

■ DUCSU ELECTIONS ■

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How are students feeling about it?

MEHRAB JAMEE

The Dhaka University Central Students' Union, more commonly known as the DUCSU, is holding elections after six long years. But arguably, a fair election has not been held since the 1990s. The last DUCSU election, held in 2019 under the Awami League government, was marred by controversies and election irregularities.

Critics slammed the election on counts of voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, and an extremely uneven playing field, providing an unfair advantage to the ruling party's student wing, Bangladesh Chhatro League (BCL). Out of the 25 posts up for election, BCL was declared victorious in 23. The only major upset was Nurul Haque Nur, a leading figure in the quota reform protests of 2018, winning the top post of Vice President (VP).

However, the panel quickly became dysfunctional after the election, with clashes taking place between the VP's supporters and BCL activists on campus. Nur was assaulted a number of times himself, and with that, the glimmer of hope that appeared for a restoration of campus democracy at Dhaka University (DU) was nipped.

After their tenure ended in 2020, subsequent elections were not held. BCL continued to illegally dominate all aspects of student politics at the DU campus.

After the July uprising and the fall of the Awami League regime, BCL was banned nationwide. Students' political organisations started to regroup and rearrange themselves after years of being suppressed and persecuted. Voices

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in favour of healthy political practice raised the demand for fresh Students' Union elections in various public universities, DU being the first to hold them.

DUCSU, constitutionally a non-political platform for student leadership and a nurturing ground for democratic practice, is to hold fresh elections. A total of 471 candidates have been confirmed to contest in the upcoming election on September 9, 2025. Almost all major student parties have announced their endorsed panels, along with a notable number of candidates running as independents. The number of candidates has nearly doubled compared to the previous elections, as the university authorities are promising a free and fair election.

So, are students more hopeful this time round?

Ahmed Abdul Mukit, a student at the Department of Political Science, remarked, "It feels good to see that DUCSU elections are finally happening after so many years. For now, I see a lot of rhetoric, and I hope at least 50 percent of it will actually be delivered. If each candidate can fulfil even half of their declared manifesto, the campus environment



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

will move significantly towards progress. We are just hoping for a fair election where competent candidates are elected."

Another student, Junayet Rasel, a master's student at the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, said, "My expectation from this DUCSU is that, once elected, the promises made in words are reflected in action, moving away from the culture of blind partisan loyalty."

A sizable chunk of the student body, however, remains disillusioned with the concept of campus politics in general. Samiha Binte Kibria, a student at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), DU, said, "During my time at university, I haven't really seen anything impactful done by previous DUCSU representatives or any other student representatives for that matter. Even during the darkest days of DU in July last year, it was the general students who fought for real change, be it from self-determination or their commitment to their fellows and this nation."

Regarding the need for an official body for the representation of general students' demands, she said, "During the most trying times, the general students came together and were able to realise their demands by communicating with the authority. I am not sure how DUCSU representatives will do a better job at this. The whole thing feels unnecessary."

Depoliticising university campuses was one of the original nine-point demands of the July protests. But this has been nearly impossible to execute in reality on most campuses. Even Students Against Discrimination (SAD), the leading banner for the uprising, and their political successor party, the National Citizen Party (NCP), are quietly stepping away from campus depoliticisation.

So, if not depoliticisation, can healthy politics replace the patronage politics of the past? What role can DUCSU play here?

"DUCSU is not only a breeding ground for leadership, but it also plays an important role in safeguarding students'

rights, in policymaking, and even in national politics. In representing the voices of DU students, DUCSU could be the strongest platform if elections are held at regular intervals," said Farhan Ahmed, a student at the Department of Law.

Speaking about what a dynamic DUCSU can do to restore faith in the disillusioned voter, Mukit said, "DUCSU should function as a non-political student forum. We will vote for our representatives to work in our interest and not in the interest of any other party. After fulfilling their promise to the general students, candidates can maintain a role in any political party they choose."

From its inception in 1922, there have been 37 DUCSU elections. The platform has produced many influential politicians, lawmakers, and leaders in the past. But infrequent elections after the 1990s, political instability, and partisan violence have eroded trust in this democratic institution.

With the entire country going through a period of reconstruction and reform of age-old institutions, many students of DU are daring to aspire for a democratic DUCSU once more. Junayet ended on a hopeful note, "In my view, DUCSU is essential because it brings student politics under accountability. If student politics is here to stay, leaders must be kept accountable."

Although students believe previous DUCSU elections have failed in many regards, because of the change in campus culture post August 5, they hope this election will bring positive change for the campus and the general students.

Reference:

Dhaka Tribune (March 12, 2019). *Irregularities rule Ducusu polls.*

Mehrab Jamee is a 5th year medical student at Mugda Medical College and writes to keep himself sane.