

Campuses without politics

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By Anwar Syed

SUPPORTING the Model University Ordinance of 2002 in this newspaper (February 8 and 9), a former vice-chancellor of the University of Karachi opposed the elective element in the faculty's participation in the executive, administrative and academic bodies of universities. Further, he would minimize this element in the constitution of student unions.

The Universities Act of 1974, he reminds us, provided for student and faculty representation in these bodies on an elective basis. He believes that, as a result, instruction and learning became a secondary object of teachers and students. Their unions linked with political parties, the campuses became the "hotbeds" of regional, religious and ethnic strife. Academic standards declined. Both administrators and professors came under severe political pressures and the universities lost their autonomy.

All of this did happen, but it is not right to say that it happened because the law in 1974 had allowed elections. Students (not all, but many) had been politicized since before independence. Their unions came under the influence of external political forces—initially the Jamaat-i-Islami and the PML—as early as the 1950s, when the Islami Jamiat Tulaba, an affiliate of the JI, emerged on university campuses and won successive student union elections. Strife and violence between rival student groups surfaced at about the same time.

In the first half of 1968 students created political turmoil—and in some instances ousted governments—in France, Turkey, South Korea, and several other places. Student unions were banned in Pakistan at that time. Some of us could see that as soon as the students returned to the campuses in September, they would launch an agitation for the restoration of their unions. And, this is precisely what they did.

Their movement started at the Punjab University in Lahore, spread to campuses across the country, and then merged with a larger revolt against Ayub Khan's rule. Students, along with peasants and workers, became the object of the late Mr Bhutto's solicitude and strategy. It should be emphasized, once again, that these developments surfaced before, not after, the Act of 1974.

In the proposed scheme of things a body of 15 to 20 members will replace the existing senate in the universities and act as a board of governors. These members will, presumably, be appointed by the chancellor (usually the provincial governor), who will most likely act on the advice of the education secretary. The names of those to be appointed will be picked from a list submitted by a nominating committee. It is not clear where this committee will originate. The new senate or board will have no elected members.

A syndicate, the university's executive

persons will be elected to their positions; they will be appointed by the senate-itself an appointed body — on the vice-chancellor's recommendation.

This framework does not recognize the faculty's right to representation in the principal organs of the university's governance. Any faculty member included in them may have been picked for his wisdom and/or knowledge of academic affairs, but he/she cannot be regarded as a faculty representative because the faculty has not chosen him/her.

At this point, if I may be allowed a bit of digression, I should like to relate an episode. I heard once that in the fall of 1950 a small group of professors at Columbia University went to see General Dwight D. Eisenhower who was then serving as its president. As his secretary showed them into his office, he rose to meet them and, with his usual good-

the right to participate in politics, and on reaching a certain age they have the right to vote, which is very much a political act. Most of our students attain the age of eighteen in their third year at college, and General Musharraf has given all of them the right to vote and thus made them full citizens.

It may be argued that while faculty and students may participate in politics, they must do their politicking outside the campus, not on campus. Persons in various workplaces do not allow their political affiliations to influence their work; nor do they canvass their political preferences among their fellow employees. In this train of thought faculty and students should do the same. Sounds good. Professors should not let their political attachments colour their teaching and evaluation of students, and the latter should not attempt to force their political preferences on teachers and administrators.

Do students have the right to project their political ideologies and affiliations to fellow students outside the classroom? It is hard to see how one can say they don't. The real objection to the intrusion of politics on campuses is not that it is evil per se, but that our particular brand of it is coercive, abusive, and violent. We object to gangsterism, not to politics.

The way out of this mess is, first, to limit the concerns of student unions to education-related issues and, second, to persuade the leaders of political parties in the country to forbid high-handedness and violence on the part of their affiliates on campuses. Is this asking for the moon? Let us give it a try before giving in to despair. In any case, banning politics will not do; it will then simply go underground and become ever more troublesome. Our mission must be to civilize politics, not to outlaw it.

The apprehension that an elected body entitled to speak for professors on professional issues or their right to elect a few representatives to the university's statutory bodies (senate, syndicate, academic council) will politicize them, open them to political machinations and mischief from outside, and thus impair the quality of their teaching and research is entirely without basis. If some professors do actually interact with colleagues and students in a manner unbecoming their station, that is because they have been touched by the moral decay prevalent in larger society. It has nothing to do with their right to elect officers in their professional organizations and representatives on their university's governing and regulatory bodies.

The bias against elections on campuses is merely a spillover from the bias against democratic politics common among administrators. The culture of democracy brings forth individuals who, instead of simply obeying orders, will ask questions, propose different ways of achieving professed goals, suggest new goals, and make a variety of demands. All of this makes life uncomfortable for rulers and their agents. It requires more work, patience, perseverance, and respect for the dissident on the part of administrators. It also calls for the painful exercise of

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natured smile, assured them that the "university" valued their views. On hearing this, one of his visitors looked him in the eye and said: "Mr President, we the professors are the university."

An exaggeration, was it? Perhaps, but then only a slight one. A place devoted to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, functioning without administrators, can be imagined, but a university without professors is entirely inconceivable. The proposition that persons without whose presence an institution cannot even be conceived are not, by a right inherent in the centrality of their function to the institution's mission, entitled to a say in its governance, and to participation in the maintenance of its good order, would appear to be preposterous. Why then do apparently sensible men want to extinguish this right? They will protest that they do want the faculty's wisdom and professional expertise to bear on the conduct of the university's affairs. But they want its administrative bodies and officers to identify where in faculty ranks the right kind of wisdom resides. They fear that if this task is left to the professors themselves—by allowing them to elect their representatives—they will both it up by permitting extraneous political forces to influence their choices.

It seems that the new university ordinance says nothing about student unions. The sceptics—including the former vice-chancellor referred to earlier—would revive them if they were to be elected indirectly by departmental associations, and not by the entire body of students.

Why the aversion to the flow into campus-