

Student protest and the crisis in Pakistani higher education

The most revolutionary weapon of all

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Punjab University came to a standstill at the end of January, due to violent clashes between rival student groups. Students from the Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba and the Pashtun Education and Development Movement (PEDM) were arrested and charged under anti-terror laws. This article explores the crisis in Pakistan's higher education system and the dynamics of student protest.

Since arresting two hundred students on terrorism charges was such an absurd move, it had to be dropped within a week. Students have now returned to the university and there remains a menacing calm – for now.

This clash should not be viewed as something specific to Punjab University, though it does contain elements unique to our campus. Yet, protests and clashes have erupted in various educational institutions across Punjab (and elsewhere). It is important for us to take a step back from the immediacy of the current crisis and analyse the broader reasons that are propelling students in disparate sites to turn towards violence as a vehicle to communicate their grievances.

Three major processes can help us understand the palpable frustration among students today. The first is the exponential rise in the number of young people, particularly from lower-middle class and working-class backgrounds, seeking higher education. Now this would be a delightful development in any setting, except that we have botched this opportunity and turned it into a disaster.

For example, various governments failed to build an educational infrastructure that is adequate for students entering higher education. While a select few could get into elite universities, many were accommodated in second or third-tier private universities that have mushroomed since the Musharraf era. Other avenues that are open for this surplus student population are shoddy 'degree colleges' affiliated with public-sector universities, or university departments that have a lower admission criterion. None of these sites has an appropriate quantity of qualified teachers or research facilities to meet the requirements of this massive influx of students.

The result is that classrooms are overcrowded and teachers are underpaid, overworked and often under-qualified. The fact that no government has made any effort to translate some essential readings into local languages (a common practice all over the world) makes the learning experience even more burdensome for a vast majority of students. This means that very early on in their educational career, students lose interest in the subject, and obtaining a degree becomes a mere ritual rather than an enriching experience. The result is that most classrooms become an exercise in managing and disciplining students rather than a frank and democratic exchange of ideas between teachers and students on the key issues facing the world.

In an earlier article, I had mentioned how this underwhelming educational experience is coupled

with the spectre of unemployment or underemployment for a significant number of these students. A vast majority of degree-holders detest the idea of returning to their parents' profession while their dreams of social mobility hit an impasse when the job market simply excludes them. Without a past to hold onto or a future to believe in, time itself melts for them. This situation would be a powder keg for any society. But it is especially scary for us, since we have many groups who are willing to sell these young people millenarian fantasies as an escape from a humiliating present.

The second major problem is that we have not built any infrastructural capacity, whether bureaucratic or physical, to respond to the growing number of students entering metropolitan cities for higher education. For example, just the admission process at a public-sector university is a nightmare since very few officials are able to guide students or their families on exactly what is required. For students coming from out of the city or other provinces, it becomes an ordeal since they are forced to come to Lahore multiple times just to find out what exactly needs to be done to acquire admission.

Such institutional vacuums do not last for long and are bound to be filled. For example, if one goes through an organised student group, then the process can be completed within a few hours. Those seeking admissions are relieved since their time and money is saved, while student groups get potential new recruits. Voila!

An even more embarrassing example is that of boarding and lodging for young people entering the city. University hostels tend to be the cheapest accommodation available for students in the city, which makes them highly sought-after spaces. Student groups (and administrators) try to, and often succeed in, creating a virtual monopoly over hostels, using it as a tool to leverage their influence on incoming students. The result is that those students who manage to acquire rooms through these groups are then expected to actively participate in the activities of these groups. A city that gives massive subsidies to elite housing societies but spends next to nothing on providing affordable housing for students, is tragic in itself. But if this reality forces students into a situation where they risk their education – and even their lives – just to acquire housing, then this negligence is outrightly criminal.

Third, there is excessive fear of free speech on campuses. The recent clashes have amplified the ethnic and religious faultlines at universities. Pakhtuns and Baloch students have been accused of being 'anti-Pakistan' while the Islamist students have been labelled as "terrorist sympathisers". Moreover, a sentiment has been generated that calls for the removal of all students holding 'extremist' views from the university.

On paper, this suggestion may seem fair given the circumstances. But it will turn into another absurdity the moment it is implemented. For example, by now we should simply acknowledge that students from peripheral regions tend to have a critical view of the practices of the Pakistani state and their critique is often couched in ethnic terms. On the other hand, the rise of religious extremism among the student body is also a fact. Many of the views that students are able to air in our classrooms border on what would be considered hate speech in Western universities. If we started expelling students for ethnic or religious prejudices, there would be a dramatic decrease in the student body at every university in Pakistan.

This is not the fault of the students since they are merely reflecting the prejudices that are prevalent in our society. Those of us who chose to enter the public sector did so knowing that we would encounter these cleavages. Our job is not to police our students, but to teach them, listen to them and provide them with platforms and opportunities through which they can explore new horizons. An ideal teacher is one who can encourage his/her students to begin a process of reinventing themselves rather than holding onto rigid identities.

If we simply refuse to engage with 'troubled' students, we will be akin to doctors who refuse to engage with patients because the latter carry germs. This would be an abdication of our duty to create responsible young citizens, no matter how exhausting it can be for teachers.

Finally, it is hard not to point out that the true tragedy of such clashes is that students who belong to a similar existential situation, where abandonment, fear and chaos reign supreme, are turning on each other. It is the same system of neglect and incompetence that has robbed them of their future. If they were to acknowledge the fears and anxieties of students belonging to the 'other' side, they would not see an enemy but a mirror reflecting their own alienation from the world as it exists. Perhaps then they could begin a process of healing through which they come together on common issues that concern the future of all young people.

We need more investment in education and infrastructural development, and more flexibility in our teaching methods. This can only happen if teachers and others empathise with young people rather than demonise them. In a climate of fear and anger on campuses, kindness will be the most revolutionary weapon at our disposal. We all must embrace it.

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P.S.

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