

# Democratic practice on campuses

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COLLEGES and universities are caught in a moral and political dilemma. Students are encouraged, on the one hand, to engage in party-affiliated or factional campus politics. And, on the other hand, that very political involvement becomes a black mark when they apply for government jobs. Many of us advocate student politics on campus, yet the same political affiliations are later used by the government to disqualify candidates from public service. Yet the heart of education, centres of intellectual and moral growth, is exploited for partisan interests, resulting in students falling prey to political branding and faculty divisions.

Campuses have recently become flashpoints of political unrest: the administration of universities and other higher education institutions have banned political activities by students, teachers, officers and others on the staff. Even in an online survey, 93 per cent of respondents supported ending student politics in educational institutions. Students on campus today enjoy an environment far less tumultuous than before and can study without hindrance. The call for a politics-free academic space has, clearly, never been stronger. How can educational institutions remain non-partisan yet foster

democratic practice? What responsibilities do students and teachers have? And what can we learn from experiences in developed countries?

### **Duty of university students**

A STUDENT'S primary duty is to acquire knowledge, hone skills and prepare for life through self-improvement. University life extends this mission beyond textbooks to include research, debate, sports, community service and cultural activities with which students mature into well-rounded individuals and civic leaders.

Regrettably, in most public universities, constructive activities have been displaced with clientelist, factional student politics. Student organisations often operate under the umbrella of national political parties. With tacit administrative approval, direct or indirect involvement of some teachers and the lure of perks, many students gravitate towards campus politics, sometimes under pressure, to secure a seat in halls or senior favour, sometimes out of personal ambition and sometimes driven by the promise of privileges. Even the most gifted students often feel compelled to participate in student politics to pursue careers in academia.

Here begins the greatest nightmare for students. Those once groomed as leaders in campus politics find that when they make preparations for public services, their political past becomes a liability, especially when the administration or the government changes. Police verification, intelligence reports and recruitment board's assessments of 'political involvement' exclude them from lists. Marches, banners, membership of a party's youth wing or even Facebook postings become 'negative records,' blocking their careers in the public sector.

Students are subtly or even overtly encouraged to engage in politics during their studies, sometimes with active sponsorship. Yet, when it comes to employment, the very engagement brands them as unfit. As a result, students become confused. They lose confidence. And, the institution fails in its core mission of developing human resources.

In leading universities of the developed world, students cultivate leadership, critical thinking and free expression through clubs, unions and seminars. Student associations are politically independent and have no direct or indirect ties to national parties. Their focus is on student welfare, academic policy reform and leadership development. In contrast, student politics in Bangladesh often becomes an obstacle to education, breeding turf wars and violence. Campuses become sites of division and tension, driving out many who wish to remain neutral, sometimes threatening their safety. There, politics is measured not by academic debate but by control of halls, lecture halls, seat trade, extortion, marches, 'guest room' culture and poster wars metrics that undermine both student's lives and the nation's future.

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#### Bangladesh-themed souvenirs

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It is time to break free of this reality. We envision a politics-free academic environment that nurtures democratic practice, where students learn to lead and express views impartially and ethically. We want our educational institutions to become spaces of discourse, coexistence and respectful disagreement, not 'training grounds for partisan conflicts.' Ensuring this is the shared responsibility of students, the education ministry, university administration, teachers, political parties, guardians and all conscientious members of society.

### **Teachers and political involvement**

UNIVERSITY teachers represent the most respected intellectual class in society. Their chief duties are teaching, creating knowledge through research and dissemination. They also serve as analytical advisers at the nation's policy-making level. Yet, in many public universities, a significant number of teachers have become directly involved with political parties. This affiliation is now more than ideological. It has become a key to recruitment, promotion and administrative favours.

Studies and news reports show that in most public universities, vice-chancellors, registrars, deans and even hall provosts are often the people who have demonstrated loyalty to the ruling party. During teacher recruitment, party loyalty frequently outweighs merit. In some cases, a deserving candidate must join the pro-government teachers' association to secure appointment.

The most damaging effect of this is the decline in the quality of education. Research-oriented, pedagogically skilled and student-focused educators find themselves sidelined for political reasons. Consequently, universities face a shortage of qualified teachers and deepening divisions along partisan lines. Even worse, some teachers grant examination favours or exhibit administrative bias based on political identity, eroding student's trust and forcing top scholars to learn in a hostile environment. After the July-August 2024 uprising, many teachers were harassed. This constitutes a regrettable development. Yet, this should remind the teachers that politics must never trump academic neutrality.

In contrast, in leading global universities, teachers are not party-political actors. They organise through independent professional associations, with agendas focused on educational excellence, research innovation and student-friendly academic environments.

Now is the time for our teachers to abandon factional politics and return to the pursuit of scholarship. No nation can cultivate free-thinking leaders if its educators remain shackled by political bias.

## **Solutions and recommendations**

— A ban should be imposed on clientelist political activities by students and teachers in educational institutions. Strict monitoring and accountability mechanisms should ensure compliance and discourage any attempts at influencing institutional decisions through clientelist networks.

— The selection process for vice-chancellors should be fundamentally revised to insulate universities from partisan student-teacher politics. All important stakeholders, particularly students and teachers, should be meaningfully involved in the compilation of candidate shortlists. Public forums or debates should be organised where shortlisted candidates are required to present their academic vision, leadership philosophy and institutional priorities. Transparent, merit-based appointment guidelines should be established and strictly followed to ensure that selections are made based on academic competence and integrity rather than on political loyalty or external influence. This participatory and accountable process would help to restore public trust and create a more politically neutral academic environment.

— A revision in the selection process to give importance to merit, transparency and academic Integrity is one of the critical steps towards depoliticising educational institutions. In many public universities, teacher appointment is often influenced by political affiliation rather than academic merit or teaching and research capabilities. It should, therefore, be revised to enforce merit-based criteria, forming

independent and diverse selection committees free of political ties and ensuring transparency through published scores and external audits. Probationary appointment with performance-based evaluations should be implemented. Political lobbying in recruitment should be strictly monitored.

— Merit-based seat allocation in halls should be restored and 100 per cent accommodation for students should be ensured.

— Non-partisan yet democratic students' councils should be formed. Election reforms should mandate that candidates run individually, prohibiting party slates or panel nominations. Additionally, independent election commissions, separate from the university administration, should be entrusted with overseeing the elections to ensure that voting is free, fair and transparent.

— Teachers' association election process should be reformed. Reforming the teachers' association election process is essential to restoring academic integrity and eliminating partisan influence. Elections should be based solely on individual candidacy, completely excluding panels or group nominations to prevent collective political campaigning. Both student and teacher bodies should be professional, education-focused and transparent, with no room for party politics.

— Leadership and personal growth by institutionalising participation in extracurricular groups such as debate clubs, language clubs, sports teams, innovation hubs and community service organisations should be fostered. Every student should be actively involved in the language club along with at least one other skills-based or leadership-focused group during their academic journey.

— Explicit political activity by teachers and the staff such as campaigning, organising partisan events or using institutional platforms for political agendas should be formally recognised as a breach of professional ethics and classified as a disciplinary offence. Employment contracts and codes of conduct must be updated to define such actions clearly, with corresponding penalties including warnings, suspension or dismissal depending on severity and recurrence.

— Similarly, participation in factional or clientelist political activities by students, especially those involving party-backed organisations or disruptive campus mobilisation, should be defined as misconduct under institutional bylaws. Admission guidelines, academic regulations and student codes of conduct must reflect this policy, ensuring that educational institutions remain neutral spaces dedicated to learning, critical thinking and democratic engagement free from partisan control.

— Students' mental well-being should be ensured by providing professional counselling and psychiatric services and regularly organising mental health awareness and motivational seminars/workshops.

## **Towards vibrant, democratic campus**

THE students and teachers who once led our freedom struggle are the very people who can now forge a new, progressive academic culture. By strictly separating partisan politics from the campus while simultaneously fostering open debates, civic engagement and ethical leadership, we can create institutions that arm young minds not with party banners but with knowledge, skills and a spirit of inquiry.

Our universities must become non-partisan yet vibrant hubs of democratic practice, where every student can freely express ideas, develop leadership and emerge as an enlightened citizen. Only then can we ensure that our higher education system serves the nation, not narrow political interests.

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