

CAMPUS IN TURMOIL

The playbook must change



Dr Manzoor Ahmed
is professor emeritus at
Brac University.

MANZOOR AHMED

A sadly familiar playbook has been on display once again at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST). Students have been on "fast-unto-death" in front of the vice-chancellor's residence. The threat of a looming tragedy prompted the education minister's personal intervention.

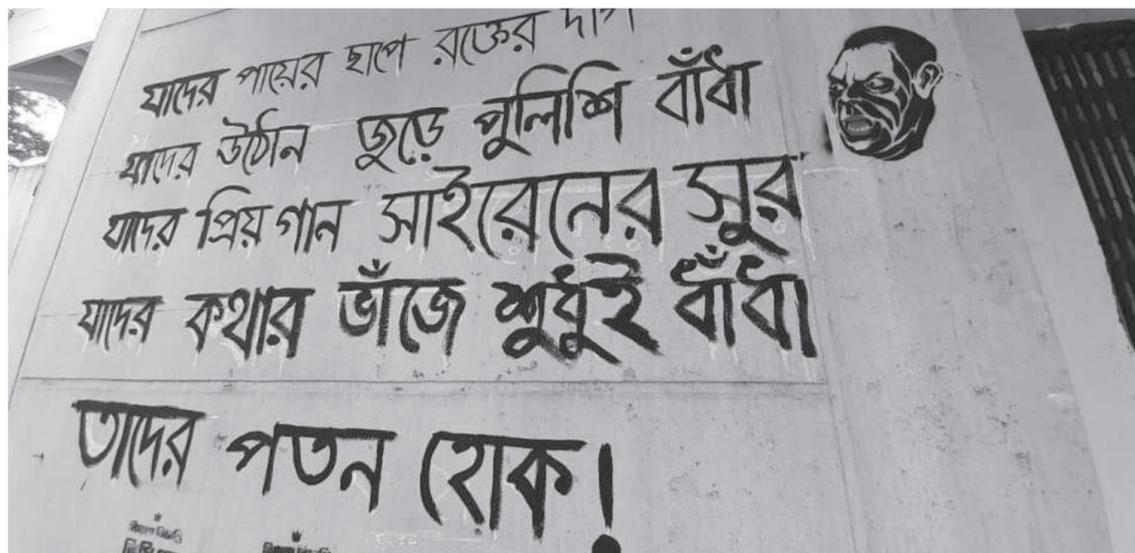
Through mediation by many, including the local ruling party politicians, this sad saga may come to a close. Unfortunately, this is not the end of the story; it can be predicted that there will be recurrences of the turmoil on this and other campuses. It does not bode well for higher education in Bangladesh.

The unrest leading to escalation and confrontation has hardly been an isolated incident. A familiar scenario has played out repeatedly on our university campuses in recent years. There is no dearth of reasons for students to complain about their life on campus—problems about academic issues,

allegedly subjected to mental torture by the ruling party's student front on control over hall management. At Kazi Nazrul Islam University in Trishal, Mymensingh, students engaged in "unruly" protests demanding the opening of the student dormitory.

It appears that the VCs in their second term are in a hurry to reap the fruits of their loyalty and pay back their benefactors, since they are unlikely to be renewed for a third term. There have been allegations of misconduct and corruption against five public university VCs whose term ended last year. The Rajshahi University VC, it is reported, signed ad hoc appointment letters for 141 faculty and staff, including his daughter and son-in-law, on his last day in office. He left campus under police protection facing protest. The UGC inquiry found him liable for many violations of rules.

Similar allegations of defying



room and board, safety and security, interaction with the administration, and general well-being. Complaints by students on any of these matters, unattended, unresolved, or met with insensitive response, become a flashpoint for all the accumulated grievances and turn into a conflagration.

Prof Zafar Iqbal, a popular former SUST teacher, wrote, "I have seen too often the steps played out in the student movement. The matter could have ended when the female students went to the vice-chancellor (VC) with their demands. I know that with a little expression of sincere sympathy, students making hard-line demands can be calmed. All they want is an assurance that someone is concerned about them, listening to them with empathy." (*Kaler Kantho*, January 22, 2022).

Students refused to cease their protest when their demand for urgent relief was met by the VC's assurance of looking into the problems within a month. Dormitories were closed and students were asked to vacate them, which many refused to do. Members of the student body loyal to the government as well as the university administration intimidated and assaulted the protesting students. Then the police were called in, which could happen only with the VC's consent, apparently to rescue him from a siege by students. All these were by the playbook for meeting student protests. But, according to news accounts, the police went too far this time, by firing shotgun pellets at students. The police and the authorities were lucky that no one was seriously hurt.

Unrest has flared on many campuses in recent years. There are a few depressingly common denominators in these incidences—VCs appointed as a reward for their loyalty to the ruling regime, ruling party-supported student activists used as musclemen to intimidate and even assault protesting students, and teachers involved in campus politics for personal gains with a faction of them patronised by the VC.

The SUST VC, Farid Uddin Ahmed, formerly of Dhaka University, is known for his faculty politics role in the Blue Faction (friendly to the regime) of the teachers' organisation. He is in his second four-year term, reappointed last year by the government.

Since the universities reopened after the long Covid-19 closure, disturbances have been witnessed in several public universities, arising apparently from mishandling of situations, which should not have arisen at all or should have been nipped in the bud. But each became a cause for major disturbance. At Rabindra University in Sirajganj, a proctor decided to punish students (by shaving their head) for their hairstyle she found unacceptable. A student hall provost at Khulna University of Engineering and Technology died,

procedures in appointing unqualified staff and faculty members, including relatives, and procurement and purchase irregularities have been levelled against the VCs of Khulna University, Bangladesh Open University, Bangladesh National University, and Jagannath University, who completed their second term last year (*Kaler Kantho*, January 22, 2022). There have been far too many of these misdemeanours reported in the media.

Why are the highest seats of learning in the country in such a disarray? It is lamented that none of our universities can make international rankings, and that universities don't pay attention to or spend on research. The international ranking criteria presumably don't measure levels of corruption and nepotism of university heads or selection of university heads, and their job tenure based on their political affiliation.

Discussing the state of higher education in a webinar held in London last year, Education Minister Dr Dipu Moni said being a reputed educationist was not a sufficient credential for a VC; the right person must have strong leadership qualities to be able to discharge many management and administrative responsibilities. I do not suggest that she is being ingenious, but surely a university head should provide leadership and command respect of peers both in academic and management spheres. I wonder how many of the heads of our public universities fulfil these requirements.

What should be done? We assume that a compromise will be reached to pacify the student protesters at SUST, taking them away from the street and back to their dormitories. But that, clearly, is not enough.

The obvious steps must include appointing VCs who are respected both for their academic credentials and proven administrative records. The reality is that all reasons for students' grievances cannot be eliminated, but procedures should be in place to handle these grievances with sensitivity and sympathy, so students can see that a good faith effort is being made. If armed law enforcers are required to be called in to quell student protests on campus, that should be a *prima facie* signal that the VC has lost the right to lead the institution.

There is one other critical step that is central to bringing about the essential transformation on campus, which requires a change in attitudes and values at the political level. This is to accept the idea that, ultimately, not much can be gained by maintaining a student front and teacher proxies to subdue and undermine all dissenting views—by any means. In fact, much is being lost and will continue to be lost unless this home truth is accepted.

Through this writing on the wall, the students of SUST have sent out a clear message for those in the administration.

PHOTO:
SHEIKH NASIR

Heroes in the time of pandemic



Shahnoor Wahid
is a senior journalist.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

LET us talk about the heroes of the pandemic. We want to remember those extraordinary men and women who have offered selfless services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, knowing very well that they could get infected by the deadly virus. Undaunted, they went to the front line and offered help to those suffering. They launched a war against an enemy, which was an invisible entity that could kill within hours. Interestingly, wars are fought to kill, but this war was fought to save lives.

Let us pause for a while and contemplate. These heroes were detached from their families, worked day and night against numerous odds, survived on morsels, slept for a few hours in crowded motels, and shared a room with colleagues. And yet, they set on the most noble of all missions: saving human lives. They were the present day Florence Nightingale. The entire world saw how these heroes ran with stretchers to the emergency wards with patients gasping for breath. They saw death by the dozens every hour.

Bangladesh also had its share of heroes during the pandemic. From the onset of Covid-19 in the early 2020, our healthcare heroes faced adverse situations like lack of knowledge about the virus, lack of essential information, clear directives from the health authorities, shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), oxygen, medicine, ICU beds, etc; yet, they ran from one floor to another in hospitals in search of essential supplies. They attended severely infected patients, and in the process got infected themselves.

We cannot mention the names of the Bangladeshi heroes, but it is not possible to collect all the names of those who were in the frontline. A good number of doctors fought on the front line, setting examples of personal sacrifices by treating severely infected patients with minimal support. They, in fact, went beyond the Hippocratic Oath to save lives, despite shortage of essential equipment, healthcare facilities and

unpreparedness of the health officials to deal with the crisis. These frontline doctors have helped many patients get cured and go home. But, at the same time, we sadly remember many of those medical heroes who could not make it to their own homes: many doctors, nurses and healthcare attendants lost their lives from contracting the coronavirus while on duty.

Besides the healthcare providers, heroes emerged from the general population, too. They formed small groups, raised money, bought essential ration items like rice, lentils, cooking oil and vegetables, and carried them to the doorsteps of the poor people who were under home quarantine. These brave young people cooked food and offered them to the workers walking towards their villages. Many of them bought oxygen cylinders and went to help patients waiting outside hospitals. Others offered free masks and water bottles to rickshaw pullers and day labourers. These are our heroes.

Alongside various individuals, many social clubs and voluntary organisations, corporate houses and banks also offered supplies and cooked food to the poor during the pandemic. We must not forget the services offered by the armed forces, the police and Rab during those gloomy days. It was indeed a unique example of human response to one of the deadliest crises in recent human history. We remember the heroes.

It has been said earlier that the healthcare providers worked against numerous odds in their fight to save lives. Some government studies say that the lack of knowledge about the nature of the virus, how it is transmitted, or the incubation period of Covid-19 came as obstacles every step of the way. Hospitals were not fully equipped to handle the emergency situations, especially the ventilator support system to treat severe acute respiratory syndrome. With the new variants spreading fast, we hope the hospital logistics will be in place and the frontline fighters will be supplied with the required PPE.

Healthcare providers have put their own lives at risk to take care of those in need throughout the pandemic.

FILE PHOTO:
STAR

Besides the healthcare providers, heroes emerged from the general population, too. They formed small groups, raised money, bought essential ration items like rice, lentils, cooking oil and vegetables, and carried them to the doorsteps of the poor people who were under home quarantine.



Bangladesh Industrial Technical Assistance Center (BITAC)
Ministry of Industries
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
116(kha), Tejgaon Industrial Area, Dhaka-1208.
Phone: 02-55030055, Fax: 8870728
E-mail: purchasedhaka@bitac.gov.bd, Website: <http://www.bitac.gov.bd>

Ref. No: 36.06.2692.026.37.002.21/231 Date: 10 Magh, 1428 Bn. 24 January, 2022 En.

e-Tender Notice (OTM)

Following tenders are invited in the National e-GP system portal (<https://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of goods details in the table.

| Tender ID No | Package No. | Description of Goods | Last Selling & Time | Closing Date & Time | Opening Date & time |
|--------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 652092 | BITAC.PUR. 2021-22 GR-76 | Procurement of Foundry Items. | 08-02-2022 05:00 pm | 09-02-2022 12:00 pm | 09-02-2022 12:00 pm |

This is an online tender where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit e-Tender, registration in the e-GP system portal (<https://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required.

The fees for downloading the e-Tender Documents from the National e-GP system portal have to be deposited online through any registered bank branches.

Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP system portal and from e-GP-helpdesk (helpdesk: <https://www.eprocure.gov.bd>).

The procurement entity reserves the right to accept or reject any or all tenders.

(Md. Mostafizur Rahman Pabel)
Purchase officer
BITAC, Dhaka
for Director General

GD-151