

REVOLUTION AND EDUCATION

# Some thoughts on the 'political' in universities

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Much has changed since the all-out protests began in mid-July, galvanising an entire nation, from aggrieved mothers to despondent rickshaw pullers, to bring down a 15-year-old authoritarian regime. It was indeed people's power and it was infectious. The movement mobilised not only street agitation and online activism—forms of protest we are already familiar with—but also an unprecedented array of civic actions. While in the fervour of the moment when old binaries of young and old, right and left, and secularists and religionists converged, it seems urgent to consider how these convergences may play out in the transformation that is being called for.

At this moment, all eyes are on the interim government. The need to restore law and order, stabilise and grow the economy, and institute a robust political system and culture that do not fail again makes the tasks complex and onerous for the new government. How will the country recoup, regroup and rebuild? Eventually, when the country emerges from the transitory interim phase to a democratically elected one, will all that the revolution called for in spirit prevail in structures? How will inclusion be defined and what kinds of processes will ensure it? Experts will need to work out how the current phase and its policies are emboldened to achieve this desirable end.

Many are already talking about constitutional changes and mechanisms such as truth and reconciliation that might provide a means to political rectification. We may also look at the Arab Spring which sociology professor Asef Bayat refers to as "refolution"—a term referring to a phenomenon which resulted in neither revolution, nor reform—to draw lessons from and work towards the required redistributive justice to make the transformation meaningful. While experts work on the state apparatus, economy and political mechanisms, society also has a role to play. As a part of civil society, universities may play their part in this transition as universities

are the very sites where it all began.

Universities have long provided fertile grounds for student protests that have also taken on autocratic regimes in the past. However, public universities carry deep political fractures polarising both student and faculty bodies. They are now confronted with reform within and between students, faculty, and overall institutional governance. Private universities have been relatively free of

were a decade ago. The trickle-down effect of the neoliberal economy has enabled a broader class to invest in better education. Additionally, there is a generational shift towards prioritising higher spending on education. This diversity in class composition is equally reflected in differing opinions and stances on a variety of issues ranging from gender, religion, history and national identity. The fact that distinct groups have not yet

Universities that thrived on factional student politics need to ensure that the capital and collective energy do not fall into old structures and patterns of behaviour.

Whether public universities will ban politics altogether and how this will affect any possibility of its return later require careful thought and execution. Private universities, where national politics through student groups was not allowed,

collaborative action in many spheres of life, including engaging higher authorities with reason and purpose. It is this form of engagement that paves the way for societal changes. Universities that have responded appropriately to students' justified demands and universities that have formal or informal mechanisms of standing by students' rights to protest, are well placed to deepen their channels of student engagement in order to cultivate their collective and creative energy.

Last but not least, the classroom is of essence. Paolo Freire in *Pedagogies of the Oppressed* spoke of education as the seed for societal change, highlighting pedagogies in classrooms as the place to start. Freire argues that education must be redone to move away from a banking mode, where wisdom is deposited from teacher to student, to one where learning is born out of students being allowed to think outside the box. In this framework, the classroom is a place where "wisdom" is co-created and both teacher and student learn and teach each other new things. Enlivening a classroom with present-day realities, engaging students to think about them collectively, and allowing them the space to express their aspirations while guiding them through the ethical import of their thinking are how we retain the relevance of Freire today. As educators, we firmly believe that when such approaches to education are pursued, they provide the basis for healthy, inclusive societal change, and many students in this movement are surely richer for having received such an education.

As the country emerges from the revolution to rebuild, universities must deepen some of the good work they have done and rethink what has not worked. We have seen that students are capable of teaching themselves many things, including bringing down a regime. They must constantly remember what brought them together across many divides, including the public-private one, in order to arrive at the kernel and essence of this new politics. As the dust settles, universities must come forward with students to enunciate the new political and effective pathways to achieve its objectives. Students need university classrooms as much as classrooms need the students. We must embrace this relationship and do it through mutual respect so that our students remain the life force of the nation. It is urgent that we, as teachers and students, get back to our calling in education as co-learners towards the continued and arduous task of nation-building.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

deep political factionalism, partly by design. In recent years, they have resisted pressures to introduce student politics with the stated intent that students remain focused on academics. While this confirmed for many that private university students are placidly apolitical, their involvement in recent events proved otherwise. In fact, their participation in the July movement—propelled by their participation in earlier movements such as the 2015 No Vat on Education protests and the 2018 road safety movement—allow us to reconsider whether the old binaries of public and private hold anymore.

Private universities are now much more diverse in class composition than they

coalesced around these important issues has been a boon for the movement. The coming together to depose an autocratic regime could, therefore, not be prevented by the strength of or competition between distinct groups.

Such a position that is driven neither by discrete ideology nor through any particular party patronage has lived up to its potential of galvanising a nationwide movement. It is now imperative to wrestle with the challenges posed by the need to enunciate the new "political" in the nation and elsewhere. An important part of this wrestling lies in the recognition of the social capital formed through the coming together of students.

may strengthen some of the ways in which they have already been nurturing students' growth and promoting student-centricity. Students rising to the call of post-revolution clean-up and maintenance demonstrate civic engagement that universities who actively promote it can further harness. Embedding civic engagement into the curriculum and establishing university-wide networks that bring students together for the common good would be an excellent way to protect some of the social capital accrued from this movement.

As students engage societal problems and work collectively to address them, they learn by doing and preparing for

## Universities must prepare for the transition of students



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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In a recent circular, the education ministry asked all educational institutions to reopen and resume their activities. It is a curious call, to say the least, as all academic institutions have been technically open following the ISPR statement issued on August 5, the historic day of regime change. The resumption of classes, however, is a different ball game.

The traumatic memories of losing hundreds of lives due to unprecedented police brutality are still fresh in the public imagination. The resignation or forced removal of many institutional heads, including 19 vice-chancellors of public universities, has created a vacuum in academic leadership, further complicating the situation.

The challenges of reopening academic institutions, therefore, extend beyond simply unlocking their doors. While talking to our students, it was obvious that many of them are experiencing severe stress. Their mental state is a mix of grief, pride, and revolutionary zeal, which makes it difficult for them to return to any academic routine. While some are upbeat about the national duty that they have embraced to bring structural change to the system, many others have developed anxiety, depression or PTSD, requiring psychiatric help before they can effectively engage in their studies. Some of them are recovering from their injuries or undergoing medical treatment. There is also a growing tension between revolution supporters and former collaborators or supporters of the old administration, which has created mistrust and conflict among students. For example, the regular students who have returned to the dormitories of the public universities are adamant about resisting any

entry by their opponents.

The lack of leadership and the ongoing purges among staff and students are also not helpful in restoring normalcy. The makeshift administration can bring necessary modifications to academic schedules and lesson plans, but these could have long-term repercussions on students' academic and professional futures. No one knows how to undertake essential activities such as exam administration, curriculum



The students who led the charge for change have made an extraordinary contribution to our nation.

FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

planning, and the maintenance of academic standards, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability. Private university students in a strict semester-based paid system may now face a graduation delay. The economic disruption may handicap many of the students from paying their fees and living expenses. It is possible that many public universities will see the return of session jams.

Those preparing for critical public or international exams such as HSC, O Levels and A Levels face additional pressure to meet deadlines.

The primary challenge lies in a mindset shift, however. Students seem unwilling to withdraw from public service or associated visibility. Their revolutionary achievements, such as graffiti, traffic control, and street-cleaning, are garnering significant media attention. Their resistance to the resumption of classes may stem from a supposed compromise with their revolutionary drive. Perhaps they fear that their withdrawal at this stage may leave their calls for change incomplete, and some old politicians could return with vengeance. The environment is polarising. Reopening educational services will require a sophisticated strategy that prioritises rebuilding leadership, providing psychological

can regain a sense of normalcy, purpose, and direction. Students can critically reflect on their actions and activism during these counselling sessions to renew their sense of purpose.

It will require a lot of tact for us to deal with the students, who were previously known to be generally apolitical but are now politically charged. Their desire for "cleansing" operations targeting peers and faculty members believed to be complicit with the previous regime will require deft and professional handling. This is a delicate topic, and institutions must inform their staff to deal with the atmosphere of distrust and retribution. If needed, the University Grants Commission (UGC) or other teachers' associations can organise workshops on creating a congenial educational environment where unity and mutual respect are essential. Faculty members, too, must approach students with understanding and patience, recognising the immense stress and trauma they have experienced. Faculties should adjust academic expectations to accommodate the students' current emotional state, and provide guidance and mentorship to help them navigate this challenging transition.

To support students effectively, educational institutions must implement trauma-informed teaching practices and provide resources to help students heal and succeed. Creating safe spaces on campus for open dialogue and fostering understanding among students is crucial. If needed, universities should also establish partnerships with their alumni bodies and social organisations to provide additional support services, such as housing, food security, and legal assistance. Some of the universities have already named some of their installations after the martyred students or held memorial services to begin the healing process.

Students have done their part in bringing a positive change. The onus is now on us to channel the revolutionary zeal that fuelled the protests into constructive efforts to build a more inclusive and tolerant

academic community. The students' ability to foster reconciliation and solidarity in the aftermath of removing a tyrant will measure the true victory of their movement. This is the time to set aside differences and work together to ensure that institutions can resume their vital role in shaping the future leaders of our nation.

Reopening universities is not just about resuming academic activities, but about rebuilding them as centres of learning, healing, and unity. As members of the

academic community, we must rise to the challenge of rebuilding our institutions with the same courage and determination that fuelled the revolution. The students who led the charge for change have already made an extraordinary contribution to our nation. They must now return to classroom to continue their activism, not retreat from it. By resuming their studies, students will equip themselves with the knowledge and skills necessary to guide our country into a new era of justice and prosperity.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

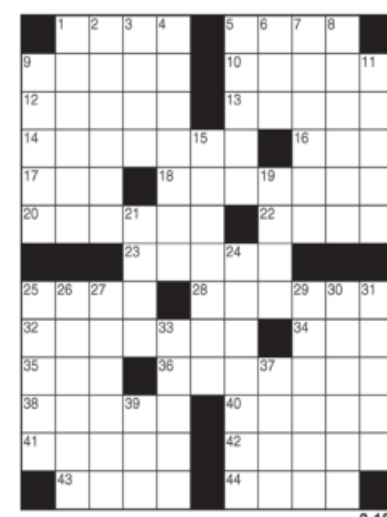
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7 Luke's father

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- 21 Fail to fail
- 24 Set to wed
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- 26 Book buyer
- 27 Mason of movies
- 29 Take to the sky
- 30 Caretaker
- 31 Raring to go
- 33 "You don't say!"
- 37 Simple cart
- 39 Stirrup setting



AUGUST 3 ANSWERS



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