findings—including one on the likely scenario of the spread of Covid-19—also came under severe institutional assault, which forced the researchers to make amends.

Likewise, allegations are rife about partisan appointments of teachers, compromising the quality of teaching staff. There is a widely held perception that it is partisan loyalty, and not academic and administrative experiences, that

closure of academic institutions which, according to Unesco, was one of the longest in the world. While the decision to resume in-person classes was welcomed, concerns were expressed about the adequacy in making arrangements for the vaccination of students and staff members. The inability to lead a regular life with friends and peers might have contributed to the suicide of as many as 151 students of education institutions of various tiers.

During the pandemic, as students were unable to attend schools, the contingency arrangement to hold online classes particularly affected those who did not

irregular payment of salaries; on the other hand, many teachers were suspended. The extent of the hardship faced by teachers was amply reflected when a former teacher was forced to take up the position of a road cleaner to maintain bare subsistence in Bogura (Prothom Alo, August 10, 2021).

A primary school teacher stated at the webinar that local teachers enjoyed no breaks during the Covid-19 period, and had to attend schools regularly. He bemoaned that they had to perform a number of tasks, including making door-to-door visits, without any protective gear. Even pregnant and sick teachers were not relieved of the responsibility. This resulted in many teachers contracting the coronavirus. He stated that there was little scope for promotion of school teachers, and thus their salaries remained the same for as long as 10-15 years—until they moved to the next grade. "How can we survive on the same salary, when the prices of all essential commodities rise every year?" he asked. Lack of monitoring and accountability, and the absence of media reporting on the state of affairs in local schools and colleges, provide the administrators of those institutions near-complete impunity, the teacher said.

Overall, teachers faced a number of challenges and restrictions, including suspension. On May 7, the Ministry of Public Administration issued the revised "Social Media Usage Guidelines in Government Offices, 2019." Following that, staff members and students of Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (Kuet) were instructed to follow the guidelines, despite the fact that Kuet is an autonomous institution. Likewise, on May 2, the staff of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) were advised not to give any statement to the media without prior permission.

During the tenure of the immediate past vice-chancellor of a public university, 140 teachers and other staff members were recruited against 39 UGC-authorized posts. The absurdity of the process of selection was evident when 1,649 applicants for the position of laboratory assistants were interviewed over a period of two days. The high-handedness of the university administration was evident in a case where it selectively harassed a group of teachers after they expressed solidarity with students protesting against an increase of fees by 423 percent over a period of three years, and demanding rescinding of the rule that requires them to secure advance clearance

from the intriguingly titled DSA (Department of Student Affairs) before publishing any creative work (essays, poems, short stories, and the like) and pursuing any cultural interests such as playing flute, sitar or singing songs and reciting poems.

The Nagorik panellists deplored that, despite changes in the university administration, the "guest rooms" and the concomitant abuse of fresh students have continued to take place in Dhaka University for decades. This manifested that the administrators had essentially abdicated their moral, ethical, and administrative responsibilities in ensuring the well-being of students.

Arguing that conditions in academic institutions cannot be decoupled from the national reality, a faculty member of another public university stated how the university authority caters to the whims of the local political establishment. He claimed that teachers and students with dissenting views feel the "invisible presence" of actors monitoring their actions and words. Elaborating the point further, the representative of the University Teachers' Network stated that academic freedom and broader fundamental rights were inseparable, and spaces for both had shrunk over the years. While some university authorities take actions on dissenting students and teachers directly, others encourage groups affiliated with the administration to perform the task. Referring to Amartya Sen's advice to Dhaka University students that they should probe and think critically, the professor asked how that could be possible in campuses that are patently intolerant of diverse views, and in a country that uses the repressive Digital Security Act.

The webinar participants agreed that academic institutions played a crucial role in shaping the nation. Creating an enabling environment through fair recruitment and necessary administrative arrangements, and ensuring that teachers and students are able to freely express their views and challenge dominant ideas and narratives, are essential for academic freedom. Therefore, the onus rests on the administrators of academic establishments, and those at the helm of the state, to ensure that such conditions prevail in all educational institutions across Bangladesh.

CR Abrar is an academic, Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua is a Supreme Court advocate, and Rezaur Rahman Lenin is an academic activist.



Students and teachers should not have to be afraid of expressing their opinions.

PHOTO: STAR

counts for the selection of top administrators of universities nowadays. Merit and academic excellence are no longer the principal criteria for securing nominations for deanship or membership of syndicates, senates, or selection committees for faculty recruitment. Even recruitment and promotion of the faculty members often depend on political lineage and institutional affiliation. All these contribute to the lowering of the standard of academic excellence.

At the Nagorik webinar, the panellists expressed concerns about the long 61-week

own or have access to computers and smartphones. In addition, poor internet facilities and connectivity—especially in rural, haor, and hilly areas—put the students in a disadvantageous situation. Their inability to make up for classes (missed due to poor internet connection and other reasons) and to consult teachers and peers in person further compounded their problems.

The situation was particularly dire for the teachers of schools and colleges. On the one hand, teachers of many private institutions endured hardships due to non-payment or

# Buying of a football club, geopolitics and sportswashing



KAMAL AHMED

**T**HE takeover of Newcastle United, an ailing English club, by a consortium led by a Saudi-backed investment fund, has once again stoked a passionate debate on sportswashing. As a result of the approval of the buyout, the

struggling club has suddenly become the richest club in the world's richest football league, the English Premier League (EPL), where Newcastle currently ranks 19th out of 20 teams in the league's point table. The change of ownership, though largely welcomed by the fans of Newcastle, has prompted widespread criticism from human rights groups, and raised some critical geopolitical questions.

These supporters, who have been demanding the ouster of Mike Ashley, who bought the club in 2007 but has done little to lift it out of mediocrity, have celebrated the takeover and are now darning to dream of trophies after more than a decade. But the deal has enraged human rights defenders due to the appalling records of human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. The majority owner of the consortium, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), is providing 80 percent of the fund in the GBP 300 million deal. The PIF chairman is Mohammed bin Salman, the

crown prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, who has been accused of ordering the death of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which the kingdom's leader denies. A number of rights groups and Western intelligence agencies have directly implicated him in ordering the assassination of the dissident journalist. Prior to the takeover of the club, Khashoggi's fiancée Haticce Cengiz had also urged the Premier League not to allow the move to go through, citing the involvement of the crown prince in Khashoggi's murder.

There's further controversy surrounding the deal, as news reports suggest that the EPL's approval came after Saudi Arabia settled an alleged piracy dispute with Qatar-based broadcaster beIN Sports, which owns rights to show Premier League matches in the Middle East. It was reported earlier in the year that beIN Sports had asked the Premier League clubs to block the deal because of piracy concerns. This piracy dispute remained as an impediment to the Saudi takeover bid for quite some time. Quoting sources, BBC Sport reported that an agreement between the Premier League and the consortium was found prior to the news emerging on October 7 this year.

Concerns about ignoring issues related to human rights were raised around the same time. The UK-based human rights organisation Amnesty International wrote to the Premier League to express its disquiet over the purchase of the Magpies, asking its chief executive, Richard Masters, to scrutinise Saudi Arabia's

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human rights records as part of the Premier League's owners' and directors' test. According to Amnesty, the phrase "human rights" doesn't even appear in the owners' and directors' test of the Premier League, despite English football supposedly adhering to FIFA standards. It said, "As with Formula One, elite boxing, golf or tennis, an association with top-tier football is a very attractive means of rebranding a country or person with a tarnished reputation. The Premier League needs to better understand the dynamic of sportswashing and tighten its ownership rules."

Finally, on October 7, the Premier League concluded that "the Saudi PIF was separate from the state," and therefore it had allowed the takeover to pass its owners' and directors' test. It said that it had received sound legal advice about adhering to rules. But the

controversy drags on. The role of a sovereign state in another country's football league is bound to be under intense scrutiny.

The 19 other top-flight clubs have called for an emergency meeting this week. Media reports suggest that these clubs got united in opposition to the takeover of Newcastle and demanded to know whether any rules had been waived, and why they received so little notice. Despite these clubs' concern that the Premier League's brand could be damaged, it is too late to derail the takeover. Instead, with the arrival of a new set of billionaire owners, their immediate worry would be the prospect of pushing transfer fees and wages to new heights.

Supporters of the deal, however, argue that singling out football and the buying of Newcastle United by the Saudis is unfair as countries around the world continue all other trade and business activities with the kingdom. A BBC report says that the PIF has invested in some big names, such as Disney, Uber, Facebook, Starbucks, and pharmaceutical company Pfizer. Mark Middling, a senior lecturer of accounting at Northumbria University, who specialises in financial transparency in football, told *The Guardian*, "The UK still sells arms to Saudi Arabia and has business arrangements within the country. If you're going to trade with Saudi Arabia, to turn around and say they can't own one of our football clubs would be a bit hypocritical."

Amid this controversy, British Prime

Minister Boris Johnson had a telephone conversation with the Saudi crown prince on the upcoming G20 and COP26 on October 11. A press release issued by 10 Downing Street noted, "They also discussed the opportunities for further boosting trade and investment between the UK and Saudi Arabia, ahead of next week's Global Investment Summit in London. The prime minister welcomed the recent launch of a consultation on a UK-Gulf Cooperation Council Free Trade Agreement."

Rights groups like Amnesty have been arguing for quite some time that some countries are opting to invest in sports to divert attention from their poor human rights records. They know that owning a football club allows you to build a relationship with key stakeholders. The term "sportswashing" has been increasingly used in relation to the changing of ownerships of Manchester City and Paris Saint Germain by the UAE and Qatar, respectively, or Chelsea by Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich. A leading newspaper in Ireland, *The Irish Times*, cited a story about a match played three weeks ago between Manchester United and the Swiss club Young Boys of Bern, where the travelling fans unveiled a banner in the second half that read, "Beautiful Game." But immediately, the home fans unveiled a choreographed response, "Ugly Business."

Is football really becoming an ugly business?

Kamal Ahmed is an independent journalist. His Twitter handle is @ahmedka1

## QUOTABLE Quote

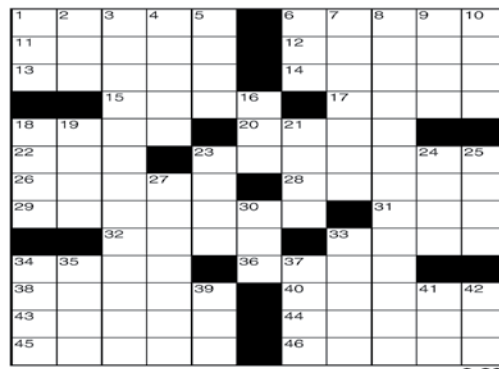


WILL DURANT (1885 - 1981) American writer

*To say nothing, especially when speaking, is half the art of diplomacy.*

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Appear unexpectedly
  - 6 Israel's Meir
  - 11 Plain silly
  - 12 Top players
  - 13 Time being
  - 14 Mailing need
  - 15 Make well
  - 17 Lofty poems
  - 18 Coup d'—
  - 20 Long ride
  - 22 Shaggy ox
  - 23 Tall grazer
  - 26 Kagan of the Supreme Court
  - 28 Surmise
  - 29 Pre-election events
  - 31 Hotel feature
  - 32 Prayer ender
  - 33 Train units
  - 34 Poker payment
  - 36 Blowgun ammo
  - 38 Words to live by
  - 40 Admit
  - 43 Tatum of "Paper Moon"
  - 44 Sung story
  - 45 Suit material
  - 46 Towel material
- DOWN**
- 1 Wrestling win
  - 2 Lennon's love
  - 3 Breakfast mix
  - 4 Free of censorship
  - 5 Jury member
  - 6 Empty talk
  - 7 Padded footstool
  - 8 First at the plate
  - 9 Titled woman
  - 10 Band boosters
  - 16 Yale rooter
  - 18 Took in
  - 19 Account
  - 21 Crocus cousin
  - 23 Airport area
  - 24 Dread
  - 25 Goes astray
  - 27 Convention ID
  - 30 Conclude
  - 33 Pancake's kin
  - 34 Novelist Oz
  - 35 Less than any
  - 37 Oodles
  - 39 Flamenco cry
  - 41 Bruins legend
  - 42 Dissenter's vote



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

G A P S B R A N D O  
 A R I A A U R O R A  
 N E L L S L I D E R  
 G A L O S H E S  
 P A G E R S N I D E  
 A L E T L I T  
 P O R T S T A L E S  
 A E S O P O N A  
 C A M E R A M E M O  
 E R O D E S I R O N  
 E M B O S S A S K S

## BETLE BAILEY



## BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES



## BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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