

Buet and student politics: A storied past



Students at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) have boycotted classes and exams in protest of alleged resumption of political activities on campus.

Around 2:00am last Thursday, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) activists entered the campus and allegedly carried out political activities, despite a ban on student politics being in place since the murder of a second-year student, Abrar Fahad, in 2019.



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While Buet's recent history of student politics has been soured by death and violence, as one of Bangladesh's oldest and most prestigious educational institutions, the university has always been close to the forefront of the country's history.

Pre-independence

Student politics started playing a massive role in the early days of Pakistan. In 1948, immediately after Pakistani authorities said Urdu would be the only state language of the new nation, students in East Pakistan organised protests.

Students of Dhaka University and other institutions in the area --including Ahsanullah Engineering College (as Buet was known back then) -- took a central role.

In fact, in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Oshompto Attojiboni, the father of the nation mentions, "Other than a few university students, 90 percent students joined the movement. Jagannath College, Mitford, Medical School, and Engineering College, especially, participated actively."

In 1962, Ahsanullah Engineering College became East Pakistan University of Engineering Technology (EPUET).

Two of the most influential student politicians of that time -- Siraj Sikder, the revolutionary communist who founded Purba Banglar Sarbahara Party, and Hasanul Huq Inu, a former minister and current leader of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal -- were from EPUET.

During the war in 1971, the Palashi campus of the engineering university bore witness to many atrocities taking place in Dhaka University and adjacent areas. Many students from the institution fought in the war and sacrificed their lives, among them Shafi Imam Rumi, a member of the famed Crack Platoon.

After 1971

The postwar period saw the prevalence of various student political parties on the BUET campus, including Bangladesh Student Union, BCL and Bangladesh Chhatra League (JSD). While the Buet ordinance did not allow any student organisations to exist beyond the "University Students' Union and the Departmental or Hall Associations, whose constitutions have been embodied in the Ordinances of the Board of Residence and Discipline", students would band under the umbrella of different political parties to contest elections for the Engineering University Central Students' Union (EUCSU).

Until the 1990 mass uprising, politics in Buet mainly followed this suit. Student politics in Bangladesh took the forefront as democracy was restored in 1991, and during these protests, Buet saw its fair share of disturbances. Violence in the adjacent areas often spilled over, leading to sine die closures and irregular academic activities.

Modern day

Since 1991, student politics in the Buet campus has largely been influenced by the party in control of the national government. Political parties grew more powerful during this time, and as they looked to assert control over university campuses across the country, Buet was not left behind.

Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal and Bangladesh Chhatra League vied for control of the campus and residential halls during the 90s and the first half of the 2000s, leading to factionalism and the occasional case of violence.

Three murders

In recent years, politics on the Buet campus has resulted in the tragic deaths of three students, and that has largely turned the opinions of many students against the prevalence of student politics.

On June 8, 2002, Sabekun Nahar Sony, a student of the chemical engineering department, found herself in the middle of a crossfire between two factions of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal. The clash took place over high-value tenders, something Sony had nothing to do with. She was shot in front of Ahsanullah Hall on her own campus, and died as a result.

Tumultuous protests followed, and student politics in Buet was banned. The ordinance to disallow student organisations other than the University Students' Union and Department or Hall Associations was implemented, and student politics on campus ceased to exist until 2009, when the current government first came to power.

In 2013, another life was lost to student politics.

Despite being aligned with the ruling party, Arif Raihan Dwip, a member of the convener committee of the Buet unit BCL, was stabbed to death in his own hall by Mezbah Uddin, another student of Buet and a Hefazat-e-Islam activist. This attack came at a time when similar cases of violence by religious extremists started to take place more frequently, prompting the government and ruling party to take a strong stance against them.

The most recent murder in Buet took place in October 2019, when Abrar Fahad, a second-year student of Electronics and Electrical Engineering, was beaten to death by several BCL activists. After posting on Facebook about his political views, he was accused by the members of the Buet unit BCL of being a religious extremist and Shibir member, and then beaten to death in a room of the university's Sher-e-Bangla Hall.

Stance against student politics

Abrar's murder led to immediate protests and students once again demanded the cessation of student politics in Buet. Under tremendous pressure, the authorities agreed to ban student politics on campus.

Since then, students have been proactive about keeping Buet politics-free. In 2022, a mourning seminar was billed to be held under the banner of former members of a student political organisation on campus, leading to protests by students. Last year, a student was given a post in a central committee of the BCL, and that led to massive outrage among students.

Last week, when members of the BCL were seen on campus engaging with students, protests were held once again to ensure Buet be kept free of student politics. This led to counter protests and statements by various student political bodies who want politics to return to Buet.

As of now, the latter group can be the happier one as the High Court stayed the decision to ban student politics in Buet, meaning political parties are free to operate on campus once more.