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The Case for Student Unions in Pakistan

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Amongst the kernel physiognomies of a democracy, the existence and proactive role of students unions is undoubtedly one. Just across the border, the world's largest democracy, despite its political and communal pockmarks, India is a practical manifestation of how student unions undergird a democracy at the grassroots, functioning as an "assembly line" for generating political workers and as a nursery for the political leadership of the future. In Pakistan, the chronic lack of genuine political leadership is nothing short of an endemic as very few bona fide politicians can be named who were able to cut a figure without the imprimatur of the security establishment. A political figure who instead of a formulaic path, rises through the ranks of a political outfit, is abreast with maladies that afflict the common man, could be truly defined as an example of for the people and by the people. This gap of political knowhow amongst the denizens and familiarity with constitutional rights in tandem with the creation of subsequent political cadre could materialize if student unions are encouraged in Pakistan. Unfortunately, student unions as an indispensable cog remain banned in a relatively inchoate democracy like Pakistan. It is ironic how scenes of vehement protests and Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement for Palestine on American varsity campuses is a cause of awe and celebration for us, while at home we remain almost obtuse to the ban on similar activities and student unions.

Background

Proponents of student unions contextualize the ban on student unions as part of a global bid to counter revolutionary thought amongst the young minds in order to secure the

compliance to embalm the Kafkaesque status quo. In doing so, pretty much all vestiges of genuine revolutionary outfits ceased to exist. This policy was espoused by successive regimes in Pakistan despite the fact that the founder of the Nation, Muhammad Ali Jinnah was an advocate of student participation in politics.¹ Additionally, the 1980s heralded the vanquishment of progressive and left-wing elements, as in various parts of the world, right-wing authoritarian regimes and pro-US democracies with emphasis on free market began cropping up.²

If we go back to the early 1950s, two major incidents spring to mind where student unions actively exercised their freedom of expression and protest which gave the state a pretext to resort to violence. Firstly is the language riots of 1951 vis-à-vis mandating of Urdu as the official language, which was a bona fide cause of contention for the Bengali populace and secondly is the Democratic Students Federation's (DSF), an affiliate of Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP), movement of 1953 which provided the government with a charter of demands only to be met by excessive state violence; DSF and CPP both got banned by the government later. The 1950s was a time where notwithstanding ideological gulfs, both DSF and Islami Jamiat-i-Talaba (IJT), both at opposing ends of the political spectrum not only coexisted but even cooperated at times as they had representation in the inter-collegiate body particularly when joint statements were issued and joint policy decisions were taken.³ Fast-forward to 1955, with government's patronage National Students Federation (NSF) was created only to have infiltration by left-wingers, upending the government's bid for a staunchly pro-regime student body. In a show of unyielding commitment to anti-imperialist agenda, the NSF organized a vehement protest in 1962 against the CIA-designed regime change against the first Prime Minister of Democratic Republic of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba.⁴ The 1960s remained punctuated by show of muscle by both the NSF and staunchly rightist IJT.

¹ Ammar Ali Jan, "Student Unions and the Struggle for Democracy," *Dawn*, June 30, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1842893/student-unions-and-the-struggle-for-democracy>

² Gideon Rachman, *The Age of the Strongman* (New York: Other Press, 2022), 180 – 193
Ammar Ali Jan, "Student Unions and the Struggle for Democracy," *Dawn*, June 30, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1842893/student-unions-and-the-struggle-for-democracy>
Amy Chua, *World on Fire* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 5, 15.

³ Ammar Ali Jan, "Student Unions and the Struggle for Democracy," *Dawn*, June 30, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1842893/student-unions-and-the-struggle-for-democracy>

⁴ Ibid

In 1968, NSF helped organize people from various walks of life especially farmers, students and workers to agitate against Field Marshal Ayub Khan, resultantly not only did the military dictator resigned but also paved way for the first general elections.⁵ Throughout 1970s varsity campuses not only became the epicenter of student body elections, but also the locus of social, literary, and political debates. This provided a milieu for students to politically navigate and orient themselves, playing a bigger role than of a bystander in politics.

Furthermore, when General Zia-ul-Haq imposed a fateful coup d'etat suspending the constitution and overthrowing Zulfikar Bhutto's democratic dispensation in Operation Fair play 1977, it proved to be a coup de grace for Pakistan's fledgling democracy in retrospect.⁶ The military dictator went on to ban student unions on February 9, 1984, in other words it has been almost 4 decades since students were robbed of their democratic right.⁷ The ban and demobilization made absolute sense for the Zia regime since notwithstanding glaring infringement of human rights and a backdrop of apprehension, labor as well as student unions especially on the left-wing were at the forefront of the resistance as well as rejection of Zia's Islamization and tyranny, particularly in the absence of career politicians. The student union elections from 1981 to 1983 in which progressive elements came out as victors was an eloquent testimony to the fact that student unions were harder to clamp down than seasoned politicians since they were ideologically charged as the defenders of democracy and rule of law, hence banning them and depriving posterity of political purpose and drive was the panacea for the regime.⁸

After many years, PPP's provincial government in Sindh made a bid to restore student union after consultation with Vice Chancellors (VC) of various varsities who

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Zubeida Mustafa, "Student Unions," *Dawn*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1736357/student-unions>

⁷ Ammar Ali Jan, "Student Unions and the Struggle for Democracy," *Dawn*, June 30, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1842893/student-unions-and-the-struggle-for-democracy>

Zubeida Mustafa, "Student Unions," *Dawn*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1736357/student-unions>

⁸ Ammar Ali Jan, "Student Unions and the Struggle for Democracy," *Dawn*, June 30, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1842893/student-unions-and-the-struggle-for-democracy>

unequivocally and unanimously opposed its restoration with the exception of one VC.⁹ Nonetheless the PPP government was easily successful to get the bill regarding student unions passed through provincial legislature in February, 2019. After a hiatus caused by COVID-19, the pending procedure of notification of bill's law was completed in 2022.¹⁰ However, since then there has been no progress on turning the Act into actual implementable law by framing rules. Exponents of student unions suspect that this might be another case of PPP shortchanging the citizenry, in other words passing much needed laws that are blocked at the implementation stage.

Policy Recommendations

- Student unions ought to be envisioned as a moral compass for our society which continues to be in a state of decay.
- Student Unions ought to be considered in the international anti-imperialist context, threaded to the broader counter-status quo movements to hold governments accountable, in both the Global South and Global North.
- The ban on student unions is broadly a policy that impedes conducive environment for progressive ideology, rather manufactures consent by rejecting critical thinking and emboldening slavish and ingratiating mindset. In other words, the ban discredits student unions and is used as an instrument of counter-revolutionary policy.
- Article 17 which states, *“Every citizen shall have the right to form associations or unions, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of sovereignty or integrity of Pakistan, public order or morality”*, needs to be implemented in true letter and spirit.
- Policy-makers need to revisit the revisionist narrative that student unions beget violence, rather they need look to the past for clarity which belies the aforementioned stance.
- Ethnic thuggery, Islamo-gangsterism and extremism has run amok even in the last 4 union-less decades. How can the Mashal Khan lynching case be forgotten here?

⁹ Zubeida Mustafa, “Student Unions,” *Dawn*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1736357/student-unions>

¹⁰ Ibid

Therefore in this equation, there isn't a direct causality between student unions and vacuous violence, if that were the case, varsity campuses would have become hubs of peace and harmony after a 4 decade ban.

- As violence on especially public sector varsities rage on, it must be noted this type of violence is without an ethical or ideological underpinning, therefore it can be described more as vacuous turf wars.
- Citing IJT as a reductive case against student unions is misleading. At the heart of this matter is the difference between a student organization and a student union; the latter is elected by the students and represent their interests especially in disputes with the administration be it sexual harassment by faculty members, making sedition cases against students clamoring for clean water or the overall defunct education system. IJT is an organization, which like any other outfit is a group of students with similar political and ideological standpoints.
- The monitoring of curriculum, student activism and even classroom discussions by the agents of the deep state need to be reined in. An FC college Professor, Ammar Ali Jan was removed from his position over having a political discussion in the classroom. Such actions are reminiscent of George Orwell's 1984 and are counter-productive.
- It must be understood that varsities are part of the society, as every aspect of the social fabric is impacted inevitably by politics, same goes varsities that can't be expected to function in an artificially curated silo by the deep state.
- Student Unions and varsity campuses ought to be viewed by policy-makers as microcosms of real-world electoral politics as it would imbue the students with democratic values.
- The acute dearth and crisis of bona fide political leadership in the country that hasn't been parachuted into politics by security establishment or has bought their way to the top of the political pecking order, could be remedied in the long run by promoting student unions and campus democracy. We could produce leaders who actually deserve to be at the helm.
- If student unions are to be restored there needs to be zero tolerance possessing or brandishing weapons on campuses. There should no hate-mongering, while

hindrance of academic activities or interference of political parties need to be prohibited, in other words student unions ought not to shade into agents with fealty for political parties.

- Pakistan's polarized society needs student unions as they could rally students for national unity and causes simultaneously function as a peaceful and legitimate pressure group holding the government accountable like in the past.