

# THE BANGLADESH OBSERVER

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## Students And Their Cause

One feels heartened to have heard General Ershad say in Dhaka on Monday that he would not 'use the students for his political gains.' And this is the crux of the problem — whether students should be, or should let themselves be, used for political gains—either by the administration or the opposition. If President Ershad has said so and means what he said it may understandably be put down to the what he has seen happening over the years in this country.

Induction of students directly into politics dates back to pre-independence days (in the form of such noted student parties as N.S.F. etc.) and the time of Governor Munayem Khan of then East Pakistan. That the strategy or manoeuvre backfired with disastrous results is common knowledge. And if this a piece of history for us to study it must be educative enough to warn against kindred practices or manoeuvres. By the same token if parties or politics of politicians make inroads into the habitat of students and get the students arrayed across a battle line drawn, the inevitable result is clashes. And we have lived to see them frequently happening—not only, at times, with casualties of dead and injured, but also the cumulative one of careers ruined and, into the bargain, the academic atmosphere vitiated. Over the years this has happened violently and disquietingly enough to be warning for the future. And we are yet to see if either students, politicians or the government have learnt enough to eschew those styles and methods that have not paid at all in the past.

But it would be naive to say or preach that students would have nothing to do with politics. For one thing, poor, struggling developing countries like Bangladesh could never put in a watertight compartment its central youthforce, namely, students and decree that they must give up thinking, talking about, and taking part, in politics. That would reflect a brand of totalitarianism that is stifling and works against individuals' intellectual and social right to freedom of thinking—and behaving. In fact, national emergencies, or crises do galvanise this force into lines of action warranted by them. We have seen this occurring as historical events in the past—in the forties and seventies. One may recall in this connection how students were brought out of their education institutions in 1919 in response to a call to join in the struggle for independence against British rule.

What however distinguishes such student participation in political upheavals from the current form or nature of it is that where it was a collective response to a mission, we have it now in the form of continuing in-fighting among students—mostly under extraneous influences. At all events the outcome is as unqualifiedly negative as can be. The genuine mission or cause claiming a student's energy and attention, namely, his studies, pursuit of knowledge, "intellectual equipment" in general, go by the wayside. And if we have now been faced with a steadily deteriorating educational situation (with indiscipline, a heavy rate of examination failures, declining standards of scholarship etc.) it is to a large extent due this incursion into education from outside.

As we have hinted earlier, confrontation on the direct political plane between what may predictably emerge as a government-backed student wing and an opposition-supported one can advance neither the political cause of the country in the true sense nor that of students. It may instead defeat both. And the continuing instability and the failure of democracy over the years and the persisting uncertainty as to a stable, democratic national government must illustrate the dimension of this failure.

We are not against student mobilization or organisation on an idealistic, non-partisan basis to promote social service, educational programmes etc. But the line separating such idealism and the rather perilous political involvement on this side or that must be clearly drawn and kept assiduously from disappearing in course of time. And a viable, self-respecting student leadership rising from the limbo of frustrations and negations of the past, we believe will be able to keep students a compact, really patriotic youth-and-workforce upheld for this side's or that side's interests of the nation. And here is one acute and difficult question for students and their genuine cause.