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Education
Dawn

The case for student unions

By Omar R. Quraishi

THE past week or so has seen a turf war re-emerge between student wings of the MQM and the Jama'at-Islami in many of Karachi's higher educational institutions. The parties involved — the All Pakistan Mohajir Students Organization (APMSO) and the Islami Jamiat Tulaba (IJT) — have been blaming each other for the resulting violence.

What started it all is still unknown, though according to some unfirmed reports it all began with a small quarrel between workers of the two organizations. As usual, those who suffered the most were college and university students who had nothing to with either the organizations or the initial quarrel. Classes were disrupted for a couple of days at the University of Karachi and several of its affiliated colleges. And in a disturbing development, the clashes spread even to the normally peaceful Sir Syed University of Engineering and Technology.

According to reports published after the clashes died down, teachers and administrators at the affected colleges have said that the students were not playing according to the rules. The rules are that once enrolled no student will indulge in any kind of political activity. In fact, there is a system in place at all universities and colleges under which all entering students are required to sign a statement saying that they will indulge in political activities only at the risk of being slapped with severe penalties, including suspension or expulsion.

Even the students share this view. I have received several emails over the past few months from students of Karachi University and several other institutions and the one thing that has come through in most of them is that all of them hate the political student organizations present on their campuses. And it shouldn't be difficult to understand why they would. After all, activists of student organizations, especially the IJT (and perhaps more so in Lahore), are known to go to extreme lengths to prevent the two sexes from mingling, and more often than are the primary causes of disturbances to classes. So why should ordinary students have any sympathy for them.

One also can't ignore the security factor here. The University of Karachi has a strong Rangers presence. This force has frequently come for some very heavy criticism. The students don't like their presence on the campus, while the administration probably thinks that if it weren't for them (the Rangers) the entire campus would become a battle-field. And the same students who criticize the Rangers for being there in the first place also criticize them for not intervening when fights between students break out (case in point: a letter published in this newspaper on April 24 by a student who didn't even have the courage to give his/her own name). But this might be a bit of a digression.

Back to the clashes between the IJT and the APMSO. Unfortunately, the thinking among university administrators and even the students and their parents is that indulging in political activities is something that must be prohibited. But no one is really willing to question the logic of this prohibition.

Why should someone, in the prime of his or her life, and probably with his or creative faculties on the rise, be told that 'oh, well, sorry but you can't take part in any kind of political discussions or be a member of a political organization'. This serves no purpose except that it effectively shuts out any kind of avenues for students to vent their feelings on issues close to them. As a student in a well-known large university on America's East Coast, I came across all kinds of organizations on my campus. There was everything from the International Socialist Organization to the student chapter of the Republican Party. There was an organization representing African Americans and which was extremely



the event was actually quite well attended. The world did not end and classes happened the next day. Like most large American universities we had an organization to represent South Asian students, and like in most cases it was dominated by Indians. In due course of time, the Organization of Pakistani Students sprung up as a counter and now it has at least a couple hundred members. Here too, differences between the Indians and the Pakistanis were not played out in pitched battles in our university's vast lawns but were confined to the level of heated debate or verbal, and sometimes written, protest. The university had, and probably still does, a very large organization for Muslim students whose members used to offer their Friday prayers in the same hall where the members of the Jewish Students Unions would hold their weekly meetings. Never once was there even a slight skirmish.

Now, some who read this will invariably point out that there exist huge differences between studying in America and in Pakistan. They will say that it is naive to talk about studying in America and then to draw an inference from it and apply it in Pakistan's case. They will say that the situations are simply not comparable and while giving freedom to students in America has paid off, the same cannot be said for students in Pakistan.

But perhaps these detractors miss one key point and it is this: Why have things come to this and whose fault is this? Did our parents and their parents not play in Pakistani univers-