

“Banish mal-politics from the education sphere: Take definite steps to implement the education policy with adequate resources.”

The signatories of the remarkable statement, published in national dailies, were Prof Anisuzzaman, Prof Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Prof Kabir Chowdhury, Prof Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, and Prof Jamal Nazrul Islam. The last three are no more with us. But their call is as relevant and urgent today as it was a decade ago.

Among the nine points the professors had made, the first one was to keep students and the youth away from malignant politics and to preserve the learning environment on campus—direct and indirect connections between Awami League and Chhatra League should be severed. At the same time, all heads of educational institutions and local administration should be directed to control strictly criminal activities and breaches of regulations by students and non-students on campus. The government should assure full support for these steps. These decisions are essential to restore the glorious tradition of student political activism.

Would the sky fall if the ruling regime did not have a pliant student body at its beck and call to do its bidding, or to disrupt and suppress any expression of ideas or display of discontent by students, which irks the ruling party or the government?

There has been spontaneous student activism recently (related to civil service job quotas, road and public transportation safety, and sexual violence against girls). In these instances, the role of the student supporters of the ruling regime has been to disrupt activities of common students and detract public attention from the issues—all in the name of defending the regime.

Sit-ins and demonstrations had been going on for weeks revolving around the formation of the central committee of Chhatra League by its disaffected members. They felt deprived of rewards they were entitled to for their service to the party.

The composition of the central committee of over 300 itself is unusual, comprising mostly vice-presidents and secretaries and only a few members without posts. The spectacle has brought to the fore once again the problems with student politics as it exists today.

The committee has been formed apparently with the guidance of Awami League pointsmen designated by the party rather than through a democratic process within the student body. The dissatisfied factions alleged that the selection was not in accordance with the rules of the organisation regarding student identity, age, marital status, etc.

Moreover, quite a few of the appointed people are alleged to have been engaged in unlawful activities including physical assault on opponents, extortion, arson, drug dealings, exam question leaks and other criminal activities. The complaints have been vindicated in a way because some of the people named for organisational posts were dropped from the list and investigations against others have been promised.

Earlier in the year, the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducusu) election held under court orders after a pause of three decades displayed again the ugly side of student politics today. There was hope that a new beginning in student political activism was possible with a genuine election of student leaders to carry out campus extra-curricular activities; exercise citizenship rights of students as they saw fit; and nurture future social, cultural and political leadership within the student body of the most prestigious and the largest university in the country. That hope was rudely dashed.

Unless and until the umbilical cord of student organisations to their political parents was cut, the election of student unions was not likely to bring a positive outcome. This indeed proved to be the case. The Ducsu election was marred by widespread complaints about vote-rigging, ballot-box stuffing, and obstruction of voting which the university officials ignored or in which they were complicit, according to media reports. It was a replay of managing election outcomes on a miniature scale of the national parliamentary election.

The toxic influence of political party-directed student bodies has spread to dormitories, campus life, admission of students, question leaks, tenders and contracts for university business, safety of female students, and even the appointment of staff and teaching personnel.

There was a glorious history of students' involvement in national politics. One may recall the state language movement and the 1960s and 1970s when students showed the way to political leaders at critical moments. As a general rule, students were concerned with their extra-curricular campus activities conducted through the elected student union. But the elected unions, with their elected representatives leading the way, also became platforms for venting and articulating the views of students on critical national concerns.

Would the sky fall if the ruling regime did not have a pliant student body at its beck and call to do its bidding, or to disrupt and suppress any expression of ideas or display of discontent by students, which irks the ruling party or the government? What kind of society and nation would it be if the young people, especially university students, are so docile, unadventurous and timid that they are afraid to express themselves about matters they feel strongly about, even if it displeases the ruling regime?

If the founding ideals of Bangladesh are to be fulfilled, a change in our political culture is called for and the politics of inclusiveness, tolerance and consensus must be fostered. This is precisely what is prevented and discouraged by the present “patron-client” relationship between political parties and their affiliates among students. The student wings have become the spawning ground for the politics of cronyism and corruption—a means to acquire and exercise power for the party and its leaders at any cost.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, head of Shujan (Citizens for Good Governance), conveying a consensus from citizens’ consultation throughout the country, wrote recently: “We must reform our political parties to ensure their internal democracy, transparency in their nomination process and financing, and the end of ‘partiarchy’. They must renounce extremism, communalism, identity-based politics, and inter- and intra-party violence. Their associated and affiliated bodies must also be disbanded” (“18 reforms that would change Bangladesh,” *The Daily Star*, June 3, 2019).

Higher education—or for that matter, all types of education—needs to be out of bounds of political interference motivated by short-sighted views and factional or individual interests. A first step would be for the ruling political party to seriously rethink what to do with its affiliated student body.