

Renegotiating the language of authority and power



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Since forever, lessons on legal authority (within jurisprudence) seemed rather futile to me as they stood in dissonance with my lived socio-political reality in Bangladesh. One such instance is the “service conception” of authority I had to learn, meaning simply that legal authority exercises its power over us because it serves us. In fact, authority derives its authority from the service it delivers. It serves us with meaningful options that we would choose from anyway. The lessons made me wonder why we are not conditioned to really conceptualise authority as service. More importantly, why do those in power never see themselves in our service—the governed?

The ground reality of politics in Bangladesh has historically been quite complicated with opposing geopolitical interests at play and various factions awaiting to capitalise on political leverage. Perhaps, in both catering to and exploiting such complexities, the language of authority in Bangladesh has been of compulsion, uncritical submission, and exertion of force. Invariably, binaries have been produced to perpetuate cycles of oppression against the “others.”

The identities of “political others” have changed over time, as the political fields

have been critical of how minority voices got subsumed by the majoritarian nation-building politics since independence.

In particular, in negotiating with the “Indigenous question,” ethnic nationalism in Bangladesh has proved to be a major failure no matter who got hold of power. Similarly, the marginalisation of “women question” and “religious minority question” within the politico-legal imaginary too has been a disconcerting reality. More curiously, politics in Bangladesh produced a third category of “critical others”—shunned as “others” for not uncritically sympathising with everything the ruling elites stood for. Unappreciative of the nuance, such “others” have by and large been wrongly labelled as “political others.”

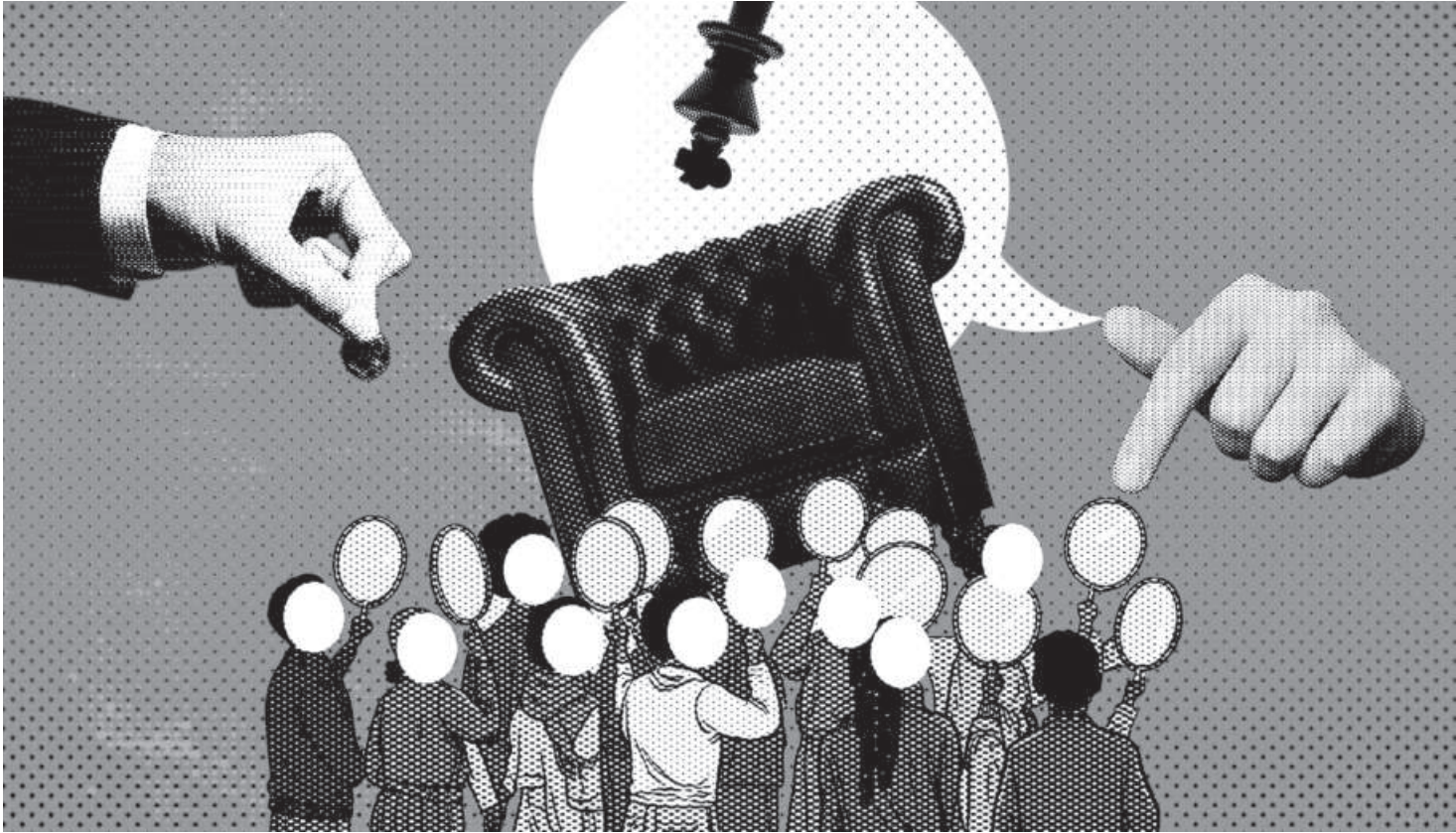
Any transition makes for a fertile ground to further marginalise the various categories of “others.” Transitions make us aware that power is not concentrated only within those formally at the helm of statecraft in Bangladesh, rather it is decentralised. Power pervades across spheres—from court corridors to the narrow alleys, from schools to universities, from tea-stalls to our walls, it grows and breeds even within our domesticity. As we stand at a crossroads, the government needs to rethink and

to also free our politics from the clutches of whataboutism and tropes of circular narratives of dominance and hegemony. This would potentially humanise the liminal space that the “political others” inhabit. Furthermore, it is important to replace and reform the state-centric paternalistic or assimilationist language for defining and treating the “apolitical others” (eg, the minorities). To this end, some begin by

identities—both those that are dominant and more so those that are peripheral. There is no singularity or duality to any identity, and we ought to appreciate the plurality (and intersectionality) that defines Bangladesh as a collectivity.

It is certainly not an easy task to break free from our deep-seated social as well as political culture which is as old as the state itself. However, with appropriate language,

to ensure that they are not viewed (or worse, hounded) as political or critical “others” for challenging the status quo, critiquing the establishment, or questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions that those in power usually try to feed us. Necessary reforms should therefore be brought to empower academia and media in such a way that can create meaningful democratic (and yet not majoritarian) spaces for reconciliation and



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

The identities of “political others” have changed over time, as the political fields shifted, and schisms widened more and more. Their rise and fall have been marked by suppression, reprisals, and dominance. The “apolitical others” however, remained unchanged over time, across regimes. Such “others” are the fringe-dwellers—the Indigenous and religious minorities, the disabled, the gender-diverse, and invariably, the women.

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renegotiate what power and authority should imply for the “others” at any given point—should they serve or dominate or should they harm or protect?

Instead of “serving” us, those in power have exploited their authorities and trod abysmally intolerant paths in the past. However, while redressing the wrongs perpetrated in the past, time is now ripe

seeking reform around the label “minority,” while others outrightly denounce the tag. In this context, we ought to ask if getting rid of the epithet of “minority” would mask the obvious fissures and the systemic imbalance of power. Indeed, being “minority” is not numeric, but is about marginalisation within an often-majoritarian power domain. Therefore, to me, the epithet “minority” is but a fact, with no judgment attached—it can mean anything from resistance against assimilation to even pride of belonging.

Time is now ripe to acknowledge the positionality of “minorities” within the power hierarchy while also being mindful to their agency and subjectivity as different identarian groups. Now is the time to work towards dissecting and understanding the varied voices that make up different

changes, although minimal, could certainly occur. As we speak of reform, the interim government needs to address the language of power above all—both the language that defines the authority and language that the authority uses to speak to (or define even) the “others.”

One of the ways to do so is strengthening the academia and the mass media. I put academia and media together essentially because these two produce language. Indeed, responsible academic and journalistic practices can potentially influence the power behind language and similarly shape the language behind power. The role of these two should never change, rather remain steadfast across regimes—unapologetically critical, unfettered, and powerful. There should also be institutional guarantees and safeguards

responsible statecraft.

Hannah Arendt once said, “The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative on the day after the revolution.” Standing at a crossroads, it is important for the media and academia to help sustain the liberal fervour of the July uprising for as long as possible, and to become voices for ones who are forcefully silenced and ones who are conventionally (and conveniently) not heard. We need to be vigilant so that the political transition does not make room for shrinking spaces for dissents or for unjustly quelling those considered as “others” at any given point. Indeed, now is the time to create conditions so we may dare to conceptualise the governed as the “served” and the ruling elites in our service—for as long as the demarcation exists.

Our expectations from Dhaka University



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Politics at the University of Dhaka has played a significant role in various decisive moments of Bangladesh’s history. However, partisan politics deterred its overall academic atmosphere for more than three decades. Partisan politics of both students and teachers has proven to be damaging for academic excellence. Just as student politics was followed by gono room culture and torture cells, teacher politics also destroyed the checks and balances in the administration system. Such types of student and teacher politics should be banned, and students’ councils should be revived.

In a resource-constrained university, politics works as a means for one to get a piece of the pie. Being politically involved increases the probability of one getting a position of authority such as the vice-chancellor, dean, provost, house tutor, and so on. It also assists many to get important positions outside the university. The appointment of the VC, who decides on major issues, must be significantly modified, and it must be ensured that their authority does not make them autocratic. A VC guarded by a gunman and his residence guarded by police seem strange.

The present practice of recruiting pro-VC, treasurer, proctor, provost and house tutors must also be revised. The dean election, which is mired in many problems like recruitment, promotion and formation of different committees, should be stopped. The practice of a dean becoming the editor of the journal published from their faculty must end.

The administrative section (registrar’s building) is perhaps the most inefficient part of the university. Its employees should be smart and efficient, and their service delivery mechanism should be a standard-setter. Unfortunately, that is not the case.



SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The University of Dhaka is plagued with a number of fundamental problems.

A big part of the administration staff doesn’t have computer literacy. The entire administrative section needs restructuring and modernisation.

At a good university, students remain engaged in studies and they rarely have spare time. But this university offers degrees in many subjects where students have to spend a bare minimum time in studies to earn decent grades. The syllabuses of these subjects require an upgrade.

Over the past 20 years, numerous departments were opened without rational reasoning. Some of them were opened to recruit political teachers and a few others to place several teachers as chairmen,

compromising with quality. For example, some departments under the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Social Sciences were created that overlapped with those at the Institute of Modern Languages. Some are also contradictory within their respective faculty. At the Faculty of Business Studies, the number of departments more than doubled in just 20 years; in 2003, there were only four departments, which increased to

master’s degree as well. There could be many students at the undergraduate level, but not the same at the master’s level. There must be a separate test for master’s admission, which should remain open to students from other universities as well.

A lecturer is appointed just after completing their master’s degree. Sometimes, a candidate may join as a lecturer a few months after their graduation. There is no meaningful training for the new recruit. Consequently, they often fail to manage their class. But a good university appoints lecturers after finishing another degree, preferably a PhD.

It is also peculiar that the university tries to recruit teachers with higher degrees and good research profiles but offers poor salaries. The salary of a university lecturer does not differ significantly from that of a college lecturer. A portion of these teachers do not allocate much time to the university due to low pay. They come to the campus when they have classes. They stop research after becoming a professor. Some make extra money by other means. The low salary cannot bring in foreign faculties to the university. Even with this low pay, a huge percentage of teachers engage in rigorous research and give much time to the university. The salary structure must be revised to support a better standard of living for the teachers. Once it is revised, all teachers must be held to account, and they should achieve their yearly research target.

Taking the opportunity of low salary, some

At a good university, students remain engaged in studies and they rarely have spare time. But this university offers degrees in many subjects where students have to spend a bare minimum time in studies to earn decent grades.

positions are allocated based on political affiliation. By offering these positions, the teachers are made subservient to partisan politics. A house tutor, for instance, gets

nominal allowance, pays lower house rent, and their experience as a house tutor is counted for promotion. This should be ended as well.

The University of Dhaka is at the top of many students’ list of universities around the country. But when they get admission here, most of them face issues with accommodation. The university does not allow first-year students to stay in the residential halls. But they get space there by making “friends” with political leaders and getting involved in politics. This hampers their studies and they cannot attain good grades during the first year, which affects their subsequent results. Thus, the first-year students must be given priority when allotting seats in the dormitories. To reduce pressure on residential facilities, no seats can be allotted to the postgraduate students.

The low quality of meals is another major concern in dorms. This is because a large number of political students eat at the cafeterias without paying for them. To offset this loss, low quality food is provided. The hall administration must stop this trend and ensure high quality of food. Moreover, halls should be the abode of all academic and extracurricular activities.

The university medical centre is of no use. Most teachers and staff avoid it because of its failure to provide proper treatment. Students who have the ability to get proper medical treatment elsewhere also avoid it. Thus, this centre must be modernised with facilities to provide basic treatment. The campus must also have some public toilets.

No government has so far shown interest in resolving the fundamental problems that plague the University of Dhaka. As is normal, a university with a lack of resources poses fewer threats to the position of authority. Once these problems are fixed, students and teachers will be less dependent on partisan politics and have more room to be open-minded free thinkers. They will be driven by reasoning and always challenge authority. It is not the scarcity of resources that keeps the problems unresolved; it is simply a lack of intention to solve these issues. Let the good intention prevail among the new administration to free this university of all its ailments.