

State minister’s DU remarks and the bigger crisis in higher education



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The recent remarks by State Minister for Primary and Mass Education Bobby Hajjaj comparing Dhaka University to a coaching centre triggered predictable outrage. Students protested, teachers condemned the comments, and even pro-BNP teachers associated with Hajjaj’s own political camp publicly distanced themselves from the statement. Faced with mounting criticism, the minister eventually withdrew his remarks.

Yet the controversy may have obscured a more important question. Was the problem merely what was said, or does the intensity of the reaction reflect a deeper discomfort about the state of higher education in Bangladesh? After all, concerns about the purpose, quality, and direction of higher education are hardly new. Major newspapers have carried a steady stream of critical articles that differ in emphasis but converge on a common concern: Bangladesh has expanded higher education, yet its quality, relevance, innovation, and impact continue to lag behind national aspirations.

My own research has reached similar conclusions. Together with a team, I have examined student experiences in public and private universities through the Academic Experience Project, a series of 14 articles based on extensive investigative work. In addition, surveys conducted in 2003, 2013, and 2026 involving nearly 2,000 students from leading public and private universities revealed a consistent pattern: student satisfaction with teaching and courses has not improved much over more than two decades, suggesting that many institutions simply do not care to



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improve or are struggling to adapt to changing expectations and learning environments. This should concern all of us because universities are not simply degree-granting factories. They are meant to be engines of intellectual growth, innovation, job-readiness, and social mobility.

The uncomfortable reality is that Bangladesh’s higher education system has been drifting for decades. There has been no clear direction for it to pursue. Public investment in education also remains among the lowest in South Asia, hovering around 2 percent of GDP. Leadership positions in many educational institutions are often shaped by political considerations rather than demonstrated academic or managerial

competence. Institutional reforms are sporadic, fragmented, and rarely sustained. The absence of substantive research—and the anomalies that persist—reduces these institutions to the level of ordinary colleges rather than true universities. Meanwhile, the expectations from universities continue to grow.

The result is a system that often rewards enrolment stability, fee collection, high GPA and pass rates, and administrative compliance

of select institutions, while others have become increasingly sceptical of academic credentials altogether. Often, graduates have to sit for additional testing to demonstrate competence. The gap between what universities teach and what employers need appears to be widening.

There is also a persistent complaint from university administrators that their institutions confront a deeper crisis of coherence extending beyond isolated operational deficiencies. They repeatedly returned to concerns regarding governance ambiguity, weakening academic culture, organisational fragmentation, leadership deficits, and growing market pressures.

Problems extend beyond the universities themselves. Higher education reflects broader societal malaise. Governments demand results but often underinvest in the sector. Policymakers announce ambitious visions but fail to provide coherent implementation frameworks and needed support. Media attention tends to focus on controversies rather than long-term reform. Civil society frequently and virulently critiques outcomes without engaging deeply with the structural challenges.

Perhaps most troubling is the marginalisation of many academics in discussions about educational reform. Those who devote their lives to teaching, research, and knowledge creation are often excluded from major policy decisions that concern them. Universities cannot flourish when academic voices are treated as an afterthought, and sometimes with disdain.

All of these matters because the global economy is increasingly driven by knowledge, innovation, technological capability, and competition. Countries that lead the world today do so not merely because of natural resources or cheap labour, but because they have invested consistently in education, research ecosystems, scientific inquiry, and the cultivation of talent. Universities sit at the centre of that process.

Viewed from this perspective, the state

minister’s remarks may have been less of an attack on a particular institution than an expression—however imperfectly stated—of frustration with a system that is not performing at the level the country needs. Dhaka University happened to be the focal point of the controversy because of its symbolic status as the nation’s premier public university.

But the larger question remains: where do Bangladesh’s universities stand relative to Asia’s and the world’s leading institutions, and what must be done to close the gap? This is a matter of building, disseminating, using, and archiving *knowledge capital*, the intellectual, human, and innovative capacity that drives national progress. The question is about promoting meritocracy, because the future will not reward mediocrity. High-quality employment increasingly requires sophisticated analytical skills, creativity, adaptability, and the ability to solve complex problems. These capabilities cannot be developed through rote learning, outdated curricula, or an educational culture that discourages inquiry and experimentation.

So, the challenge before Bangladesh now is to transform higher education, which will require better leadership, greater accountability, stronger research cultures, closer engagement with industry, more meaningful investment, and a renewed commitment to academic excellence.

The controversy surrounding State Minister Hajjaj’s remarks should not end with outrage alone. If his comments touch an uncomfortable reality and provoke a candid national conversation about the weaknesses of our educational system and the reforms necessary to strengthen it, they may ultimately serve a constructive purpose. In that sense, the minister deserves credit—not for the wording of his remarks, which many found objectionable, but for drawing public attention to a challenge that Bangladesh can no longer afford to ignore.

Violence is not power, and our leaders should stop confusing the two



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To paraphrase the famous science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, the source of true power for a nation is the ability to get your way without having to resort to violence. Few observations better capture the crisis of our time. Across continents, leaders increasingly confuse coercion with strength, fear with authority, and destruction with victory. Yet, history repeatedly demonstrates the opposite: violence may compel submission for a moment, but it rarely produces legitimacy, stability, or lasting success and peace.

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt made this distinction with great clarity. In her seminal work, *On Violence*, Arendt argued that power and violence are not the same thing. Genuine power emerges from consent, collective legitimacy, and the willingness of people to act together. Violence, by contrast, appears when power has already begun to erode. “Power and violence are opposites,” she wrote. “Where one rules absolutely, the other is absent.” In other words, regimes resort to violence precisely when they can no longer persuade.

Bangladesh’s recent history offers a

painful illustration. The regime of Sheikh Hasina relied increasingly on coercion to maintain control: enforced disappearances, intimidation of critics, suppression of dissent, politicisation of institutions, and repeated crackdowns on opposition movements. For years, these tactics appeared effective. Fear silenced many voices. Elections lost credibility. Public institutions weakened under partisan interventions.

But violence did not strengthen the state; it weakened it. A government may suppress opposition temporarily, but it cannot indefinitely suppress public resentment, institutional decay, and the gradual collapse of trust. The very dependence on coercion revealed the political weakness of an inability to command voluntary legitimacy. Ultimately, violence could not protect Hasina or save her regime, because the lid of the boiling pot of accumulated resentment flew open, causing a mass uprising after the so-called election of 2024.

Had Arendt been alive, she would have recognised the pattern immediately. Violence can destroy power, she argued, but it cannot

consolidate it. Once rulers become dependent on force, they enter a vicious cycle: the more violence they use, the weaker their legitimacy becomes; and the weaker their legitimacy is, the more violence they require.

The same logic now shapes global politics everywhere. In terms of the Middle East, Israeli and US policymakers appear to have increasingly embraced a worldview rooted in raw coercion, one influenced by simplistic readings of ancient power politics. A recent opinion piece by Lydia Polgreen in *The New York Times* argues that senior officials in Washington invoked the Greek historian Thucydides to justify confrontation and domination while fundamentally misunderstanding his deeper warnings about hubris, fear, and strategic overreach.

The so-called Thucydides Trap—the idea that rising and established powers are destined to be in conflict—has become fashionable among geopolitical hawks. But the lesson from Thucydides is often dangerously misunderstood: that force is inevitable and, therefore, preferable. In reality, Thucydides chronicled how fear, arrogance, and the pursuit of domination pushed Athens and Sparta into catastrophic war.

The consequences of such thinking are visible today. Military escalation in the Middle East has produced catastrophic human suffering while solving few underlying political problems. Bombing campaigns may demonstrate destructive capacity, but they rarely create durable peace or democratic legitimacy. The US should have learned it from Iraq and Afghanistan. Israel,

unfortunately, continues to demonstrate it tragically. Violence often creates precisely the instability it claims to eliminate by creating enemies rather than friends.

The war in Ukraine offers perhaps the starkest contemporary example. Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion, expecting swift submission. Instead, Russia faces prolonged war, economic strain, diplomatic isolation, and mounting domestic costs. Ukraine, meanwhile, has expanded strikes deep into Russian territory, including attacks on oil infrastructure. These operations have disrupted refining capacity and inflicted serious environmental damage inside Russia.

Recent reports describe toxic smoke, oil spills, contaminated coastlines, and “black rain” falling over Russian communities after refinery strikes. The war has not only devastated Ukraine; it has brought destruction home to ordinary Russians who had once felt insulated from the conflict. More seriously, in recent times, Ukraine appears to be gaining ground on the war front.

This is the paradox of violence: it rarely remains contained. Once normalised, it expands geographically, politically, and morally. States that rely excessively on force often become trapped by it.

Even when violence achieves temporary tactical gains, it frequently fails strategically. Russia may occupy territory, but it has lost enormous international standing and long-term economic security. The US may project military might, but coercive diplomacy increasingly undermines its global credibility. Authoritarian governments may temporarily

silence dissent, but repression eventually corrodes the institutions necessary for stable governance.

True power works differently. A genuinely powerful nation does not need to terrorise journalists, imprison critics, bomb civilians, or silence opposition to maintain authority. It persuades more than it coerces. It builds institutions rather than personal cults. It commands trust rather than fear.

This is why democratic legitimacy ultimately proves more resilient than authoritarian force.

Democracies certainly have their failures and hypocrisies, but systems grounded in public consent possess a regenerative capacity absent in coercive regimes. They can self-correct because they permit criticism. Violence suppresses criticism until reality itself becomes impossible to suppress.

Bangladesh now faces the choice of continuing to normalise the politics of intimidation and vengeance, or rebuilding political legitimacy through institutions, accountability, and democratic inclusion. Arendt’s warning remains urgently relevant: violence appears where power is in jeopardy. Leaders who govern primarily through fear are not displaying strength. They are revealing weakness and insecurity.

The strongest nations are not those that can inflict the greatest damage. They are those who can secure cooperation without brutality, resolve conflict without repression, and earn loyalty without violence. That is real power. We hope the ruling BNP will take note of it.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

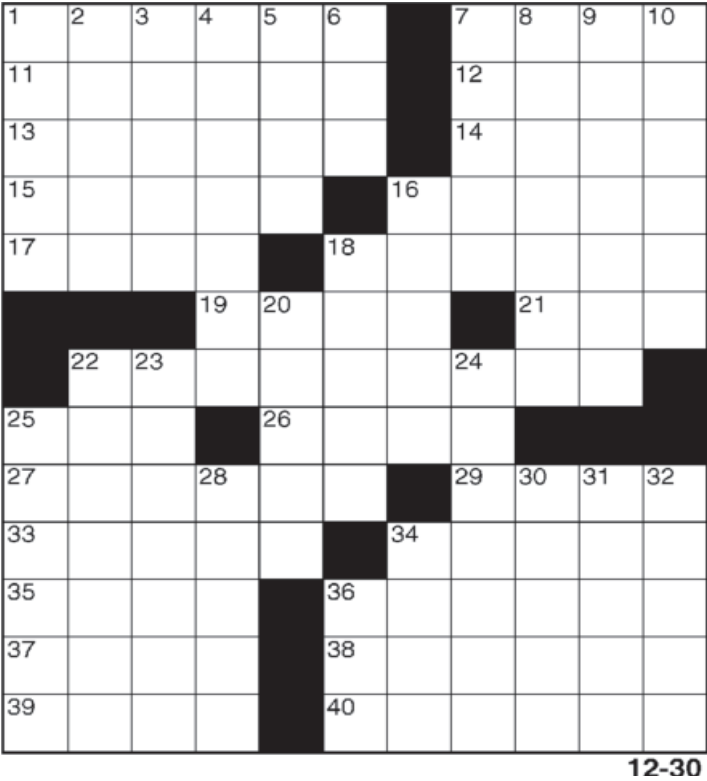
ACROSS

- Fighting
- Lab container
- For each
- Analogy words
- Feel empathy
- Visitor to Oz
- Spoiled kids
- Dyeing art
- Lacking
- Bible dancer
- Earth circle
- For each
- Some manipulated photos and videos
- Goat sound
- Account
- Pearl producer
- Puppy sounds
- Place
- Of the kidneys
- Atlantic catches
- Garment with laces
- Handling the situation
- Smiling, perhaps
- Decline

40 Gets narrower

DOWN

- No-no on some diets
- Met work
- European fashion center
- “I have no clue”
- Play parts
- Kicker’s aid
- Crucial
- Uranium-235, for one
- Now and then
- Attractive person
- Trite
- Up to now
- Made a choice
- Florida race site
- Entered cautiously
- Excited
- Kremlin setting
- Critical asset
- Ouzo flavor
- Track horse
- Some coasters
- Capital of Italia
- Ball club



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