

SOCIETY

# Pakistan Student Solidarity March : “We shall overcome”

Monday 9 December 2019, by [CHAUDHRY Amna](#) (Date first published: 8 December 2019).

**The Student Solidarity March called for justice, not only on campuses but for all marginalised segments of society**

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In early November, a video clip of student activists at the Faiz Festival in Lahore went viral. In the video, the students chanted a revolutionary poem and played the bongo drums, while onlookers clapped to urge them on. One of the participants, a Punjab University graduate named Arooj Aurangzaib, faced the most vitriol after the video went viral. Online trolls even criticised the leather jacket she was wearing. This item of clothing fed into the misconception that all these student activists belonged to ‘elite’ universities and oblivious to the harsh realities that mark the day-to-day existence of most in the country.

The overarching response to the video was that these students were naive and impressionable, swayed by Western ideals and misguided passion. But the captured moments also became a precursor for students to publicly reject how they are labelled and to redefine their space in society.

A ban on engaging in political activity on campus, over time, has grown into an unending list of activities prohibited on campus. Students cannot wear what is deemed inappropriate by the university, they cannot speak out against hostel curfews, fee hikes, segregation, cuts in the education budget, etc. Students cannot turn to anyone if they are intimidated and students cannot hope for justice if they are sexually harassed by figures of authority.

But at the Faiz Festival last month, Arooj Aurangzaib was there to tell students what they could do. They could all come out to march together and protest the curtailment of student rights. On November 29, thousands came out to do so.



*Women were at the forefront of the marches | Murtaza Ali/White Star*



*Thousands marched in Lahore | Murtaza Ali/White Star*



*A marcher holds a placard with a photo of Mashal Khan in Karachi | Shakil Adil/White Star*

## **Students' Demands**

A few weeks prior to the march, several progressive student organisations convened an 'Education Emergency' meeting in which they formed a Student Action Committee. These students wanted to call attention to the crisis in education in the country. Recent developments related to campus life indicated urgent steps were required to address the emergency: the reports of sexual harassment and intimidation of female students at the University of Balochistan, the meagre budget for higher education and the government's refusal to lift the ban on student unions.

The Student Action Committee (SAC), with student representatives from all over Pakistan, announced the second Student Solidarity March — the first had taken place the previous year — to be held across eight cities. Their demands included, but were not limited to, the restoration of student unions, the allocation of at least five percent of the GDP to education, the formation of inquiry committees for cases of sexual harassment in every university and the disallowance of security forces from intervening in educational institutes.

SAC was adamant that the march also address the wider problems of privatisation, misogyny, racism and the sheer neglect of marginalised groups. As a result, mobilisation for the march did not just take place on campuses, but student organisers also engaged with labour leaders, lawyers, doctors and feminists.

On November 29, it seemed like all their hard work had paid off.



*The Student Solidarity March in Lahore | Murtaza Ali/White Star*



*Photo by Murtaza Ali/White Star*



*SAC was adamant that the march also address the wider problems of privatisation, misogyny, racism and the sheer neglect of marginalised groups | Murtaza Ali/White Star*

## The March

On a sunny winter afternoon, a truck pulled up outside Nasser Bagh in Lahore, and a crowd began to gather around it. The organisers of the march stood on the truck, turning it into a makeshift mobile stage. One of them chanted “*Meray des ke tulaba zinda hain!* [The students of my country are alive!],” into a microphone, as the crowd cheered. Every single person sitting atop the truck looked on at the swelling crowd with excitement.

According to their estimates, at least 5,000 people came to the march in Lahore. There were marches not just in eight but in 25 cities across Pakistan, from Karachi to Gilgit. Students were not the only ones in attendance. Labourers and labour organisers, members of the transgender community, lawyers, academics, feminists and other concerned citizens came out. Outside Nasser Bagh there was such a large crowd that the Government College administration, ostensibly fearing a riot, closed the gates of the university.

Women were encouraged to be at the forefront of the march that day; labourers were given as much importance as any other group. Student Mashal Khan — who had been killed on made-up charges of blasphemy — was honoured alongside revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxembourg. In doing so, the march consolidated the issues of the marginalised as irrevocably tied together and created a space in which all citizens could give voice to their demands.

As the truck made its way forward — towards Punjab Assembly — and the march began, the organisers announced the march would be entirely peaceful, and that no harassment would be tolerated. The organisers took turns to chant slogans into the microphone and their voices rang out — arresting and clear even in the midst of all the commotion.

According to Mohiba Ahmed, spokesperson for SAC, and Raza Gilani, a member of the Progressive Students Collective, the possibility of a march entered their imaginations because of the study circles they organised at their alma mater, the Government College University. “This is where we first studied and learnt critical theory. From there, we formed the Progressive Students Collective, which organised the first student solidarity march [last year],” says Ahmed.

This year, student activists sought the help of labour unions, such as the Bhatta Mazdoor Union, the Labour Education Foundation, and the All Pakistan Wapda Hydroelectric Workers Union. The transgender community, Ahmed adds, played a huge part in organising and mobilising for the strike. Since the Student Solidarity March also opposed the increasing privatisation of public institutions, they found common ground with doctors and lawyers who have the same grievances. "We learnt a lot from our first march," says Gilani. "Perhaps the most valuable lesson was the importance of making connections with activists all over the country. We spent the past year travelling and building these connections, and that is why the march this year was such a success."

The organisers claim their inspiration is the 1968 movement against the dictatorial regime of Ayub Khan. "It is the workers, peasants, students and women who will lead the movement, just like last time. All these groups have to come together for us to be able to achieve our goals," says Gilani.

As evening fell, the march ended at Charing Cross. The crowd settled down. People sat on the road, talking to each other and buying snacks from vendors that hung about. People came onstage to say a few words and express their gratitude for the turnout at the march. Ahmed took the stage. "Why are we here today?" she asked the crowd. "We are here because our sisters in Fata have no schools to speak of. And the places that have educational institutes, women are harassed and humiliated. I speak for my sisters at the University of Balochistan today. Those in power will have to listen to us now."



*Student Solidarity March in Karachi | Shakil Adil/White Star*



*A Pashtun student holds up a sign at the march in Lahore | Murtaza Ali/White Star*

## **The HQ\*\***

Two days after the march, there is still plenty to do at the SAC office and students occupy almost every square metre of space. For the past month, the Student Solidarity March was being planned in an office space on the fourth floor of a nondescript building. The entire campaign is run on donations.

Most of these students have been up all night, protesting the disappearance of Alamgir Wazir, a Pakhtun student activist who spoke at the march and is the nephew of MNA Ali Wazir, who was arrested on allegations of involvement in anti-state activities. Along with missing Alamgir, activists Dr Ammar Ali Jan, Farooq Tariq and Iqbal Lala, Mashal Khan's father, have been charged with sedition for participating in the students' march.

At the office, there is a sense of urgency. The question of what they should do to respond hangs in the air. Eventually it is decided to make a video responding to the sedition charges. The young students begin to prepare for the tasks that lie ahead of them, conscious that they are about to do something unprecedented.

“The students of today have never seen student unions in this country, they are not part of our imagination of how a university functions,” Mudabbir, an activist from Gilgit Baltistan, tells Eos. When asked how they would like to respond to the criticisms being levelled at them, they claim that new movements are never imagined as organic but are framed right from the beginning as suspicious. Student unions, they claim, have acquired a bad reputation because there is little understanding of what student unions do. “If anyone criticises us for being elite or influenced by the West, the only thing I can say in response is that we are not just fighting for ourselves, but for everyone,” argues Mudabbir.

“The movement is also criticised because there are women at the forefront,” adds Ahmed. “But women are suffering the most at the hands of universities. Campuses are not safe for them, the lack of scholarships and hostel facilities affect them even more and that is why they are at the frontlines today,” she says. “Women have to be a part of this, as does the transgender community. We want these people to come together, for this to be an intersectional movement.”

That is the hope. After tirelessly listing their demands and explaining their motives, a sense of hope fills the room. “We are very hopeful, especially after the march,” says Ahmed. “We are witnessing history right now,” adds Ali. “People from all walks of life have come together, and it is students who have brought them together.”

The committee plans to keep the momentum of the march going. “A framework has to be developed for the formation of student unions,” says Zahid Ali. “And students have to be a part of this conversation. If no steps towards this are taken within the next few months, then we will consider a sit-in in Islamabad for the restoration of student unions.”

A few hours later, the Student Action Committee uploads the video. In it, the organisers extend their gratitude to everyone who came out to support the Student Solidarity March, before addressing the intimidation they are currently facing.

“Who is labelled a traitor in this country?” one of them asks. “Should Iqbal Lala, who protests against the horrible lynching of his son, be labelled a traitor?” One by one, each student speaks, directly addressing university administrations and government officials. They all look into the camera with resolve, as if to say this is just the beginning, and we are here to stay.

**Amna Chaudhry**

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**P.S.**

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- Not reproduced here: Header: Marchers sing at the Student Solidarity March in Karachi | Shakil Adil /White Star