

# Goose-stepping backwards

*Edu - Universities*

By Kausar S.K.

THE question is: what is the role of universities — to be bastions of change or of undemocratic practices? Is it to foster democratic behaviour and strengthen institutions, or to vindicate old systems that favour traditional power blocs?

At a time when the struggle for establishing democracy is under way, and there is a surge to challenge undemocratic moves even if they emanate from an elected government, a public-sector university has adopted the jirga system to resolve a conflict.

It is a sad reality that public-sector universities in Pakistan appear to be part of our social problem instead of playing a leading role in analysing and addressing social problems whether political or psychological in nature. Universities are meant to be hubs of learning, centres of research, analysis and knowledge. They are supposed to be robust seats of creative thinking, where future leaders hone their skills. They are meant to function according to transparent and accountable systems. While some private universities demonstrate these traits better than their public-sector counterparts, it is public-sector universities which must play a greater role in nation-building. Having said this, what is one to make of the jirga held to settle a dispute at the Sindh University? The Sindh High Court has ruled that jirgas are illegal; the vice chancellor of the university is on record as saying that jirgas are barbaric, and he said this when he signed the petition launched by the Women's Action Forum in Hyderabad against the jirga system. How is one to make sense of this obvious contradiction between theory and practice?

What happened on the campus of Sindh University, Jamshoro, was the following. There was a clash between a students' group and university employees. Allegedly, a group of students physically abused a group of employees and the latter protested. The administration, instead of using its own internal mechanism — a disciplinary committee responsible for such cases — held a jirga on campus, with a landlord of dubious repute as its guest. When WAF's Hyderabad chapter protested against this unimaginable measure, the administration denied that it was a jirga, declaring it was a 'matter of decision-taking'.

The organisation, however, insists that it was a jirga because compensations to the tune of Rs50,000 were to be paid by the students to those who were severely beaten and had to be hospitalised. Needless to say, the jirga conveniently bypassed the existing system, and was an open endorsement of the parallel judicial system which civil society groups all over Pakistan have been protesting against. By resorting to this practice, the university has weakened its own system, and has given legitimacy to an illegitimate mode of decision-making.

It has also sent dangerous signals to its own students. Implicit in its actions is the message that the universal approach to the norms of justice is not what can extricate society from systems that legitimise subordination of the powerless. It has demonstrated that the only way to deal with wayward students is by strengthening the tribal system. This archaic approach must be resisted and that too at the micro level, for that is where real power is derived from.

An aggrieved employee was told that his tribal chief would be invited to the jirga, but he took a principled stand, stating that the university should address his issue and not his tribal chief. He must be saluted for he represented resistance to archaic norms by indicating that he wanted the official system to come into play — in this case it was the university's disciplinary committee.

Pakistan is at a crossroads. Its civil society is becoming increasingly pro-poor, more supportive for the autonomy of the judiciary and the necessity of accountability and democracy. The lawyers' movement is an example of this trend, and the involvement of civil society groups and the media also bodes well for the country. There is talk among the legal community of strengthening the judiciary by improving the lower court systems. It is time for public-sector universities to start defining their roles in a way that sees students contributing to a better future and not regressing.

It is to be hoped that incidents such as these in Sindh will prod civil society to come forth and deliberate on the role of institutions of learning and outline mechanisms to prevent jirgas by taking legal action against those who dare to organise one. ■

---

By holding a jirga  
on campus, the  
university  
has weakened its  
own system.

---