

Worrying academic environment at public universities

HISTORICALLY public universities played a foundational role in the struggle for a democratic Bangladesh. However, in recent times, the academic environment of public universities has taken a turn towards the worst. The university administrations, as reported in New Age Youth on Sunday, are undemocratically electing officials for its office on political consideration and without representation of students. On July 29, a senate meeting of Dhaka University was held to select the three-member panel for the selection of next vice-chancellor without student representatives and defying the ordinance of 1973. All public universities including Dhaka University are governed by this Ordinance that terms the Senate as the higher authority of the university and requires participation from current students, alumni and teachers. Sadly, for nearly 26 years no Dhaka University Central Students' Union election took place. Similar situation prevails in other public universities. In the absence of a democratically elected student body, their concerns remained unheard and unaddressed. The tragic loss of eyesight of Siddikur Rahman, a student of Government Titumir College while demanding exam schedule is reflective of this situation. No student should ever have to face the fate of Siddikur had there been an effective system to resolve students' grievance.

The instability that has stalled the academic activities of Jahangirnagar University from May following the death of two students in road accident also underscores the anti-student sentiment of the administration. Considering that four JU students were brutally killed in the Dhaka-Aricha highway near campus during the term of the current vice-chancellor, the demand for strict traffic safety was more than legitimate. The fact that the administration confided to ruling party student wing and the state security forces instead of engaging in a dialogue with the student is sign of moral failure of administration. This failure also marks a change in which public university vice chancellors are politically appointed, thereby relies on ruling party cadres and police forces to quell protest and run the administration. Earlier in June, the High Court questioned the legality of the appointment of the vice-chancellor of Noakhali Science and Technology on the ground that the appointed VC does not have the academic qualification required under the rules of Noakhali Science and Technology University Act, 2001. Meanwhile, the former VC of Begum Rokeya University, as reported in New Age on Monday, is implicated in a corruption case of embezzling Tk 90 lakh. In what follows, it will not be mistaken to suggest that students' academic development is not the priority of the university administration.

It is in this context, the incumbent must start a dialogue with all concerned including different student groups to organise election for student body representatives and ensure students voice in the decision making process of the university. It must note that recruitment of teachers on political consideration which could often lead low quality people being appointed teachers and partisan university administration will have disastrous repercussion in higher education system. Students at large should continue to mobilise for democratic governance and better academic environment at public universities.

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