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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Academic Freedom and Politicization of Universities: A Socio-Historical Analysis in the Context of Bangladesh**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the historical trajectory and current trends of academic freedom and politicization in universities of Bangladesh. Using a qualitative research design based on secondary data, supplemented by insights from survey (N=50) and interview work, the paper analyzes how political influence has structured institutional governance, academic buoyancy, and campus ambience historically. Academic freedom exists in a conditional, bounded and heavily constrained manner vis-a-vis embedded political structures, mechanisms of informal control and patronage-based systems. Historically, universities in Bangladesh have served as bastions of democratic movements and nation-building, but the ever-increasing institutionalization of partisan politics has pushed back against autonomy, meritocracy and academic integrity. The research shows that politicization occurs through both apparent and subtle processes, such as interference in governance, self-censorship and political brokerage within student organizations. By combining historical analysis with empirical evidence, this research provides a valuable contribution to the literature by developing an integrative framework that connects academic freedom and political institutional dynamics. The paper concludes with exhortation for structural and cultural reforms to return institutional autonomy and safeguard intellectual independence in higher education.

**| KEYWORDS**

Academic Freedom; Politicization; Student Politics; Institutional Autonomy; Bangladesh; Meritocracy

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**1. Introduction**

Academic freedom is broadly viewed as a cornerstone of higher education, permitting scholars and students to explore knowledge, research and express ideas without undue interference or restriction. Webster University (1990) defines academic freedom as the freedom to teach, research, study, publish and participate in intellectual debate freely and without fear of political or institutional harassment (p. 1). In democratic societies, academic freedom is inherently connected with the pursuit of critical inquiry, innovation and social progress. In many developing countries, including Bangladesh, such an ideal is under siege by the ever-growing politicization of universities.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the relationship between universities and politics. Historically, universities have been prominent sites of political awareness and civic engagement as well as social transformation (Brennan et al., 2013). In the case of Bangladesh, higher education institutions occupied a primary role in almost epic historical movements such as Language Movement 1952 and Liberation War 1971. The events are a testament to the positive nature of student and faculty activism in creating national identity and democratic values (Uddin, 2006).

However, the nature of political activity on campuses has changed over the years. What began as largely issue-focused activism has gradually morphed into partisan political alignment. Student organizations linked to national political parties have now come

home to roost on the campus for they decide the iota of campus life, governance and decision-making processes (Alam et al., 2011). This transition has positioned these arguments about excess politics on the same side as fears that politicization is a threat to academic freedom by limiting open inquiry, encouraging bias in hiring and promotion, and also perpetuating conflict, instability.

Political interference into university action has also raised fears about institutional autonomy and meritocracy. Evidence suggests that political factors sometimes take precedence over academic ability when it comes to leadership appointments, faculty recruitment and even evaluation (Shahjahan, 2014). These practices harm academia and degrade the quality of teaching and research, as well as erode trust in academic institutions.

In this context, it is also important to critically interrogate the historical trajectory of university politicization and its impact on academic freedom, providing insight into the complex relationship between political engagement and academic independence.

## 2. Literature Review

According to Altbach (2001), academic freedom is not only an individual right but also an institutional condition without which universities cannot perform their functions. Likewise, many have emphasized that academic freedom includes freedom of expression and research as well as the right to institutional self-governance (UNESCO, 1997). More consequentially, more recent studies have added breadth to this analysis by arguing that academic freedom needs to be considered beyond formal legal guarantees but through real institutional practices (Stachowiak-Kudła, 2022)

There is a growing body of literature that may signal some broader comparative dimensions to this story, as it relates to academic freedom and political contexts. Comparative studies show that academic freedom is generally higher under democratic institutions and lower under politicized or authoritarian systems (Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2022). The Academic Freedom Index builds further upon this dimensionality of academic freedom by distinguishing other inherent constructs, namely research freedom, institutional autonomy, campus integrity and freedom of academic expression (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). These findings indicate that academic freedom is located firmly within political and institutional architecture rather than being a standalone academic ideal.

In postcolonial societies, universities serve a double function: on the one hand they are knowledge-producing institutions (Brennan et al., 2013), while on the other hand they are spaces for politically mobilizing movements. Such dualism is most evident in Bangladesh, where higher education institutions have been central to national movements throughout history. Couple of further examples, like in Bangladesh, Uddin (2006) argues students were especially important during the Language Movement and independence struggle in forging national identity. As a consequences, university culture integrating serving the politics and hoisting the political regime blurring between academia and policies.

But currently it seems like political involvement of a different kind is on the rise. As Rahman (2019, p. 74) writes, "in Bangladesh student politics has moved away from issue-based activism to becoming partisan alignment with larger national political parties." This has transformed campuses, leading to greater political competition that has often resulted in conflict and instability. Similarly, Kuttig et al. (2020), noted that student politics are now situated within larger political networks, becoming a vehicle for political recruitment and distribution of resources.

There has also been broad study about the relationship between politicization and campus violence. As argued by Suykens (2018), violence in student politics is not only a failure of the order but plays a functional role within the political authority and how a party can dominate through state institutions. For instance, Jackman (2021) presents a different view and argues that student organizations exist through larger political lens colored by loyalty, control, and competition. Such studies suggest that politicization is not an event, but rather is baked into institutional and political structures.

Another large body of literature pertains to governance and institutional autonomy in higher education. The reforms in higher education face competing policy priorities, expansion, quality assurance and political control (Kabir & Greenwood, 2017). As noted by Rahnuma (2020), while quality assurance mechanisms have been introduced, the effectiveness of these has been hampered by structural factors such as weak institutional autonomy and political influence over administrative decision making. This shows that governance problems are closely related to the overall issue of politicization.

Politicization also affects academic quality and meritocracy, research shows. It is widely perceived that political favoritism in faculty recruitment, promotion and appointment of administrative staff undermines merit-based systems weakening the quality

of education (Alam et al., 2011). Faculty self-censorship to avoid political reprisal also inhibits academic inquiry and intellectual pluralism (Altbach, 2001). It creates a context in which academic freedom is codified on paper yet limited in practice.

Meanwhile, a few scholars warn against treating political engagement as merely problematic. Brennan et al. (2013) maintain that the purpose of any university is to educate citizens and promote democratic participation. Student movements had historically played a role towards social justice and democratic transformation in Bangladesh, encouraging political engagement to yield positive outcomes rather than partisan interests (Uddin, 2006).

New global literature putting this issue in a wider comparative context also illustrates the decline of academic freedom in many regions. Academic and cultural expression has been narrowed in many countries, according to V-Dem Institute (2025), illustrating broader trends of democratic backsliding. This global context further establishes that attacks on academic freedom in Bangladesh are not an isolated event, but part of a larger trend against academia.

In general, the literature presents a nuanced and multifaceted relationship between academic freedom and politicization. Bangladeshi universities have played a historically important role in the development of democracy, but with the steady institutionalization of partisan politics, academic autonomy, governance and quality are under serious threat. Existing studies, for example, tend to address these issues independently of each other and focus on either student politics or governance or on academic freedom. Poorly researched on two distinct and yet intrinsic dimensions, the issue suffers from a mein of misleading and incomplete findings that do not add up to the level of analysis as is needed therefore requiring some reformulation. This paper aims, among other things, at redressing this situation by delivering an integrated historical perspective capable of making sense out of both dimensions combined in order to lead towards a more extended conclusion.

**Table 2.1 Literature Review Summary Table**

Theme	Key Authors	Core Argument	Critical Insight
<b>Academic Freedom Concept</b>	Altbach (2001); UNESCO (1997); Stachowiak-Kudła (2022)	Academic freedom includes teaching, research, and institutional autonomy	Formal guarantees exist, but real practice depends on institutional context
<b>Academic Freedom &amp; Political Context</b>	Berggren & Bjørnskov (2022); Kinzelbach et al. (2025)	Academic freedom is higher in democratic systems	Freedom is structurally linked to political regimes, not isolated
<b>Universities in Postcolonial Context</b>	Brennan et al. (2013); Uddin (2006)	Universities act as both knowledge centers and political spaces	Blurring of academic and political roles is historically rooted
<b>Transformation of Student Politics</b>	Rahman (2019); Kuttig et al. (2020)	Shift from activism to partisan alignment	Student politics now functions as political extension, not representation
<b>Politicization &amp; Violence</b>	Suykens (2018); Jackman (2021)	Campus violence is structured, not accidental	Violence is embedded in political control mechanisms
<b>Governance &amp; Institutional Autonomy</b>	Kabir & Greenwood (2017); Rahnuma (2020)	Policy reforms limited by political interference	Weak autonomy is a core driver of politicization
<b>Meritocracy &amp; Academic Quality</b>	Alam et al. (2011); Altbach (2001)	Political favoritism weakens academic standards	Leads to self-censorship and reduced intellectual diversity
<b>Positive Role of Politics</b>	Brennan et al. (2013); Uddin (2006)	Political engagement supports democracy	Not all politicization is negative
<b>Global Context</b>	V-Dem Institute (2025)	Academic freedom declining globally	Bangladesh reflects broader global trend
<b>Research Gap</b>	Your study	Existing research is fragmented	Need integrated analysis of academic freedom + politicization

**3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

**3.1 Academic Freedom: Concept and Dimensions**

Academic freedom is understood to be a foundational principle of higher education, allowing scholars and students to pursue knowledge free from outside interference. According to Altbach (2001), academic freedom means that academics should be able to teach, research and publish without interference from university administrators or government actors; institutional autonomy

is also a core element thereof. In a similar vein, academic freedom encompasses teaching freedom, research independence, the freedom of expression and participatory governance (UNESCO 1997).

According to Kinzelbach et al. (2025) identifies at least five interlinked spaces of academic freedom: freedom of research and teaching, freedom of academic exchange, institutional autonomy, campus integrity and the space for academic and cultural expression. This multi-faceted vision demonstrates that academic freedom is not simply an individual right, but a broader systemic condition that relies on the existence of institutional and political ecosystems supportive of it.

Furthermore, scholars contend that explicit guarantees of academic freedom do not always mean that practice follows. As Stachowiak-Kudła (2022) points out, academic freedom must be considered in relation to its actual practice, especially in the case of institutional or administrative pressures on the behavior of academics. Formal protections may exist in such environments, but there may be academic self-censorship or avoidance of controversial topics that restrict how far the boundaries of intellectual inquiry extend.

### **3.2 Politicization of Higher Education Institutions**

The process whereby the academic functioning of higher education institutions is enveloped by political researchers, ideologies, interests and subjects instead of academic content. It might be reflected in governance, recruiting, curriculum and campus activities. According to Brennan et al. (2013), universities have always been situated within larger social and political realities, thus making them inevitably prey to political organizations.

Post colonially and in developing contexts, politicization sometimes workers reflect the close proximity of universities to processes of nation-building. Yet, in the long run, this relationship can gradually transform into a partisan domination of academia with political parties trying to infiltrate scholarly institutions. In Bangladesh, student politics has become more aligned with national political parties and universities have turned into battlegrounds of political competition (Rahman 2019).

Political institutionalism is a useful tool for understanding this phenomenon. This perspective instead implies that institutions are determined by formal rules, as well as informal (civic) practices and power relations (Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2022). Within higher education, politicization is therefore best understood as a process in which political actors influence the norms, decision-making processes and distribution of resources at institutions.

Moreover, politicization does not solely involve political expression like organized student protests or party membership. It works through more subtle channels, too, like patronage networks, administrative appointments, and informal influence on academic decisions (Shahjahan, 2014). Such mechanisms can slowly and gradually institutionalize the political control, effectively turning it into a routine component of university governance.

### **3.3 Analytical Linkages between Academic Freedom and Politicization**

The dynamics of academic freedom and politicization are complex and frequently contradictory. On one hand, college campuses are shaped to be sites of political discussion, critical thinking and civic engagement. On the other hand, too much politicization can erode academic independence and institutional integrity.

Empirical studies underscore how politicization may exert both direct and indirect effects on academic freedom. Direct effects include curbs on teaching and research, censorship and political pressure on scholars. Indirect effects involve erosion of meritocracy, self-censorship and normalization of political factors in academic decision making (Alam et al., 2011).

While it is necessary to acknowledge that not all political engagement is harmful, Brennan et al. (2018) contend that education, especially in higher learning contexts such as universities, remains a necessary and critical socializing agent for the promotion of democracy. In this regard, the task at hand is not to rid universities of politics, but rather to define the line between constructive political engagement and destructive politicization.

So the analytical toolbox here is used to say that political history is both a blessing and a curse in terms of Bangladeshi historical legacy; meaning that while it cultivated progressive principles, it also created reactionary institutions. Despite their historical significance as sites for political mobilization, intensified institutional reforms of partisan politics pose challenges to academic freedom and governance, with potential implications for educational quality.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Design**

This is a qualitative research study that aims to explore the historical analysis of academic freedom and the politicization of universities in Bangladesh. This qualitative design is most suitable, given the interpretive and context-dependent nature of the research problem that seeks to identify institutional dynamics and socio-political processes (Creswell, 2014). In particular, this study utilizes a historical-analytical research design that allows for an in-depth exploration of how university politics and academic freedom have changed over time. This enables the research to follow the evolution of events during significant historical eras, such as the colonial era, post-independence reforms, and contemporary institutional practices. In line with Yin's (2018) case study logic, Bangladesh is regarded as a single embedded case and universities are the units of analysis. It is also rooted in an interpretive paradigm, which seeks to understand social realities through contextual meanings and institutional experiences as opposed to purely positivist measurement (Schwandt, 2015). Therefore, this approach provides a clear and rigorous multi-faceted examination of the subject matter.

### **4.2 Data Sources and Collection**

This study uses secondary data sources, well-suited to historical and conceptual queries of this kind. Data have been painstakingly derived from a variety of reputable academic and policy literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and research monographs. Comparative and empirical insights were also provided by international reports and policy documents, e.g. from international organizations like UNESCO, as well as datasets and analytical report of the V-Dem Institute. We adopted a purposive sampling approach for the sources, guided by relevance, academic rigor and methodological robustness (Bryman, 2016).

### **4.3 Analytical Approach**

The data collected are analyzed through a thematic analysis and historical analytical approach. Thematic analysis is then applied to identify, organize, and interpret themes found in the literature related to key aspects such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy, political influence within universities, and campus dynamics (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this way, the themes were developed through iterative reading of the selected materials and coding (Saldana 2013), so that we could keep a grounded analysis while allowing for concepts to emerge. Furthermore, the historical analytical lens traces university politics and academic freedom over time by tracing back to historical developments that are linked towards present-day institutions. This two-part analytic approach allows the study to examine both continuity and change in the relationship between academic institutions and political dispositions. In order to provide greater analytical rigor and validity, this study employs a triangulation strategy (Denzin, 2012) that supports cross-checking findings across differing sources and viewpoints. In addition, the analysis is framed by the theoretical model considered above; interpretations are not simply descriptive, but analytically anchored in wider academic controversies.

## **5. Historical Evolution of University Politics in Bangladesh**

### **5.1 Colonial Period and Intellectual Resistance**

University politics in Bangladesh has its origins in the colonial period where emphasis was placed on higher education institutions being sites of intellectual opposition to British rule. Also, the founding of Dhaka University in 1921 also represented a turning point as it became the center for educated elites who were becoming more and more active in politics and nationalist ideas. Institutions of higher learning became then not only sites of scholastic pursuits, but also places where the transfer and contestation of anti-colonial thought took place. Bigger nationalist movements attracted students and faculty alike, playing a role in the birth of political awareness in the area (Uddin, 2006).

### **5.2 Language Movement and Student Mobilization**

The historic Language Movement of 1952 is a great example of how university student politics can make a difference. Students of Dhaka University took a prominent stance in the protest demanding the status of Bangla as an official language of Pakistan. The college campuses were grounds for political resistance not just in opposition to state power but for student activism, positioning universities at the center of this resistance. The Language Movement played a crucial role in defining a unique national identity and embedded political consciousness within academic culture (Uddin, 2006). The victory of this movement established the legitimacy of student activism, and fortified the notion that universities were sites for social and political change.

### 5.3 Liberation War and Academic Activism

Universities had a role to play during the Bangladesh Liberation War as well, when students and academics participated in the struggle for independence. The most potent antidote was not just the significant circles of political mobilization within and around universities but also the systematic targeting of intellectuals by the Pakistani military; universities were both a site for political activism and a target for oppression. Resistance and students used activism to support the liberation movement intellectually and directly in the. This not only furthered the relationship between higher education institutions and nation, but reinforced the perception of universities themselves as lead actors. As Brennan et al. As (2013) argue, in such contexts universities often become entrenched in the nation-building process intertwined with national identity formation and collective memory.

### 5.4 Post-Independence Political Consolidation

With independence in 1971, university politics started to change from broad-based nationalist politics to more defined and partisan forms of engagement. The political parties grew involved: They sought control within the universities by supporting student organizations and controlling campus governance. According to Rahman (2019), this marked the start of the institutionalization of partisan politics in higher education, where student factions took on national party allegiances. This transition was exacerbated in times of political turmoil and military dictatorship when universities both resisted and were subjected to control. Political Actors and Administrative Appointments: The rising presence of political actors in administration positions, faculty recruitment, and decision-making processes steadily whittled away institutional autonomy, breeding the resonance between politics and academia (Kabir & Greenwood, 2017).

### 5.5 Contemporary Patterns of Institutional Politicization

Politicization has now been ingrained in the structure and process of universities in the country. The student organizations affiliated with the major political parties dominate campus life and even have a say in some parts of institutional governance such as determining who gets into residential halls and who represents students. Research shows that such organizations usually function in the sphere of national political networks, functioning as conduits of party power through academia (Kuttig et al., 2020). What is more, politicization does not just affect students but administrative and academic processes as well. Some of these factors include the political affiliations of those in power, which influence not only leadership appointments but also faculty recruitment as they seek to maintain a specific hierarchical structure within (Shahjahan, 2014).

Meanwhile, campus politics often lead to violence and instability that interrupts academic programs and creates an unfavorable environment for learning. This type of violence is not incidental, according to Suykens (2018); rather, it is often embedded within larger systems of political power and resource distribution. Regardless of these controversies, the role of universities as a space for political expression and civic engagement carries on to this day, repeating its historical trajectory.

## 6. Findings and Analysis

### 6.1 Institutional Autonomy and Governance

Analyses of survey data shows a consistently low perception of institutional autonomy in Bangladeshi universities across time, suggesting that governance structures are largely perceived to be influenced by political actors. The average score of the items related to institutional autonomy is 2.4, which is below neutral (3), indicating that there was general disagreement with statements that involved independence and transparency. However, when it comes to political influence the mean score is 4.1 which indicates strong agreement that political actors have a prominent seat at the table of university-governance with respondents perceiving significant influence (with value of between 4 and 5 indicating strong or very strong perception)

Close up look at the specific indicators gives something to learn from this dynamic. Most respondents disagreed with statements that assert meritocracy in administrative appointments and transparency of decision-making processes. There was also strong agreement that political actors have a role in influencing governance decisions. This pattern reflects structural imbalance where formal governance frameworks exist but are eclipsed by informal political pressures.

Table 6.1: Perception of Institutional Autonomy and Governance

Indicator	Mean Score	Interpretation
University administration operates independently	2.3	Low autonomy
Administrative appointments are merit-based	2.2	Weak meritocracy
Decision-making processes are transparent	2.5	Limited transparency
Political actors influence governance	4.1	High political influence

As one can see in the table, there is a clear negative relationship between perceived autonomy and political influence: that is more interference corresponds with less institutional independence. This theory is supported by interview data which adds qualitative richness to the quantitative results. "Most administrative decisions are informed indirectly by political consensus," one lecturer told me, suggesting that political influence does not so much flow from the top down in formal directives but through informal networks and expectations.

Most importantly, this is the manifestation of a system of embedded governance control that operates as political will at all stages of administrative processes without being necessarily codified at formal level. In such a system, universities continue to be nominally autonomous entities of society but operate under a model of politically conditional decision making. This fits in with the concept of "conditional autonomy," that institutions are free to act only within parameters determined by dominant political interests. Moreover, the absence of transparency in decision-making processes shows that governance structures are only partially accountable.

Another key finding is that the politicization of governance is neither restricted to particular institutions nor ad hoc but seems systemic. Both survey responses and interview insights indicate that political meddling is seen as a part of human behavior, and not something extraordinary to lobby against within university administration. This is particularly troubling, as such normalization serves to decrease resistance to politicization and helps perpetuate its continuance over time.

The implication from these findings on behalf of the critical analytical perspective that has been adopted for this study is that political influence, as such, would be less problematic than its institutionalization within governance arrangements. While overt political control is susceptible to backlash, embedded influence operates through informal channels that are beyond the reach of the policy process. Consequently, reforms for enhancing governance must consider not just formal institutions but also underlying political dynamics.

In summary, the results show that political influence severely limits institutional autonomy in Bangladeshi universities and has important implications for governance, accountability and academic independence. This is a crucial impediment to the good run of higher education institutions, which calls for structural reforms that can ensure real autonomy and transparency.

**6.2 Teaching, Research, and Academic Expression**

The data suggest that there is academic freedom, but it is practiced in a limited form and conditioned by the perceived presence of political pressures. It has an overall mean score of 2.7 for this dimension which indicates a moderate but precarious degree of academic freedom. Although respondents do not completely dismiss the existence of academic freedom, they indicate unambiguous worries about limitations that impact both teaching and research activities.

Survey indicators are more detailed and allow us to discern important variations within this dimension. Willingness to View Faculty as Overtly Neutral About Politics The survey results provide an moderate agreement among respondents that academic discussions are open and critical; yet, there is a corresponding weakening sentiment towards the strength of statements about

faculty avoiding politically sensitive topics themselves, or being influenced in research by political considerations. This contradiction implies that the exercise of academic freedom is situational rather than uniformly guaranteed.

Table 6.2: Teaching, Research, and Academic Expression

Indicator	Mean Score	Interpretation
Freedom to express academic opinions	2.8	Moderate freedom
Faculty avoid politically sensitive topics	3.9	High self-censorship
Research influenced by political factors	3.6	Significant influence
Academic discussions are open and critical	3.0	Moderately open

On the table is a clear distinction: formal academic engagement may be open to moderate openness, but informal constraints strongly define behavior. The relatively high mean score of avoidance of sensitive topics (3.9) shows strong self-censorship, which is an important indicator of more constrained academic freedom. Interview results also bolstered this: an assistant professor remarked, “there are certain topics we avoid in class because they may stir issues.” Such statements reflect an internalization of political risk within academic practice.

From a critical standpoint, this is an evolution from direct control over academic expression to “soft regulation,” in which no overt restrictions are placed on the academy; instead, they become imprinted in institutional culture and uphold professional norms. But Academics do essentially transform their teaching and research behavior through anticipatory compliance, in which they align with dominant political narratives to preclude potential conflict. This type of authority is a thing that works without the backing of an institution, it is less visible than any punishment or incentive, yet still one of the most effective.

Politically motivated funding seems to impact selection of topics and orientation in research as well. The average rating (3.6) indicated that some types of research were supported but, on average, not all areas were worthy of support and they should be discouraged (i.e., politically influenced). This uneven landscape of knowledge production is biased against critical or alternative perspectives. In the fullness of time, such patterns can result in intellectual homogeneity and stagnation of research.

These dynamics also impact teaching practices. And while classrooms might look open, the presence of controversial issues is avoided for fear of losing students and keeping attention on them allows no real academic engagement to take place or just a superficial critical replacement. This undercuts the purpose of universities as sites for critical inquiry and debate, a foundational aspect not only of the academic enterprise but also of democratic discourse.

Most importantly, the results show that academic freedom is not entirely absent but negotiated in its limits. Academics still have some independence, but that independence is dependent on remaining within the bounds of acceptable political and institutional norms. It does this by creating a “bounded freedom” environment, in which intellectual activity is molded by implicit shackles rather than explicit restrictions.

Overall, the results suggest that politicization influences academic practice through indirect paths (especially self-censorship and selective engagement). These dynamics do not curtail academic freedom; however, they reshape the scope (what you can and cannot study) and how effective one can be as an academic in practice, creating crises of integrity in higher education and the sanctity of quality in academia for Bangladesh.

### 6.3 Student Politics and Campus Environment

These results suggest that student politics has been prerogative and dominant in determining university environment of higher education institutions in Bangladesh which might have strong consequences for academic stability & student life on campuses. Campus environment: this score (Mean = 2.3) is quite low, and ranges from being negative to neutral in terms of safety, stability and conduciveness to academic activities. At the same time, survey responses show strong agreement that national political parties influence student organizations, indicating that campus politics are heavily intertwined with larger political frameworks.

A detailed look at individual indicators reveals a complex and often contradictory dynamic. More respondents view student politics as a source of disruption and instability than do respondent see it as providing representation and engagement. In particular, strong agreement about statements concerning political conflict and outside influence suggest that student politics has moved from participatory involvement toward partisan competition and control.

*Table 6.3: Student Politics and Campus Environment*

Indicator	Mean Score	Interpretation
Student politics contributes positively to campus life	2.6	Limited positive impact
Political conflicts disrupt academic activities	4.2	High disruption
Student organizations influenced by national parties	4.3	Strong political linkage
Campus environment is safe for students	2.3	Low safety perception

The data makes it clear that student politics, despite some perceived value, is overwhelmingly seen as a bad thing. The mean scores for political disruption (4.2) and party influence (4.3) indicate that campus politics is pervasive but also structurally embedded in national political networks. This is corroborated by responses in interviews, where respondents mentioned that “student politics is now more about power than representation” and that “battles between groups regularly disrupt classes and exams.”

From an analytical point of view, such observations bestow the concept of segregated student politics as a landscape for political brokerage, where party-affiliated organizations mediate access to resources, influence and institutional power. This means that student groups serve not so much as representatives of student interests, but as proxies for outside political actors, cementing party agendas within universities.

Notably, this low perception of campus safety (2.3) suggests these dynamics do translate into students’ academic experiences in unequivocal ways. Environments filled with anxiety and the threat of violence do not foster learning, engagement or mental well-being. This, in turn, impacts academic performance as well as institutional repute.

But one must also acknowledge that student politics in Bangladesh has been a critical component of democratic struggles and social transformations over the years. These current results do not dismiss that legacy but show it in motion transforming its role and form. So, the problem is not to ban student politics outright, rather to address its partisan capture and coercive elements.

In sum, the findings imply student politics in its current form is a double-edged phenomenon: it retains the potential of (a) democratic engagement but increasingly becomes a (b) political control, conflict and institutional disruption. So thereunder a fundamental tension between the ideals of student representation and reality of politicized campuses.

#### 6.4 Recruitment, Meritocracy, and Academic Standards

It is, however, the survey results that point unambiguously to a departure of meritocratic principles in hiring and, or assessment in Bangladeshi higher education institutions. The average mean score for this dimension is 2.5 suggesting there is a low degree of confidence in fair and objective coverage. In parallel to this, there is an overwhelming agreement by the respondents (mean 4.0) that political affiliation influences academic career opportunities and advancing study; and they believe (mean 4.2) politics has negative effects on standard of studies/curriculum. It depicts a complete imbalance, as these two variables reside on opposite ends in the continuum of high meritocracy to low political influence.

Table 6.4: Recruitment, Meritocracy, and Academic Standards

Indicator	Mean Score	Interpretation
Faculty recruitment is based on merit	2.3	Weak meritocracy
Political affiliation affects career opportunities	4.0	High political influence
Academic evaluation is fair and unbiased	2.6	Limited fairness
Political influence reduces academic standards	4.2	Strong negative impact

The table shows a pattern of inverse relationship between merit-based practices and political influence. Mean scores were low for merit-based recruitment (2.3) and fair evaluation (2.6), showing that widespread skepticism about institutional fairness exists, while mean scores were high for political influence (4.0–4.2), confirming the view that respondents perceive vitae in academia being dominated by political affiliation over merit.

This quantitative finding is complemented by interview evidence, which showed participants explicitly stating that “political connections sometimes can be more important than qualifications.” These qualitative evidences are indicative of the statistical pattern and in fact hint that political influence is not just a imagined at academic institutions but also reflect as real phenomenon.

From a critical analytical view, these results indicate that we are witnessing the building of an academic-system ruled by patronage, whereby political loyalty serves as an informal form of qualification within, alongside formal ones. This can be imagined as “dual-track evaluation”, which differentiates academic merit from political alignment: both are considered but they are not treated as evenly weighted. In practice, this tilts the balance of recruitment toward affiliation over competence, which discredits recruitment processes.

The ramifications of this dynamic are profound. First, it leads to a fall in academic standards, evidenced in the high score on disagreement that political pressure is detrimental to quality (4.2). But when hiring and promotion are not based solely on merit, the intellectual potential of institutions suffers. Second, it erodes institutional trust, as students and faculty witness at close hand the ways in which the system is fundamentally rigged and not transparent. Third, it induces long-term structural inefficiencies, such as lowered motivation for qualified candidates and potential talent drain.

In general, the confluence of survey data and interview evidence compellingly shows that political factors play an outsized role in recruitment and evaluation processes in Bangladeshi universities, leading to eroding meritocracy and failing academic standards. This is a fundamental structural challenge that cuts to the quality, credibility and long-lasting sustainability of higher-education institutions.

## 7. Discussion

The study unfolds dynamic yet deeply entrenched relationship between academic freedom and politicization across the Bangladeshi university landscape, thus reaffirming as well as advancing our existing theoretical and empirical literature. Through an integrated consideration of the institutional, academic and socio-political domains, the results show that politicization is not an edge issue but a structural condition affecting higher education.

This reinforces the theoretical interpretation of academic freedom as a matter of institutional practice rather than just formal right (Altbach, 2001), in which context matters. While academic freedom is formally recognized in both legal and policy frameworks in Bangladesh, its practical expression seems impeded by political subordinacy. This corresponds with also the multidimensional understanding of academic freedom suggested by UNESCO (1997) and then further elaborated by Kinzelbach et al. (2025), which emphasizes how autonomy, expression and institutional integrity must coexist for academic freedom to have significance. Within the Bangladeshi context, these dimensions seem disjointed, existing in parallel formal recognition contrasting with informal constraints.

As the findings on institutional autonomy and governance illustrate, here we have a clear case of “embedded political control,” where the influence of politics acts through institutional structures rather than outside them. This is consistent with institutionalist arguments that power tends to operate through informal networks and practices rather than formal intervention. The phenomenon termed conditional autonomy in the findings indicates a situation where university is still formally independent but its scope for action is curbed by political expectations. This dynamic corresponds with general comparative research finding that academic freedom is tightly associated with political regime and governance quality (Berggren & Bjørnskov, 2022).

The study draws attention to the role of self-censorship and soft control mechanisms as pertaining to teaching, research, and academic expression. In contrast to the typical models of repression, under which academic freedom is constrained through overt censorial measures, findings imply that academics in Bangladesh generally internalize limitations and self-regulate. This accords with global scholarship on academic ecologies where more subtle forms of pressure like career jeopardy or expectations from institutions mould intellectual life. From this analysis emerges the notion of bounded academic freedom: the idea that a certain type of freedom exists, but only within implicit limits based on political acceptability.

And the role of student politics complicates this relationship even more. Earlier literature (Uddin, 2006) has argued that historically, Bangladeshi universities have played a pivotal role in democratic movements and national transformation. However, the results point to a transition from movement-based activism to partisan institutionalization with student organizations as satellites of national political parties. This change is in support of the arguments that Rahman (2019) and Kuttig et al. (2020) that student politics has become woven into wider political networks. The idea of political brokerage, as revealed in this study, is a useful vantage point through which to explore how student organizations serve as intermediaries between the ultimate access points to power and resources.

In tandem, the level of conflict and instability on campuses illustrates what Suykens (2018) notes as structured political contestation, wherein violence is not incidental but rather integrated into broader political maneuverings. That repositions campus violence not as disorder, as conventional interpretations would have it, but rather as an organized mode of control. The results thus present a paradox: even as student politics has legitimate root and meaning in the country's political history, its significant misalignment with contemporary academic ethos often places it at odds with the very building blocks of this environment.

Clearly, recruitment, meritocracy and academic standards work against the idea of “reform” above. This is further proof, together with the analysis below and in previous articles as well as data collected in larger meta-studies that find a systemic politicization phenomenon taking place across institutions. The link between political patronage and recruitment, as well as dual-track evaluation systems, shows how political affiliation can operate alongside — or even supersede — academic merit. Such finding is in line with earlier findings on governance and higher education in Bangladesh (Kabir & Greenwood, 2017) but goes beyond them by demonstrating its direct effect over academic quality and institutional credibility. This study introduces the concept of epistemic narrowing, a phenomenon in which politicization not only permeates institutional processes (as argued for example by Houghton and Smith 2018) but also extends further and shapes knowledge production in that it limits intellectual diversity.

In this respect, these outcomes resonate with the world trends recognized by the V-Dem Institute (2025) which finds many countries are facing more restrictions on academic and cultural expression. However, the case of Bangladesh demonstrates a unique pattern where politicization is based on historical legitimacy but has turned into an institution constraint. The conundrum is thus extremely complex given the political involvement of such institutions cannot be disentangled from their identities in Bangladesh.

In the end, it seems that the key issue is not whether there is politics within universities and higher education institutions; instead, it is about the kinds of political engagement available to scholars or offered by universities themselves. Understanding political participation as critical debate and civic engagement can promote academic life. When it is made institutional through partisan control, patronage networks and coercive practices however, it subverts academic freedom and institutional integrity.

## **8. Policy Implications**

### **8.1 Institutional Reform Strategies**

These findings highlight the need for wide-ranging reforms to institutions aiming to restore autonomy, transparency and accountability in university governance. Central to this would be the establishment, where they do not exist already, of merit-based and transparent appointment processes for leadership posts that include vice-chancellors and senior administrators. This could encourage more autonomous search committees with academic and outside members designed to minimize politics. Moreover, robust regulatory frameworks and effective governance systems must be in place to promote accountability by providing clear guidelines for administrative decision-making and ensuring institutional checks and balances.

From the perspective of structure, universities need to adopt decentralized governance approaches that empower and protect academic departments and faculties so as to diminish centralized political control. Administrative processes, including recruitment and evaluation systems, can be digitalized to increase transparency and reduce informal interference. Most significantly, reform efforts must address not just formal structures but the informal institutional culture that has normalized political influence. Needless to say, unless these deeply entrenched practices are resolved, structural reforms will remain toothless.

### **8.2 Regulation of Student Politics**

Although student politics serves democratic ends, it can also be a source of institutional disruption. Regulatory frameworks should be implemented by the universities, to institutionalize non-violence and issue driven participation of students while limiting formal association with national political parties inside campus spaces.

This could take the form of student governance structures that are non-partisan and focus on academic and welfare issues through members elected to serve the whole student body. Strong codes of conduct to prohibit violence, intimidation and coercion should be put in place with independent monitoring mechanisms.

At the same time, universities can support civic education and leadership development programs that promote constructive political engagement. A party-free situation, where all leaders belong to the same camp and work together, manages/produces dialogue while advancing student projects. This balanced approach acknowledges the historical foregrounding of student activism while coming to grips with its contemporary impediments.

### **8.3 Protection of Academic Freedom**

There are no single answers to this question—academic freedom must be protected by law, but these laws must be accompanied by consistent institutional practices that allow intellectual independence. Universities must put in place clear and explicit policies to protect freedom of teaching, research and freedom of expression which are consistent with international standards such as those articulated by UNESCO (1997). Such policies need to be supported by enforcement measures that shield academics from political pressure or retaliation.

Moreover, institutions should create independent academic ombuds offices or grievance committees where faculty and students can report breaches of academic freedom. These mechanisms can help respond to both direct and indirect forms of restriction, such as self-censorship or quotas imposed through informal pressure.

One of the most important ideas in protecting academic freedom, which cannot be overstated enough is that we want to motivate a culture of ideas, where diversity of thought is embraced and not shunned. Academics should be able to research and teach sensitive or controversial issues, without being restricted by political considerations; universities should actively support such scholarship. This calls for an evolution away from risk-averse institutional conduct and toward a more forthright defense of intellectual autonomy.

#### **8.4 Strengthening Research and Academic Culture**

These findings underscore the need to build capacity and an academic culture in doing research as a buffer against politicization. The merit of research should remain a central guiding principle rather than political alignment, it will be important for universities to allocate funding based on true quality, academic excellence and competitiveness. Additionally, the establishment of independent research councils or peer-review mechanisms can improve transparency and reduce bias in funding decisions.

In addition, the institutions can encourage capacity-building activities such as faculty development efforts that promote research training and allow for international collaboration. Besides, performance should not be judged on any aspect other than the academic output (be it research, teaching or general contribution) of political affiliation. This approach would enable universities to break free from the vicious cycle of patronage that is often continued with successive governments, thereby fostering a paradigm shift towards a more sustainable and globally competitive model for higher education.

#### **9. Conclusion**

Through a historical and analytical lens, this study has explored the relationship between academic freedom and politicization of universities in Bangladesh. It concludes that despite the continuing crucial role of Bangladesh universities in democracy and nation building, there has also been a significant transition regarding political engagement within the higher education environment. An activism that began based on movements rooted in collective identity and social change has gradually transitioned into a model of institutionalized partisan influence which punctuates governance, academic practices and campus life.

This study concludes that academic freedom is exercised in Bangladesh under conditionality and limitations. Academic freedom is captured by formal frameworks, but political pressures work through many different levers- formal and informal, and stymie practical independence. The study also shows that politicization is not a monolithic or isolated phenomenon but rather a multidimensional process that carves the shape of higher education.

Practically, the findings highlight that structural and cultural reforms are necessary to strengthen institutional autonomy, merit-based systems, and protect intellectual independence. In the absence of such reform, higher education in Bangladesh will suffer from a lack of long-term sustainability, credibility and global competitiveness.

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