**Student Unions**

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Institutions of higher learning provide leadership to contemporary societies in the process of social transformation. Students are an important part of the thought leadership provided by academic institutions. Universities are sanctuaries of idealists and dreamers. Students charged with the idea of a free, democratic, and prosperous Pakistan played an active role in politics soon after independence. This was the continuation of the political activism in support of the creation of Pakistan. Aligarh Muslim University was the breeding ground for young student leaders. Students Unions became an important vehicle for political activism of students in Pakistan. Global students’ movement against the Vietnam War that originated in American universities spread to campuses all over the world in the 1960s and 70s. This movement turned into a cultural revolution against conventional values, capitalist exploitation, and imperialist hegemony. It was a caravan of dreamers, idealists, truth seekers, and young people opposed to the commodification of society.
Quaid e Azam advised students to keep away from politics after the creation of Pakistan. According to Farooq Maudoodi, his father also advised his children to stay away from student politics. One wonders what was the thinking behind the advice of these political leaders. The answer seems to lie in the thinking that students should try to change the world through knowledge, ideas, and imagination. Their turf is the world of knowledge, dialogue, and research. In Pakistan, political parties with a limited following and weak presence in the parliament used students as a proxy for street power and turned academic institutions into hotbeds of political confrontation. As a result, student unions emerged as an important vehicle for politics of dissent and unfortunately, violence became an integral part of student politics. Engaging in violence simply means crossing the boundaries of the discourse of knowledge and entering the discourse of ignorance. This defeats the very purpose of using student unions for grooming future leaders. If we look at the history of student politics in Pakistan we see that it was not only student unions but college magazines, debates, mushairas, dramatic clubs, and sports that created an atmosphere for the holistic development of our youth. Student unions hardly paid attention to the real issues of students related to curriculum development, pedagogy, scientific research, development of the local body of knowledge, aligning learning with career development, and nurturing critical thinking. Improving the quality of education was also never on the agenda of union politics.
In the absence of any focus on substantive issues and vibrant intellectual debate, student politics turned into hollow slogan-mongering, rhetorical speech-making, and the use of violence as a form of political statement. This slowly and imperceptibly bred the tradition of vigilante justice where student organisations felt justified in being the plaintiff, witness, advocate, judge, jury, and executionist in dealing with the opposite point of view. India’s mission to the moon was led solely by scientists trained in India and our ambitious young people are drowning in the Mediterranean Sea in search of jobs through human traffickers. Union activity does not train budding politicians in leadership either. At colleges and universities, the size of the constituency is very small, and it consists of voters who are mostly equal in social status, live or interact nearby, and contesting election is not an expensive proposition. Therefore most of the elected office bearers come from the middle class. In practical politics, these student leaders are conspicuous due to their absence. Student Union politics has also not strengthened the tradition of playing by rules.
The hallmark of the Union politics has been crossing the boundaries. This is the disease that has already spread to our national institutions and has led to the decay of the state and political institutions and political and ethical norms. Restoration of student unions without defining the code of conduct and mechanism to enforce this code of conduct will not serve the student community well. Preparatory work to agree on the norms and use of student unions as intellectual platforms not as a proxy for a political party are important requisites for responsible politics. This job cannot be done by the courts. It requires active engagement of civil society and intellectual leadership. We need to start a healthy debate on the role of student unions and focus and the scope of union politics before student unions are restored. Restoring student unions without preparation will lead to a national disaster.