

RESTRICTING DHAKA UNIVERSITY

When safety meets public outrage



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Dhaka University is located at the heart of Dhaka, a city that stands by the Buriganga River with mostly northward expansion. Over the last 400 years, we have seen relatively little growth in the southern part of the town and the south bank of the river. The narrow alleys of Old Dhaka can be one contributing factor. The presence of some sensitive sites may also have stifled its growth. Dhaka University, initially spread across 600 acres of lush green Ramna, but later reduced to 275 acres in the last 100 years, is one such site. Together with the Pilkhana BDR compound and Azimpur graveyard, the university campus limits the scope of the city's expansion.

Compare the city map to a human face, and you'll see the campus near the jawline and neck. The university authority's recent decision to regulate traffic flow at all seven main entrances has brought the spatial issue back to the surface. But we need to be cautious in portraying Dhaka University as a mere physical space. It is the symbolic heart of Bangladesh. If it misses a beat, the whole nation feels it. If it beats too often, the entire body pulsates with energy and emotion. We have witnessed this phenomenon during various protests and uprisings. It is not an overstatement to suggest that every political movement that shaped the nation's consciousness has its origin in Dhaka University. As a living palimpsest with layered memories of the past, the university serves as an essential energy base that empowers individuals and creates a space for activism and intellectual rigour. Restricting the flow of the public into the campus, therefore, has both physical and symbolic consequences.

Prior to Victory Day, the university decided to limit campus mobility. Evidently, it prioritised self-protection over public accessibility. The exercise of autonomy by the university could potentially be detrimental to the public good. A group of teachers, representing the University Teachers' Network (UTN), recently met the vice-chancellor requesting him to reconsider the decision of blocking public thoroughfares. Engaging students to control traffic has further attenuated the situation.



Dhaka University is a part of the urban fabric.

FILE PHOTO: SAZZAD IBNE SAYED

Newspapers and podcasts have reported on how students assisting the police force are constantly confronting passersby and preventing them from entering the campus. Their near-vigilante attitude has far-reaching consequences.

Let me begin by considering the concerns that led the administration to restrict mobility on campus. The presence of outsiders poses security challenges such as theft, harassment, accidents, crimes, substance abuse, and trespassing. Noise and overcrowding can disrupt the academic environment, hindering learning, research and intellectual activities. Recently, permitting a mass rally in the nearby Suhrawardy Udyan made this particularly evident: punters virtually took over the entire

campus, littering and urinating everywhere. The political tension persists, and it's impossible to ignore the fear of the ousted faction resuming its full fury on campus. The proctor says he must prioritise protecting his students. His statement pits the needs of a few (campus residents) against those of many (general public). As a state-funded university that hosts numerous city corporation-owned roads, the DU administration must adopt a more pragmatic approach when managing access to key public facilities. The campus houses Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) and skirts BIRDEM Hospital and BSMMU. It houses or is adjacent to two public academic centres (Bangla Academy and Shishu Academy), one vital research centre (Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission), two national parks with historical significance, one public library, many schools and commercial centres, and access to a flyover leading to the national highway. There is no rational way the university can deny access to essential services for the sake of institutional convenience.

The restriction has forced many passengers to walk from the metro rail station

or take a second ride to move through the campus. This is disproportionately affecting non-affluent citizens, leading to an increase in both travel time and cost. With so much focus on cars and rickshaws, there seems to be little control over pedestrians. On Thursday, thousands of former paramilitary men walked through the campus to gather at Shahbagh. And there were no stops for pedestrians. But the restriction barred access for patients in ambulances or passengers in cars and motorcycles from travelling. Despite possessing a DU car sticker, the slow identification and rerouting of unauthorised vehicles created a bottleneck, delaying me from approaching the checkpoint by almost an hour. I could see how the decision to divert traffic had led to public resentment.

Anyone who has read the comments on traffic alert groups on social media will notice a growing voice against the university's relocation from its current location to the outskirts of the city. People now associate DU with gated areas such as cantonments and housing societies due to its exclusionary policies.

What's even more dangerous is that the university has recruited student volunteers to serve as gatekeepers, who lack proper training in crowd management and proper gear to differentiate themselves from the general public. Heated exchanges with frustrated members of the public are becoming commonplace, which can easily spiral into violence. Some video footage shows students overstepping their authority. Their actions can damage the university's reputation and question the administration's leadership. Confrontational incidents involving students may result in legal challenges against the university. Some of the comments made by the students suggest that they see themselves as separate or superior to the general population. This can deepen social divisions and breed resentment among the public. If this situation persists, students run the risk of losing the solidarity and goodwill that they garnered during the July uprising.

Conversely, over-reliance on students for enforcing access policies suggests a failure of institutional governance. It signals that the university administration lacks the capacity to implement policies through proper channels, such as trained security personnel, advanced technology or infrastructure improvements. A confrontational dynamic between students and the public can lead to long-term polarisation, undermining the shared civic identity that DU symbolises. DU, being a university committed to sustainability, must place a high priority on inclusion. Students should not serve as gatekeepers for decentralised agencies of power that impose discipline and punishment on the public. Instead, it should portray itself as a democratic space that upholds the public's "right to the city" and not a privatised space that turns the campus into a contested and polarised site.

Since the problem concerns security, the solution lies in the employment of trained security teams for campus management. The university must hold stakeholders' meetings and devise strategies such as bypass roads, tunnels, and designated lanes for rickshaws, bikes or cars to effectively manage traffic flow through the campus. DU must not lose its reputation as a civic space for organising public events and cultural programmes. While we must control access to sensitive or academic zones, we should maintain open access to areas such as hospitals, libraries, or museums. Dhaka University, I believe, has the intellectual acumen and pragmatism to balance safety with access and preserve the university's role as a shared, civic space.

A political culture that refuses to change



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AZMIN AZRAN

Former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on Tuesday embarked on a long-anticipated journey abroad for medical treatment. The chairperson of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—whose imprisonment, health deterioration, and subsequent treatment became a politically charged issue for years during the Awami League regime—has gained tremendous sympathy for the hardship she has endured. As a result, her journey to London, which reunited her with her eldest son Tarique Rahman after seven years, has become something of a watershed moment in the country's recent political history.

BNP, which has been politically stifled by the Awami League, understandably looked to capitalise on this moment. However, the way BNP activists descended upon much of North Dhaka on Tuesday night to bid their

party chief farewell, choking the city's most vital artery—the Airport Road—with sheer numbers is an approach that lacked creativity and freshness. It stank of an all too familiar tendency of our political parties to construct cults of personality, something much of Bangladesh has violently rejected in the recent past and has been trying desperately to move past.

For an outside observer, it must be baffling that the BNP, having witnessed what the actions of the last 15-plus years did to the Awami League in three short weeks last summer, never even considered the fact that if they didn't play fast and loose with people's precious time like Sheikh Hasina used to, it would set a nice contrast in the minds of voters and the young generation.

For BNP, this Tuesday was an opportunity.

If they could only get Khaleda Zia on the plane without majorly disrupting life in the world's densest city, and have some strategically placed public relations agents on popular media to discuss this refreshing approach and focus on the former two-time prime minister's steadfast commitment to not compromise with an undemocratic foe and the culmination of a years-long familial separation, the party may well have been cruising on the journey to wiping the memories of the horrendous five-year period when it was last in power.

In truth, every day since August 5, 2024 has been a day of opportunity the BNP has missed. The Awami League's ouster, the mountain of legal troubles facing Awami League politicians, and the general rejection of its influence across all facets of life in the country have certainly been a victory for BNP. Yet, to solidify this victory, the presumptive prime political force in Bangladesh has to distance themselves from the one that has just been booted.

The BNP faithful might say that this is an unnecessary exercise. The party has forever been the furthest possible thing from the Awami League due to the decades-long animosity between the rivals. Yet, in the minds of those who remember 2001-2006 and those

who don't remember that time but have been told stories of corruption, misrule, and the perennial threat of bombings that haunted those days, BNP is part of the same political culture that birthed the authoritarian juggernaut that the Awami League became.

In fact, history supports this perception. BNP and the Awami League were the two major stakeholders of the post-Ershad democratic restructuring, and they subsequently split the honours in the four elections since, whose credibility has been largely accepted. While the Awami League has emerged victorious—by a long margin at that—in the cursed contest of inflicting misery on the people of Bangladesh, BNP too has been a participant.

There is little doubt that BNP is poised to benefit greatly from the aftermath of August 5, 2024, but if it wants to be seen by history in a light that is a shade separate from that which cloaks the Awami League, it must shake things up.

The political culture that seeks to elevate one politician, or a political family, to a position any greater than a regular citizen of the country is a political culture that must end. It was refreshing to hear that some in the BNP leadership called for more sense on Tuesday night, but that call went unheard. For millions in Dhaka, it was like being haunted

by a nightmare, when yet again, a politician's flight abroad took priority over the journey of every ambulance, emergency vehicle, public bus or a simple homebound employee after a long day.

All BNP members achieved on Tuesday night was reassuring themselves that they too could call on the numbers that the Awami League boasted in its heyday. But people already know that BNP is the biggest party in the country right now. What people don't know is if it has the capacity to show the bare minimum respect to its potential constituents, which Awami League never showed in all its years of power.

This lack of respect—this disregard for public welfare—is what makes a popular, elected government fester into one that needs to turn its guns on the public to stay in power.

The BNP, on Tuesday night, made a clear show of its lack of respect for the people whose support they hope will carry them into power. In the next election, the support of the blindly faithful may just carry the party over the line into the parliament (or the presidency, depending on constitutional reforms), but if its attitude towards the public does not change, it too runs the risk of eventually festering into some form of the disease that kills before it's violently cured.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**

1 Torture device

5 Carell of movies

10 Lotion additive

11 Broadway's Bernadette

13 Gaunt

14 Bored by routine

15 Stuck, so to speak

17 Wedding words

18 Signifies

19 Light metal

20 Farm animal

21 Blanchett of "Tár"

22 Like ghost stories

25 Finishes last

26 Chuck of "Meet the Press"

27 "2001" computer
- 28 Hosp. parts

29 Gets rid of

33 Cut off

34 Fretting

35 Confused

37 Past due

38 Century division

39 Resting on

40 Heads, to Henri

41 Departed
- DOWN**

1 Overly eager

2 Without aid

3 Movie barbarian

4 Computer need

5 Book parts

6 Watches over
- 7 Greek vowel

8 Harvard motto

9 Learned

12 Boulders

16 Tiny

21 Diner side dish

22 Unemotional

23 Tiara's kin

24 Newspaper revenue source

25 Hot flow

27 Door parts

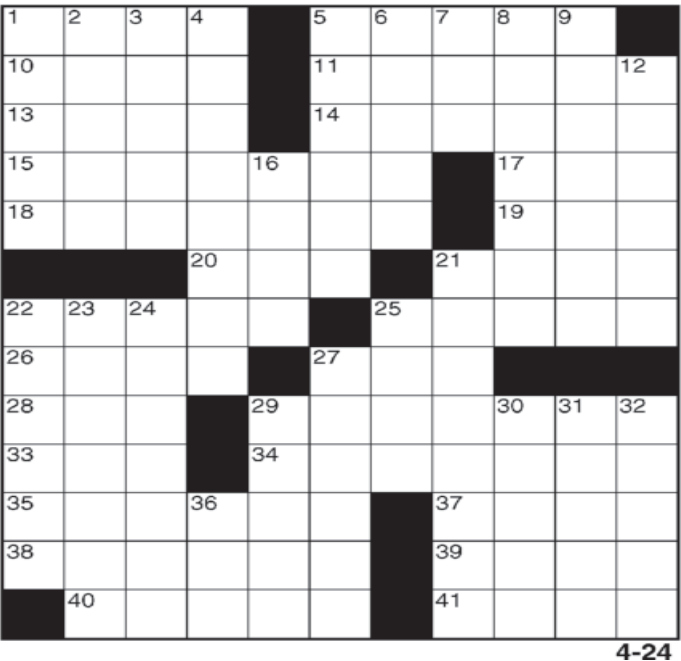
29 Electronics component

30 Country division

31 Wyoming's — Range

32 Used a broom

36 Diet no-no



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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