

Pakistan's universities are radically unjust

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Best There is growing concern in academic, policy and political circles on the radicalisation in educational campuses. A serious debate is taking place to change the narrative on Pakistan's history to prevent the proliferation of extremist ideas among the youth. What this debate implicitly acknowledges is that the militant narrative around religion and nationalism imposed on students and faculty by the state is now an existential threat to none except our own society.

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Yet, our policymakers continue to provide 'solutions' that seem to be lifted directly from the textbook of colonial officials. For example, there will be increased surveillance of campuses to monitor the activities of students and faculty. This measure exposes an anxiety that there is too much freedom on campuses, a rather embarrassing claim since public-sector universities provide few avenues for open debate or even critical discussions. More often than not, administrations intervene to ensure that the debate does not cross the multiple red lines fixed by state authorities.

In fact, the biggest hurdle in developing an 'alternative' narrative is that any serious engagement with questions of ideological orientation for society is interrupted through the intervention of university administrations – or at times directly by state intervention. There is constant fear that if students are not discussing their out-of-date textbooks or repeating clichés on religion or nationalism, then they must be conspiring against the administration, or worse still, against the country.

My experience at the previous university where I taught showed that nothing scared administrators more than a group of students sitting together to study on campus, particularly if they are from 'restive provinces'. Such hysterical behaviour at the sight of young people meeting for study circles leads to comical situations where university administrators clamp down on 'reading groups' on campus.

The assumption was that such gatherings, especially if they discuss political texts, can lead to riots on campus. This bizarre equation between texts and riots reveals all that is wrong with the education system. Essentially, most university administrators trust neither students nor the circulation of ideas, with their intersection becoming an explosive combination in their minds. Rather than sites of knowledge production, where critical discussions can take place at a relative distance from the intrusive gaze of power, universities have become sites for managing young minds and bodies through the mastering of surveillance techniques. By asking for more coercive measures on campuses, we demonstrate how in our search for knee-jerk answers to problems, we have forgotten to pose the right questions.

State authorities have little clue about how ordinary people are thinking, and in any case are not interested beyond the repression and manipulation of young minds. But even liberal critiques of state policies often solely focus on the dissemination of ideas as the primary strategy for resisting radicalism among the youth. What such prescriptions miss is the context in which the youth becomes susceptible to extreme views, which goes way beyond the realm of political ideologies.

Consider the state of social sciences in public universities in Lahore. Thousands of students graduate every year in the city, without fully understanding the available career options. This is partly a result of the low-investment in the teaching staff as well as in essential facilities such as computer labs and libraries. Most libraries in the 'top' universities of Lahore cannot match those of a small, under-funded community college in the West. Moreover, there is almost little to no guidance when it comes to career-counselling or funding options for education abroad.

The situation is compounded by the fact that a large number of students from all classes and regions across Pakistan are seeking higher education in Lahore. This would be a welcome development if the government had planned for providing adequate resources for their skills enhancement and for creating job opportunities. Yet, after completing a four-year bachelors degree from a university, most students face the harsh reality that their degrees do not have much worth in the market. The better-paying jobs in the NGO-sector and private schools often go to students from elite universities, since the inability to speak or write English fluently becomes a fatal deficit for students from public-sector universities.

Many such students are opting for continuing with higher education, propelling the growth of Masters and Mphil programmes across the city. Teaching a Masters class in the public sector is particularly disturbing, since the students seem disoriented and, consequently, disinterested in the subjects at offer. It almost seems like such programmes have less to do with skill enhancement and are more an excuse to prolong the inevitable fate of unemployment or underemployment for the vast majority of students.

One has to imagine what goes through a young person's mind as his/her creativity and vibrancy gives way to cynicism and despondency. For students from working class backgrounds, the situation is even worse, since they develop desires of upward mobility. Once those desires are frustrated by the lack of opportunities, they can no longer fall back upon the professions of their parents, since the long journey through the education system was precisely an attempt to escape the fate of their elders. In such situations, not only is their future stolen from them, but their link to the past also melts away. With hatred for the past and little anticipation for the future, we are witnessing an entire generation that is experiencing the dissolution of time itself.

The youth bulge that experts constantly talk about is nothing but the story of such frustrated desires and the growing resentment against the 'youth culture' enjoyed by students belonging to the city's elite. For this reason, the resort to 'strict' measures of control is a hopelessly inadequate response to radicalism, since it represents a continuation of the policies that demonise marginalised youth in the city. It is not students who are 'becoming' radical. It is the context in which they exist that is radical - ie radically unjust and unsustainable.

What students require in this situation is not more policing, but more empathy, good teachers, better facilities and more job opportunities. Otherwise, the constant transformation of bright minds into unwanted elements by the system will become a time-bomb causing further unrest in society. And if it is the corruption and indifference of this system that is making millions of people redundant and disposable, then we must find the courage to reject such a system. The alternative - of wasting the skills and potential of millions of precious young souls for a broken system - is too high a price for any society and one that we should definitely not have to pay.

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P.S.

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