

The chaos in SUST demand change in the system



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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CAN the flapping of a butterfly's wings here cause a storm elsewhere? The vice chancellor of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST), who is experiencing a version of chaos theory, will tell you it sure can. Students of his university have come alive to participate in the "woke" culture, to take him off of a pedestal, and to "cancel" him over an alleged misdemeanour of one of his colleagues, who dismissed the grievances of her students allegedly in a derogatory manner. What started as a simple protest over the quality of food in a dormitory has now morphed into a fast-unto-death movement for the removal of the vice-chancellor.

It all began on January 13, 2022, when the resident students of Begum Sirajunnesa Chowdhury Hall requested their provost to come over to sample the meal. A host of other issues plaguing the dormitory was raised at the same time, including food offered in the nearby cafeteria at a lower price, Wi-Fi speed, lack of safe water, allowing guardians to attend their sick wards, cleanliness of toilets, and setting the number of students in each room. All fair demands, but they did not receive a sympathetic hearing. Students were provoked to storm out of their dorm, and they gathered in front of the VC's residence around eight in the wintry evening demanding immediate resignation of the provost. The VC reportedly came out at three in the morning, asking the students to return to their rooms and lodge a formal complaint during office hours. Fair enough, but why take so long to point out the obvious?

The next day, when the students met with the VC with a formal petition, he categorically told them that the issues raised would be solved within a month. The demand for the provost's resignation, however, was uncalled for, he said. Again, why give an instant verdict without formally investigating the events of the night before?

Protests grew as ordinary students demanded a change in the system. The students corralled the VC in one of the office buildings and blocked the main access road to the campus. The campus became paralysed. Sensing a shift in power, members of the pro-government student wing infiltrated the mob and tried to forcibly disperse the gathering. The surgical operation to remove the student growth not only failed, but also caused the toxicity to spread at a rapid pace. The provost in question resigned citing personal reasons—a move too late. The fulcrum has shifted, and the "woke" students now have one demand: "cancel" the VC.

Stranded in the office building for hours, the university administration probably called for police intervention. I say probably because no one is claiming credit for this decision, now that it has proven disastrous. And theoretically, as per the university ordinance, police cannot enter/act on campus without prior permission of the university authority.

The angry mob reacted to the police presence, and the armed force acted on "self-defence," charging batons, firing rubber bullets, and hurling sound grenades. The disproportionate use of force left many students injured and hospitalised. Force was applied when



restraints were required. The mighty uniformed force simply intensified the ongoing crisis. Scores of students started a hunger strike demanding unconditional resignation of the VC. They are not even willing to engage in any dialogue.

Prof Farid Uddin Ahmed, who was credited for bringing positive change to the academic culture of SUST in his first term, suddenly finds himself facing mass public shaming. Social media is rife with his academic deficiency of not having a PhD. He is facing public backlash after social media users unearthed sexist jokes he had allegedly made in the past. Referring to female students of Jahangirnagar University (JU) seen walking around the campus after dark, in an audio clip Prof Ahmed is heard saying, "Do you want to be like JU students whom no one wants to marry?" Not surprisingly, the JU Teachers' Association condemned the comment, and many others highlighted the liberal culture in which a female university student should thrive to become a productive citizen, and not necessarily a wedding product.

Things are not looking bright for Prof Ahmed as the protesters remain adamant on their one-point, fast-unto-death demand for his removal. The only silver line for him is that the government still thinks there is not enough ground to dismiss him vis-a-vis student agitation. The age-old formula of phasing out is now being tried. The public is keenly observing the stare game to see who blinks first. The trend so far: the government does not publicly yield to any external pressure that might create a precedence. Even the JU teachers who have signed the protest letter know it very well from their own experience of dealing with the vices of their VC.

If you review the sequence of events originating from a regular complaint, you will notice an absolute lack of professionalism among all concerned.

▲ **Refusing to back down or stop their hunger strike, the SUST students have only one goal now: having the VC removed.**

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

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I can say it with confidence as a former student of a public university who knows about the abysmal quality of food served in the dorms that allow different stakeholders to cash in from the surrounding cafeteria network. As a former journalist who had to observe various twists and turns of a brewing student agitation, I can see how things have unfurled out of control. As a university teacher, I can understand the thin line that separates the faculty members from the students, and the campus power dynamics that are never addressed. I can understand the frustration out of which a teacher can say, "We are not peasants or scumbags that students could speak to us in such abusive manners." No matter how politically incorrect she might sound in articulating her frustrations, the fact remains: the language of protest does not necessarily conform to any civility and polity. Students do use hurtful comments in the heat of the moment, which we are supposed to ignore. As a university administrator, I know how the SUST colleagues allowed the tension to simmer and reach its boiling point. As an ordinary citizen of Bangladesh, I know nothing is what it seems. Somehow, the Zen thinking is deeply ingrained in our culture where we are quick to see through layers.

The antibody against an "imported" VC, the local/non-local calculus in a regional campus, the untimely discourse on his academic qualifications, and the second term are all signature ingredients in teachers' politics. The muddy current in which the students are whirling will allow a deft angler to find his fish once the water is cleared. We are not strangers to such fishy intrigues. So, going forward, may I suggest the following:

1. Appoint vice-chancellors with impeccable academic and administrative track records, so that it

does not compromise the leadership of an institution. By the same token, politicisation and regionalism should not have anything to do with anointing an academic leader.

2. Establish the right protocol for a grievance policy: aggrieved students must know when and how to express their grievances. Insisting on a spot visit by the provost after her office hours is inappropriate. The same students who will join the workforce in a year or two will learn it the hard way. Why don't we introduce them to the ways of the world? Why don't we establish a line authority, where the cafeteria manager knows how to record the concerns of the students and raise the issue before the appropriate body? Then again, a provost must establish a rapport with the residential students to earn their confidence and cooperation. She cannot simply shoo her students away, saying, "What's the urgency? Is anyone dying? Go out if you want. Where will you go?" These are completely unprofessional remarks—the flapping of the butterfly wings—that caused the storm in the VC's office. Faculty members are not trained to become administrators. We expect them to perform administrative duties without any formal orientation.

3. The student wing of a political party must stop acting like a rescue operation unit for the administration. They are a student wing and should primarily work for the betterment of the campus culture.

4. An academic campus is a highly sensitive area where the armed forces must act and perform with utmost diligence and sensitivity. The armed guard itself acts as a sign of provocation. Police should have specially trained campus units to deal with student agitation.

We can all see how the butterfly is flapping its wings at SUST. We must try to discern what's causing the flapping, and why.

QUOTABLE Quote



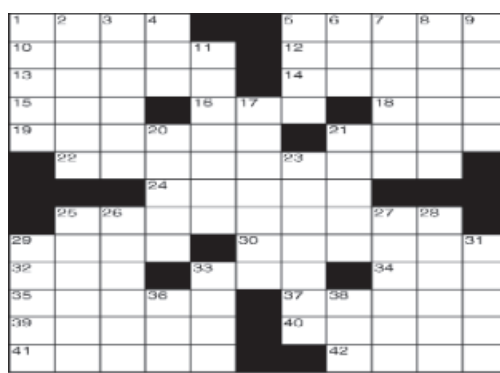
CARL SANDBURG

(1878 - 1967)
American poet

When a nation goes down, or a society perishes, one condition may always be found; they forgot where they came from. They lost sight of what had brought them along.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Grating sound
 - 5 Urges on
 - 10 Savory jelly
 - 12 Smithy sight
 - 13 Bounty captain
 - 14 Head out
 - 15 Oxygen: Prefix
 - 16 Greek vowel
 - 18 Summer shirt
 - 19 Puzzle
 - 21 Grade
 - 22 Mary Poppins's creator
 - 24 Prepared to fire
 - 25 Harry Potter's creator
 - 29 Pirate's take
 - 30 Uses
 - 32 Annoy
- DOWN**
- 1 Moroccan city
 - 2 Napping
 - 3 Helix shape
 - 4 Greedy one
 - 5 Big do
 - 6 Early hour
 - 7 Film set on
 - 8 Pandora
 - 8 Pearl harvesters
 - 9 Glossy
 - 11 "Ta-ta!"
 - 17 Streetcar line
 - 20 Kick off
 - 21 FCC's concern
 - 23 Soft and smooth
 - 25 Syria neighbor
 - 26 Indiana city
 - 27 Kidman of film
 - 28 Brilliant flashes
 - 29 Deceitful people
 - 31 Long tales
 - 33 Retreats
 - 36 Move up and down
 - 38 Deli choice



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



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