**Notes from the campus - On Vice-Chancellors**

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University is the nursery where education, research, creation of knowledge, academic discourse, and critical consciousness bloom. In the 21st century, when we look at our universities, regrettably, instead of being in the classes, students and teachers are seen sitting in protests. What else can they do amidst the overwhelming crisis and issues? It is indeed tragic that the appointment of Vice-chancellors is not made on a merit basis; rather, it is made on political influence and personal interests. This reality is, in fact, the root cause of the crisis in the universities. Previously, the governor had the authority of appointment and used to be the chancellor who remained the direct lobby of the federal government. However, after the 18th constitutional amendment, the Chief Minister holds the authority and serves as the chancellor. Unfortunately, even under this arrangement, the authority is not being properly handled.
The role of a Vice-Chancellor typically involves leading both academic and administrative departments within an institution. To become a good vice-chancellor, strong leadership acumen is direly essential. However, mere possession of a Ph.D., seniority, older age, a relationship with any politician, bureaucrat, or competent leader, or retirement from the armed forces gives no guarantee of good leadership and management skills. A good leader is not one who decides or makes any policy for the population and rigidly adheres to it, which may potentially harm the majority of the population. Isn’t it partial to create policies without taking into confidence those for whom they are intended? In simple words, for intelligent judgment, the Vice-chancellors must be impartial specialists, not generalists. In Pakistan, many vice-chancellors are retired generalists and others tend to adopt the same behavior, illustrating how the mental disposition of vice-chancellors aligns with the methods employed by dictators or land-grabbers. This alarmingly increasing bureaucratic hierarchy and the ill-behaviors of officials are issues of significant concern prevalent throughout all the universities in Pakistan.
It is indeed disheartening to observe that Pakistan, particularly the Sindh Government, has been failing to find good leaders to play the crucial roles of vice-chancellors. This is where the vice-chancellors are running universities in the same manner that government machineries are running the state nowadays. Just as governments levy taxes and adopt IMF regulations to address financial needs and debts, university Vice-Chancellors, for the same monetary motives, compromise the quality of education and other affairs of universities. The trend is prevalent in all the universities of the state, where vice-chancellors frequently give no attention to the stakeholders of the institutes. They even refuse students as major stakeholders by imposing unilateral decisions that primarily serve themselves and benefit the state, while neglecting to engage or address any of the grievances of students.
It is said beyond doubt that a bad leader can even destroy a good university. For instance, consider Mr. Y, a resident of the capital of Pakistan, appointed as the vice-chancellor of a university located in the capital of Sindh. His rare presence in the university remained not only questionable but also caused unending troubles and issues for the students as well as staff, leading to the downfall of academic standards and the reputation of the university. He, from his residency, worked merely for the extension of VCship in the university where he prudently doesn’t pay (or never paid) any heed to the basic issues of students and staff. His appointment is believed to be politically influenced, the same pattern he practiced in making appointments as well as in getting an extension, rather than making any development in academics, infrastructure, and non-scholastic activities despite being highly remunerated and having high-class perks and privileges. During his tenure, he used to call the cops to create a warlike situation over the slightest student movements, lodge FIRs, involve in campus politics, work to make his own contexts, suppress student voices, be part of lobbies, display inappropriate behavior with students as well as staff, exploit student groups for personal interests. Yet he supports officials ranging from clerks to the Registrar, dean, and professors, even in cases of harassment, corruption, misbehaviors, wrong acts, nepotism, favoritism, etc. Just imagine the fate and future of the institution and its reputation, which such a person might be leading as a Vice-Chancellor—either ruined or sabotaged.
The qualities indeed play a vital role. Vice-chancellors must possess commitment, training, trustworthiness, a strong educational background, capability, morality, and a student- and education-friendly attitude. Additionally, leadership skills are essential qualities that enable them to prioritize education, uphold the institution’s reputation, and cater to the needs of stakeholders above personal benefits. The wise decisions of the Vice-chancellors rest on leadership qualities, a practical approach, and technical grip not only in their domain but also in the domain of those affected by their decisions.
However, the reality often presents a different picture, as we have polarized men as vice-chancellors who are ideologically committed to the systematic dismantling and privatization of educational institutions. They first function as the dictators of the institution and then work to secure their seats and extensions, often at the expense of educational quality and academic progress. Moreover, the management under such VCs develops new tactics to prevent students from defending their rights. Whenever students defend their rights, they don’t argue back. Instead, they accuse students of disrupting the university.
Additionally, the appointment of Vice-chancellors who are not native to the region can result in a lack of understanding of local issues and university affairs. This can cause a dearth of indigenous solutions due to the unique challenges faced by universities. It is highly dangerous to give the reins of horses to untrained horse-riders; the same is the case with universities. It is necessary not to grant leadership positions to ill-equipped individuals who lack necessary skills and qualifications, leading to collisions—a situation that education in many universities is currently facing. This situation exposes the manner in which VCs are functioning. Since the vital question arises: How many vice-chancellors in Pakistan have truly demonstrated leadership by standing for the students and their rights?
It is more than clear that Vice-chancellors define the destiny of the institutions and the future of students. There must be a system for identifying bad leaders who should never be recruited for VC seats. Moreover, capacity-building trainings, leadership and management programs, along with pedagogical support systems, must be implemented to train those who are leading the universities as their vice-chancellors. The incompetence must be removed. Because it is very weird to witness VCs following and deciding on verbal orders—not the written ones. Shouldn’t the compatibility of such puppet vice-chancellors who pave the way for even more authoritarian successors be questioned?
It is necessary to reimagine the behaviors of Vice-chancellors who, due to their opportunist nature, run and rule rudely and authoritatively over the universities. They not only take perks and privileges but in return, facilitate the anti-student state functionaries to take over the universities, no matter what consequences arise. A more expected outcome is the collision of the academia. Despite legal provisions, was it expected that the vice-chancellors in Sindh provinces would be at the forefront of opposing the implementation of The Sindh Students Union Act 2019, enacted on 2nd of March 2022? This reflects their anti-intellectualism and bureaucratic monopoly over the universities, which are supposed to empower the students.