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We must protect academic freedom and democracy in universities

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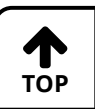


Students and teachers should be allowed to express their views without fear. Photo: Star

Zobaida Nasreen

“Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” — John Milton in Areopagitica (1644)

Last week some students of the University of Science and Technology Chittagong (USTC) physically assaulted Professor Masud Mahmood and poured kerosene on him in an attempt to set him on fire after dragging him out of an academic office. That day, he returned to campus after a probe committee formed by the university found the allegation of his delivering “obscene” lecture to be false. Earlier in mid-April, some students felt that they would have to compromise their moral beliefs listening to the lecture by the English literature professor about male-female relationship and Freudian psychoanalytic theory. They attempted to shut down discussions about topics they disagreed with by demanding his removal. When it was not possible through due process, they threatened him with dire consequences.



In May, Maidul Islam, an assistant professor of sociology at Chittagong University, sought security after at least 10 young men took position outside his apartment at night and threatened to harm him. Eight months earlier, Maidul was arrested in a case filed by a leader of the student wing of the ruling party, for a “defamatory” post on Facebook. The university also suspended Maidul on the same grounds.

In the last week of June, an Islamic organisation reiterated its demand for the removal of a chapter on evolution from all textbooks. In this context, it is worth mentioning that during our school days, we saw our teachers find it challenging to give lectures on love, sexuality and reproductive issues and they would cautiously set aside these topics due to often uninformed and misleading cultural and religious taboos.

These are only a few recent instances in a wave of events that signal a growing climate of intolerance against intellectual inquiry and freedom of thought—the core concerns of academicians all over the world. There are also pro-government student bodies that routinely use force and intimidation to thwart protests on campus. So, there are clear threats to academic freedom from non-state actors, who are increasingly trying to enforce censorship and thought policing through physical assaults, public shaming and so on.

But, more effectively, it is the government and the university administrations that are limiting both academic freedom and democratic dissent on campus by using repressive state apparatus. Laws like the Digital Security Act 2018 have been enacted to criminalise dissent. A number of teachers were arrested, interrogated, suspended or sent on forced leave for Facebook posts critical of the establishment. Curbs on student protests have created a climate of fear and so they cannot speak freely even when they see injustice or inequality.

Last year was a tumultuous year for student protests. So it was no surprise that there was an increase in administrative and police actions against students. On April 18, *Prothom Alo* reported that the police could not yet find any evidence against the students detained during last year’s movement for road safety for their alleged involvement in street violence. Yet, harassment of the students continued. This is a direct form of control that puts the lives and academic careers of protesting students at risk, and ostracises them socially.

But the university administrations are using subtler forms of control, like serving show-cause notice, taking disciplinary action, and suspending studentship to deter students from dissenting against the ruling class. This is an indirect way of intimidating the students into submission.



A brief account of the administration's handling of recent student protests at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University (BSMRSTU) in Gopalganj could be useful to understand how a simple mechanism such as that of serving show-cause notice was manipulated to crush student activism against sexual harassment. The BSMRSTU administration issued show-cause notices to 19 students in May alone and suspended the studentship of another student. Five of them were served the notice on May 9 for their status update on Facebook and sharing newspaper articles on their timelines. Those five took part in protests demanding justice for two of their classmates who had filed sexual harassment complaints against a teacher. Though the students shared news reports and opinion pieces published in national dailies, the administration interpreted it as an attempt to destroy its "image" and an "act of instigation". It took the disciplinary action to send a message to the students that they should not dare to raise their voice against the authorities.

A few days later, the same administration issued show-cause notices to 14 more students. This time the students were campaigning for ensuring a fair price of rice for the farmers. The official reason given to justify the notice was that the students formed a human chain without permission and carried placards critical of the government. Why did these issues command such a response? The disciplinary action against students for protests over a non-academic issue goes to show how narrow the focus of the university has become and how ideologically compromised it is that it can so easily attempt to silence critical voices.

Such indirect forms of control are normalised using a language peculiar to our broader political culture. We are moving dangerously towards a totalitarian situation in almost every sphere of our social life. The three magic terms that have been making the rounds over the years to shut down anti-establishment thoughts are: "image of organisation/country", "popular sentiment", and "instigation". These terms were used countless times to discredit and silence voices from within a community against regressive practices. Such an anti-intellectual ploy has taken deep root in our academia. We are putting our students and teachers in a tight corner where they cannot even voice their frustration over an injustice or inequality without fear.

The suppression of protests is counter-productive, which only makes the spring of freedom inevitable. A side-effect of this might be the flourishing of extremism.

The gradual erosion of autonomy of the universities over several decades is partly to blame for this situation. Increasing government interferences, concentration of too much power in a few hands that are willing to sacrifice the principles of self-organisation and self-governance on the altar of the ruling class, and trampling of freedom of speech—all have



contributed to it. However, we have learned to recognise the value of autonomy of the judiciary, the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the National Human Rights Commission. It is an irony that we are abandoning the ideals of autonomy within the domain of higher education in favour of bureaucratic institutions that are driven by economic value. We have now developed a peculiar higher education system where not all of the taxpayer-funded universities are “public”—the newest ones are known as “government” universities. Since 1998, the number of state-funded universities has increased six-fold (currently 54). But none of the 45 new universities is autonomous; they are all government-controlled.

Our higher education is in a mess right now. It is, as Raymond Williams put it, neither “free play of the market” nor “a public education designed to express and create the values of an educated democracy and a common culture.” So in an increasingly globalised world, where Bangladesh (of course, as a peripheral country situated at the receiving end of the bargain) occupies a significant place by supplying cheap labour in large quantities, we have to seek to recuperate autonomy and academic freedom if we are to build a free and democratic society that would broaden our scope of generating knowledge and innovation.

The students and teachers who are struggling against fear need solidarity. We need an initiative to return universities to their democratic nature which would produce enlightened individuals embodying the values of democracy. To achieve this, we must have campuses free of fear.

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