

By Syful Islam

Rawayt Selim (not his real name) may seem to be a typical student at the Department of International Relations at the University of Dhaka, the oldest university in Bangladesh. What sets him apart from other students, however, is how he got there: Allegations by authorities claim that Selim gained admission, not by getting good grades, but by improper, illegal means.

In fact, Selim is only one of many students to illegally gain admission to the institution by paying bribes ranging from 300,000 taka to 500,00 taka (US\$4,392 to US\$7,320), paid to professors, university officials and leaders of the student wings of political parties.

The university's fact-finding committee also discovered that many students who gained admission through illegal means have graduated from the university and are now working in both government and private firms in various capacities.

In the 18 month period before July 2008, the Dhaka University Syndicate, the highest decision-making body, cancelled the admissions of 230 students and dismissed four university officials on charges of corrupt practices. The authorities have also discovered that admissions department heads have made questionable recommendations in the applications of 25 students who eventually managed to obtain university admission through these corrupt practices, say sources in the fact-finding committee.

The University of Dhaka is a significant institution in Bangladesh. Most of the top civil servants, ministers and political leaders in Bangladesh are graduates. Less positively, many of those arrested in the recent anti-corruption drives also studied there.

According to Professor Yusuf Haider, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dhaka, and coordinator of the fact-finding committee, this corruption reflects the moral degradation of the country's people as a whole. He states, "In addition to the teachers, university officials and leaders of student wings of political parties who were caught contributing to the fake admission process, both students and their parents are also responsible. It is the parents who gave their children the necessary money to buy these unearned admissions. Admission through illegal means is an impediment to the real goals of education and will encourage future corruption. The ideal of education as a

way of learning decency and ethical practice is completely missing here.”

From the Top to the Bottom and Beyond

Corruption has been rampant in the country's educational institutions from the primary to the university levels. Teachers are involved, too. They neglect their regular classes and deeply involve themselves in private teaching and consulting. They participate heavily in partisan politics and take full advantage of the situation when their faction comes to power. It is commonly known that the heads of many Bangladeshi educational institutions, including university vice-chancellors, principals of colleges and even headmasters of public schools, are appointed based on their political connections, rather than their professional skills.

The Coordination and Development (C&D) Committee of the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science at the University of Dhaka recently tried to appoint a professor based on his political connections, clearly bypassing the appointment rules. This kind of action can be stopped only after a professor submits a note of dissent, university sources said.

Sources in the University of Dhaka also say more than half of their 1,550 teachers fail to participate in academics in one way or the other. As many as 245 teachers are staying abroad on a leave of absence, 25 have left without permission and some 300 are engaged in private teaching and consultancy with foreign and local institutions. This, among other problems, has resulted in overcrowded classes and has increased — up to two years — the length of time it takes for students to graduate and enter the workforce.

Making the Grades

Mostafa Kamal Majumder, editor of the New Nation newspaper, thinks that corruption in the education sector is pervasive mainly because getting jobs in both public and private sectors depends solely on getting a certificate, no matter the actual skills and abilities of the jobseeker. Even though higher education is not required for most jobs, students pursue higher education both to improve their employment chances and to seek social esteem.

Shafayet Ullah, an examinee at the higher secondary level, claims that his geography teacher forced him to pay 2,200 taka (US\$32) to secure passing grades in the practical session of examinations. “The teacher did not

teach a single class, but we still wanted to take the test and submit our practical sheets, but the teacher forced us to pay the money. This happens in every educational institution. I am really ashamed at how some teachers commit such sins and pollute a noble profession.”

Interviews with a number of students in several schools reveal that even students at the secondary education level have to pay bribes to the school authorities in exchange for selection for the lengthy secondary school certificate examinations. If they fail the test examinations, they have to pay 1,000 taka (US\$15) to 1,500 taka (US\$22) for each subject to ensure that they will be allowed to take the next round, the public examinations. Students are also required to bribe their teachers for the required marks in the practical examination sessions.

A most alarming situation prevails in the primary education sector. There, teachers go through a corrupt process that starts from the time they are appointed and lasts until they are retired. They are not required to spend adequate time in the classes while their students are being forced to pay bribes on different occasions. The teachers, in collaboration with school-managing committees, receive a certain portion of the government-allocated scholarship money and food. Similarly, the teachers must bribe the Upzila (a local government body) education officials in order to secure such essentials as training, transfers, monthly pay orders and retirement benefits.

Corruption in the Wider Society

Despite the present government’s crusade against corruption, it has not reduced petty corruption, observes Professor Muzaffer Ahmad, Chair of the Trustee Board of Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) chapter. “Only political corruption has been noticeably reduced because those leaders are in jail and remain inactive. It will take time to stop the systemic corruption.”

Professor Muzaffer also advocates pressing charges against a former adviser of the caretaker government who has reportedly amassed a huge sum of money through his misuse of power. Reacting to the practice of judges granting bail to some of the accused, Muzaffer says, “Judges are not guiltless.”

Asked about current trends of corruption and the government measures taken in response, Mostafa Kamal Majumder says, “Considering that the latest TIB report says that the corruption rate has increased, I do not think there is much more to be said on that question. I will put

the whole thing in a different way: Corruption has to be prevented. Corruption is deeply rooted in poverty, deprivation and lack of distributive justice among other reasons. The problem with government initiative is that it entirely relies on the curative aspect of corruption without properly focussing on preventive measures.”

In the latest development, on September 9, 2009, the Anti-Corruption Commission (DUDOK: Durnitee Domon Commission) submitted charges against former law adviser and retired justice Fazlul Haque for amassing and hiding illegally gained wealth. Haque, an adviser to the caretaker government headed by President Iajuddin Ahmed, has reportedly acquired wealth worth 1.8 crore taka (US\$261,251) beyond his known sources of income and concealed information on wealth worth about 91 lakh taka (US\$132,076). He allegedly received the money in payment for transferring forest officials from their posts in order to allot some government lands to a privately owned housing company. Officials of the Anti-Corruption Commission have also uncovered huge sums from the bank accounts of his son and other relatives.

On July 30, 2008, the government formed a Truth and Accountability Commission (TAC) to allow accused officials and others to seek mercy by making voluntary public confessions. They could also avoid further prosecution in exchange for surrendering their ill-gotten wealth. However, most Bangladeshis do not like the idea of establishing such a commission when the anti-corruption drive is only halfway through its campaign.

The interim government has arrested more than 200 high-profile suspects, mostly political bigwigs from the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, along with some top business executives and bureaucrats, on corruption charges since January 2007. From the citizens' standpoint, these individuals deserve longer jail terms for their past deeds, not leniency. As a result, the appearance that the TAC was formed to help corrupt bigwigs escape justice has only created confusion among citizens over exactly where the government stands against corruption.

“If you ask the people about the formation of TAC to free the corrupt officials, you will get a variety of opinions. But most of the people will oppose a scheme to show mercy to them,” says Yusuf Haider, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor.

“The government's previous tough stand against corruption has been compromised by the formation of the TAC,” notes Shahjahan Sipon, a young executive in the telecom sector.

In the meantime, a chief adviser to the caretaker government, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, has said that the suspects are being released on bail and the government has little say in this regard.