

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

We can't have same old politics on campus

Reforming the culture of student politics is crucial

A recent *Prothom Alo* survey—where 93 percent of respondents, or over 326,000 people, supported banning student politics—reflects widespread frustration and disillusionment with the current culture of student politics in Bangladesh. This overwhelming sentiment cannot be dismissed lightly. For far too long, student wings of political parties have exercised unchecked control over university campuses, often resorting to violence, intimidation, and coercion to maintain their dominance. In particular, the crimes and abuses committed by Chhatra League over the last 15 years have understandably led many to conclude that banning student politics altogether is the only solution.

However, the manner in which such surveys are framed misses the critical point that it's not student politics per se—but rather party-based student politics—that is problematic. Unfortunately, much of the discussion and reaction revolving around this issue seems to stem from this faulty premise. The decision of the 19 public educational institutions including 11 universities and six medical colleges that have recently prohibited student politics, with 13 of them simultaneously banning politics for teachers and staff, is also based on this premise. "Ban student politics" has become a rallying cry since the fall of the Awami regime on August 5.

However, we must also recognise the vital role that student politics, when properly structured and purpose-driven, can play in representing student interests and addressing legitimate grievances within our educational institutions. The very uprising that ousted the Awami League government owes to the leadership of largely nonpartisan but politically conscious students. Among them were also students tied to rival political parties, many of whom sacrificed their lives. But they left behind their political identity when they joined hands with other students for a cause that unified the whole nation.

The history of student politics in Bangladesh is replete with such glorious moments transcending party lines. Students being exploited by political parties to do their bidding form the other stream of this history, and it is this stream that needs to be rectified. Interestingly, we don't even need a new law or ordinance for that. The Representation of the People Order (RPO) already prohibits political parties from having any affiliated student or teacher organisations. However, we have seen how political parties bypassed this law on technicalities, with Awami League calling Chhatra League a "brotherly organisation", and BNP calling Chhatra Dal an "associate organisation" with its own constitution. Preventing such manipulations can put an end to the culture of party-based politics on campuses, and this is where we should focus.

The rights of students or teachers to engage in political activities are inalienable, but they can do so on their own time and outside the campus. But pursuing their political rights or agenda at the expense of general students and teachers is unacceptable. Clearly, there is a fine line to balance here. So instead of banning student politics altogether, university administrations should ban party-based politics, activate and empower student unions to better protect their interests, and ensure academic and intellectual freedoms so that our students can grow to be the leaders we need. Political influences in teacher recruitment, dormitory seat distribution, and other relevant areas also must stop. No party should be given the chance to exploit our universities again.

Health sector needs urgent healing

Govt must focus on purging partisan influences

A *Prothom Alo* report on the politicisation of the public health sector portrays a grim picture of how far the rot has spread. The report details how partisanship has pervaded the sector—from medical academia to healthcare services to projects under the health ministry—ensuring absolute dominance of the erstwhile ruling party. But Awami League was not the only one to have spread its tentacles; BNP also did the same while in power, and it seems the party is trying to do it again after the fall of the former.

Reportedly, after forming government in 2009, Awami League and its affiliates placed loyal officials in various health-related institutions. One example is the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), where five consecutive vice chancellors appointed since 2009 have either been a member of pro-AL Swadhinata Chikitsak Parishad (Swachip) or directly involved with AL politics. The same goes for pro-VCs, proctors and others in top positions. Political recruitments were also seen at 37 other public medical colleges. Elsewhere, at the 495 upazila health complexes, only officials loyal to AL were appointed as upazila health officers. Thus, loyalists were favoured in leadership positions at every level of the public healthcare sector—from the grassroots to the top—whether they were qualified or not. In the process, AL deprived anyone with suspected links to BNP and even deserving nonpartisan candidates.

During BNP's rule in 2001-2006, it was the pro-BNP Doctors Association of Bangladesh (DAB) that dominated public sector recruitments, choosing party loyalists in important positions, and thus depriving those even remotely affiliated with AL and its politics. During the times of both regimes, those who were not affiliated with either party or their politics have suffered, and the lack of competent leadership eventually plunged the sector into an unprecedented crisis.

In the aftermath of Sheikh Hasina's fall, it seems BNP is focused on repeating the same cycle. As many as 173 doctors who were recruited in BNP's time, and deprived of promotions throughout the AL rule, were all promoted in one day—on August 8. The *Prothom Alo* report suggests that the spate of promotions is still going on. Frustrated DAB members are cornering relevant authorities, staging protests in various medical institutions, and in some cases even vandalising public hospitals.

We understand the frustration of pro-BNP doctors and medical professionals, but their attempt to forcefully claim what they think they deserve cannot be acceptable. Political partisanship is one of the root causes behind the ailing public health sector, and it's time to do away with it. Otherwise, much-needed reforms in the sector will continue to elude us. To restore discipline in this vital sector, we urge the interim government to be strict and judicious about all appointments and promotions. Only those who are qualified and deserving should get preference.

What the interim government needs to do urgently



Anu Muhammad
is former professor of economics of
Jahangirnagar University.

ANU MUHAMMAD

After 15 years of autocratic rule and authoritarian economic policymaking, the time has come for significant societal reform through conscious youth leadership and public participation. Such a possibility was created once in 1972 and again in 1990. We could not realise either of those two opportunities because of the betrayal and hypocrisy of the big political parties. Instead, we saw them consolidate their wealth and create a new political class.

It is important that we remember the failings of the past, so that we do not replicate them moving forward. Now, there is an interim government—we know its limitations but we must also keep in mind its primary responsibilities. This government came to power through a mass uprising, so it has public support and responsibility to initiate some major reforms that other governments did not. Let's consider some of the things this government can do in the next one or two months.

First and foremost, inquiry committees should be formed to investigate the unprecedented number of killings and acts of repression that we have witnessed. The responsible persons, organisations, and policies that enabled these actions should be brought to justice and amended through a special tribunal. An example must be set so that this sort of mass killing can never happen again in Bangladesh.

Massive corruption, bad deals, bank robberies, loan defaults, and over-expenditures in megaprojects have been commonplace in the last 15 years. The government should publish a white paper and make public all the deals, contracts and excesses of the previous regime. The next duty would be to analyse the large amount of loans incurred—Bangladesh has never had such high levels of foreign loans. The people of Bangladesh are yet to fully realise the steep amount they will need to repay as a result of these incredibly expensive contracts, since the deals were never made public. Moving forward, we must demand full disclosure of each loan or contract signed by our government, as the burden for paying them will fall on us.

Then there are the megaprojects, which have been touted as the

achievements of the government; yet many of them are actually disastrous, unreliable, and risk-prone, threatening the security of the country. It is essential for this government to review these megaprojects. One of the most prominent ones is the Rampal project which has the potential to destroy the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world that also acts as a protective barrier against natural disasters. Enough national and international research has been conducted by experts clearly highlighting the dangerous impact of these projects. Moreover, there has been a decade-long people's movement against this project with support being attained from every section of society.

There is also the Rooppur Nuclear



The energy sector has become an area of large-scale corruption in Bangladesh.

VISUAL: STAR

Power Plant, which poses an existential threat. It is unusual to find a nuclear power plant in such a densely populated place filled with forests and rivers. If the risk of such a nuclear plant were ever to become a reality, the lives of tens of millions of people would be endangered. Even the nuclear waste management system of a project like this would put the country at risk.

The decision is clear: projects like Rampal, Rooppur, and Bashkhal are cancelled. The interim government can initiate the process of doing so. Now, a question may arise: Since we have already taken loans for these

projects and spent such an exorbitant amount of money, won't this be a massive financial loss to not continue? My answer is this: if a government, without the consent of its people, takes a loan that is against their well-being, it is not the people's responsibility to repay that loan. It is a case of odious debt, a legal doctrine explaining this very phenomenon. However, should we not receive that exemption and have to repay the loan, I would still argue that cancelling such projects would be more beneficial than going ahead with them in the long run.

The energy sector has become an area of large-scale corruption in Bangladesh. In the name of capacity charges, some companies receive hundred thousand crores of taka. Previously, the prime minister was in charge of this ministry, along with the state minister, aided by some local and international private companies. The companies that benefitted from unethical arrangements included well-known names such as Summit, Beximco, Bashundhara, United and many others in Bangladesh; in India, it consisted of NTPC, Adani, and Ambani; in Russia, it was Rosatom and Gazprom; in the US, the organisations were

environment. We can achieve this by developing Bangladesh's capacity in natural gas exploration and by pushing for renewable energy. The interim government must initiate this journey.

Next, we have to prioritise the major but neglected sectors crucial for public well-being which include public education, public healthcare, and public transportation. For far too

The entire power and energy policy needs to be revised. The Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply Act must be repealed immediately. Right now, we are running on a master plan made entirely by foreign consultants. We have to reject this and cancel all the environmentally disastrous, import-oriented, foreign-funded projects and opt for environmentally friendly, safe, non-corrupt projects.

long, we've seen low budget allocation and high irregularities in these sectors. Meanwhile, public transportation remains under the auspices of corrupt business owners. Should the spirit of the 2018 Road Safety movement be revived, and the demands made then be fulfilled now, the public transport sector can be greatly rectified. After independence, great emphasis had been placed on education and health; yet we have backtracked completely. Every government has failed in this regard. If the current government focuses on fixing these sectors, their credibility will increase, and based on this, stronger institutions may be developed.

The conversation of reforming the constitution should also start. We need to figure out how the constitution has become exceedingly discriminatory, autocratic, and anti-people. How was power taken from the people? Why does the prime minister hold so much power in one hand? The constitution includes clauses for gender, class, ethnic and religious inclusion and also includes clauses against all sorts of discrimination. Yet, these promises have not been fulfilled due to opposite clauses in the same constitution.

Finally, along with institutional reforms for sustainable democracy, the VIP culture must be eradicated. Public offices should transform to serve the public without hassle. There must be accountability and transparency for all actions taken by government offices.

Understanding the auto-pass trap



Maisha Islam Monamee
is a student of Institute of Business
Administration (IBA) at the University of
Dhaka and a contributor at The Daily Star.

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

When the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exams were cancelled in the face of intense student protests, it seemed like a swift and empathetic solution to an urgent crisis. After all, the protests were marked by significant trauma and loss, and many students were left physically and emotionally scarred. On the surface, offering an automatic pass might appear to be a compassionate acknowledgement of their struggles. Moreover, the decision aligns with the desire to avoid exacerbating the students' stress and discomfort. However, as someone who experienced the "auto-pass" phenomenon firsthand during the pandemic, I can attest that such decisions are rarely as simple as they seem. The "auto-pass" trap—though it may provide immediate relief—carries hidden costs and long-term consequences.

To begin with, a major drawback of the auto-pass system is its potential to undermine the academic integrity of the examination process. HSC exams are designed to assess students' knowledge and preparedness at a critical juncture of their academic journey. By cancelling these exams and relying on past results or alternate assessments, we risk diluting the standards that make the HSC a meaningful benchmark. Another critical concern is the issue of fairness.

Using SSC results as a stand-in for HSC exams feels like being measured by a ruler that is too short for the task. The HSC exams are meant to challenge students at a higher level, reflecting their progression and readiness for higher education. By bypassing these exams, we risk creating an inequitable situation where some students are unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged based on their past performance.

Quick fixes rarely lead to lasting solutions, especially when it comes to education. The auto-pass decision sets a concerning precedent for how crises are managed in our education system. While student voices are crucial and must be heard, decisions impacting large numbers of individuals should be made based on comprehensive consideration and long-term implications, rather than immediate pressure.

There must be students who have prepared diligently for their exams, especially those who previously struggled and hoped to improve their grades. The auto-pass system overlooks their hard work and sacrifices. This not only impacts their academic journey, but also their sense of achievement and self-worth. I have many friends from the 2020 HSC batch who were unable to apply for admission tests due to average grades. Some of them had to

take a gap year before applying abroad, while my English-medium peers opted for the next session of A Levels.

The "auto-pass" label can also have a lingering impact on students' futures. The tag sticks for longer than one would think—through university applications, job interviews, and even casual conversations. It might imply to others that these students did not earn their qualifications through traditional means, potentially leading to doubts about their capabilities. The social and psychological impact of this stigma can be significant, affecting their self-esteem and how they are perceived by peers and potential employers.

Moreover, we need to acknowledge the fact that the protests leading up to the cancellation of the exams were far from orderly, and the decision to cancel the exams under the pressure of a mob-

immediate demands of a vocal group can sometimes overshadow a more balanced and considered approach. Decisions like these should be made through representative discourse and after consideration of all sides.

Instead of opting for a blanket auto-pass policy, several alternative approaches could have been taken to balance compassion with fairness. For instance, providing special provisions for students who were directly affected by the protests—those who were injured or deeply traumatised—could have been one solution. These students could have been given the option to take their exams later when they were ready to perform at their best. Alternatively, implementing modified assessment methods could have provided flexibility for students facing exceptional circumstances. For example, offering project-based evaluations or oral exams could have allowed students to demonstrate their knowledge in a different format. The authorities could have also prioritised mental health support and counselling for the affected students to help them cope with their trauma and stress.

Quick fixes rarely lead to lasting solutions, especially when it comes to education. The auto-pass decision sets a concerning precedent for how crises are managed in our education system. While student voices are crucial and must be heard, decisions impacting large numbers of individuals should be made based on comprehensive consideration and long-term implications, rather than immediate pressure. As students, we deserve a system that values our hard work and gives us the chance to prove ourselves in a level playing field. Anything less is a disservice to us all.