Student Politics: Legal Status, Contemporary Trends and Projection of Its Prospective Re-emergence in Bangladesh

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Abstract

A society's typical mode is that it often engages in partitioning; differences based on race, sex, age, economy and group identity are some of the main nuances between one and the other. When it comes to understanding social change, youth is one of the distinct social identities that tend to attract a great deal of attention. Youth participation in social life and decision-making is vital for the development of the society in which they live; their imagination, ideals, and energies are vital for the development of the society in which they live. The importance of students' political participation is well documented in Bangladesh's national history. The absence of the memento in modern society and culture has led to a loss of hope among the most active and enthusiastic members of society. This paper investigates the legal status of youth political activism, participation in the decision-making process, and the cause of hope degeneration, with a focus on the matter's near-term horizon. Despite the fact that this is not a comprehensive study, it will undoubtedly provide a framework in light of the current generation's ambitious and courageous statements.

Keywords: Student Politics, Legality Checks, Bangladesh Politics, Political Conflict, Political Culture.

1.0 Introduction

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that 'one of the great liabilities of history is that all too many people fail to remain awake through great periods of social change. Every society has its protectors of the status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions. Today, our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change'. Since society undergoes constant changes, social changes have to be conceived; our very ability to adapt to change will help us survive in

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harmony. However, any attempt to summarize social change makes us below its objective. Even if we do not define differences, we still face challenges, and we have changes to accept. A social character investigation examines the depth of social involvement and personality. It perceives social development as an ideal dynamic process to accommodate changes that are affected by man's critical and creative action by resolving antagonisms that arise from time to time because of changes in the endogenous and exogenous climate. The lack of freedom, economic and cultural heterogeneity, and group interest posed constraints. Society, through its dynamic changes, let us acquire how we have to move, keep ourselves running through antagonisms we may not expect to be in our ways of prosperity. Man's social action is primarily the outcome of structural changes mediated by socio-psychological factors. To frame it another way, man and his social structure have an on-going dialectic thread shaping each other without ever proclaiming a final form to either.

2.0 Conceptual Framework

The study is conducted from a realist ontology closely observing the fact in the midst of a cluster of socio-economic and psychological factors. Since the issue is political, power politics is closely associated with students' political affairs, heading into a much more complex sketch of the situation. Thus, narrowing down the focus concentrated the interactive discussions (with respondents) on the prospective student movement pattern considering the present state and realising the glorious past. The research is qualitative. The core concern was laid to explore a design in analysing students' current trend in political activism, the legal status of the student/youth participation in the socio-political system and predicting a prospective revival and future conjunction to its stunning past. Sampling is quite exclusive. The nominated respondents were chosen based on their practical experience, contemporary involvement in student politics and institutional knowledge of the issue.

3.0 Background

During any national movement, student organisations used to play an important role. Not only were they a deciding factor, but they were also the pioneer on many occasions.[3] The student movement in the Indian subcontinent has always been remarkable. With the onset of the Henry

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[3]   GM Quader, 'Student politics in Bangladesh: Past, present and future' *The Independent* (Dhaka, 29 April 2017) <www.theindependentbd.com/arcprint/details/92337/2017-04-29> accessed 28 November 2020.

Derozario initiated Academic Association in the early Nineteen century, students educated by the British institutions organised themselves with the mind-set to reiterate their very own cultural heritage. The student organisations also participated in agitations to revolt against the British government. They started believing to be subtly oppressing by making people civil in the regions. The Dhaka based 'Anushilan Samity' turned to become a radical group led and premiered by the students. In the late Nineteen century, the inauguration of the two major Political parties named the Congress and Muslim League in British colonial India joined by students who used to take part regularly in both organisational and agitation programs against the occupying Raj earlier.

Bangali nationalism finds its root in the thoughtful expression of pride in the thousand years of historical, cultural, intellectual and revolutionary heritage of Bangali people and the land. Besides, youth's political and social activism in the history of Bangladesh traces back to the ninetieth-century British colonial regime.[4] The legacy continued through independence, partition in 1947, and even more desperately throughout the Pakistan period. Even more promising is their constructive role, promoting popular sovereignty and protecting democratic self-determination along independent Bangladesh's journey.

The significance of student politics can be traced back to the glorious Language Movement in the middle of the last century. Apart from his infamous speech regarding the exclusion of Bangla and Urdu's declaration as to the only national language of then Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah also sounded alarmed, saying no student should be involved in any form of politics. He was well aware that student power, if not anything else, could pose a blockade to the oppressive regime led mainly by the then West Pakistani political and bureaucratic elites. While listening to Jinnah's speech in Curzon Hall of Dhaka University and Racecourse Moydan (presently the Sohrawardy Uddan), students let him promptly know their discontent. Bangali students instantly rejected their West Pakistani counterparts' irrational and autarchic effort to make Urdu the only state language of Pakistan. They later spearheaded the language movement and sacrificed their lives.

Student organisations of East Bengal (later known as East Pakistan) had both the motif and ability to articulate the general interests comprehensively. The 1969 mass upsurge, which sought to emancipate the people from the long-held oppressive activities of the occupying power,

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4   Anil Rajimwale, 'Student Movement in India in the Nineteenth Century' (1988) 49 Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 343-348 <www.jstor.org/stable/44148408> accessed 23 January 2021.

the Pakistani generals, is a great example. Students from Dhaka University joined by college students e.g. Dhaka College, Jagannath College (Presently Jagannath University) and common people endeavoured the upsurge where student leader Asaduzzaman was martyred. They formulated and posed an eleven points programs to the General Ayub regime; procession, meetings and gathering were other parts of the movement. Students like those of the 1952 language movement selflessly laid down their lives in the upsurge. The sanguinary war of independence in 1971 was also heralded by the students from Dhaka University and joined by others from different education institutions.

In the 1960s, students manifested even a more vital role in a movement that linked the overall cultural revolution of East Pakistan. Observing the situation, General Ayub formed a student association naming National Student Federation (NSF), which he tried to offer as an alternative to the hugely supported Chatra League and Students' Union. The military motivated NSF failed to gather broad-based student support. Consequently, the popular student organisations spur a more potent power which was demonstrated by their remarkable movement against the Education Commission Report in 1962.[5]

Student leaders and general students had a vital part in the movement for the restoration of democracy in the 1990s. General Ershad's dictatorial regime ultimately toppled by students' unity from Awami League, BNP, and various Leftist student fronts where the major political party leaders failed to come to a common ground to emerge as a force against authoritarianism. Student leader Shahid Noor Mohammad along with other students, was martyred. Like General Ayub, General Ershad also could measure the student movement's power against any dictatorial regime. General Hussein Muhammad Ershad also formed a student organisation named Jatiyo Chatro Samaj, who, like General Ayub, blatantly banned students' participation in politics. Student organisations emerged as the most challenging party to the decade long dictatorship.

Since the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh in 1991, students started to suffer from an identity crisis. In the absence of any burning national issue, the student leaders went through grey phases that lack any vision or activism. Students are seen to have been oriented to immediate gain, shaded under the shadow of a political party or mere factional identity, and sought personal interests instead of the common good. The major political parties also failed to re-energise their student leaders. They could barely

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[5]   Nahid Riyasad, 'EDUCATION MOVEMENT 1962: unresolved question of inequality in education' *New Age* (Dhaka, 23 September 2018) <www.newagebd.net/article/51214/education-movement-1962-unresolved-question-of-inequality-in-education> accessed 25 December 2020.

communicate the progressive motifs of the students as a whole. The poor leadership took student politics in an era that is clash-prone, rampantly confrontational, aggressive and abundant only in intolerance both among and within the parties. Scenarios ultimately have become chaotic, and student leaders could not positively participate in any democratic movement for an extended period.

4.0 Aims and Objectives

Although students' engagement in politics in Bangladesh has been the focal point of criticism for quite some time, our pre-liberation war history of the nation is ornamented by the struggle and contribution of the students. From the language movement to the war of independence, students sacrificed their lives for socio-cultural justice. In securing long enshrined democratic aspiration, they joined the forces that sought to fight against injustice to the people of the land. The changing pattern of student politics in the post-independence era, the student's valiant voices from time to time attuned to self and/or group-centric and party guarding. In the late 80s of the last century, while movement against dictatorship, a distinct set of students' forums were organised, thereby helping the nation topple the decade-long military dictatorship down and restore into a functional democracy. Since the democratic restoration period of the early 1990s, student politicians have only worked as a branch of mother political parties. Students are targeted, motivated, and manipulated by the political parties to implement their electoral politics' narrow agenda.

Almost forty percent of the population in Bangladesh are youth.[6] The nation is yet to employ the potential of the young people in its developmental segments, but a national daily conducted survey shows that about 80% of the youth show their abhorrence to student politics. Student politics in the understanding of the common mass has an incomplete definition. It often sees the violent sides of the engagement but fails to understand the essence that makes the students understand the governance and economy. The plight of student politics should not be seen from the looming crises of weak governance, poor leadership, and an unhealthy culture of politics.

Despite an apparent abhorrence to politics, students seem to be highly informed of the issues that affect the political environment and overall national development. Students who happen to be staying at home,

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[6]   Ministry of Environment and Forests, Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh, *Rio+20: National Report on Sustainable Development* (2012) <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/981bangladesh.pdf> accessed 12 February 2020.

showing abhorrence to politics, have a wide range of access to social media and digital platforms, making them politically aware. The pragmatism is that the policy levels consider the students as a soft source of censorship. Still, the students themselves are, especially in recent years, if not before the democratic restoration period, seen to have taken them seriously. Youth are the future government, electorates, and masses, which is why they should be encouraged to be aware of the things they have to deal with in the future.

The study's core objective is to shed light on the prospective student revival of their dignity and outstanding activism, considering the vibrant youth community's potentials rather than putting a ban on it.

5.0 Legal Status of Student Politics

From Bangladesh's perspective, assessing the legal status of student activism, also known as student politics, is extremely difficult. Because the modern concept of organization is based on numerous legal foundations, there is a degree of abstraction that allows students to organize their forum, evolve, and function by actively participating in the decision-making process. The University Ordinances of 1973 govern the four oldest and most prestigious public universities in Bangladesh (the University of Dhaka, the University of Chittagong, the University of Rajshahi, and the University of Jahangirnagar). There are separate laws that govern the operation of all other public universities. Universities must form a separate committee to run the university, according to the 1973 ordinance. It is legally required for all of them to hold elections in order to form student unions. Other universities have laws in place that allow students to form student unions. Colleges and schools have recently begun to hold elections to form student unions, which is a recent development of the phenomenon. The idea behind the student union is to represent students in the institution's policy-making process. In line with this, student representation is thought to be preparing the nation's future political leadership. To comprehend Bangladesh's legal framework for student politics, one must first examine the philosophy that underpins it. Student activism and student movements are valued for their ability to a) determine students' opinions through democratic participation for efficient management of academic institutions; b) provide space for future political leadership of the country; and c) assist in the formation of a strong fighting front against all oppressive and unlawful acts by other interest groups against the general public's interest. The Representation of the People Order (RPO) of 1972 states in article 90(b) (1) and (b)(3) that:

> …formation of any organisation or body as its affiliated or associated body [consisting of] the teachers or students of any educational institution or the employees or labourers of any financial, commercial or industrial institution or establishment or the members of any other profession; provided that nothing shall prevent them from organising independently in their respective fields or forming association, society, trade union etc. and exercising all democratic and political rights, and individual, subject to the provisions of the existing laws, to be a member of any political party.

Although there is scope for working independently, the student organizations emerge as political parties' sister organizations. The law permits students to organize themselves in educational institutions without fear of legal repercussions. When there is an election in the institution, it is common for in-house organizations (those not previously connected to any political party), including student-led organizations, to seek to form a panel, because multiple organizations can exist. Students' organizations appear to have placed their complete trust in political parties in order to win an election. Students' organizations appear to have placed their complete trust in political parties in order to win an election. In this context, political parties extend their support in exchange for loyalty. Despite the fact that students are not required by law to join a broad-based organization, almost all Bangladeshi student organizations seek protection from a political party. The relationship between student organizations and their mother parties is more vigilant during election seasons. Major student organizations in Bangladesh include Bangladesh Chatra Maitri of the Bangladesh Workers Party, Bangladesh Chatra League of the Bangladesh Awami League, and Jatyatabadi Chatradal of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

6.0 Key Factors for the Degeneration of Student Politics

6.1 Newly Emerged Political Context

The crisis of leadership in politics and governance is one of the prime reasons that created a flawed base of student politics in Bangladesh. Lack of vision among student leaders, intolerance within and among political parties, faction, violence and arson prone political culture, uninterrupted growth of the rent-seeking group, impunity for crime and corruption have taken place in both national and local politics. These have a far-reaching reflection in the sphere of student politics in any setting. The political parties, in Bangladesh, from time to time, have used students as instruments in street politics, including party interest-based confrontation with the opponents. Students are treated as expendable foot-soldiers for the

mother parties. Besides, university administrations' politicisation has impeded the academic authorities from playing a due role in ensuring a healthy campus environment throughout the country.

6.2 Decay in the Nature of Politics

There were dual agenda of student politics in the 1960s and '80s: one that evolved around intellectual discourses and the other based on contemporary political issues. For the last three decades in Bangladesh, student politics has shown only a little interest in enhancing a better academic environment; both the ruling party patronised student organisation, and the primary opponent can be seen through this lens. Broadly, narrow partisan interests have ignited student organisations to move. In the University of Dhaka, DUCSU elections did not hold for nearly three decades, making no inducements for the student leader to seek legitimacy and popularity as the representatives of general students on the campus.

6.3 Economic Interests

Major political parties have used student leaders in distributing patronage and rent. The ruling party student wing often handles tender bidding on and off-campus. Extortion, partisan recruitment in government and non-government offices, control of campus dormitory accommodation, etc., are some of the main factors students joined political platforms.

Agitation in student politics in South Asia started in the colonial period. Mere party interests were not the students' motivation; broader national interests were at the base of the protest, agitations and movements. One of the characteristics of student politics now is that there are not only agitations against the ruling authority; both intra-party and inter-party violence are rife here.

There is a pressing need for change in this pattern of student politics in Bangladesh. A significant number of the student leaders join national and local politics and become representatives in the legislature and local governments. If the culture does not change, mass people will be represented by those who lack motivations for seeking common interests.

7.0 Methods

The research comprises intensive interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Sample respondents were selected purposefully from the seriously

concerned young population closely engaged in politics. This study focuses on the issue of how students concern themselves with politics.

Politics by at least one prominent definition means 'a collective activism' of a certain number of people who attempt to secure their interests.' Student politics, in this line, may be defined as collective activism by a number of students who connect themselves through a common set of interests.

The data collection method of the study was comprehensive. With a questionnaire, respondents were asked to contemplate and analyse the issue on the prospective line of the matter. While marking on the simple close-ended questionnaire, interviewees seemed keen to explore the issue further. A rigorous review of available literature and analysis of contents are other methods that have been purposefully incorporated to reach the study's goals.

The questionnaire was constructed on three categories of questions: (a) a general overview of an objective perspective, (b) situational, constructive or foundational, of a subjective nature, and (c) ambitious and/or prospective outlook.

8.0 Findings

There has appeared a recurring pattern in the cluster of factors. The finding shows a pattern that validates student politics' astounding state in the realm of power politics and the market economy. It also possesses a positive outlook for future broader potentials.

The opening question was from a more comprehensive global perspective regarding the evaluation of student politics in Bangladesh. Of the three options, including two positive choices came out fifty/fifty result while the negative one marking absolute 50% on board. Student politics in Bangladesh is not in a good position comparing to those of the other nations.

Evaluation of Student Politics in Bangladesh

10%
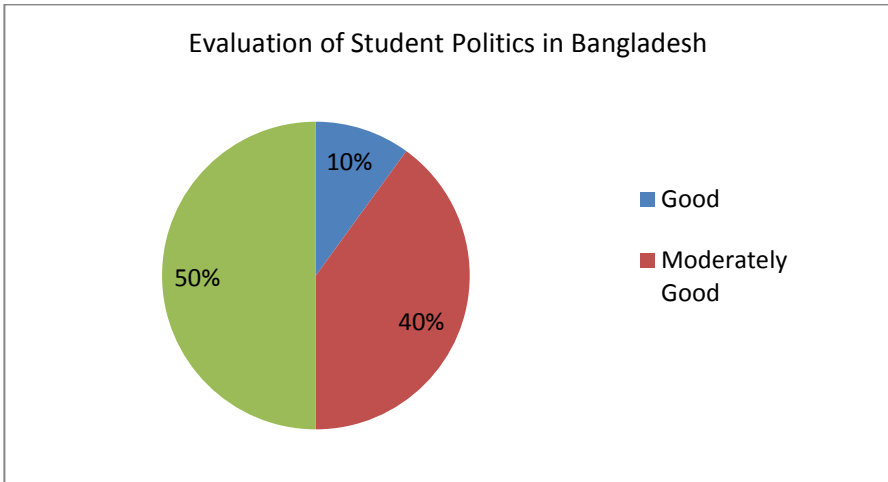
40%

50%

Good

Moderately Good

Table 1: Evaluation of Student Politics in Bangladesh

The second question was aimed at the fundamental constraint of the partisan student politics; that is, the mother parties' influence on their student wings resulting in the sheer confrontational environment. This issue enjoyed the absolute approval varying from moderate (40%) to the firm (60%) choice. Contemporary Student Politics fails to continue its glorious legacy, especially for the over-influence of the mother party.

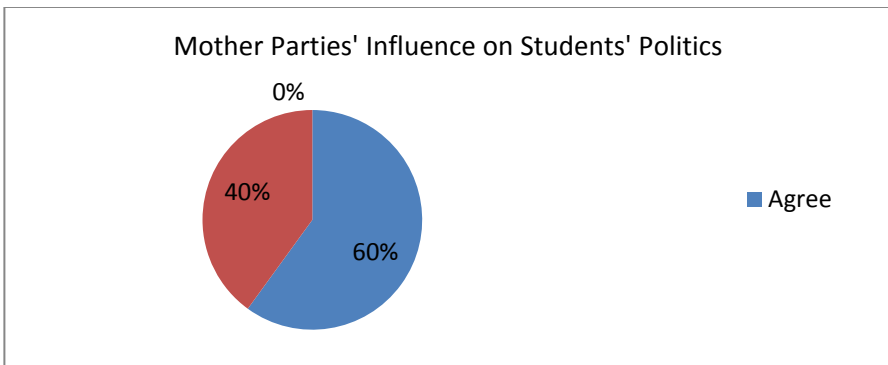## Mother Parties' Influence on Students' Politics

0%

40%

60%

Agree

Table 2: Mother Parties' Influence on Students' Politics

The 3rd question was grounded on the 2nd one. The respondents were asked to opine on a statement that says 'beyond the sphere of influence of the political parties contending for the electoral political power youth community could create a political culture of their own.' The graph below shows the result.

Students' own political culture independent of other mother political parties possible

100%
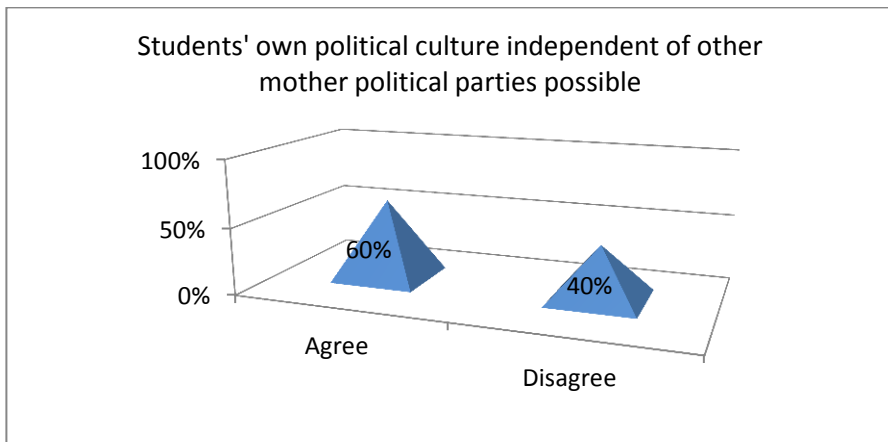
50%

0%

60%

40%

Agree

Disagree

Table 3:
Students' own Political Culture Independent of Mother Political Parties

Given the more spontaneous youth movement in the country, respondents were asked to choose from two closely related options for why student politics lacks unity and effectiveness, one for the moral and political cause and the economic and social constraints. Seventy per cent of respondents were for the socio-economic reasons for the absence of unity and effectiveness of the student and youth community issues.

Lack of Unity & Effectiveness for
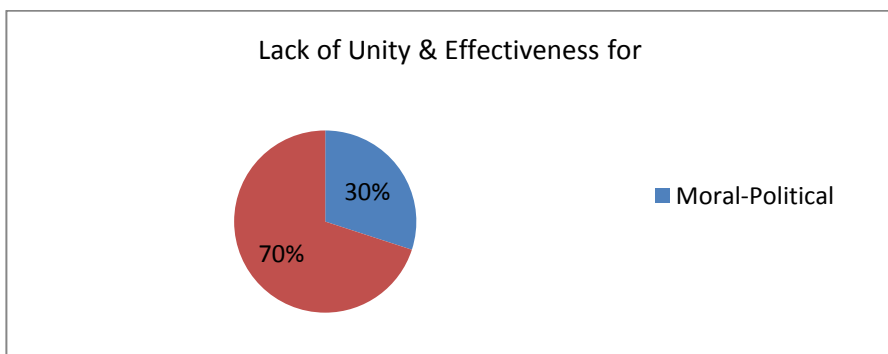
30%

70%

■ Moral-Political

Table 4: Lack of Unity & Effectiveness: Why?

There are two different grounds for the economic constraints prioritising moral cause. One is the Marxist approach to analyse politics based on the economic system; the other is treating the matter as it seems apparent. Everyone is, in the market economic system, headed for immediate financial gain. But digging into the matter implies the insatiability and un-limitedness of the material desire and indeed the greed. This observation essentially suggests an underlying philosophy. That is, one could overcome the economic constraints with a solid ideological base and self-

control or temperament. How could a philosophically and morally empty person leave the chance of illegal or immoral material gains?

Questions five and six are essentially motivational measures, where every respondent (100%) were determined to choose the same choice. Question five voices for the scope of student politics beyond mere own rights and privileges. Should they concern about the national, international affairs and issues regarding socio-cultural and politico-economic problems? The sixth one looks for the most crucial factor for a successful and efficient student movement; willingness-unity or Money-Security? Every respondent unanimously chose the first one.

The fifth and seventh questions seem similar. But the seventh and the last one is the most ambitious and confidence provoking measure. On this question, the respondents were of more diverse opinion. Sixty per cent were positive in viewing the future potentials of the youth generation, while at least 30% were cynical of the matter. Most of them conditioned their choice on the contemporary political and social culture and situation. Yet, they are hopeful for change when the case might take a positive turn.
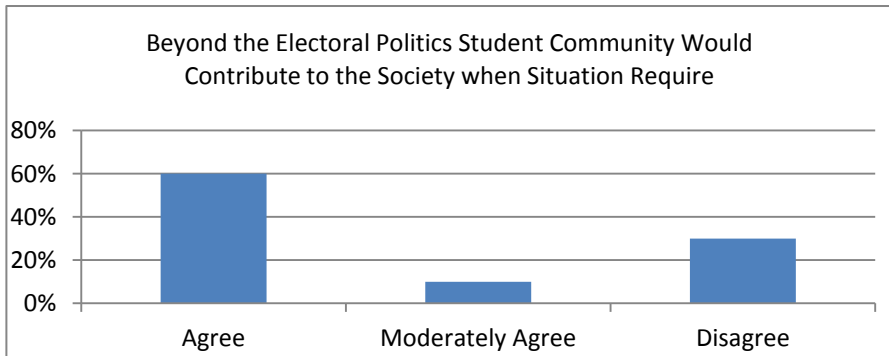

Table 5: Beyond the Electoral Politics Student Community would contribute to society when the situation Require

9.0 Concluding Remarks

The concept of 'common good' politics appeals to all social beings because it involves the idea of owing something to their communities. We should be excited about our future as newlyweds. Students' movements should work to ensure overall social safety, freedom of expression, and resistance to oppression of any kind. They should also speak out against gender discrimination and identity-based partitioning. Their inclusion is required for more effective and efficient policy formation, globalization of

national knowledge, the creation of a better business environment, and better responses to environmental challenges, among other things. Because youth make up the majority of a society's population, their legitimate demands must be met. It will be fruitless to exclude young people from any process. Youth can assist in confronting and resolving not only socio-economic challenges, but also deeper political dangers. In Bangladeshi and global history, the idea of prohibiting student politics is seen as ineffective. Rather, a clear legal foundation should be established for students to participate in the political system and social decision-making processes for the greater good. In Bangladesh's history, youth have made significant contributions. Neglecting or exploiting youth for personal gain will surely backfire.

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