

Pakistan: Students stage sit-in on 38th anniversary of student union ban

Sunday 13 March 2022, by [AHMED, Hassaan](#) (Date first published: 10 February 2022).

‘Student unions used to be nurseries for future politicians’: Qamar-uz-Zaman Bhatti

On February 9, 1984, former military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq imposed a ban on student unions in Pakistan.

As many as 38 years have passed but the student unions couldn't be restored in true letter and spirit. To mourn this ban, students from major universities of Lahore gathered at Charing Cross on Wednesday just in front of the Punjab Assembly to mark the anniversary of the undemocratic ban.

Civil society, lawyers, trade unionists and rights activists also participated in the sit-in camp to show solidarity with the students.

“Today is one of the darkest days in the history of Pakistan as vibrant student unions were banned on this day some 38 years ago,” said Haider Butt, a student from Lahore.

We have gathered here today under the banner of the Progressive Students' Collective (PSC) to mourn the ban and it is our demand that these student unions be restored immediately, he said. “We'll stage sit-in here for some days to press for our demands. We'll have poetry sessions, theatre performances and singing during our stay here,” he said, while disclosing his plans to Minute Mirror.

The students have demanded provision of health facilities and public transport discounts on student cards, in addition to the establishment of harassment committees in all the universities with students given a part in the committees as well. The demands further included increase in the education budget to the benefit of the students.

“There should be no enforced disappearances of students and teachers in the universities. Sohail Baloch and Fasih Baloch should be freed from jail,” the students said.

They were of the view that the Punjab governor had made a promise that students from Balochistan and ex-FATA would be given scholarships but his commitments had not yet materialized. They also demanded establishing new universities that the government had promised earlier.

Educationist and activist Ammar Ali Jan also addressed the students in which he demanded uplifting of the ban on student unions.

“There should be complete demilitarization in the universities and all the check posts of Rangers and FC [frontier corps] must be abolished immediately in the educational institutions,” Jan told Minute Mirror.

He furthered that there was a continuous attempt in Pakistan to curb free thoughts and ideas, which

wasn't in the interest of the country as it was an undemocratic approach. He was of the view that student unions were the platforms from where new ideas used to generate and therefore a ban was imposed.

Speaking on the occasion, Punjab Union of Journalists (PUJ) President Qamar-uz-Zaman Bhatti said that the ban on student unions was a well-orchestrated conspiracy of a military dictator and Pakistan was still paying the price for it.

Bhatti, who himself is a trade unionist and a former student leader, said that we could find a leadership crisis and vacuum in our politics just due to ban on student unions.

"These student unions used to be nurseries for future politicians and Pakistan has seen many politicians who came from student politics. Former Senate chairman Raza Rabbani, PML-N [Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz] stalwarts Kh Saad Rafique, Javed Hashmi, Ahsan Iqbal, former senator Mir Hasil Bizenjo, Jamaat-e-Islami's Ameer ul Azeem, Liaqat Baloch, Hafiz Salman Butt, PTI's [Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf's] Mian Mehmood ur Rasheed and PPP's [Pakistan Peoples Party's] old loyalist Jehangir Badar came from student politics," he said.

The sit-in of students would continue for three to four days in front of Punjab Assembly to press for their demands.

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