

Pakistan: protest by Baloch and Pakhtun students

Our collective shame

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In October 2017, the Quaid-e-Azam University campus has witnessed some ugly scenes. Hundreds of students were protesting for a number of days against fees hike, improving hostel and medical facilities and restoring students expelled a few months ago in clashes between ethnic groups. All demands except the one to restore the expelled students were accepted, prompting a section of the students to continue their protest.

What happened next was a repugnant sight, yet one that occurs far too frequently on our educational campuses. The university administration resorted to calling the police on campus, knowing well that unleashing security forces could easily lead to excessive violence on students. This is exactly what happened, with over 70 students arrested and reports of torture of incarcerated students circulating on social media. Fear and abandonment are perhaps the most common experiences of a student at a public university, and such actions only solidify the feeling of helplessness and alienation prevalent among the country's youth.

What is even more disturbing about this recent round of repression is that it occurred primarily against Baloch and Pakhtun students. Many of these students come from regions that have experienced traumatising forms of violence, whether led by the state, international actors or extremist groups. Their entry into educational institutions in Punjab should begin a healing process, both in terms of the hospitality and the quality of education they receive. Instead, the university administration's decision to use brute force against them has only helped open up old wounds residing at the heart of our federation. I saw this first hand at a previous university I taught, where the administration was really upset that Pakhtun students were holding philosophy reading groups in Pashto, as if Urdu or English were the only languages worthy of philosophical discussions! Such blatant form of racism puts a heavy responsibility for those in Punjab to demonstrate solidarity and to assert that Baloch and Pakhtun bodies are more than mere conduits for excessive, humiliating violence carried out by the authorities.

Much of the current violence on campuses stems from an inability of administrations to understand the necessity of free speech as part of a university education. The absence of student unions or any other form of effective representation has already created a massive gulf between students and administrations. The everyday humiliation, where the fate of students depends on the whims of guards, teachers and administrators, has created a palpable sense of accumulated rage. Worse still, universities actively discourage the congregation of students – to have discussions with relative autonomy from their families, university administrators and the state.

Free speech is often curtailed on campuses with such ludicrous reasons cited such as 'threat to national security', when in reality it is the incompetent university administrations that are the target of students' criticisms. That is particularly tragic since universities are sites for producing

knowledge, which by definition means a critical interrogation of the existing coordinates of the world. Punishing critical thinking on campuses is a paradox which has arguably turned all universities into potential crime sites. Without representation, or even an outlet for critical discussion, such confrontations between administrations and students become the form for expressing the crisis in our university system.

The emergence of councils based on ethnic identities is a response precisely to the suffocating environment faced by students, particularly from the peripheral regions of the country. Yet, they come at a heavy price both in terms of education and politics. Universities can be ideal sites for young people to experiment with different ideologies, engage with opposing points of view and reinvent themselves through their own will. Yet, the lack of resources and the feeling of being besieged results in students moving towards the certainty of identitarian markers such as language, ethnicity and religion.

These are the cleavages dominant in Pakistani society and are being reproduced rather than being challenged, burdening the youth with the weight of the past. No amount of incarceration, FIRs or any other form of repression will ever be a substitute for the promotion of critical and open discussion to build new forms of solidarities and identities, something our society is desperately in need for.

As a teacher, it is hard to remove oneself from the personal insult involved in such forms of police actions on campus. One does not need to overly romanticise student groups (which doubtlessly have a lot of problems) to know that students are not the primary problem in our education system. It is difficult enough to meet dozens of bright young people in classrooms and in office hours every day, complaining about the stifling environment they have to face, from their family to their campuses. Their creativity and energy do not find an adequate outlet, nor is the future of our students as secure as it ought to be. In such a cruel atmosphere, not only do we need more resources, but more empathy towards students, understanding how vulnerable they are, and how much they have the potential for contributing towards society if provided with the right opportunities.

I end with a brief anecdote that is symptomatic of the abandonment faced by students today. While reading the news of the police crackdown on students at QAU, I was sitting with a student of intermediate along with his mother. The student's mother narrated how her husband had sold his buffalo to pay for their son's education, and was doing odd jobs in the village. He has fallen sick, and the family can no longer make ends meet, let alone pay for their son's education. So, they want him to start a job (preferably as a driver). This student wanted to pursue his dream of obtaining a Masters degree in English, but has to now abruptly end his education to support his ailing parents. A mix of disappointment and rage was written all over his face as he stared at me, and there was absolutely no adequate answer I could provide on why he must go through all of this.

The fact remains that the choice between an unfulfilling career or pursuing an education is one that no 16-year old should ever have to make. Yet, this story is typical of millions of young people who abandon their dreams due to adverse conditions, and do not receive adequate support from a state that nonetheless demands excessive obedience from them.

While the students protesting for their rights at QAU were incarcerated, there will be no FIRs registered against the system and the individuals that have stolen the future of our youth. We need to stop being outraged by the ephemeral moments of students' assertion, and feel a sense of shame in letting down so many young people. Shame is a powerful emotion, one that can perhaps propel us to start doing things differently.

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P.S.

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