



A CASE FOR STUDENT UNIONS IN PAKISTAN



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This February 9th it has been 39 years since the ban on student unions in Pakistan. Placed by a military dictator, General Zia ul Haq in 1984, the ban has been upheld by all subsequent democratic governments. The ban was enacted to put an end to the student power in the country, especially their resistance against dictatorship and anti-democratic processes. In the past, Pakistani students led major movements and changed the course of history especially in the anti-Ayub movement. During the Zia regime, Jamaat-i-Islami had extended their support for his Islamisation project, and became part of the first cabinet announced by the dictator. This aided Islami Jamiat-i-Talba (IJT) in gaining more ground to function with impunity compared to the anti-dictator student groups. During the 1979 student union election at Karachi University, some students from IJT fired shots at a progressive student gathering, the first time an assault weapon such as the AK-47 was used in student politics. For what is about to be four decades since the ban, IJT remains the student organisation with a monopoly over violence on campus.

The justifications provided for legitimising this ban revolve around the argument that student unions lead to an increase in on-campus violence and are a deterrent to

academic excellence. However, prior to the ban of the 1970s, student politics used to be a vibrant space: allowing the central stakeholders at the academy to autonomously bargain for their rights and better academic facilities. It was also a space where young people engaged in the democratic processes of elections and campaigning. In the absence of student unions, there is a severe lack of institutional accountability in the education system and universities arbitrarily decide fee structures and scholarship allocations – leading to an increase in students (or their guardians) opting out of university education altogether.

The ban on student unions has led to a deterioration of academic culture, in turn fostering intolerance for disagreements and debates on campuses. Student unions are nurseries and institutions that instil democratic values: where students from various ethnic and class backgrounds can come together to express their views, debate and get elected to represent the issues and concerns of the student body. With millions of out of school children and young adults excluded from education due to unaffordability, it is all the more important to restore student unions in order to introduce a platform that can tilt power dynamics in the higher

education arena in a manner that is more equitable. The quality of education and critical consciousness has plummeted over the past few years, with students like Mashal Khan being mob-lynched by peers on-campus due to growing levels of intolerance.

The ban has proven to be catastrophic for Pakistan not just in terms of education but also politics. According to the latest census the majority of the country's population constitutes young people. This youth bulge means that in forthcoming years, young voters will be deciding the future of politics in the country. In the absence of student unions, there are no pathways for the youth to take part in the politics of the country. This especially limits the accessibility to political processes for working class and middle class youth who have the biggest stake in the future of the country. Without any experience and understanding of basic democracy and experience in democratic processes, the politicisation remains meaningless and often only leads to polarisation instead of encouraging dialogue, political debate and nurturing political movements. In the past, student unions produced some of the biggest political leaders of the country, serving as the only pathway for working and middle class political workers to gain entry into mainstream politics. Given the abysmal state of democratic politics in the country, student unions restoration is absolutely crucial. Pakistan is in dire need of young leaders, to cater to the growing demands of its young populace.

Pakistani politics remains the domain of a few landed families and moneyed elite, which is directly related to the absence of student unions. According to research conducted in 2013, 400 families have dominated Punjab's politics since the 1970s, with dynastic candidates jumping parties depending on who holds power at any given point. Within political parties, the state of democracy is abysmal, bordering on non-existent – and dynastic transfer of leadership is the norm. If you ban student unions for two generations then who would have access to power and politics? Certainly not the majority of young people. Student unions are known as nurseries for future leaders and politics, a ban such as the one in place for almost 40 years only leads to centralisation of power with the few.

In the last six years there has been a renewed effort by students to organise themselves and demand the restoration of student unions. In 2018, progressive student organisations under the banner of Student Action Committee (SAC) held marches in over 50 cities across the country to demand restoration of student unions. Every year the student groups associated with SAC such as Progressive Students Federation, and Progressive Students Collective hold rallies, protests and sit-ins across the country to campaign for the restoration of unions and campus democracy. The campaigning has given rise to discussions around revival of the student unions but little action has been taken to ensure their restoration. Various political parties have extended support too. In Sindh, the People's Party even came up with a bill but there has been no progress in making student unions functional – largely due to push-back from opportunistic, power-hungry Vice Chancellors. The political parties that rely on the mobilisation of the youth have also made no contributions to the restoration of unions. The young people who study politics, society and economics neither have opportunities nor an interest in the future of the country, due to the continuous exclusion of young people from democratic processes.

Every year, thousands of educated young people leave the country in the hopes for a better future elsewhere. The ban on the unions not only impacts on-campus politics but destroys democratic values across the entire landscape of the country. Such exclusionary practices are a deterrent for young people to take ownership of the country and invest in its present and future.

It is time to undo the wrongs of the past: restore student unions now.

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