Students' Perceptions Study on 'Student Politics' in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Student's association with politics can be found in Bangladesh before its inception as a nation. While many notable contributions made by student politicians in the history of Bangladesh, the present situation is far away from that glorious past. Now the influence of political parties is criticized heavily by the students. The study analyzes the reasons behind student politics by ranking six major reasons to join student politics according to various student groups. The study concludes with the issue of reformation of the current model of student politics where disconnection of the link between student and national politics is emphasized.

Key Word: student union; student politics; campus violence; academic environment; teachers' politics

Introduction

The involvement of students in the national politics is famous for significant contributions during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971, the establishment of Bengali language in 1952, and the establishment of democracy in the 1980s, but now it has transformed into a paradox. The current form of student union politics in Bangladesh is strongly linked with national politics. In Bangladesh, there are four major political parties, namely Bangladesh Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Bangladesh Jatiyo Party and Jamayat Islam Bangladesh. All of them have a wing for students through the student union, especially in the public universities and other public academic institutions. Thus, political demonstrations and violence are a regular phenomenon in the campus life of public academic institutions. At the same time, student politics is not allowed in the private universities, which also creates a negative perception against the student's rights and proper development. In this context, this paper tries to find out the perceptions and scopes of students' involvements with party politics through students' unions, which is also known as 'student politics'.

Several studies mentioned that due to the socio-economic and overall social conditions in underdeveloped countries, students' unions are always biased towards national politics (Altbach, 1993; Glazer, 1968; Hamilton, 1968). Many researchers believe that students' involvement in 'party politics' has created a political atmosphere in higher education institutes and that has an impact on the educational atmosphere. Altbach (1984) pointed out that student politics in the third world countries play a dominant role as a political factor comparing to the role of student politics in the industrialized countries. However, Choi (1991) indicated that in a newly industrialized country like South Korea, student activism indicates serious and complex social conflicts within the society. He noted that since the 1980s, student activism in South Korea has grabbed attention because of its enormous changes in organizations, activism, and tactics of demonstration. Nkinyangi (1991) examined the role of student activism in sub Saharan Africa. He mentioned different policy reform programs by the international organizations such as World Bank, IMF where they played a role in the unrest caused by students. While some of the policy reforms were targeted at the whole nation (increasing price for consumer goods and privatizing public institutions), some of them were related to education as well (cutting back on subsidies for teacher's and student's allowance, decreasing per unit cost of education by limiting grade repetition), etc.

Ullah (2001) pointed out that the tradition of student politics was established in the Bengal region while it was under the British ruling. Hannan (1994) and Alam (2003) noted that Bangladesh, being an independent nation since 1971, has been administered by both the elected government and martial law. Consequently, student politics has always been associated with campaigning for social change because of the demand of times. Datta (2005) pointed out that political violence and violence in student politics are following a similar trend in Bangladesh. The research made by Alam et al. (2011) linked the national development and student politics of Bangladesh. The authors concluded that while student politics was very influential in the 1970s and 1980s, now student politics is infected with many problems which create negative impact on the national development.

There are only few studies conducted on the student politics of Bangladesh. Thus, this study is an attempt to reduce the gap and provide the policy to make adjustment and to make the scenario better off.

Data Collection

This study collected primary data from three different student groups – (i) students from a private university where there is no scope for student politics, (ii) students from a public university who do not participate in politics, and (iii) students from a public university who are involved in politics. A total number of 75 samples were selected from these three categories, considering 25 samples from each group. The demographic characteristics of the sample are given in table 1. The sampling method was based on purposive and stratified random sampling.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents of the survey

Mean Age	23-24 year
Male	51 respondents
Female	34 respondents
Education	Honors and Masters students
Social class	Participation from upper class, middle class and lower middle class

The data were collected from the students of North South University (NSU) representing the private university and Dhaka University (DU) representing the public university. The data were collected through a questionnaire survey by the researchers themselves during the period of February-March 2012. As the topic per se requires normative judgments from the participants of the study, this study also conducted ten interviews from the current top student political leaders from Dhaka University (DU) to understand their motives and perceptions about the issue.

Findings and Discussions

Views about student politics

The students are aware of the golden time of student politics where student leaders were famous for their patriotism and sacrificed for the country in 1952, 1971, and the 1980s. 29% of the respondents think that during this time frame, the major achievement of student politics is its contribution in the liberation war in 1971 exclusively. However, a greater percentage (57% of the total respondents) reported that student politics has played a crucial role in both the liberation war and in ending the military regime in 1991 (Table 2). Thus, a majority of the students admit the contribution of student politics in more than one national crisis period of the past.

On the other hand, 53% of respondents agreed that the current practices of student politics are not as effective as before. After establishing the democratic government, the situation of student politics has not followed its reputation. The political party dominated the student politics in a negative way. Total of 65 % of the respondents agreed that political parties influence the students for their own benefits and they use students for political issues. As a consequence, a total of 48% of students agreed that it creates violence in the campus that leads to demolition of the academic environment and deteriorates the overall academic quality. The beneficial impact for student politics is undoubtedly the opportunity to get leadership training, especially political leadership, which is supported by 59% of the total respondents. But only 16% of respondents mentioned that political parties help to provide trainings to the students. Among the other positive impacts, 45% of respondents agreed that it opens the door for national politics, and a very few respondents, only 8%, mentioned that student politics contributes towards academic improvement.

Table 2: Students' views about student union politics

Issues	Private University Student	Public University Non-Political student	Public University Political student	Total Respondent
Student politics contributed during liberation period only	12 (48%)	3 (12%)	7 (28%)	22 (29%)
Student politics contributed during liberation period and to gain democratic system in the country	7 (28%)	19 (76%)	15 (60%)	41 (57%)
Current form of student politics is not	13 (52%)	14 (56%)	13 (52%)	40 (53%)

effective as it was during the liberation period and military regime				
Currently, the political parties influence students for their own benefits	20 (80%)	18 (72%)	11 (44%)	49 (65%)
Political party influences create violence in the campus and deteriorate academic environment and quality	10 (40%)	12 (48%)	14(56%)	36(48%)
Political party provides training and helps to create leadership among the students	2 (8%)	1 (4%)	9 (36%)	12 (16%)
Involving in student politics helps to gain leadership or political leadership training	14 (56%)	14 (56%)	16 (64%)	44 (59%)
Involving in student politics opens the door to join in the national politics	10 (40%)	11 (44%)	13 (52%)	34 (45%)
Involving in student politics helps to improve academic environment	2 (8%)	4 (16%)	0 (0%)	6 (8%)
Student politics is problematic for non-political students	15 (60%)	11 (44%)	7 (28%)	33 (44%)
Violence of student politics causes death and physical injuries of general students	6 (24%)	9 (36%)	5 (202%)	20 (27%)
Student politics causes poor academic performance of the involved student	5 (20%)	10 (40%)	8 (32%)	23 (31%)
Student politics causes academic session jams	20 (80%)	10 (40%)	6 (24%)	36 (48%)
No good side of student politics	3(12%)	7(21%)	3(12%)	13(17%)

Further, 17% of the respondents reported that they are unable to find any good aspect of student politics. 44% of respondents claimed that student politics creates problems mostly for non-political students. For an extreme, 27% of the respondents identified that student politics is the sole reason for valances that lead to death and physical injuries for many innocent students. 48% of the respondents mentioned that student politics causes serious session jam taking more years to complete the degree than it is required. For an example, a four year honors degree might take six or seven years due to session jam. Session jam is created because of the political instability at campus for which the class and examinations get delayed. Students also believe that this factor significantly affects the academic environment. As well as, students involved in politics tend to neglect their studies and perform poorly in academics, which was supported by 31% of respondents.

The motives behind joining student politics

This study identified six major reasons that work behind student involvement in student politics. It also ranked the reasons from 1 to 6 as the most priority to the least priority scale (Table 3). The first reason is to arrange an accommodation in the university dormitory. In public universities, most of the students come from the rural areas. Thus, everyone expects to stay in the university hostel which is highly subsidized by the university authority. As the number of seats is limited, student politicians play a major role in allocating the seats. Though these halls are administered by the university authority, in reality these halls are controlled by the political parties. At the same time, to get better facilities at the dormitory, such as getting an own bed instead of sharing one bed with another, getting extra services in the dining, joining political parties, etc., becomes very essential.

Secondly, exercising power or getting attention and more facilities from others is another cause of engaging in student politics. Students who are in politics generally have muscle power, political backup, and get different facilities and care of others. Thirdly, this political involvement creates a scope to engage in the national politics. There are several records that students engaged in politics have been treated as more dedicated to the party and also got extra favors such as position in party, nomination as election candidate from the party, financial responsibility, etc.

Fourthly, students get an opportunity to voice their concerns over national issues. Though student politics played a crucial role in terms of contribution in national issues in the past, now this matter carries little weight. Fifthly, there are financial benefits to engage in student politics. Student politicians can do lobbying, illegal toll collection, and also have income from the central fund of the party.

Table 3: The reasons for student joining in the student union politics

Reasons	Priority Ranking			
	Private University	Public University Non-Political	Public University Political student	Total Respondent

	Student	student		
Student involves in politics to arrange an accommodation in the university dormitory and to get other facilities	5	1	1	1
Student involves in politics to exercise power or to be focused among others	2	3	2	2
Student involves in politics to get a scope to engage in the nation's politics	3	2	3	3
Student involves in politics to voice their concerns over national issues	1	5	5	4
Student involves in politics to get financial benefits	4	6	6	5
Student involves in politics to improve university and academic environment	6	4	5	6

Finally, students are supposed to join politics to improve academic environment and increase the welfare of the general students and society. However, the current motive of joining in the politics is different so that this objective received the least priority.

Reformation of the model of student politics

To decide whether to ban or reform the student politics system, it is necessary to realize the core objectives of student politics. It is probable that student unity is one of the oldest structures of student politics (Altbach, 1974). In some countries, the student forum/club is also known as union (Altbach, 1974; Hamilton, 1968). When a group of students have religion, region, or any other interests in common, forms an organization under certain conditions within a school, country or even an international context, this is known as a the students' union. Thus, different groups of students having one or more interests or aspects in common can form a different student union within a school, country or international context. Each student union will campaign in favor of its own outlook or agitate to receive its entitlement. However, the current

form of student union in the public academic institutions and universities in Bangladesh widely imply the student politics only.

The respondents of this study ranked the goals of student politics in the following order- (i) promoting leadership among the students, (ii) opportunity to voice students' concern over national issues, (iii) improving the academic environment and quality, and (iv) creating links with political parties. However, most of the current student politicians mentioned that in the current form of student politics, political parties use students for the parties' benefit; as a consequence, students tend to neglect their studies and spend more time on political agendas. In many of the student unions, there is no regular election and minimum control of the academic authority, which was agreed by 48% of the respondents (Table 4). As national political parties mostly control the student politics, student politicians always like to engage in violent activities to become highlighted and get attention from the prominent political leaders. For an example, sometimes student politicians do not pay the bill of canteen just to exercise and show off their political power. Thus, most of the students expressed their disappointment about the current malpractices of the student politics and they are worried for the future. The respondents agreed that without a big change in the form of student politics, the future of the student politics is bleak in Bangladesh.

Table 4: The expected form of student union

Issues	Private University Student	Public University Non-Political student	Public University Political student	Total Respondent
Irregular election in the student union causes violence in the campus and Exercising the leadership is not possible due to the irregular election in the student union	14 (56%)	11 (44%)	11 (44%)	36(48%)
The private university system where student politics is not allowed because the setup is different from public university	14 (56%)	8 (32%)	10 (40%)	32(43%)
Student politics need to be banned completely	14 (56%)	14 (56%)	10 (40%)	38(51%)
Student politics needs to be delinked from party	11 (44%)	10 (40%)	13 (52%)	34(45%)

politics

Student politics need to be focused on the students

and academic activities rather than the issues relevant to the political parties	12 (48%)	17 (68%)	16 (64%)	45(60%)
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On the other hand, student politics is prohibited officially in private universities in Bangladesh. As an alternative of student politics, the private universities follow another model where there are many students' clubs for extra curriculum activities that have no linkage with political parties. Due to the availability of club activities, 43% of the respondents agreed that students of private universities do not require student politics, but 16% of the respondents believed that it is not enough; because having no student politics means that the students of private universities do not have any common platform to voice their opinions against university authority for any valid issues. Similarly, 15% of the respondents mentioned that the students and authorities of private universities are not concerned about the situation of the country because it is officially not allowed to be involved in any national political issues.

Based on the practices of private universities, 51% of the respondents supported to ban student politics, whereas only 26% respondents opposed it. Instead of banning student politics, they provided suggestions to improve the form of activities. To improve the situation, 45% of the students said that student politics needs to be delinked from party politics. At the same time, students also have to know their rights and need to practice discipline and morality. 60% of the respondents believed that these changes must be initiated from the students' perspectives rather than political parties. However, everyone agreed that the issue of student politics should be looked at for the benefits of students rather than political parties.

Recommendation and Conclusion

The main purpose of this research is to understand the views of students regarding student politics in Bangladesh. Regarding the issue of student politics, the students from private universities pose similar sorts of perception just like the students of public universities. Even the students who are involved in politics also hold similar types of understanding as the general students.

The reason behind joining student politics nowadays is more about political gain rather than academic improvements. The current form of student politics that is heavily influenced by political parties is not accepted among the general students as well as the students who are currently involved in politics. However, students have not agreed unanimously to completely ban politics among the student unions. A few students even criticized the absence of student unions in the private university system in Bangladesh.

Overall, they like to reform the current form and mode of student union in the public academic institutions. Students expect that the activities of student union will be free from the agenda of the national political parties. All the activities of student unions must be viewed from the perspective of academic and social betterment which would follow a disciplinary way.

It is also very important to mention that teacher politics which is also subservient to the political parties also create an impact on student politics in Bangladesh. Here, the teacher's groups are named after colors like white or blue rather than after any political parties but the essential functions are the same (Patwary 2011). It is no more a secret that the administrative heads in public academic institutions are being appointed based on political involvement rather than academic qualifications. These sorts of practices among teachers are also responsible for student politics and violence in campus. Thus, to improve the situation, teachers' union also needs to delink from the national political parties.

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