

Pakistan: The students are rising

Wednesday 4 December 2019, by [JAN Ammar Ali](#) (Date first published: 22 November 2019).



A palpable sense of despondency and disorientation characterizes Pakistan's political landscape. Part of the reason is the abysmal performance of the PTI government that made lofty proposals of ending the country's debt burden and investing in jobs and public housing.

Yet, the party of hope and change has turned into little more than a face for the entrenched elites that have historically dominated decision-making in the country. The induction of IMF-approved officials into the cabinet and the state machinery has eroded even nominal notions of financial sovereignty while facilitating the corporate and feudal elites with tax breaks. These subsidies for the elites are being doled out at a time of unprecedented hardship for ordinary citizens who are experiencing an exponential rise in inflation as well as unprecedented cuts to the social development sector.

The PTI's inability to challenge the structures of power has turned its historical character into that of a force that confirms the cynicism of our age which deems change to be impossible. On the other hand, the opposition has so far failed to generate any serious enthusiasm about its confrontational stance. The lukewarm response of the general public towards the impressive mobilization of its cadres by the JUI-F for the Azadi March shows the disjunct between high politics and social realities. Indeed, many are unable to relate to the demands for procedural democracy when questions of exploitation and inequality have not been addressed in any significant way by the opposition.

The persistent rumours of intrigues, palace conspiracies and backdoor deals have furthered the sense of confusion that marks our present. There is no clearly defined alternative to a system that is increasingly militarised and which continues to push us towards unemployment, austerity and environmental degradation. The blurring of ideological lines is a symptom of the disorientation faced by a world that has lost a measure to evaluate its own actions, churning out spineless characters who view shifting loyalties as a sign of political wisdom. It is this absence of principles and a workable hypothesis that haunts our present, with confusion and cynicism blocking the possibility of transformative politics.

It is no surprise then that the recent viral videos of students chanting revolutionary slogans at the Faiz Festival have struck a chord with large sections of the population. The fire and courage in their voice appeared as a glaring contrast to the overly calculated maneuverings characteristic of high politics. In the videos, they can be seen daring the entire spectrum of political leadership in the country, invoking the possibility of a new, untainted force on the political horizon.

Yet, apart from the well-deserved praise, there was also a serious backlash witnessed against the protesting students. Initially, many tried dismissing them as elites, particularly by obsessing over the

leather jacket worn by Arooj Aurangzeb, the student leading the chants in the video. Those who made these accusations were embarrassed to find out that the students in the videos were enrolled in public-sector universities and belonged to humble family backgrounds. The accusation of elitism in particular stemmed from the limited public imagination of how assertive public-sector students can be. The fact that women were leading the chants only confirmed the suspicion that they must be “elite, liberal” women, ignoring how feisty and assertive middle-class and working-class women can be.

Once the social media world could see the clarity of purpose among these young citizens, the nature of allegations started becoming more serious. Some have started accusing them of being part of the opposition’s agenda, while others with even more fanciful imagination have begun accusing the students of playing on a secret “foreign agenda”. These allegations are gaining steam as students prepare for a Student Solidarity March to be organized on the 29th of November.

To understand the ‘mysterious’ agenda of the marchers, it is pertinent to delve into the background of the movement. For years, academics and concerned citizens have been complaining about the decrepit conditions of higher education in Pakistan. The lack of quality teaching, prohibition on asking critical questions and the breakdown of infrastructure such as water and housing, have all contributed to an accumulation of anger among the younger generation. On top of these dismal conditions, the lack of employment opportunities is further fueling the resentment, with the ‘youth bulge’ often cited as a possible cause for social and political disturbances in the near future.

Despite the escalating crisis, students have little to no representation on campuses. The constitution guarantees the right to association to all citizens but the de facto ban on student unions has resulted in the concentration of power in the hands of a tiny, myopic set of university administrators. The frequent incidents of violence on campuses, including the tragic case of Mashal Khan, are indicative of the close nexus between the state, conniving administrators and certain student groups. The recent news of allegations of a seven-million dollar fraud at one of the premiere universities of Lahore is exemplary of the unbridled powers of these university administrations.

One can list a number of other shocking cases in recent times. The sexual harassment scandal at the University of Balochistan shook the country due to the details of the systematic way in which an opaque and criminal administration blackmailed female students. More recently, students at the University of Sindh were charged with sedition for daring to demand clean drinking water on campuses. Then, we heard the news of the rustication of six students from UET Lahore because they raised their voices against the unbearable fees hike.

The situation is comparable across universities in Pakistan, a condition that led a group of dedicated students to organize a student solidarity march across the country. Their demands are commonsensical. Among other things, they want the restoration of student unions, a reversal of budget cuts to higher education, clean and safe environment on campuses, and the promotion of critical thinking among students.

One is perplexed to see how the desire to create a vibrant and safe universities could be part of a foreign agenda. Why would the country’s enemies celebrate if there is more investment and reform in our higher education? And who benefits when we accuse students fighting for these necessary reforms as ‘seditious elements’?

The fact that many are unable to understand the youth upsurge is testament to the stale language we are accustomed to in describing political events. The framing of every social movement as “foreign conspiracies” shows the limitations of our acquired language, with our socio-political crisis turning into a linguistic crisis. It is a sign that something new is emerging, a process that contains

fluid contours that disturbs preconceived notions of doing politics.

In more delightful news, a workers' rally will join the student solidarity march in Lahore. The ability to see disparate struggles as part of the same continuum of justice and equality is the basis of any shared political project. There is a long way to go before these young men and women can truly shake up the entrenched power structures in society. For now, they have emerged as symbols of hope from the ruins of a torn and paralyzed society. We must embrace and join them in demanding a just future for our country's abandoned youth.

Ammar Ali Jan

P.S.

- The News, November 22, 2019:
<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/572314-the-students-are-rising>
- The writer is an historian and a member of the Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement.