

DHAKA UNIVERSITY

# One hell of an unwanted mess for all



**D**HAKA University looks like a bit of a mess. Authorities of all sorts look embarrassed. But to blame it all on the ineffectual and coteries-dependent vice-chancellor is unfair. By installing a party cadre-based, students and teachers, university works up to a point but under stress, it can crack and can, be, counter productive. The government has almost the entire media, muscle and forces on its side but it got involved in a skirmish with general public opinion which it did not win.

The government party's understanding of public opinion appears to be limited to the BNP which it has largely disabled. But the DU protestors were not partisan and the Awami League seems less able to know what to do when it comes up with non-partisan resentment.

Public alienation from political parties has never been higher. This includes the ruling party and the opposition and parties seem out of touch with public opinion. The way out could have been mainstream media but sadly the larger part of the media, mostly children of crony capitalism, is more keen to display political loyalty than provide accurate information. Talk-shows became AL-BNP battlegrounds, which has further fed the impression that old political equations still apply.

This has created a huge gap between the authorities and the protestors and into that stepped in social media with all its rumours, gossip and facts as well. It also reflected the tone of public opinion better and people turned to it rather than mainstream media. Paid media, when partisan, hurts its own cause, even when factual.

The limits of patronage based government once

The group in charge of Dhaka University now is a faction of the AL group there. One is led by former vice-chancellor Arefin Siddique while the counter group is led by the current vice-chancellor and a few others. A virulent inner faction conflict had been on for long and the prime minister reportedly had to personally sit through several 'salish' sessions where both the groups accused each other of many crimes and misdemeanours. The prime minister was not unhappy with Arefin as he had kept Dhaka University quiet, the one location everyone is anxious about.

As the Akhtar group became large, the authorities and the protestors and prime minister, perhaps reluctantly, agreed to a switch. And Akhtarzai, man stepped in as the new vice-chancellor.

The latest situation was triggered by the quota crisis — a fundamentally economic demand — which was unnecessarily turned into a political event by the Awami League. The gap between official statements and public perception was best exemplified by the mystery around the ransacking of the vice-chancellor's house. While the government was saying that anti-quota opponents did it, the police statement that 'professionals' did it turned public eye to look elsewhere. Since the police are capable of tracking down any criminals if they want, the identity of the misbehaving criminals have aroused more suspicions. The result is a backfire with a lot of confusion.

The Sufia Karnaal Hall episode

THE Esha episode has further damaged the image. That Chhatra League has been turning its heat on the activists is no secret nor that many Chhatra League activists had joined the movement. No matter what happened at the hall, the expulsion of Esha was hasty and the subsequent reinstatement was too. This was followed by expulsion of other anti-quota Chhatra League activists. It did not show a campus in control of senior and calm minds, more like an inner clash zone of a political party.

But after Esha's return, the situation worsened. The hall authorities were

emboldened enough to chuck out several opponents and activists of the anti-quota movement. The vice-chancellor and the hall supreme, a party activist, accused them of misinforming people using the social media and cited that as the reason for their ouster at night. It was explained that their phones were searched, evidence found and actions taken.

But it seems, it never even struck them that the entire process could be illegal and the actions could be interpreted negatively by the public. Asking female students to leave in the middle of the night by handing them over to their local guardians is never going to be popular with the general crowd. Dhaka University also never thought that ordinary students might resist and take to the streets.

Ultimately public resentment against the action fuelled by social media forced the authorities to backtrack and take the students back. The Chhatra League too was instructed not to conflict with the protesters. It has in the end left the university, the vice-chancellor, the ruling class and party all look rather uncomfortable and unsure.

The root cause test

THE root of the problem is in the reading of the problem. It lies in an economic policy that is failing to produce enough jobs, those produced are low grade, the number of graduates are swelling and resentment rises as economic opportunities remain weak. It is not about who will win a street fight or protest — of course, the ruling party or police will — but that many are ready to take more risks knowing this as livelihood crisis is the mother of all crisis.

As the government moves to track down social media activists and add conspiratorial colours to the issue, many may be worried. But that cowering down does not make people happy and unhappy people are unpredictable as the events showed.

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প্রতি নং	
তারিখ	
চীফ, পরিসংবহন বিভাগ	
চীফ, ডি.এল.পি বিভাগ	
সিস্টেম ম্যানেজার	
সিনিয়র সিস্টেম এনালিস্ট	
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