Dhaka University and the enduring cycle of partisan control



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As Bangladesh approached the second anniversary of the July uprising, Dhaka University (DU) authorities suspended three teachers and relieved four others of their academic and administrative responsibilities over various allegations. Moreover, under the banner of "Anti-Fascist Teachers of Dhaka University," more than 100 teachers submitted a memorandum to the vice-chancellor that included a list of 231 teachers accused of being affiliated with the Awami League (AL) and various left-leaning groups, of opposing the uprising, and of siding with "fascist forces." The memorandum demanded action against the accused teachers and a ban on the Blue Panel's activities—the AL-leaning platform of teachers at DU. The university authorities responded by forming a committee to investigate the allegations.

This dispute reminded me of something a trusted comrade posted on social media a few weeks after the uprising. She wrote that the vision of July could not be achieved unless we underwent a process of de-Awamisation. De-Awamisation means dismantling the harmful practices that the AL regime normalised during its 15 years in power. In institutions of higher education, these practices included partisan appointments, targeted disciplinary proceedings, ideological loyalty tests, the repression of criticism, mob pressure, weaponisation of law, and, most importantly, the conversion of universities into instruments and extensions of the state and the governing political party.

The latest controversy therefore raises a question much larger than the fate of the individual faculty members affected. It pushes us to consider how institutions of higher learning in Bangladesh have historically collaborated with powerful state and non-state actors and remained complicit in repressing political opponents and dissident voices. The mechanisms of repression include influencing funding allocation, curtailing academic freedom, obstructing educational content, imposing punitive legal and administrative sanctions for criticising the government or addressing particular topics, stigmatising and demonising dissenters, repressing student activism, and securitising campuses.

Let us take a quick tour through recent history.

Professor Morshed Hasan Khan of the Department of Marketing at DU published an opinion piece in a national daily on March 25, 2018, in which he described Ziaur Rahman as the "announcer of independence" and claimed that most AL leaders, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had left the country during the 1971 Liberation War. Later, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) protested on campus, declared him persona non grata, and submitted a memorandum urging authorities to take immediate action against him. Eventually, the authorities terminated Professor Khan over allegations that he had distorted the history of the Liberation War and defamed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Of course, institutional repression carried out in conjunction with the state was not limited to DU. Maidul Islam, a professor at the University of Chittagong (CU), faced a massive online smear campaign because of his critical social media posts led by BCL activists and colleagues who supported the AL government. On August 20, 2023, the CU Teachers' Association held an emergency meeting and urged the VC to take legal action against Professor Islam for criticising the government. The professor received a show-cause notice and was arrested and imprisoned for 37 days.

In 2020, Sirajum Munira, a lecturer in the Department of Bangla at Begum Rokeya University, faced a complaint filed by university authorities over a Facebook post that allegedly mocked Mohammad Nasim, the then health minister. She was eventually arrested under the infamous Digital Security Act. A few days later, Zahidur Rahman, an assistant professor in the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at Rajshahi University, was suspended and later arrested under the same Digital Security Act for criticising Mohammad Nasim on social media. The list goes on.

Just as academics were arrested, suspended, or dismissed for criticising powerful political actors and institutions during the AL regime, under the current BNP government too, affiliation with the former regime or an insufficiently enthusiastic interpretation of the July uprising may become grounds for professional exclusion, repercussions, and punishment. Since winning the 2026 election, the BNP government seems to have restored partisan control over top-level administrative appointments at public universities. Following the February 12 election, the government appointed new VCs to seven public universities, all of whom had direct connections to the ruling political party. As a columnist later pointed out, there has been a sweeping "cleanse" of university leadership, followed by reported "counter-purges" against academics considered insufficiently loyal to the new political order.



VISUAL: **ALIZA RAHMAN**

Against this backdrop, let us examine the recent DU move. Notable among the suspended teachers is Professor Sadeka Halim of the Department of Sociology. Halim, a former VC of Jagannath University, was suspended over allegations of conduct "unbecoming of a teacher both inside and outside the classroom," as well as offenses involving "moral turpitude." It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the specific allegations or the procedural questions and concerns surrounding the case. What seems particularly problematic, however, is that public responses to her suspension—both in mainstream and social media—have split into two opposing camps. One group has focused on establishing that Halim possesses superior moral character and has been an exceptional mentor, educator, and administrator. The other has devoted its energy to depicting her as an awful person and professional, often through a broader smear campaign.

I would argue that two crucial issues are lost within this binary debate. First, there is a need to recognise that institutions of higher education demonstrate a recurring pattern of selectively targeting political opponents and acting as extensions of the state. Second, we must distinguish between accountability and partisan punishment.

Accountability identifies specific conduct, examines evidence, allows the accused to respond, and imposes proportionate consequences. Partisan punishment begins with a person's political identity and then works backwards to construct guilt. The University Teachers' Network articulated this distinction clearly: "Accountability must be ensured through established legal processes and natural justice, not through vengeance or an ideological purge." The network emphasised that political beliefs, identities, or support for a particular political organisation cannot, by themselves, constitute professional misconduct. It also warned that blanket investigations could produce a university-wide "witch-hunt."

Sadeka Halim's political background is no secret. She served on the AL advisory council and was appointed VC of Jagannath University during the party's rule. However, political affiliation cannot substitute for evidence. Terms such as "moral turpitude" and "conduct unbecoming of a teacher" are broad and vague categories that can conceal political decisions beneath the language of institutional discipline. At the same syndicate meeting, faculty members were also relieved of their responsibilities over alleged activities "contrary to the spirit of the July uprising," for spreading "propaganda" against the university administration and the government, and for supporting a banned organisation. What exactly constitutes the "spirit of July"? Can criticising the incumbent government or holding an oppositional political view violate that spirit, or be classified as propaganda?

For 15 years, the AL regime encouraged people to view the party, government, state, and nation as interchangeable. True de-Awamisation means dismantling this political architecture. It requires ending the appointment of active party officials and leaders of partisan teachers' organisations as VCs. It requires restoring meaningful Senate elections and limiting executive control over university leadership. It requires transparent faculty recruitment, independent review bodies, protection from intimidation, and disciplinary procedures grounded in clearly defined professional standards. It also requires separating political expression from professional misconduct. A university teacher should be free to criticise the BNP government, the AL, university administrators, religious organisations and practices, nationalist orthodoxies, and even dominant interpretations of the July uprising—provided that the teacher does not incite violence, discriminate against students, or abuse institutional authority.

De-Awamisation also means rejecting collective guilt. Not every AL supporter participated in repression. Not every teacher appointed between 2009 and 2024 was unqualified. Not every administrator who remained in office endorsed every action of the repressive government. Individual responsibility must be established through individualised evidence. The "spirit of July" should not become what the "spirit of the Liberation War" became under AL rule: a morally powerful historical ideal appropriated by the state and the government and converted into an instrument for policing political speech.

De-Awamisation is, in fact, the most important precondition for realising July's vision because AL's deepest legacy is not a particular group of people. Its deepest legacy is a political culture. It is the culture of appointing loyalists and calling it governance. It is the culture of silencing critics and calling it discipline. It is the culture of mobilising mobs and calling it popular demand. It is the culture of treating political opposition as moral failure. It is the culture of using universities to reproduce state ideology rather than challenge power.

The test for DU—and for every other institution of higher learning—is therefore not how many AL-affiliated professors it can suspend, dismiss, or investigate. The test is whether it can create and implement procedures that remain fair regardless of which party governs Bangladesh and regardless of the political identity of the accused. The test is whether it can achieve the radical and transformative goal of genuine de-Awamisation by freeing Bangladesh from its authoritarian political traditions.

Where is that change people shed their blood for?



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EMRAN MAHFUZ

Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, the minister of local government, rural development and co-operatives, recently expressed his frustration at the prevailing state of governance, saying, "In my four-five months of experience as a minister, I have realised that nothing has changed. Those who used to take bribes are still devising ways to do so, and those who used to obstruct good initiatives are continuing to obstruct them." This frank admission captures a painful truth about how the post-July uprising era is playing out.

Let us take a step back here. From 1952 to 1971, from 1990 to 2024—every turning point in our history has been marked by the sacrifice of countless people. Why do people shed blood? What compels them to endure unimaginable suffering and even embrace death? Surely it is in the hope for a fair and just society, where people's rights will be protected, the state and its institutions will be accountable, and hard-earned change will not be limited to only power changing hands.

But what are witnessing today transcends economic and governance concerns. The very people who had stood shoulder to shoulder in July-August 2024, responding to the call of protesting students and refusing to compromise on their demands for rights and reform, now stand divided. The unity that once was their driving force is beginning to fracture, forcing us to ask whether, after so many sacrifices made, so much blood shed, and so many dreams nurtured, we have been able to prepare the foundations for the change we so longed for.

I remember reading a story by Principal Ibrahim Khan, where, during a devastating flood, when people were forced to abandon their homes in search of safety, the character of Boro Mia was carefully loading his belongings onto a boat. Then, facing the same reality, rats, snakes, and other creatures also quietly climbed aboard, none attacking each other until they reached safety. In the face of disaster, they all recognised a singular goal: surviving. We witnessed something similar in real life during the devastating floods of 2024, when reports emerged of people sharing a shelter with snakes and other animals. In times of catastrophe, nature imparts on us a profound lesson—that in the face of a common threat, our differences become secondary, and survival becomes the only priority.

The July mass uprising reflected that same spirit. Men and women, those in burqas and those without, individuals from different political beliefs, social backgrounds, and identities all took to the streets together. Two years ago, no one questioned another person's attire, identity, or ideology because we were all united towards a common goal. But the moment we felt that the danger had passed, we drifted back into our old divisions. Debates erupted about who had belonged to which camp before, who shouted out the loudest slogans, who posted what on social media, or whose contribution measured higher. The tallying of achievements has become the most important thing. As if we have become free of every crisis. As if there is nothing left to achieve together.



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FILE PHOTO: **REUTERS**

What we fail to realise is that it is this very competition for recognition that is weakening us. History demonstrates how great achievements are often destroyed not by external enemies, but by internal divisions. That is why preserving the unity that once transformed us into a powerful collective matters far more today than placing garlands of glory around our own necks.

To me, the spirit of 1971 and 2024 represents the ideas of social dignity, justice, and freedom from discrimination. That is why I oppose attempts to stop Mohan Raihan from reciting his poetry. For the same reason, I condemn the unlawful intrusion into the private life of former Jamaat leader and MP Gazi Nazrul. I also oppose the public humiliation of anyone simply because they privately support Awami League. Likewise, I condemn the harassment of AB Party leader Asaduzzaman Fuad in Babuganj, Barishal.

An act of injustice must be named as such, no matter who commits it. It is precisely in pursuit of the right and courage to speak this truth that people have made supreme sacrifices from 1971 to 2024. We rejected Hasina's rule because people were forcibly disappeared, violence was unleashed indiscriminately, false cases were routinely filed, and inequalities widened across society. Yet, sadly, that culture of repression and discrimination has not disappeared afterwards. Once, people used to be branded as "Jamaat-Shibir." Today, they are labelled "Awami/fascist collaborators." This tendency of tagging is detrimental to our unity. A democratic state cannot allow people to be shamed or punished outside the law by assigning them a political label.

The question is: why are the cases against the principal July perpetrators not moving forward more decisively through the legal process? If there are specific allegations against anyone, legal action must follow without delay. Punishment should be proportional to the crime committed. Justice must rely on evidence, and not be guided by the political identity of the accused. Let there be thorough investigations, and let justice be done. That said, is it unreasonable to expect a democratic society to remain humane and tolerant in its political and social spheres? Have we forgotten that the martyrs did not lay down their lives so that we could replace one cycle of hatred and revenge with another? They sacrificed so that we could move towards a peaceful, dignified, and just society. How much longer will we continue to nurture these needless divisions and this culture of vengeance? We must seek freedom from every form of oppression and injustice.

It is true, however, that over the past years, a section of poets, writers, journalists and academics openly aligned themselves with and flattered the Awami League in ways that were deeply unacceptable. Their intellectual surrender to political power and willingness to legitimise injustice harmed society. If anyone once again uses their professional identity as a shield while acting as an unquestioning servant of a new political order, discerning sections of the public will surely recognise them for what they really are.

But in resisting one form of injustice, we must not become defenders of another. In opposing authoritarianism, we must not normalise authoritarian behaviour ourselves. At this moment, what we need most is a shared sense of responsibility. Not revenge, but justice. Not divisions based on political identity, but rather equal application of the law. The unity that once gave us the strength to stand together must not be weakened by our own actions. We still have a long way to go. There is much to be done. Let's bring back our unity to finish the task of rebuilding our society.