

Why did Abdullah have to die?



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NO STRINGS
ATTACHED

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Last Friday, loved ones of 23-year-old Abdullah, a student of political science at Government Shaheed Suhrawardy College in Old Dhaka, gathered in a graveyard in Bardaanchara, a small village in Benapole, Jashore, to bury him. Abdullah was a vital part of the student-led mass uprising in July-August, fighting for justice, for change, and for a future he believed in. But instead of celebrating his victory, his family watched in agony as they buried him—three months after a gunshot to his head left him fighting for his life.

Why didn't he die that day? Why did he hang on, only to slip away after three months of suffering, three months of agonising hope that he would make it? These heart-wrenching questions will remain unanswered, but we cannot help but wonder: could timely medical intervention have saved Abdullah's life? Instead of a sombre burial, could we have seen him alive, his face lit with the joy of knowing that, despite the violence of those days, his cause had triumphed?

Abdullah was shot in the forehead on the evening of August 5, in front of Bangshal Police Station. This was the day the people's uprising, which he had passionately fought for, achieved an incredible victory. But victory came at a brutal cost. After being shot, Abdullah lay on the street for hours, bleeding, with no one to help him. It wasn't until someone rushed him to Mitford Hospital that he received treatment. From there, he was transferred to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH), where doctors operated on him. After his discharge, however, his condition worsened, and he was hospitalised again. An infection had set in, and by the time he was moved to the Combined Military Hospital (CMH), it was too late. His prolonged fight to live ended on the morning of November 14.

In a recent speech, the chief adviser of the interim government mentioned that around 1,500 people had perished during the uprising. And 19,931 people were injured, many of them blinded, maimed or barely alive. How many of them, like Abdullah, are still fighting for their lives? And how many,

despite the horror they endured, remain forgotten as the rest of us move on, distracted by the new headlines of the day?

Apart from the loss of eyesight or a limb, many have lost the ability to work, which has left them and their families under a huge economic burden.

A report by *The Daily Star* in October found more than 200 such patients in some of the major hospitals in Dhaka. The stories from these visits revealed the despair of these young people, who now face a bleak and uncertain future.

For instance, Mozammel Haque, 21, has lost vision in both eyes because of pellet injuries on July 18 during the quota reform protests in Narsingdi. His mother despairs about how he will sit for his exams or even find a job, whether he will ever get married or have a family.

Mohammad Sujon, 21, a cable TV operator, needed two open heart surgeries and another one in his intestine to stay alive after two bullets pierced his torso on August 5 in Old Dhaka. His family of four members is financially dependent on him. What are his prospects of working again?

As the days wear on and we go about our business, and go back to nursing our personal grievances, the faces of these brave individuals will start to fade. How easy it is to forget things that make us feel uncomfortable or events that don't really affect our lives. Have we forgotten so soon how horrific those days between July 15 and August 5 were? Have we forgotten what these young people have gone through, what families who have lost their loved ones in this uprising are going through? Have we erased from our minds those chilling footage of people, most of them young, being shot in cold blood, their bodies treated with utter disrespect, the blank expressions of the injured or dead being hurriedly carried by their friends?

Fresh news constantly flooding us with new fears and uncertainties is perhaps the reason behind the loss of short-term memory. Grisly murders, mob killings, frightening

robberies, hours of traffic gridlock every time a disgruntled group decides to block the roads to get their demands met, food prices hitting the roof, worrisome international ratings about low economic growth, the weight of piling up foreign debt, and an uncertain political landscape—these are the items on our daily dose of stress factors. But they are also a wake-up call for us who thought that August 5 would magically

(such as serious head wounds) that require complicated surgeries, some of which may need advanced treatment abroad.

The government has set up a July Shaheed Smrity Foundation to provide support to the families of the martyrs and to those severely injured during the July-August uprising. While the interim government has waived treatment costs for the injured, delays and inefficiencies plague the system. Reports

Institute of Ophthalmology, their faces filled with frustration and despair. The apparent slow response to their needs had forced them to take to the streets, demanding the care they had been promised. In response, four advisers visited the protesters late into the night, acknowledging the government's shortcomings and pledging immediate action.

Swift, decisive action must follow these



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We must all work together to help those who suffered injuries during the July-August uprising, to rebuild their lives with dignity.

erase 15-plus years of systematic looting and suppressing and maiming a nation physically and psychologically, so that they would lose the ability to stand up for their rights.

We must not forget that everything that is happening to us is a consequence of that dark period in history.

Which is why we must be clear about our priorities. We must prioritise the care of the injured—those who are now facing a future without sight, without limbs, or without the very life they once knew. There are around 400 people who have lost their eyesight, many of them students, as a result of bullet wounds and others who have critical injuries

suggest that funds meant to help the injured have not been distributed quickly enough. The burden of costly medical tests and medicines, unavailable at public hospitals, falls on the families, while patients in private hospitals face crippling bills. Numerous patients are from other districts and from families who cannot really afford the cost of travelling to Dhaka, accommodation and food for those attending to the patient. These costs have to be taken into account while disbursing funds.

On November 13, injured protesters gathered outside the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (NITOR) and the National

promises. The government must ensure that the funds for the treatment of the injured are adequate and reach them on time. Many of the injured have still not been included in the list; this must be done urgently. Donations and assistance must come from the public as well. Already, individuals and small groups have begun to offer assistance, but it is not enough. Those who will be released from hospital must be given the support needed for their rehabilitation. We must all work together to help those who have given so much, to rebuild their lives with dignity, knowing that their sacrifices will never be forgotten or undermined.

Pathways to world rankings for private universities in Bangladesh

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A review of the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings indicates that the number of Bangladeshi universities in the rankings are increasing. In 2025, as many as 15 universities are listed, whereas there were four universities in 2023 and two in 2022. Among them, about 50 percent (in 2025 and 2024) are private universities.

In the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, there are 17 universities in 2025, whereas in 2024 and 2023, there were nine and five universities, respectively. In THE Asia University Rankings, there were nine Bangladeshi universities in 2024; comparatively, there were five universities in 2023 and only three in the 2022 rankings. Clearly, the number of universities is increasing in both QS and THE rankings. However, their positions (especially of the private universities) have much to be desired.

Every year, there is triumphant clamour in Bangladesh about those institutions ahead of others; yet, they typically rise and fall within the lower bandwidth. Consequently, even the highest-ranked universities in the country remain confined to subordinate categories. In contrast, the world's top-ranking universities consistently demonstrate many distinct strengths and characteristics. For one, top-ranked universities are known for their high-impact research in peer-reviewed publications, in substantial quantities, often leading pioneering studies and setting trends. They also attract substantial funding from governments, private institutions, and industry partnerships to support cutting-edge and innovative ideas pursued in contemporary facilities.

Celebrated universities are also staffed by renowned and distinguished scholars. They are often leaders in their fields, with extensive publications and citations. It must be emphasised that they are also exceptional educators, sharing their knowledge in engaging learning environments that stretch the imagination of and experiences for their students.

Top universities have rigorous admissions criteria, seeking high-achieving and motivated students, often from various cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds to enrich the academic space. Support for students, including scholarships, mentorship programmes and career services, is extensive, which results in high retention and graduation rates. In Bangladesh, an often-ignored area is our students' mental health needing serious attention.

While expensive, leading universities invest in modern facilities, libraries,

help commercialise research findings and new ideas, secure patents, and harmonise industry partnerships.

Many top-class universities have extensive international collaborations, student exchange programmes and joint degree offerings, allowing students and faculty to gain global perspectives. Faculty exchange programmes bring in international faculty to foster global awareness and understanding.

Top-class universities are blessed with effective leaders (and governance structures) who are visionary in their outlook, driving



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digital resources, e-learning platforms and related tools needed for a mind-stretching educational experience. Recreational facilities are also extensive to make mind and body work in unison. Facilities for spiritual nurture enhance the synergy.

Top universities offer a vast number of programmes and disciplines, providing numerous choices for students with an array of interests. They also promote interdisciplinary education that creates room for exploration and expansion of the mind. Furthermore, the curriculum is designed to develop students' analytical and critical thinking and problem-solving skills, preparing them for leadership roles. Universities like MIT promote innovation by providing incubators and reasonable funding for startups. This encourages students and faculty to translate their ideas into products, services or even businesses. Startups created by Stanford University generate around \$2.7 trillion in annual revenues! These universities also have technology transfer offices that

strategic initiatives well adapted to changing educational trends. The strategic plans they craft, from collective and inclusive thinking, generally focus on improving teaching quality, strengthening research, encouraging student engagement with their communities, and expanding global presence.

These are some basic elements that universities in Bangladesh must aspire to shape as a fundamental goal to rise in stature, recognition and impact. Achieving this should lead to an improvement in rankings—not as the primary objective, but as a by-product.

While featuring in the international rankings is not the be-all-end-all of a university's pursuits, participation helps attending to several important impact parameters. For example, the ranking organisations can drive impactful research that can contribute to industry, academia, and ultimately society. Thus, QS rankings emphasise academic reputation (30 percent), citations per faculty (20 percent), and

international research networking (five percent), while THE rankings emphasise similar traits, particularly research quality (30 percent) and the research environment (29 percent).

Bangladesh's universities, especially the private ones, currently assign unusually high teaching loads to the faculty. Due to current policies, faculty members are fully engaged in teaching (four to five classes of 175-250 students each term) with little time for research. Then there are other administrative tasks such as mentoring, serving on numerous committees, being a part of co-curricular activities, or even helping with the admission process to ensure stable enrolment—a survival issue for private universities. With faculty members stretched to the limit, often for inconspicuous tasks, the real task of building university reputation gets sidetracked.

There are a number of programmes that the government can initiate. One is creating national rankings based on selected and locally relevant parameters to benchmark quality, tracking quality progression, and infusing a competitive ethos (especially for research grants) in the otherwise indolent academic ecosystem. In the absence of reliable local ranking mechanisms, internationally recognised rankings are currently used to signal university quality. This is inadequate and raises questions about relevance. To be sure, celebrating rankings has become a controversial and contentious matter.

Launching quality PhD programmes (under stringent conditions) and promoting high-impact research publications are also important to add value to the universities. However, the availability of qualified supervisors, as well as internal and external examiners, represents a significant challenge. Encouraging publication in the Web of Science (WoS) or Scopus platforms that include indexed journals from Taylor & Francis, Springer, Emerald and other publishers can quickly shape high-impact research. Creative incentives must be devised for those who publish in these competitive arenas.

Faculty members play the largest role in imparting quality education and building a brand reputation for a university. But their recruitment, especially at senior levels, still depends on academic degrees and length of teaching (experience). This is no longer sufficient and must be enhanced by placing more weight on their publications in various indexed platforms. Importance must also be given to inclusion in Google Scholar, Scopus or Scimago, along with h-index and other quality markers known for evaluating

scholarly output.

The advancement to senior ranks, particularly at the associate and full professor level, must require MPhil or PhD-level supervision and serving as examiners, locally and internationally. They must also publish papers with young scholars and junior faculty members and groom them through intellectual exchange. Participating on editorial boards of scholarly journals and engaging in peer review are additional key activities that set scholars apart from others.

To keep pace with global progression, private universities in Bangladesh may invite visiting professors from across the region/globe. An international exchange programme (for faculty and students) would also contribute to international recognition.

Industry linkages are another challenge for the private universities. Industry-driven research projects, academia-industry collaboration, arranging regular industry talks and symposiums, industry visits, etc could contribute to enhancing reputation and rankings.

To develop a university as a centre of excellence, the key executives must possess several vital characteristics like vision, ethical leadership, willingness to take risks, high capability, and a futuristic outlook. Their performance must be reviewed regularly by the board of trustees based on selected criteria to promote continuous quality improvement and to guide good governance of the university on its journey to greater heights.

In recent times, the quality and capability of members of the board of trustees in private universities have raised questions. For those lacking experience in university management, a crash course may be developed to enlighten and inspire them to discern between running academia and industrial outfits. Such courses are also important for those who come to serve in academia late in life from other careers. The board may consider engaging academic advisers to assist with leadership selection, developing training modules and research tracks, designing academia-focused evaluation systems, driving motivation programmes, and a host of other issues.

The global higher education landscape is becoming increasingly competitive, and universities worldwide are striving to improve their rankings and image. A few Bangladeshi private universities have made good progress but they face significant challenges. If universities prioritise quality education, foster a research culture, advance technology adoption, and promote internationalisation, achieving a place in global rankings will naturally follow.