

Student unions now | The Express Tribune

Abbas Moosvi February 24, 2022

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The writer is a Research Fellow at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics. He tweets @AbbasMoosvi

If democracy is to mean something beyond ritualistically casting a vote every few years, it will necessarily entail the strengthening of civil society. A dynamic, proactive, collaborative approach to governance is the need of the hour — whereby citizens are seen as key stakeholders in the decision-making process that determines the nature and quality of their lives. The restoration of student unions lies at the core of this dream, which the Sindh Assembly unanimously chose to do this month: allowing them to operate freely for the first time in over 38 years.

The clampdown on student (and labour) unions may be located within a worldwide depoliticisation of society, roughly beginning during the Reagan-Thatcher years as neoliberalism rose to prominence — subverting virtually all aspects of life to the interests of propertied elites. The primary messaging that proliferated across nations during these years was a magnified focus on the ‘free’ market — which allegedly functioned to reward or penalise based on the ‘value’ one was generating in society.

Not only did this pathological (and false) idea lead to the suspension of state intervention to correct abysmal market failures, it also failed to weaken the power of the government — which was the very apparatus responsible for ‘opening up’ the market through a series of painstakingly planned policy interventions. In this way, rather than a withering away of top-down control — as is commonly proposed — the role of the state was reconfigured to mean the protector/facilitator of big capital.

This ideology also became the orienting force of international financial institutions, which emphasised privatisation and deregulation in the developing world in exchange for loan disbursements: fostering states controlled by rent-seeking elites with little incentive to pursue structural reforms that generated wins for ordinary people. The words of eminent scholar Eqbal Ahmad capture the moment, “... the whole democratic process in the world today is threatened by the fact that major institutions of society are trying to enter into the private life of people to turn them into consumers.”

It is in this backdrop that education also transformed from a social good to a commodity — whereby students were seen as customers rather than nascent leaders. In Pakistan, student unions were banned under Gen Zia’s dictatorship. However, this only prompted student

groups to operate in a largely unregulated, informal, and myopic capacity.

Far from 'depoliticised' campuses, administrative hierarchies came to be populated on the basis of political connections, thereby leading to massively inflated university bureaucracies. As the admin to faculty ratio skyrocketed, a parallel nosediving of educational quality was observed — not just in terms of academics, but more broadly in the form of fee hikes, hostel difficulties, sexual harassment, religious extremism, and a general atmosphere of fear and intimidation whereby students were told to keep their heads down, focus on their 'studies', and not ask too many questions.

Wherever student unions have legal backing around the world, they serve crucial functions. They act as a body that represents the interests of students, voicing their grievances and countering bureaucratic overreach. By getting students to participate in the process of negotiating power relations, student unions instil a vibrant, courageous spirit in young minds — prompting them to take stock of their conditions, generate solutions, and polish their critical faculties to play a substantive role in their own governance.

In a country where opportunistic dynastic parties have saturated the political landscape, colluding with one another to restrict space for grassroots progressive forces, student unions may generate an alternative. Let us discard the idea that a citizenry is a puerile hoard to be ruled over. If students can vote in national elections, why are they barred from participating in the governance of their academic institutions?

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