

Restoring unions

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IN a recent incident at Sindh University, Jamshoro, 75 students were arrested in a police crackdown. A case of terrorism and sedition was registered against them. Just a day earlier, the Lahore High Court had struck down the sedition law, citing its inconsistency with the Constitution. In another incident, more than 15 Hindu students were attacked, allegedly by Islami Jamiat Tulaba, the student wing of the Jamaat-i-Islami, for celebrating Holi at the Punjab University. The IJT has reportedly illegally occupied 15 rooms in Punjab University hostels, forcing those who had already paid the hostel fees to live in the hallway.

These are just a few incidents involving violence, police crackdown and criminal cases against students by university administrations. Sexual harassment is also witnessed at university campuses. The absence of student unions has aggravated matters.

The Zia regime banned student unions in 1984. Before that, student unions were the nursery that produced future political leaders, who had learned from the unions' peaceful resistance against authoritarian rule. When unions were banned, the student wings of religious parties filled the vacuum, mainstreaming sectarian and religiously inspired politics, which resulted in the radicalisation of students on campus. There was no more

critical thinking, debate or discourse, and no room for dissenting opinions. Instead, rigid thinking promoted polarisation, gender segregation and discrimination.

Due to the ban, a systematic process of depoliticisation of students set in, resulting in shrinking spaces for study circles and debates on progressive literature, political philosophies and ideologies.

The ban on student unions has restricted the space for debate.

Student unions promote a democratic culture, involving students in decision-making and negotiating for rights with the administration and management. They provide a platform for students to participate in and have a say in decisions related to academic matters; they can also hold authorities accountable and make them more responsive to students' well-being, safety and security. Had they existed, unions could have addressed sexual harassment of female students (as well as female teachers) on campus and in hostels and challenged anti-student policies. Due to the absence of unions, cases of sexual harassment by faculty, administration and male fellow students are covered up. There are no anti-harassment committees in universities, which has created an unsafe environment for female students.

Students, including females, have been demanding the restoration of unions. Civil society organisations and some political parties showed solidarity with their demand. But unfortunately, except for Sindh, there has been no progress. With the passage of the Sindh Students Union Act, 2019, last year, Sindh took the initiative to restore student unions in the province's educational institutions, in light of constitutional Articles 16 (freedom of assembly) and 17 (freedom of association). According to this law, all academic institutions in the province must hold annual elections to elect their representatives to take care of academic, extracurricular or other education-related interests of students. Under the new law, educational institutions must include at least one member of the student union in their syndicate, senate or board.

The unions' main purpose would be to work towards resolving academic and non-academic matters and promoting a healthy and peaceful culture of dialogue and debate, while stressing on peaceful ways of resolving disputes and negotiating with the administration to have their demands fulfilled.

Unfortunately, institutions of higher learning in Sindh have not yet formulated regulations and procedures for the conduct of student unions, despite the passage of the law more than a year ago. The Sindh government should take a proactive approach and implement the Sindh Students Union Act, and work closely with universities and colleges to ensure that unions are able to operate in a transparent and democratic manner. The Women's Action Forum, Karachi, has sent a letter to Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah to implement and notify the Act. The Sindh government should also set up a monitoring mechanism to ensure that student unions are operating in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

Meanwhile, the other three provinces should follow Sindh's example and restore student unions in their respective jurisdictions without further delay.

Universities should be instructed to allocate funds and resources for the establishment and functioning of student unions in universities and colleges and the smooth and peaceful operation of these essential student bodies, which, in turn, should strive to create a safe and inclusive environment on campuses.

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