

DUCSU POLLS 2025

# Democracy’s dress rehearsal?



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND  
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The timing of the Dhaka University Central Students’ Union (DUCSU) election ahead of the general polls poses an intriguing dilemma for a university that has been the cradle of our national conscience. On the one hand, a student union election in the country’s largest and oldest public university, which has both witnessed and participated in the majority of political changeovers here, can become a proxy battle between national parties. The volatile political situation at present can be affected by the outcome, as the DUCSU poll results can either energise or demoralise the parent parties of some of the participating student bodies just months before the national electoral campaigns are set to begin. A recent data survey that finds 48.5 percent of voters undecided before the national election—in which the BNP, host of Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Chatradal (JCD), maintains a slim edge over Jamaat-e-Islami, undeclared patron of Islami Chhatra Shibir—makes the issue even more critical. Dubbed as the “second parliament,” the results of DUCSU polls have the potential to spread beyond the university gates and change the national electoral dynamics.

On the other hand, we can view the holding of DUCSU polls (followed by JUCSU and RUCSU polls in the same month) as a step towards rebuilding democracy from the foundation. The dictatorial democracy that sprouted over the last few decades made Bangladeshi politics a top-down affair. National parties have become accustomed to using student politics as a platform for recruiting followers instead of nurturing independent leadership. Seen thus far, a DUCSU election before the parliamentary polls is a symbolic as well as practical opportunity to demonstrate the

country’s democratic revival. The third dimension of the dilemma touches upon an ensuing debate over “overt” and “covert” politics. During the July uprising, there was a general consensus to decouple campus politics from their national hosts. However, after the interim government was formed, many student bodies started wearing their party badges—some more prominently than the others. Thus, the possibility of a shift in the political landscape appeared bleak. The administration’s contradictory statements on the party affiliation of student politics did not help the situation either. DU’s female students responded to this mixed signal by storming out of their dorms in the middle of the night on July 17, mirroring

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their rebellious action from last year while demanding a complete ban on hall-level politics. The vice-chancellor responded by promising a “controlled” regulatory policy at the hall level. The proctor went further to declare halls as party politics-free zones. JCD, the largest student body at the moment, and some of the left-leaning organisations



SOURCE: SOUVIK ARKO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The DUCSU polls play a pivotal role in shaping our national political landscape.

interpreted these declarations as attempts at depoliticisation. The issue surfaced when JCD announced committees for all the residential halls at DU. When general students protested the results, JCD suspected foul play. It felt that the general students had been instigated by the “underground party” who was strategically camouflaged within the fallen regime. The ostracised right-wing outfit redirected its energies into welfare campaigns such as offering mentoring and coaching to incoming students, distributing textbooks, and arranging affordable meals and drinkable water as well as medical services. This quiet, service-orientated activism in the residential halls has given it influence where overt politics is notorious for bullying and ragging of students, particularly in the common rooms. So their covert peers have outwitted the overt bodies, who perceive the electoral field as anything but level. The fact that JCD

has yet to submit its panel nomination has cast doubt on the holding of the election on September 9. The ideological clash between the overt and the covert became a generational face-off over the question of 1971. The university’s syndicate in its June meeting amended the DUCSU constitution to symbolically align past and recent struggles by including “July 2024 and other democratic movements” alongside its previously stated objective of upholding the Liberation War of 1971. However, once Shibir presented some convicted Pakistani collaborators of 1971 as “victims of Hasina’s judicial wrongdoings,” it reopened old wounds. While the new generation of Shibir activists has consistently tried to present itself as a modern organisation, their canonisation of the collaborators proved diabolical. Tension has already emerged as the left-leaning parties took a strong stance to protect the ideals of 1971.

Thus, DUCSU polls 2025, which is supposed to be a fresh start for student politics in a post-uprising Bangladesh, has already entered an uncanny site threatened by the conflicted, compromised, and choreographed politics of the past. We are growing more unsure about who holds the true power. Underneath the surface, there is also the allegation of the student group belonging to the fallen Awami League mobilising. The inclusion of four new posts in DUCSU—covering research, career development, health and environment, and human rights—is a welcome change. Those participating in the election should focus on these new areas to diversify students’ career prospects and interests. To take advantage of the nation’s demographic dividend, there is no other option but to upskill and reskill our young generation. DUCSU can initiate that capacity-building movement just like the way it led other sociopolitical movements—from the Language Movement in 1952, to the Liberation War in 1971, to the anti-autocratic movement in 1990, to the July uprising in 2024. The DUCSU polls are more than a student event. They play a pivotal role in shaping our national political landscape. The Election Commission will do well to address the issue of accommodating female voters. Relocating women’s polling stations to an overcrowded TSC can materially reduce turnout and benefit certain candidates. If mobilised effectively, the female vote could decide close contests, particularly in central posts. One hopes that the DUCSU polls next month will deliver a clean, competitive, and inclusive election, thus potentially uplifting the national mood ahead of the general election. Failure to do so will reinforce cynicism and add weight to those arguing that democratic revival is still more a performance than practice. By treating the DUCSU election as a test for the nation’s democratic credibility, we can send out the message that here is a democracy that is genuinely representative, autonomous, and free of intimidation. That democracy in Bangladesh is being rebuilt not just from the top down, but also from the ground up.

## ‘Now the teachers adore me’ A mother’s grief exposes a broken education system



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“Do you know what my little bird told me after coming home from school? She said, ‘Ammu, get me into coaching. If you don’t, the miss won’t be nice to me.’ Then, after seven days of enrolling her in the coaching centre, she said, ‘Now the teachers adore me.’” Umme Tamima Akhter, the mother of a Milestone School and College student who tragically died in last month’s plane crash on the school premises, is seen saying this in a video that has been circulating on social media. Speaking at a human chain near the school in Uttara’s Diabari on August 12, she said her daughter, Mariam Umme



FILE PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Coaching centres started as supplementary support, but now they have morphed into a shadow economy of education.

**Coaching classes run by schoolteachers themselves are not new in Bangladesh. It’s a parallel system where students, especially at secondary and higher secondary levels, are taught in groups, either in classrooms or in nearby coaching centres, before or after school hours, by the very same teachers who teach them at school. However, the dependence on coaching centres has reached alarming levels over the past few decades.**

Afia, had been waiting for her coaching classes to begin in the very building where the fighter jet crashed. Accusing the school authorities, she asked, “Why did they say there was no coaching? Coaching is a major part of the school.” Her words conveyed more than grief; they laid bare a disturbing

truth about our education system, exposing a vicious culture that has eroded the very essence of learning. Coaching classes run by schoolteachers themselves are not new in Bangladesh. It’s a parallel system where students, especially at secondary and higher secondary levels, are taught in groups, either in classrooms or in nearby coaching centres, before or after school hours, by the very same teachers who teach them at school. However, the dependence on coaching centres has reached alarming levels over the past few decades. Today, it is hard to find a school—government or private, reputed or average, in Dhaka or other major cities in Bangladesh—where this practice isn’t rampant. And now, what started as supplementary support has morphed into a shadow economy of education, one that thrives on fear, coercion, and inequality. It serves as an additional financial burden for many guardians across the country. In many cases, parents feel compelled to send their children to coaching classes and spend hefty fees, not merely due to a lack of quality education at

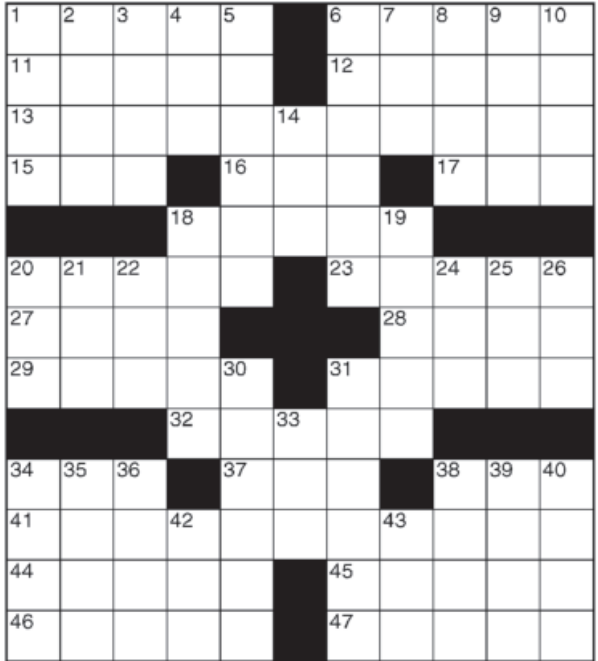
school, but also out of fear. They allege that many teachers intentionally hold back in class, creating conditions where students who skip coaching inevitably fall behind. Some worry their children will be penalised with lower marks or subjected to subtle forms of harassment. Then there is another group

introduced a policy to curb the “coaching business” by preventing teachers from tutoring students from their own institutions. The rules, drafted after a High Court order, allowed a teacher, with permission from the head of the institution, to tutor up to 10 students from other schools. They could also conduct remedial classes for weaker students, but only at the request of parents, and those sessions had to be arranged by the school administration. The policy spelt out implementation steps, set subject-wise monthly remuneration, and even included penalties such as cancellation of the monthly pay order (MPO) for violators. In February 2019, the High Court upheld the policy, noting that the coaching system had harmful effects on the minds of both students and parents. But in reality, the rules are hardly executed. The policy was not followed anywhere in Dhaka or beyond, while the education ministry and its Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education remained largely silent. Officials routinely cited a shortage of manpower for taking any action, given the sheer number of educational institutions across the country, in contrast to the size of their workforce. And so, coaching centres continue to reign supreme. In a country where qualified teachers are scarce, the salaries of educators remain dismally low, textbooks change frequently, and the entire system revolves around high-stakes exams, attempting to curb the coaching menace through fragmented policies and guidelines is a futile endeavour. This is a deep-rooted, decades-old crisis that demands more than cosmetic fixes. It calls for a comprehensive overhaul of the education system, from fair and transparent teacher recruitment with improved remuneration to reducing exam pressure and making classroom learning genuinely engaging. Only by addressing these structural flaws can we break the cycle. In an age of artificial intelligence, where knowledge and skills evolve rapidly, we simply cannot afford to let our children’s futures be held hostage by an outdated and exploitative system.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**  
1 Out of style  
6 Overly eager  
11 Cast member  
12 Stage comment  
13 Stephen King novel  
15 Skirt edge  
16 Take to court  
17 Harden  
18 Bank subtraction  
20 Allude (to)  
23 Some sculptures  
27 Region  
28 Theater box  
29 Market direction  
31 Go through a whole season’s episodes  
32 Recap  
34 Cry loudly  
37 Rented truck  
38 Steaming  
41 Stephen King novel  
44 Silver bar  
45 Knight’s weapon  
46 Romantic dozen  
47 Fencing swords

- DOWN**  
1 Hiking route  
2 Ibuprofen target  
3 Goblet part  
4 Lawn material  
5 Whiteboard need  
6 Accumulate  
7 Fire remnant  
8 Prejudice  
9 Goofing off  
10 Skilled  
14 Massage  
18 College VIPs  
19 Dutch bloom  
20 Lab animal  
21 Blunder  
22 Lawyer’s charge  
24 Singer Henley  
25 Nest item  
26 Spot  
30 Soft quilts  
31 Sizeable sum  
33 Goat sound  
34 Commotion  
35 Cry of distress  
36 Implores  
38 Sharpen  
39 In the past  
40 Golf pegs  
42 Buck’s mate  
43 Ray-gun sound



## WEDNESDAY’S ANSWERS

	P	E	S	T		P	A	D	S	
T	A	L	I	A		A	B	E	T	S
I	R	O	N	S		R	E	N	E	W
T	O	P	E	K	A		V	I	A	
A	L	E	S		T	A	L	E	N	T
N	E	D		P	L	I	E	R	S	
			F	R	A	M	E			
	S	P	O	O	N	S		A	S	K
T	H	I	R	S	T		A	C	M	E
O	R	E			A	U	S	T	I	N
W	I	R	E	D		S	P	I	L	T
N	E	R	V	E		D	I	V	E	S
	K	E	E	N		A	C	E	S	

### CORRIGENDUM

In the crossword puzzle no. 8-1 published in yesterday’s paper, the set of clues provided were incorrect. We regret this error. Here is the puzzle with the correct set of clues.

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