



Were we too quick to dismiss the efforts of student traffic volunteers?

PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

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In the aftermath of August 5, Dhaka's cacophony welcomed a new addition. At any given point, one could hear whistles and hurried discussions of young people directing cars, buses, rickshaws, and even pedestrians to maintain a functional flow of traffic amidst the pandemonium of the country.

However, one could also hear talks of dissatisfaction and general complaints, either in hushed tones or more vocal methods of expression. On social media platforms, the number of posts commending the students' efforts was slowly matched by gripes and critiques.

As of August 12, it has been announced that the police will return to their regular duties, which include traffic management. The announcement is followed by a huge sigh of collective relief, not only for the return of law enforcement but also for the students being relieved of their traffic management duties.

The public reception up until now begets the question: did we dismiss the efforts of the students too easily?

It should be acknowledged that the students who volunteered to engage in traffic control duties did so completely out of their own volition, meaning they were not paid or compensated in any capacity. In the wake of the former Prime Minister's resignation, there has been a stark lack of proper law enforcement.

Therefore, in alignment with the spirit of the Anti-Discrimination Movement, the students continued to be engaged in the events of the country. This echoes the sentiments of the 2018 Road Safety Movement, where students took to the streets in order to enforce the security that the country has been so desperately lacking.

Another aspect that must be emphasised is the fact that the volunteers are young students. They have had no training, formal or otherwise, in road management. Over the years, the roads of our country have almost become synonymous with lawlessness. Roadside accidents caused by reckless driving became a common occurrence, one without any real repercussions. So, the

students' attempts at bringing some semblance of order to the streets purely came from their own desires to make a net positive impact.

The students' efforts did indeed yield some pragmatism in the way traffic was handled. The volunteers devised a system where they would spell "check" differently each day to ensure that drivers can't reuse the same chit to bypass security checks. Lanes were cleared for ambulances, reminiscent of the 2018 movement, still in contrast to how common it is to hear stories of people suffering from the incredibly delayed emergency responses. Some of the traffic volunteers



Student volunteers on the road controlling traffic

even branched out their efforts in protecting nearby vulnerable spaces from vandalism and looting.

However, while the efforts are admirable, they are not without criticisms.

From the general public, a prominent complaint is how the students' methods of management are further contributing to the abysmal traffic conditions of the city. People undertaking long commutes have reported being stuck in traffic for hours, often citing that there is an unnecessarily large number of students standing in the middle of the streets, creating obstructions.

The attitudes of the students have been a point of contention as well. The general public, alongside bus

drivers, rickshaw pullers, and other vehicle operators have raised complaints about how some students have behaved harshly to enforce their management tactics.

The aforementioned complaints are valid, there have also been cases where the volunteers listened to the criticisms and internalised it, going so far as to correct their peers' behaviours if needed.

Additionally, the odds might have been stacked against the students since the very beginning. One can take a single look at a map of Dhaka and realise that infrastructurally, the streets of Dhaka are not designed to accommodate a lot of space for movement. Even if some of the main roads can handle a separate lane, the situation is completely different in the narrow streets that snake through most of the city.

Therefore, given the students' lack of training regarding traffic management in Dhaka combined with the confusing infrastructure of the city, the odds may have been against the students who took on the herculean task of traffic management. It can even be said that the students' perspective may have been more idealistic than practical in some cases.

But the focal point of the whole discourse should be that, at the end of the day, the volunteers are not out on the streets out of obligation, but of their own accord. These students have stood in the sweltering heat, oftentimes after conducting extensive night patrols. It is natural that one might get irritable when trying to handle the chaos that is Dhaka's traffic movement, especially in such a turbulent climate.

This isn't to say that the students should not face any criticism. The whole essence of the Anti-Discrimination Movement is to ensure that the masses can voice their concerns about the country, no matter how "small" the roles of the authority might be.

Having said that, the whole situation only further underscores how the volunteers should be given more opportunities to actively participate in civic duties as a commonplace activity, not as a last resort to maintain peace. The youth have proven their capabilities to bring forth progress time and time again. It's only fair that we give them the space to do so.