



BANGLADESH: UNIVERSITIES AND THE FAILURE OF STUDENT POLITICS

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Center for Insights in Survey Research
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Bangladesh: Universities and the Failure of Student Politics

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Cover Image Description: Students demand justice over the murder of student Abrar Fahad in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Photo: Shutterstock



OVERVIEW

In the autumn of 2019, the International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted a qualitative research study of Bangladeshi university students to understand the challenges they face on campus and to assess the effectiveness of political parties and their student wings in addressing student concerns.

IRI partnered with a local research firm to organize eight focus group discussions (FGDs), one in each administrative division of Bangladesh. Each FGD was held with students from a public university in that division and included male and

female students of different education levels (undergraduate and graduate) and subjects of study. In total, 77 students participated in the study (37 female and 40 male). As part of the selection criterion, FGD participants were not formally affiliated with a student wing or political party in order to solicit nonpartisan perspectives on campus politics. The FGDs were conducted in October and November of 2019. As common with qualitative research, the findings from these FGDs are not necessarily representative of all Bangladeshi students' opinions.

KEY FINDINGS

Finding 1

There is an opportunity for student political leaders to address campus problems. The most cited issue was access to dormitory rooms (“hall seats”).

The most frequently cited issues were (in rank order):

- Insufficient dormitory rooms (“hall seats”)
- Inattentive teachers
- Campus politics
- Poor facilities
- Unresponsive administration
- Insecurity
- Lack of transportation
- Poor medical care
- Bad food
- Out-of-date curriculum
- Student disunity
- Delayed exams due to campus unrest (“session jams”)
- Mental health problems
- Small stipends
- Lack of internships
- Drug abuse



Students of Jagannath University stage a demonstration to demand the construction of new residential halls, Photo: Alamy

Finding 2

Politics and political favoritism exacerbate campus problems.

Across the FGDs, students complained that politics exacerbated campus problems, with the ruling Awami League’s (AL) student wing, the Chhatra League (BCL), dominating campus activities.

Access to “hall seats” — dormitory rooms — illuminate the intersection of inadequate facilities and the politics of exclusion on campus. These scarce resources are allocated to students aligned with the BCL, or those willing to concede to its demands. A male student in Rangpur said,

“Whenever a student wants to get a seat in a hall, the local Chhatra League members demand money.”¹ A student in Sylhet said, “If you want to get into a hall, you have to be part of a political party. Many students don’t want to get engaged in politics. Those who are ordinary students don’t want to be active in politics. So, there are no seats for them.”

Among other perquisites, participants stated that students from the BCL often eat for free in the dining hall, get seats on university transportation, are awarded inflated grades and receive their diplomas more quickly after graduation.

This politicized favoritism is linked to a broader culture of political bullying. A student in Rangpur told us that during his second year, BCL members “checked all our cell phones, scolded us, and asked us why we didn’t go to political rallies regularly. It was winter and very cold outside. They took all our warm clothes away.” Other students shared similar experiences. “We had to live under Chhatra



Students of Dhaka University carry the national flag in front of Raju Memorial, Photo: Alamy

“ [Student political leaders] think of themselves as extremely powerful and important ... **they think they can do whatever they want.**”

— Female student in Sylhet

League. We had to attend most of the political rallies. It was compulsory at that time,” a male student in Dhaka said of his first year. A female student in Dhaka said, “I saw the beating of a girl. One of the senior sisters [upper-class female students] beat a girl with a rope because the girl lied about participating in a political movement.”

Participants complained of a culture of impunity that starts at the top with the administration and runs down to politically affiliated students. A male student in Rangpur argued that there is a “dirty political scheme” operated by the administration and teachers to politicize campus activities that is hurting his university’s reputation. A female student in Sylhet said student political leaders “think of themselves as extremely powerful and important...they think they can do whatever they want” because they have assurances from teachers and administrators that they will not be punished.

¹ The FGDs were conducted in Bangla. Therefore, quotes cited in this report were translated from Bangla to English and have been minimally edited to ensure clarity. As much as possible, the English translations preserved the syntax, word choice and grammar of the Bangla speaker.

Finding 3

Students are deeply cynical about political parties, which they believe are self-interested and do not represent student concerns.

Participants said political parties are not concerned about students or citizens. A female student from Dhaka said, "If political leaders do anything for students' concerns, they do it for certain political interests." A female student from Rangpur argued, "When a party comes to power, they only think about themselves. They don't care about the public's demands and welfare. They give us so much assurance with their words but when it comes to work, they are nowhere to be found."

FGD participants also said parties manipulate student politics. A male student in Chittagong

contended, "I think political leaders don't care about us, rather they think about their own interests. They are busy with the number of members they get from among the students. They think: How can I influence the students? How can I make my team larger? Literally, they give no importance to us." Another male student in Chittagong stated, "I cannot believe any political party. I think they betray students and will do the same thing with me." A female student from Khulna said, "No party cares about our opinion. We can't give our opinion even if we want. We feel afraid...We have no freedom of speech. We have to think many times before sharing something. We are afraid of retaliation from political parties."

Other participants attributed this culture on campus to the state of national politics. A male student from Khulna said, "Whenever any movement occurs, one party blames another. Awami League blames BNP [the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party]; BNP blames Awami League; and Hefazat² says it's done by some other party. They are always busy blaming each other. So we are not getting any importance."

Several students observed that parties support youth only after they agitate for change. A female student in Rajshahi said, "I think that in any kind of movement, students are the first to appear, and later political parties enter." A female student from Barisal argued, "Yes, political parties give us importance. But not before we shed our sweat and blood."

“ I cannot believe any political party. I **think they betray students** and will do the same thing with me.”

— Male student in Chittagong

² Hefazat-e-Islam is a conservative Muslim social movement.

Finding 4

The student wings of Bangladesh's political parties fail to represent students' interests but have the potential to serve a beneficial role.

Most students said that the student wings of political parties represent the interests of their members and parties rather than their classmates. A male student in Khulna stated, "Here, student politics doesn't reflect the way it should be. Student politics should deal with the rights and needs of all students, but here most of the political leaders only think about themselves." A female student in Chittagong asked, "Earlier, student organizations used to work for the country and general students, but those who are in power now, are they working for us?"

While some FGD participants said their classmates joined student wings out of a desire to lead, most said student wing members joined for the perks of power: hall seats, free food, favors from teachers and money. A male student from Rangpur alleged, "No one is joining Chhatra League motivated by Bangabandhu's³ ideals."

Although opposition political groups have little presence on campus, students said the student

wings of both the AL and BNP try to co-opt campus movements. FGD participants said BCL routinely falsely claims credit for successful student protests. However, opposition-aligned groups also frame their efforts around national politics instead of student issues. A female student in Chittagong complained, "After the murder of Abrar,⁴ the BNP-led student wing tried to raise its voice for Khaleda Zia. They had no intention of justice for Abrar; only their own interest." Another student in Chittagong argued, "Both Chhatra League and Chhatra Dal⁵ practice the same thing." A male student from Barisal concluded, "I think it does not make sense that student politics is political party-based. As long as it remains party-based, there will be problems."

FGD participants said that student wings should improve accountability and work to represent student concerns to politicians and university administrators. A female student in Barisal said, "Student wings should be the 'linkers' who take our problems to a higher authority."

Finding 5

Students want more civic education on campus.

Despite pessimism about politics, students are interested to learn about civics and government. FGD participants favored more civic education on campus, specifically on topics like political ideology, creativity, leadership, morals, and the history of Bangladesh. A male student from Khulna said, "It would be good if they arranged a workshop every week. They should provide

us with an opportunity to know more about the history and heritage of Bangladesh."

Participants felt that increased civic education and political engagement could improve the overall political climate. A female student in Rangpur explained, "Students think that politics means fighting and violence. I think this kind of mentality

³ Bangabandhu is the common nickname for Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's liberation leader and first president.

⁴ Abrar Fahad was a Bangladeshi student murdered by Chhatra League members on October 7, 2019.

⁵ Chhatra Dal is the BNP's student wing.

should change. We have to create a platform where we all can put forward our problems, presenting them in front of the political people. We can work together with them." A female student from Dhaka said civic education could "help me to increase my experience and social skills as well my contribution to the society."

These qualitative findings complement data from IRI's September 2019 national survey of Bangladesh. In that poll, 71 percent of youth surveyed said that they were unlikely to run for local or national office by the age of 35. When asked why they were unlikely to do so, a plurality (27 percent) said they lacked the necessary skills.⁶ Across the FGDs, students said they had participated in campus rallies on social and political issues, but few had engaged in formal politics to pursue change.

“ They should provide us with an opportunity to know more about the **history and heritage** of Bangladesh.”

— Male student in Khulna



Dhaka University graduates throw their hats during their convocation, Photo: Alamy

⁶“Bangladesh Poll: Support for Government Rebounds, Concerns over Corruption, Economic Inequality Persist.” *International Republican Institute*, 8 Jan. 2020, www.iri.org/resource/bangladesh-poll-support-government-rebounds-concerns-over-corruption-economic-inequality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1:

- 1** The student wings of political parties should increase their focus on student concerns. Too often political parties use their student wings as tools to control students, sowing distrust and ultimately undermining their ability to play a constructive role in Bangladeshi politics. By better representing student interests to university administrators and parties, student wings can deepen support for their parties on campus and foster broader student engagement in politics.

Recommendation 2:

- 2** Political parties should address student issues. University students can become an important constituency for political parties if they show real concern for students. The parties should take steps to demonstrate that they take youth issues seriously, which could include passing legislation to address student concerns, promoting youth issues on the campaign trail and in party platforms, and elevating young leaders into national-level party positions.

Recommendation 3:

- 3** Universities should restructure student politics and depoliticize campus administration and teaching. The basic functions of many campuses — hall seats, teaching, campus debate, and other issues — are politicized, which means ordinary students are often denied basic rights and services on campus. University administrators need to create a nonpartisan learning environment.

Recommendation 4:

- 4** Universities should expand civic education on campuses. Student activism is often directed toward protests rather than political engagement. With expanded education on civics and government, a new generation of informed leaders can emerge.

Recommendation 5:

- 5** Where needed, international nongovernmental organizations should support the expansion of civic education in Bangladesh. This support should include providing international expertise on best practices in student politics through workshops, trainings, and international exchanges.

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