

# Pakistan: fear of freedom on campus

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**The recent expulsion of three students from the University of Agriculture at Faisalabad highlights the paranoid manner in which campuses are being run today. The crime that cost the students their education was simply a Facebook post criticising the university administration, with one student expelled for merely liking the post and commenting under it. While dissent on campus has already been wiped out, university administrations are increasingly concerned about social media as the new space where students dare to express their opinions on campus life, and one that needs to be brought under the strict scrutiny.**

In a country where the vast majority of students are unable to acquire higher education, and where not a single university is ranked among the top 500 institutions in the world, one would imagine there would be intense soul-searching on how to improve the quality of teaching and research on campuses. Instead, university administrators' focus now seems to have shifted to monitoring the Facebook accounts of students, an exemplary demonstration of pettiness that would have made us all laugh had the future of our education system not been at stake.

Administrators seem to believe that any form of dissent on campuses will lead to only one logical conclusion: riots. Apart from the colonial underpinnings of such a crassly authoritarian assertion about ordinary people (and in this case, educated people), such thinking undermines the legal and democratic ethos on which our state is supposed to function.

Consider, for example, the affidavits students in most universities across Pakistan are forced to sign, stating that they will not participate in politics on campuses. Recently, when students across Lahore protested outside the Punjab Assembly to support Mashal Khan, the ambit of this declaration was stretched to include even protests outside the campus. In other words, the right to free expression – which is guaranteed by the constitution – has to be suspended if a citizen wishes to pursue higher education in Pakistan. How universities are able to override basic constitutional guarantees is hard to fathom, since nothing that I have read suggests that campus administrations have the right to suspend all legal obligations between the citizen and the state. But then, as proud inheritors of the colonial legacy, respecting a citizen's rights has never been the forte of administrators in our country.

The crackdown on critical thinking and dissent is justified in the name of wiping out 'politics' from campuses. Anyone who believes, however, that politics has been wiped out from universities after the banning of student unions is either naive or simply an outright liar. Academic and clerical appointments depend on patronage, whether inside the university or from outside. The direct involvement of politicians and bureaucrats in such appointments and the disregard for procedure is shockingly common, a testament to the pervasive presence of nepotism in higher education. This is the primary reason why the quality of education in classrooms (particularly social sciences) remains abysmal for even Third World standards, as many teachers remain insecure in front of inquisitive young minds and tend to act as watchdogs for the administration.

Moreover, the most violent student groups often tend to be the ones supported by the government itself, even while it claims to be anti-student politics. What is even more nauseating are the regular visits by government functionaries to campuses, in which students are shoved into halls to listen to political leaders extol the virtues of their governance, with teachers given policing responsibilities to ensure that no student dozes off due to sheer boredom with such meaningless spectacles.

What all of this suggests is that politics, power and nepotism remain integral to higher education in Pakistan. What is banned is not politics as such, but a specific kind of politics that poses a challenge to the politics of patronage, nepotism and fear. With all dissent removed, and government/administrative propaganda masquerading as 'neutrality', we have ensured that mediocrity, intrigues and paranoia overshadow critical thinking in educational institutions.

The second, and perhaps more complicated, argument is that a majority of students themselves are opposed to student representation, since it brings back haunting memories of past violence. Yet, one must reject even this argument on three fundamental grounds. First, a majority cannot suspend the constitutional rights of a dissenting minority. In fact, representation is always a complex negotiation between majority and dissenting opinion, and if the former overwhelms the latter, the very ideas of rights and representation collapse.

Second, one cannot miss the irony in the administration's deployment of 'public opinion' to justify its constant crackdown on progressive student groups, especially since the ban on student politics is premised on the dangers of unrestrained opinion. When students demand better teaching standards, research facilities and living conditions, their concerns are dismissed as being part of a 'conspiracy' and their parents are called in (yes, Pakistani university administrators constantly infantilise students by calling up their parents). Yet, the same administrators deploy 'majority opinion' when the results suit their policies, displaying the cynicism of those managing higher education.

Third, while it is true that the idea of student politics has a bad reputation today, it is also important not to elevate public perceptions at some given point in time to an eternal truth. On the contrary, the very notion of desire has to be historicised to understand how it is produced. The fear and hatred of student politics stems from a combination of brutal government repression of progressive students in the 70s and 80s, as well as the instrumentalisation of student groups by successive governments. Furthermore, when we say students today oppose politics due to memories of violence, we must remember that these students do not have personal memories of that time period. Instead, they gain knowledge of this past through popular memory, which has been carefully crafted to fit the narrative propagated by university administrators. 'Violence' has become a trigger word immediately deployed to condemn student politics by those who cannot have a five-minute conversation on the actual history of the student movement. The state has managed to collapse student movements that fought for democracy, religious freedoms, critical thinking, women's and minorities' rights into this larger narrative of violence on campuses in order to repress the desire for representation.

Yet, as psychoanalysis teaches us, a repressed desire maintains a haunting presence in our words and our actions - even when we disavow it. This is universally true of students who continuously complain about the high-handedness of security guards, of the whimsical decisions of the administration and the low quality of teaching. In such words, we witness a profound rage against the systematic subjugation of students on campuses. However, when you ask the same students if they desire representation, they will immediately resort to clichés on the discontents of student activism.

What we have is essentially a split consciousness. On one hand, there is a desire to radically transform the coordinates of the world as they exist. On the other hand, there is terror at the idea of becoming part of the process that can potentially begin such a transformation. It is also the ultimate

victory of those in power, who have demonised popular participation to such a large extent that they no longer have to justify their own policies. 'We may be bad, but you in charge of your own destiny will be an even greater catastrophe'. Freedom is not to be celebrated, but to be feared!

The Progressive Students Collective, a Lahore-based student group, has launched a campaign and a petition to nullify the glaringly anti-constitutional affidavits signed by students during admission. It is a noble idea, but the success of any such campaign will depend on the ability of the group to bring forth the repressed desire for freedom against its criminal obfuscation by the state and university administrators. To argue that politics is not just the birthright of the elites, but of every citizen who wishes to make a difference in society.

Rather than being perpetually guilty of harbouring the desire for freedom, we should assume the courage to unapologetically proclaim it. Our failure to do so would continue to slide us into a dystopic future where educational institutions, instead of producing critical minds, churn out unthinking zombies, constantly at the mercy of whimsical and mediocre administrators. Such a prospect is what should truly terrify us.

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**P.S.**

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