

A few questions over the Dhaka jet crash



WINKERS AWEIGH!
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The recent fighter jet crash at a school campus in Dhaka has led many to question the wisdom of running an airbase in Kurmitola and conducting training flights from there. This is an issue seldom broached in public media, let alone being discussed or debated.

The Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) chief explained why the airbase was necessary during an emotional address a day after the crash, standing on the tarmac of the BAF Base Bir Uttam AK Khandker adjacent to Dhaka's main airport. Then two senior officers, both one-star generals, explained the necessity of an airbase in Dhaka during a press conference on July 28.

On July 27, the government formed a nine-member probe commission to examine the cause of the tragic crash, assess damage and casualties, and determine the responsibilities. The commission has been told to submit a report within four weeks.

The remarks and the formation of the probe commission raise questions that have not so far been answered—perhaps because they have not been asked in the first place.

Let us begin with the airbase and flight training. Air Chief Marshal Hasan Mahmood Khan said, “This is our main base... this is our most important space. All the VIPs live here, our structures are here, and the parliament is here. There is a matter of protection. So, it's very important to have a strong air base here.”

His remarks boil down to the air force's overriding priority of protecting the skies over Dhaka. Air Commodore Shahidul Islam, director of air operations, echoed his chief on July 28. He also pointed out that Dhaka was not alone in having an airbase in the capital. This was common around the world, he said. The one-star general explained that flight training was part and parcel of an airbase.

A cursory look at neighbouring countries



Firefighters work to remove the wreckage from the campus of Milestone School and College in Uttara, Dhaka after a Bangladesh Air Force training aircraft crashed into one of the school buildings on July 21, 2025.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

and commonly referred capitals finds that airbases, or even airports, typically lie outside city limits, unlike Kurmitola which is very much within Dhaka city, just over eight kilometres away from parliament.

For instance, the Hindon air force station is about 16 kilometres from the Indian Lok Sabha but outside Delhi city limits. However, Hindon is used for VIP movement and not for fighter aircraft operation. From that respect, the nearest airbase (with fighter aircraft activity) is Ambala, home to the Rafales, about 200 kilometres away in Haryana.

The closest air base to Islamabad is Nur

Khan, which is in the neighbouring city of Rawalpindi almost 13 kilometres away from the Pakistan parliament. The Katunayake airbase in Sri Lanka is integrated with the Bandaranaike International Airport, very much outside Colombo city limits, about 30 kilometres from the parliament building.

The air force base at Andrews is in Maryland, the adjacent state to Washington DC, about 15 kilometres away from the US Congress.

the speed of sound at about 2,465 kilometres per hour. Presuming that it flies at a modest speed of 1,200 kilometres per hour, it would be barely two minutes' flying time away from a base in Arial Beel, for instance, or seven minutes away from the base in Jashore.

It has rightly been pointed out that the airbase was built at a time when there was no such dense settlement in Uttara. The airport was well outside the city limits. But Dhaka has

essential for our sovereignty. Do not weaken this pillar with rumours.” Exploring the possibilities of an alternative airbase is not an attempt to weaken it at all. But when responsible air force officers make sweeping statements, it does eat away at the credibility of this integral part of our armed forces and weakens its very foundations.

The decision to run an airbase or conduct training out of Kurmitola, however, rests with the defence forces. It would be encouraging to see relevant experts putting their heads together to re-evaluate their operational and strategic priorities under the current context.

As for the second issue of a probe commission formed by the government, the official notification says that the nine-member body will examine the cause of the crash, assess damage and casualties, and determine the responsibilities.

This commission headed by former Secretary AKM Zafar Ullah Khan also includes a retired air vice marshal, three additional secretaries from three ministries, Dhaka divisional commissioner, an urban planner, and a professor of mechanical engineering from BUET. There have been several accidents involving the F7, but the commission does not include anyone from the manufacturer. One recalls that India included Boeing officials when probing the recent crash in Ahmedabad.

Noting that there are no aviation experts, no aeronautical engineers or anyone with technical knowhow, how is this committee to examine the reason for the crash? Presumably, another investigation by the air force will be delving into that, and the findings may be kept away from the public for security reasons lest they compromise classified information. That is quite understandable. But it should then be clarified by the government. Other than this investigation, there has been no visible initiatives that might lead to some sort of corrective measures, a point of chronic weakness for the interim government.

The jet crash has cost lives. Lives of children who were in school. It would not be unreasonable to expect that all quarters approach this matter with due sincerity and earnestness. Anything less would be an insult to the memory of those we lost.

But so far, it bears all the features of yet another half-baked initiative meant merely to placate, with no real intention to resolve.

Why the DUCSU constitution needs reform



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The Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) and hall union elections have long been symbolic of student activism and democratic values within Dhaka University. However, in its 102-year history, DUCSU elections have been held 37 times in total; since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, it has been held seven times between 1972 and 2019, the last one coming after nearly three decades of hiatus. This stark irregularity stands in contrast to the university's legacy as a cradle of democratic movements.

A key reason for this lies in the constitution of DUCSU and hall unions, as well as the Dhaka University Order of 1973, which collectively failed to enforce a mandatory schedule for regular elections. Article 8(e) of the DUCSU constitution gives the vice-chancellor, who also serves as the ex-officio DUCSU president, exclusive power to announce election dates. Thus, the absence of elections, though undemocratic, does not technically violate the constitution.

Moreover, Article 6(c) states that elected representatives will hold office for one year, with a 90-day extension if necessary. After that, their positions are vacated, regardless of whether a new election is held. This legal void enables prolonged inaction, exposing how the DUCSU constitution permits administrative discretion over democratic rights.

According to Article 19 of the Dhaka University Order, 1973, there are 10 governing authorities at DU, including the Senate,

Syndicate, Academic Council, and Finance Committee, but students are allowed representation only in the Senate. Even this participation is limited. Article 20(I)(I) of the same order allows five DUCSU-nominated members to join the Senate, but in practice, these are appointed at the VC's discretion, with no accountability to the student body.

This was starkly evident in 2019 when, after the controversial DUCSU polls, four out of the five Senate nominees were affiliated with the then ruling party's student wing; two unelected and two elected through the widely disputed results. Such unilateral selections defeat the purpose of student representation and reinforce partisan control over student affairs.

Taken together, the above-mentioned articles of the DUCSU constitution and the Dhaka University Order don't necessarily empower the students for decision-making, leaving the power in the VC's hands to appoint and dismiss DUCSU representatives instead.

This concentration of power echoes colonial hierarchies, with the students relegated to a powerless status. While students have historically taken the lead in confronting national crises—from the Language Movement to recent democratic uprisings—DU administrators and teachers often shirk accountability, especially post-crisis. The silence of the DU authorities following the crackdown on students during the July uprising last year, and their complicity

in the government-sponsored violence against protesters, only deepened this credibility crisis.

Similarly, the teachers-turned-administrators overseeing DUCSU reforms have failed to champion the students' rights. Instead of advancing democratic participation, their proposed reforms entrench the existing power dynamics and neglect structural defects, enabling further decay of DUCSU's

administrators, and student leaders, with the VC serving as the chief adviser. This council could guide the union, propose constitutional reforms to the Syndicate, and supervise emergency elections. Such a model would balance oversight with student autonomy and promote inclusive governance.

Reform before election
Some voices within the university



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

institutional integrity.

The solution lies in introducing amendments to the very structure that permits undemocratic practices. One of the most pressing demands from student organisations is the removal of administrators from executive roles in student unions. Specifically: i) the VC should no longer serve as the DUCSU president; ii) hall provosts should not be the presidents of hall unions; and iii) treasurers should be elected, not appointed.

Instead, student representatives should be elected directly to all DUCSU and hall union posts. A proposed model includes an advisory council comprising teachers, alumni,

administration as well as certain student circles argue for holding elections first and pursuing reforms later. However, Article 16 of the DUCSU constitution gives the Syndicate the sole authority to amend the constitution. It contains no provision for soliciting suggestions from elected student bodies. Moreover, according to Article 23 of the Dhaka University Order, students are excluded from the Syndicate altogether. Hence, unless these provisions are amended, elected DUCSU members will remain powerless to initiate meaningful changes.

Claims that “essential reforms have already been made” are, in my opinion, either ignorant

or deceptive. The administration has not enacted the foundational reforms required to democratise DUCSU. Therefore, the insistence on rushing into elections without reform only serves to reinforce undemocratic control.

Reforming the constitution of hall unions, often overlooked, is equally vital. Residential halls are at the heart of student life, yet their governing structures remain deeply colonial. Articles 6 through 9 of the hall union constitution retain undemocratic provisions that curtail student agency. Additionally, there is a lack of mechanism to address critical issues such as student health, food quality, dormitory safety, and administrative abuse.

If unaddressed, hall unions will continue to function merely as event organisers (per Article 2) rather than student welfare bodies. The constitution must include provisions for new secretarial posts dedicated to health, food, environment, and human rights to make hall unions truly responsive to students' needs.

To restore DUCSU as a platform for student empowerment and democratic engagement, comprehensive constitutional reforms are imperative. The current circumstance, under the interim administration with relatively neutral oversight, presents a rare opportunity. The DU Syndicate must undertake these reforms consulting with all stakeholders—including the students—to redesign DUCSU as a functioning student parliament.

Even though the schedule for the next DUCSU election has been announced recently, the maladministration and ill-driven actions taken regarding the reform and re-organising of DUCSU and the hall unions will surely create an uncertain environment on the campus. Fear remains that such a situation will hinder the re-establishment of democratic process in DU's student community.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
- 1 Talked madly

6 Spiny plants

11 Spiny plant

12 Detest

13 Musical sounds

14 Small stream

15 Printer's supplies

17 Play parts

18 Sentry's cry

20 Canyon sound

22 Wing

23 Breathes out

26 Yoga position

28 Depiction

29 Start, as an engine

31 Load unit

32 Tablet downloads

33 Final, e.g.
- 34 Foolish

36 First person

38 Require defrosting

40 Visitor from afar

43 Nemo's creator

44 Do research

45 Useful skill

46 Crooked
- DOWN
- 1 Squealer

2 Before today

3 Sweet cookies

4 Bit of history

5 Cubicle fixture

6 Fare carrier

7 Isaac's father

8 Kid's quaff

9 Horn sound
- 10 Bothers

16 Kinsey subject

18 Crumbling car

19 In addition

21 China flaw

23 Tombstone name

24 They may clash

25 Posted

27 Triton circles it

30 Mex. neighbor

33 Stories

34 High-maintenance sort

35 Good pair

37 Arp's art

39 Sulky state

41 Second person

42 Modern

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MONDAY'S ANSWERS

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