

PRIVATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS No longer an apathetic entity?

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THE recent series of protests, initiated by private university students against the government decision of imposing 7.5 percent VAT on tuition fees, indicates a profound change in the alleged apathetic nature of private university students.

It would not be an exaggeration to argue that a common perception about private university students used to be that they, unlike students of public universities, are not interested in politics or the political affairs of the country. This was proven wrong when students of Brac University, North South University, Independent University and East West University alongside other private universities staged what can be described as civil disobedience to press their demands.

The protests came as a surprise to the wider society. In particular, the case of police spraying rubber bullets upon some East West University students and staff has stunned many. Even though the NBR sent a mass SMS stating that private university authorities, not students, need to pay the VAT, it is unlikely to quash the protests since many have argued that it is the students who would ultimately have to pay the extra cost of their education.

Like other tax payments, VAT is an agreed upon economic contract between a state and its citizens. Surely the state too has its own logic. However, the wider impacts of these protest movements are worth investigating for a number of reasons.

Firstly, these movements indicate that private university students are joining the political stream. What this means is that these apparently apathetic students of private universities are exercising their

economic and political agency by defying a proposed contract between the state and an individual. In this context, not only are private university students protesting a state decision but private universities as an establishment have also mounted criticism against the state. It may be noted that the economic management of the state is a political decision as opposed to an economic one about who has to bear how much responsibility and in what context.

Secondly, these protests are adding a new dimension to our political spectrum by setting a non-violent standard. By doing so, these protests highlight that authorities can be challenged in a peaceful manner, at a time when opposition political parties have failed to exert pressure on the government through their violent demonstrations. However, one should not rule out a distant possibility of political elements manipulating the prevailing situation.

Thirdly, these protests have instigated an old debate about whether higher education is a right or a privilege which comes at a price. Public university students receive government subsidies for their education, while private university students don't. On the other hand, little is known publicly about the logic of framing tuition fees of various private universities. Tuition fees differ from institution to institution, and many students of private universities and their parents have exhausted their economic limits by paying the fees, against the backdrop of rising cost of living. So it seems that higher education is a right for some, but a privilege for many. Where, then, is the solution of this paradox?

Finally and most importantly, these



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protest movements have exposed a lack of trust between citizens and the state. While civil disobedience in the form of protest is a right of citizens, provocative writings such as "Shoot us" is a manifestation of staunch

criticism of law-enforcing agencies, even though, thus far, except for one or two instances, the latter has not used lethal force to remove the protesters from the streets. What is needed at this stage is to find a new

way to rebuild trust and resolve this issue constructively.

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