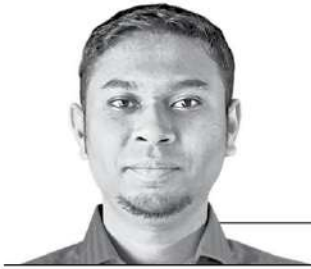


DU must lead by example in abolishing partisan politics

A note to the new vice-chancellor



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As the tide of reform sweeps across institutions with changes taking place in the leadership positions, the interim government and university authorities must ensure that teachers and students are no longer dragged into party-based politics in academic institutions. The present political affiliation of teachers and students is counterproductive for academic excellence.

The brand of student politics that has been prevalent in Bangladesh's universities since the 1990s is nothing short of running criminal rackets in academic institutions. From controlling access to student accommodations, to assaulting and even killing students critical of the party in power and interference in every other institutional decision, student politics in the academic institutions earned the reputation of notoriety, serving the dictatorial aspirations of mainstream political parties.

This environment has undermined institutional autonomy, discipline, and integrity. I hope that Dhaka University, under the leadership of the new Vice-Chancellor Professor Niaz Ahmed Khan, who was also my teacher, will lead by example the abolition of party-based politics in all academic institutions.

Thuggery in the name of student politics

We must not forget the brutality that so-called student leaders of the mainstream political parties have waged against regular students. In October 2019, 21-year-old Abrar Fahad, a student at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), was killed inside the university's student dormitory by a group of students belonging to Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of the Bangladesh Awami League. He was tortured inside the student dormitory for several hours before he died from internal injuries. Abrar's life was cut short because of his criticism on Facebook against the previous government's deals with India.

The brutality against Abrar is not the first of the hallmarks of terrorism and violence that the present brand of student politics has unleashed in academic institutions. This has been the culture inside public universities since the 1990s.

The private universities have for the longest time strictly prevented activities of mainstream political parties in their institutions. However, in the last couple of years, student committees representing the BCL have been formed in some of these universities as well. Teachers have resorted to self-



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prohibited racial discrimination in voting, education and employment, the 1952 Language Movement to recognise Bangla as the state language in East Pakistan, the Fridays for Future movement initiated by Greta Thunberg in 2018 against human-induced effects on climate, or the most recent student-led anti-discrimination movement that resulted in the fall of a tyrannical rule in Bangladesh.

Another teacher at a public

university recently shared with me her fears about the repression being carried out against teachers, who are being forced to resign by students due to their political affiliation with the previous ruling Awami League party.

Universities are also grappled by a wave of ultra conservative demands of some student bodies that have time and again risen to breach the privacy and freedom of others. This includes denying religious freedom and dictating how female teachers and students should carry themselves. Bangladesh is only free from oppression and discrimination when the minority in the country can truly enjoy the same freedom as the majority.

Institutions must promote civil and political rights

Student politics have played significant role globally at shaping discourses and ushering in social and political changes, whether it was the civil rights movement in the US in the 1950s and 60s that

rights that have paved the way for people to come together and organise for genuine causes in public interest. Students and the youth have led by example many of these movements for political change.

The right to freedom of expression, assembly, and association is fluid and entitled to everyone under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the Constitution of Bangladesh. They do not draw any distinction between race, age, gender, religion, ethnicity, economic, social, or political values.

This must not be confused with the thuggery that student wings of the mainstream political parties have brandished across academic institutions. To advance the political agenda of the parties in power, they have suppressed intellectual debates, academic and fundamental freedoms in institutions. This cannot be allowed to continue.

Institutional integrity critical for reform

A young teacher at Dhaka University, whom I spoke to recently, shared that she joined the university at a time when everyone endorsed the blue panel to be in the good books of the administration. The blue panel is the platform of teachers belonging to the Awami League camp. There is also a pink panel composed of left-leaning teachers and a white panel comprising supporters of the right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami. The panel that belongs to the party in government traditionally decides the recruitment and promotions in the university. Political orientation of candidates predominates merit and performance.

Prof Niaz Ahmed Khan is an expert in monitoring and evaluation. It is important that the existing political nexus of students, teachers and political parties do not determine the fate of teachers and functions of academic institutions. Instead, transparent and accountable systems should be in place to determine the recruitment and promotions of academics.

The university, as a matter of priority, should abandon all party-based politics through a policy and define the scope of student politics that strictly upholds the right to practice academic, intellectual, civil, political, social, cultural and religious freedom, and diversity.