

# Why must brute force always be the response to student protests?



Photo: Prabir Das/Star

At first it seemed the government was going to show the restraint expected from the state towards students protesting a quota system that needs a logical reform. Sadly, it did not take long for the government to take an unnecessarily hardline in an attempt to squash the spirit of these young people. What could have been resolved through a discussion as expected from any government, ended up being yet another violent suppression of the voices of students.

In an all too familiar sequence, when students on campuses throughout the country, spontaneously started protesting comments of the prime minister regarding their movement at a press conference on Sunday, members of the Chhatra League were ready and waiting to attack.



[For all latest news, follow The Daily Star's Google News channel.](#)

What followed was not something too surprising. Yet one cannot fail to be shocked at the brutality with which students, even women students, were beaten with rods and sticks. The images are hard to forget – students beaten unconscious, a student looking dazed as blood poured down his face, a capture of a man raising a stick just before it would hit two young women, a female student, unconscious, being taken to the hospital, young men with sticks and rods chasing students before hitting them mercilessly – these are not scenes from a battlefield but from campuses of universities.

University campuses that resemble riot scenes. Student protesters who had gone to the emergency centre of Dhaka Medical College Hospital with their wounded fellow protesters were beaten up inside the hospital. Is this why young people go to universities – to either get beaten up or to be part of groups that do the beating?

Unfortunately, that is how students are divided on our campuses.

So why the show of restraint in the beginning? It was clear that at first, the police and the Chhatra League were given instructions by their bosses to remain calm and not take any action against the students. But as soon as the high-ups in the government made dismissive comments criticising the movement, things started to take an ugly turn. The AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader at a press conference on Sunday remarked that the Chhatra League was ready to give an apt answer to the "audacious behaviour" shown on the campuses (by leaders of the anti-quota movement). Such a direct call for action gave them the green signal. True to their reputation, the members of the student body swooped on the students and "taught them a lesson" for daring to be vocal and defiant.

It is tragic that a student body that was once at the forefront of the most significant movements of our history has been turned into the bully boys (and girls) of the ruling party. These young men wielding rods and sticks are also university students. Why should students beat up other students for a cause that would ordinarily unite them? Why do the large numbers of the police force become silent bystanders when helmet-clad goons pounce upon unarmed university students?

These are naïve queries in a reality where even peaceful protests are seen as threats to power and are clamped down upon with full force. For some reason it was thought that this time the government would show tolerance and listen to the young, passionate young men and women who believed that their voices would be heard, their needs would be addressed. All they have been asking for is a fair chance in life, an equitable system of opportunities to compete for government jobs and the realisation of a dream that can be attained through merit and hard work. Are these aspirations unwarranted for young people of an independent nation?