

# Pakistan: Students on the march

Tuesday 1 December 2020, by [JAN Ammar Ali](#) (Date first published: 27 November 2020).

**It has been a year since Pakistan was shaken by an unprecedented upheaval of university students across the country. Organized under the banner of the Students Solidarity March, students took out rallies in over 50 districts to express their anger against a broken education system and the failure of the PTI government to live up to its promises of empowering the youth. The students demanded the constitutionally guaranteed right to unionize, an increase in the education budget, the formation of sexual harassment committees on campuses and an end to discrimination on the basis of religion and ethnicity.**

Unsurprisingly, the government reacted to these mass mobilizations by deeming them a conspiracy against the state, a favored tactic of the rulers when they fail to acknowledge the underlying causes of popular discontent. An entire campaign was launched to paint student leaders as working in cahoots with foreign powers to destabilize the country, an allegation that was also levelled against students from JNU by the fascist government of Narendra Modi. It was difficult to understand why the enemies of the state would want more accessible and better-quality education for Pakistan's youth and why the custodians of our country would allow our education system to continuously deteriorate.

The truth is that the protests were a direct response to the decay that is still afflicting our education system. While the education system was already on a ventilator when the PTI government came to power, the budget cut of 40 percent to the higher education budget in 2019 under IMF pressure further deflated the system, leading to higher fees and cancellation of scholarships for numerous students. The crisis was also felt by various departments across the sector that had to freeze hiring and undertake downsizing to balance their budgets, leading to a glut of unemployed PhDs on the market. The crisis is severe enough that it prompted the chairman of the Higher Education Commission, Tariq Banuri, to declare in June 2020 that the financial situation of higher education was the worst it had ever been, comparing it to "digging the grave of the country".

Funding is but one of several major concerns of the students. Last year, the sexual harassment scandal at the University of Balochistan shocked the country over the systematic way in which female students are harassed on campuses. Yet, the news was all too familiar for students across the country who know how the lack of transparency and accountability on campuses creates fertile ground for predators and harassers to inflict damage upon them. Moreover, whenever students have spoken out against discriminatory or criminal behavior, the administrations have used multiple tools to silence them. One of the most notorious methods is an affidavit that students are forced to sign upon admission that requires them to state that they will not take part in "political activities".

Ostensibly, this provision is made to ensure that students do not indulge in party politics on campuses. However, in reality this document is used against students each time they try to organize to build a collective voice against various forms of injustices, whether it is harassment, spikes in hostel fees or even the demand for clean drinking water, and soap in the washrooms. The fact that adults are forced to give up their constitutional right to association signals that universities have

become spaces where the rights and responsibilities enshrined in the constitution are perpetually suspended. Indeed, one of the starkest examples of the criminalization of the youth was when the district administration used anti-terror laws against students of the University of Punjab following a dispute on campus, signaling the vulnerability of today's youth.

All of these factors combined to provide the impetus to students for orienting their rage through a charter of demands. The rallies last year on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November were peaceful and festive events that won the admiration of different sectors of society. Interestingly, even government officials, including the prime minister himself, welcomed the protests - with the PM announcing his support for the restoration of student unions. It appeared that the students had finally won the right to representation on their campuses.

Yet, the day after the rally, things began taking a sour turn when one of the student leaders, Alamgir Wazir, was arrested from Punjab University. Later it was confirmed that a few participants including Iqbal Lala (Mashal Khan's father), veteran activists Farooq Tariq and Muhammad Shabbir, and myself were charged with sedition, a relic of the colonial era. A number of us were removed from our teaching positions from universities at the behest of the powers that be; this included Zaigham Abbas, a bright young lecturer at the Government College University. It became clear that the government is not in charge of the education policy and that those pulling the strings are eager to remind the youth of their 'proper' place in society - one of obedience in the face of intolerable suffering.

For a moment, many had thought that the rupture in consciousness produced by young confident students marching with red flags on the streets would be turned into an ephemeral moment of ecstasy without producing any long-lasting effects. Yet, this year, the conditions for students were made even worse due to the coronavirus pandemic. Moving classes online meant that a large section of students from the peripheries could no longer access the classes they were paying for, highlighting the uneven development of infrastructure across the country. Simultaneous protests were witnessed throughout the lockdown period as students from Balochistan, former Fata, Gilgit-Baltistan, as well as those from poor households everywhere continued to raise their voices against the digital divide.

In recent weeks, the anger of students has once again boiled over. A few examples can be seen in the form of protests by students of the KaraKoram International University and Islamia College Peshawar against the rampant cases of harassment on campuses. Engineering and medical students across the country are also protesting the hike in tuition fees in the middle of a pandemic, while marginalised Baloch and Pashtun students staged Long Marches and sit-ins to demand a restoration of their scholarships. Medical studies aspirants are currently protesting the abrupt policies of the newly established Pakistan Medical Commission, including the sudden change in curriculum and being forced to take indoor exams during the mounting second wave of the pandemic.

Such instances of injustices have once again fuelled the Students Solidarity Marches planned across the country this year on November 27 (today). Despite all attempts at intimidation and harassment, many students understand their constitutional rights and are unwilling to forego them. The students are once again demanding the right to representation through student unions, an issue that has become more palpable in the face of another lockdown on campuses. It is clear that the memory of last year's historic mobilizations could not be wiped out, signaling that today's youth is unwilling to compromise on their rights and dignity. [In light of the Covid-19 situation, the march in itself has been cancelled and converted into a two-hour protest - with strict implementation of SOPs].

Recently, we met a 14-year-old Christian boy in Faisalabad who told me how he wanted to become a doctor. However, his father was recently fired from a factory and, since he had diabetes, he could

not find work. As a result, the boy was forced to leave school and is now a daily wage-worker. A system that robs the youth of their future and shatters their dreams is a system not worth defending. This is why both reason and justice will remain on the side of the students who rebel against this decadent and morally bankrupt order.

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