

Uncertain Futures, Student Attrition, and Collapsing Quality Standards: Higher Education Under Illiberal Politics in Bangladesh

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Can quality assurance in universities survive without democracy? Recently, universities in Afghanistan faced a massive collapse or “transformation” under the Taliban rule by banning female students and abolishing the humanities curriculum (Graham-Harrison, 2024). In Myanmar around 60% drop outs have happened, when in 2021 the military regime has weaponized higher education through coup, systemic security forces occupied campuses, arrested scholars who raised voices and closed down liberal arts curricula (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, 2023). In an extreme illiberal context like Russia’s invasion in Ukraine has physically destroyed educational institutions and dismantled academic liberty under martial law; even if these conditions are addressed as war-driven disruptions and man-made disasters’ still the quality of higher education is under siege (UNESCO, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). Bangladesh is recently facing a crucial political transit from getting rid of an authoritarian regime towards a ‘selected advisory’ regime; the transit is supposed to be a way towards electing a democratic government however, it has been a year that the alternative political parties and advisory committee members yet could not come to an agreement to let the election happen (Malala Fund, 2024). Looking back at the political history, since the birth of Bangladesh as a nation, the writer is doubtful that even if the election happens, still the country will be stable enough to ensure an inclusive, peaceful and effective higher education system at all. This article critically demonstrates

how illiberal transformation in the political transit of Bangladesh threatens quality assurance in universities that causes student dropouts by systematically dismantling academic freedom and enforcing apparatuses by exploiting policies which eventually lead to an uncertain future.

The decline in quality assurance (QA) in Bangladeshi universities is deeply rooted and interlinked to state-led politicization of higher education. After the fall of the previous political regime under the present "advisory" regime (The Daily Star, 2024), academic appointments, curriculum revisions, and accreditation processes are increasingly dictated by political loyalty rather than merit (University Grants Commission, 2024). For example, vice-chancellors are being regularly appointed based on their political alliances and nepotism which has been a traditional political practice in the Bangladeshi higher education context. Vice-chancellor's are the chosen ones by the political group in power undermining institutional autonomy and their critical scholarship is often overlooked (Al Jazeera, 2023). In Myanmar's post-coup landscape, academic leaders and scholars are replaced by the Military officials to sustain certain political ideologues (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, 2023). In Bangladesh, regulatory bodies like Bangladesh Accreditation Council (BAC) and University Grants Commission (UGC) lack transparency and accountability because of bureaucratic formality which is eventually affecting and reducing quality assurance (QA) (World Bank, 2024). There are numerous consequences for such discrepancy- backdated curricula, faculty control over decision making, obstacles to do quality research and the worst is student attrition.

The alarming dropout rates, particularly among female and minority students are the most concerning ones which are causing institutional downfall. Campus violence is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh, however, with the students' being the maker and writer of the fate

and downfall of the last political regime and part of the advisory committee without merits making the campuses more burning, rooting for power and unstable to continue study for general students (Hossain, 2024). The political clashes, state-backed crackdowns, students-teacher conflicts and minority attacks have created a risky learning environment, which has caused numbers of female students to leave education due to unsafe campus, session jam, fear of threats and harassment (Context News, 2024). Referring back to the context of Afghanistan, Taliban's systematic exclusion of women and girls from education as female education being banned from universities; in Bangladesh although it is unofficial however due to mob violence, threats and risks, institutional negligence female students are facing barriers to continue their education (Hossain, 2024). Often, illiberal regimes use intersectional apparatuses which are state-sustained to suppress people from receiving quality education and unsurprisingly negotiating between the quality assurance and politics is one of the major tactics to paralyze a nation.

Recently, on a report of The Daily Star an article titled "Youth-less Bangladesh , Brain-less Future," spotted the ongoing crisis in Bangladesh featuring notable economists and academics, where they have agreed on the harsh situation of Bangladeshi youth purposefully leaving from academia and concerns are raised as this is not a hypothetical threat anymore rather the present reality (Uddin, 2024). In fact, universities, political interference and outdated curricula are to be blamed for producing graduates with degrees which are disconnected from the skillsets needed for the present market only prioritizing memorization over critical thinking and experiential learning. The concerned industry leaders focused on immediate reformation of policies, underscored the necessity of depoliticizing academia, accreditation standards and industry partnerships to understand genuine risks and fulfill the requirements needed to bring energetic youth to tackle the needs of the economic market (TBS News, 2024).

Undoubtedly, prolonged and frequent academic disruptions such as protests, study gaps, sudden campus vacancy and closures, session cancellations are leaving students questioning their scholarship as a student and the worth of their degrees. The similar patterns have been noticed in Ukraine reported by UNESCO in 2024 where war exploited institutions and infrastructure, but the ongoing crisis in Bangladesh is man-made where people are prioritizing power over human development and monopoly over stability. If the democratic accountability and quality assurance remains only by the name not in action then student attrition and degradation in values will continue.

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