

Public universities still trapped in authoritarian culture: speakers

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Public universities continue to operate like poorly managed state institutions, where old authoritarian practices persist under new names, said University Teachers Network at a seminar yesterday.

Speakers said no major reforms have been initiated in the university system, despite repeated calls from academics and students.

“Why an education reform commission has not yet been formed, and why education has not been given importance, remain major questions”.

— Prof Anu Mohammad

While the government has formed various commissions over the past year, it did not feel the need to form one on higher education, they said. As a result, key structural problems remain unaddressed, and decision-making power remains centralised.

The event, titled "What Kind of Universities Do We Have in Post-Uprising Bangladesh?", was organised by the teachers network at Dhaka University.

DU Economics Department assistant professor Rushad Faridi, Management department's associate professor Tahmina Khanam, and ULAB teacher Oliur Sun jointly presented a paper at the event.

Rushad said in older public universities, "autonomy" often serves as a façade for political dominance, benefiting teachers affiliated with or aspiring to align with the ruling party. Dissenting voices, he said, are still discouraged or silenced.

He also expressed concern over the rise of far-right extremism and growing anti-women sentiment, both of which are creeping into university spaces. The state's inaction, he added, is increasingly seen as silent approval.

Speaking on private universities, Oliur Sun said these institutions still operate primarily as profit-driven businesses. Despite the UGC's regulatory authority under the 2010 Private University Act, no meaningful protection has been provided for academic freedom or institutional autonomy.

Tahmina Khanam said the UGC continues to function like an extension of the education ministry, relying heavily on bureaucratic approvals for its operations and funding. Instead of acting independently, it follows ministry directives.

Education Adviser Chowdhury Rafiqul Abrar said under the banner of autonomy, many teachers have become deeply involved in partisan politics, which has severely damaged the academic environment.

He said such a system cannot be dismantled overnight. "It requires internal reform, and for that, universities must raise demands and engage their stakeholders."

On VC appointments, he said while previous governments made unilateral decisions, a search committee now exists -- comprising a UGC representative, a subject expert, and a VC.

Reflecting on the past year, Abrar said he did not hold responsibility for the entire period but understood the pressure under which the administration operated. "Not all decisions were good," he said. "Perhaps the state did not play the role it was expected to."

"Relying solely on an education commission for solutions is not realistic," he added.

UGC Member Prof Tanzimuddin Khan said the current UGC structure lacks internal accountability. He pointed out that appointments are often political.

"Our focus should be on reforming the state structure," he added.

Chairing the event, economist and academic Prof Anu Mohammad said whichever party came to power, it used the 1973 university ordinance to its advantage, corrupting the university system.

"But we cannot blame everything on the ordinance. It ultimately depends on the state and how it wants to shape the universities."

"Why an education reform commission has not yet been formed, and why education has not been given importance, remain major questions."

Among others, DU professors Md Kamrul Hassan, Samina Luthfa, and associate professor Tasneem Siraj Mahboob were present, along with several student leaders, including representatives from private universities.