

Stop political capture of public sector

Reports on BNP-linked groups' activities deeply alarming

The culture of patronage politics that has devastated our nation over the past decades—fostering corruption, undermining meritocracy, and weakening institutions—begins at grassroots with the capture of public contracts and extortion by political thugs. And this is what seems to be happening again, with the regime change only replacing the thugs. Over the past two-three weeks, we've had a number of reports on how BNP-linked leaders, civil servants, and professional groups have been trying to establish control in various sectors. This suggests that patronage politics may continue to be around even after a political government returns to power, leading eventually to regulatory capture by vested interest groups, unless reforms are undertaken to prevent it.

The latest example has its setting in Nagar Bhaban, which houses the headquarters of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC). According to a report by Prothom Alo, BNP-affiliated activists and employees have been trying to establish their dominance through a mix of showdowns, intimidation, assaults, and even extortion, creating a tense atmosphere there. They have their eyes on proceeds and contracts/leasing from various public works, projects, and markets run under the DSCC. Recently, a contractor's representative was beaten over the submission of a tender. Five high-ranking officials were also harassed, and one even beaten publicly. Promotions and placements are also being controlled.

Prothom Alo has earlier reported how BNP-linked individuals forcibly took control of the Shimulia ferry terminal, fish market, and trawler docks in Munshiganj's Louhajanj upazila by allegedly threatening and assaulting legitimate leaseholders. They have established a lucrative extortion racket there, collecting hundreds of thousands of taka daily. We have heard of a similar capture of many other terminals and markets, transport hubs and associations, footpaths, slums, and such public spaces that were previously controlled by or leased out to Awami League-linked leaders.

The question is, what is BNP doing about it? Officially, the party remains committed to preventing such exploitations. Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman on Thursday issued a warning saying that there is no place for criminals and miscreants in the party. Another top leader has been more specific, vowing stern consequences for those indulging in extortion and illegal capture of the public sector. But hardly anything has come of these warnings yet. This means at least two things: either this message is not being delivered strongly enough to grassroots leaders and activities, through swift punitive actions to convey the seriousness of the message, or the party, beyond public condemnations, is still not serious enough about it.

Both scenarios are equally concerning. We urge the BNP leadership to take action matching its strong words. It must prevent its grassroots leaders, professional groups or anyone exploiting its name to establish dominance through exemplary punishment. As the leading party in the country now, BNP has a duty to not just support but also actively take part in the reforms being envisioned by the students and people that toppled the Awami League government. It must help do away with the political culture of yesteryears that has brought nothing but misery for the country. However, we also need institutional reforms to dismantle this entrenched culture, and for that, comprehensive actions from the interim government are essential.

Are we ignoring the dengue threat?

Proper action needed from city corporations, health authorities

After the student-led mass uprising toppled the Awami League government, there have been so many issues jostling for our attention that the danger of dengue during a rainy season got pushed to the background. Our dengue control measures have never been adequate. One additional challenge this time has been the leadership chaos within city corporations and municipalities making it difficult to do their jobs, including dengue control. According to the DGHS, 79 people have died and 12,343 have been infected from January 1 to August 29. Reportedly, hundreds of patients are getting admitted to hospitals across the country every day. This calls for proper interventions from the authorities.

The governance issues within the city corporations may complicate efforts, however. Although the administration has installed CEOs with full administrative and financial power to run the 12 city corporations, replacing the mayors, we have seen how the crisis of councillors is delaying or disrupting their activities. In Dhaka, where 66 out of 75 ward councillors in the south and 11 out of 54 councillors in the north have been reported absent or missing, the provision of 14 mandated services and important activities like sanitation and mosquito control are being hampered. Without effective coordination in the grassroots, any drive to prevent the spread of dengue may not be successful.

The dengue issue has acquired some urgency after heavy downpours and flooding in recent weeks. The flood has affected some 73 upazilas across 11 districts, including crowded municipal areas. Floodwaters have begun to recede now, leaving behind garbage scattered everywhere, which will require a clean-up. This along with waterlogging caused by continued rains in many parts of the country are reasons enough to worry about potential outbreaks of diseases, including mosquito-borne ones like dengue. This must not be taken lightly, especially after last year which went on to witness the deadliest dengue outbreak in the country's history. A total of 1,705 dengue-related deaths and 321,179 cases were reported in 2023. This was largely due to the inadequate and often unscientific measures taken by the authorities. We don't yet have a vector control policy; the insecticides sprayed are also of questionable quality. In addition, inclusive data, which can help in making targeted interventions, continues to elude us.

The political governments of the past two decades could not do much to control dengue, which only grew in intensity with each year. But people have a lot of expectations from the interim government, and they must not fail in this regard. For that, proper, scientifically driven, and centrally coordinated initiatives are a must. We urge the government to take the dengue threat seriously, taking proactive rather than reactive actions, so that it can be contained in time.

WHEN TEACHERS BECOME TARGETS

Lessons from Emperor Alamgir



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND
Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University, and former pro-vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

SHAMSAAD MORTUZA

How do you process the nationwide humiliation of teachers? You don't need to be an educator to sympathise with the several hundreds of teachers-cum-administrators who have faced mob-induced resignations. There is no shortage of video clips in this digital age: a young girl, maybe 12 or 13, along with her friends, grabbing her teacher's wrist to force her to sign the resignation letter; a young boy gleefully gloating that it felt good to slap "Dipon sir," or a teacher falling sick in the midst of the hullabaloo of his resignation demand. We don't know why the students turned against their teachers with such resentment. The timeline provides a glimpse as to "how" the events occurred without probing the question of "why" they happened. These images, however, are enough to spur copycat attacks and spread fear among possible sympathisers. It's not surprising that the deposed teacher's colleagues and guardians are often seen standing silent nearby.

Suddenly, it is politically incorrect to speak against students who have liberated us from the years of oppression. The men and women, holding onto those "powerful" institutional chairs, are considered enemies of the state or representatives of a decadent class that corrupted the system. We are witnessing a carnival in which our educational system collapses, unleashing the hidden demons. The situation is a reminder of Pol Potism, which promoted a socialist campaign shielding its communal and fascist agenda. Are the teachers really the stooges of the previous regime? Or, are they scapegoats whose removals are necessary for the aspirant opportunists to sneak in through the backdoor carved by student rebels? What have the teachers done to deserve this?

As a teacher, I have my biases towards my peers. Those who know me well also know my sympathies are for my students. I do believe teachers pour their souls into their students, generate an intergenerational power to educate them, and transform their lives. If teachers do not feel that way, this profession is not for them. All of my teachers at school and in my family have moulded me into a better version of myself. I never regretted for a single moment choosing my ill-paid profession. I am starting to harbour second thoughts after observing the widespread disrespect and undermining of our colleagues. Where did we go wrong? Why are we so out of touch with our students?

Ideally, teachers are not just dispensers of knowledge. They are shapers of character and morality. The recent turn of events has either strained

or severed the bond between teachers and students. On social media, many people are sharing an anecdote about veteran educator Abdullah Abu Sayeed, who resisted several pressures to admit a student from a powerful family. He steadfastly maintained his position, asserting that the student would never mature into a "proper human," as he had already lost all respect for his teachers.

Professor Sayeed's rare conviction and courage moved me when I first read the tibits. I was fortunate to have teachers like him, who instilled a deep



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKRABOTY

sense of pride in my profession. However, after allowing the idea to thaw for some time, I realised that this is precisely why the student rebellion is happening. Our pedagogy remains entrenched in an ancient era, perpetuating the belief that students should behave similarly to the characters in Kazi Kader Newaz's poem "Teachers' Dignity," in which Emperor Alamgir reportedly chided his crown prince for simply pouring water without using his hands to wash his teacher's feet. The sanitised portrayal of the Mughal Emperor serves two purposes: to idolise the status of a teacher and idealise a system that promotes hierarchy.

But we get a different picture of Emperor Alamgir when, in 1628, his teacher Mullah Sahe came to him seeking a reward after his former student had secured the throne. Rather than meeting him, the Emperor penned a letter that Lincoln Schuster included

nobody know who you are or what has become of you."

I notice a similar behaviour among our students who have turned the table. The students have tasted power at a time when they are transitioning from boyhood to adulthood. This is a time when normally they struggle for self-identity, desire independence, and harbour natural inclinations to challenge authority. To guide them to the next stage of their lives, now more than ever, we need mentors who have an understanding of the complex situation. We need academic leaders who will know how to stabilise the environment and positively channel rebellious impulses for a constructive overhaul of the system.

Teachers need to do soul-searching to understand why they are so disconnected from their students. The old format of a teacher acting like a sage on stage will not work. We must

taken to support teachers, providing them with the right tools, respect, and protection. To paint all teachers with a single brushstroke will be suicidal.

Most teachers are quite dedicated to their profession. Some teachers may have even been unable to fulfil their role due to institutional flaws and overwhelming challenges. Several systemic issues, including politics, inadequate training, a lack of resources, and the growing complexities of student behaviour, exacerbate the situation. I can only hope the government will recognise the gravity of the situation and act to restore respect for teachers and authority figures. In the long term, we will need a national curriculum for comprehensive education. Right now, we need conflict resolution for students, better support systems for teachers, and a national dialogue on the importance of respect and discipline within educational institutions.

Is forcing our educators to resign the right way to go?

Zabin Tazrin Nashita is an engineering student at Islamic University of Technology.

ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA

Following the resignation of Sheikh Hasina, the dissolution of parliament, and the formation of the interim government, we've been witnessing a massive change in university administrations all around the country. Vice-chancellors, pro-vice-chancellors, proctors, registrars, provosts and other members of university administration bodies have stepped down from their positions, mostly citing personal reasons behind their resignation. However, it's quite evident that the decision was made under pressure, particularly from students and teachers.

The active participation of students in demanding the resignation of VCs and other admin body members comes as no surprise. The nine-point demands put forth by students during the quota reform movement called for the resignation of VCs and proctorial bodies of Dhaka, Rajshahi, and Jahangirnagar universities. As VCs of the universities, their response to violence on students by law enforcement and Bangladesh Chhatra League members was not only inadequate, but it actively placed the students in harm's way. The situation was similar in many public and private universities throughout the country, where members of the admin body endangered the lives of students by

refusing accommodation and support.

Following universities, students of schools and colleges also called for a change in their respective governing bodies, urging the resignation of principals and teachers based on misconduct during and before the protests.

While peacefully demanding the resignation of faculties and teachers is a justifiable right, the mentality borne out of it crossed a line. Administrative personnel had to step down under duress, often leading to disruptions in the educational institutions. A video of high school students trying to physically force the principal of a school to sign her resignation surfaced on the internet, which garnered criticism online.

During the Awami League (AL) government regime, most members in high positions at educational institutions were often affiliated with the political party, which has served as an incentive for students and staff to demand their resignation. Cases emerged of governing body members misusing their position to accept bribes, embezzling research funds, being involved in corruption, etc. While demanding justice for those guilty of such wrongdoing is fair, being affiliated with a political party alone shouldn't

warrant such claims.

Rather than jumping the gun on demanding resignations, we need to step back and re-evaluate whether those in administrative positions are qualified enough. Someone should not be banned simply for their ties to the AL without evidence of misconduct, considering the political climate before the protests.

The forced resignations have led to an administrative vacuum in universities, causing delays in the resuming of classes, payment of the staff's salaries etc. The University of Dhaka has appointed Professor Niaz Ahmed Khan as the new VC. Pro-VC and proctorial positions have also been filled, and the student opinion so far is rather optimistic. This isn't the case in many other universities, where academic activities are halted, setting students back.

The administrative body members' first and foremost duties should be creating a sound structure for academics and protecting the students' interests. The politicisation of these positions made way for corruption. Student politics and the violent nature of it were also overlooked. Combinedly, these caused the students' interests to take a backseat.

Recent events have created a shift in the teacher-student dynamic in general. Since childhood, we've viewed our teachers as role models not only in academics but also in principles. The teachers, in turn, were to treat students with affection and guide them towards the moral path. Self-serving politics and corruption from the teachers' ends have

disrupted this relationship and altered the students' perceptions, dampening their respect for educators. It is this very shift in dynamic that has caused students to lay hands on their teachers and force them to resign. This damage needs to be repaired.

Many consider the resignation of administrative staff a necessary step in reformation as they believe having apolitical persons in charge will bring about progress. That being said, forced resignations can create unforeseen circumstances and make way for unqualified candidates to assume positions of power. Persecution of teachers and forceful resignation not only expels qualified individuals but also reflects badly on students.

Students have expressed dissatisfaction at the news of Khulna University's VC Mahmood Hossain's resignation after his bold stance in protecting the students during the movement. So, it's obvious that the general expectation is that our educators will have our best interests at heart. We want to see a positive change in administration where student welfare and education quality are prioritised, research scopes are expanded, and resources and facilities are modernised and made accessible for students.

Resignation of corrupt individuals is indeed a necessary step in building a better education system, but it is up to us—students—to not give into mob mentality and ensure justice is done towards our educators.