**The deadly sound of silence**

Kamila Hyat

Thursday, Nov 23, 2023

We need to think why is it that at university and college campuses around the world students are out on campuses and on the streets, protesting for the cause of the Palestinian people.

Like others around the world, many fear there is a risk of genocide in Gaza and that a deliberate attempt is being made to wipe Palestinians off the face of the earth. Yet in Pakistan – a country which shares its religion with Palestinians and which is the only other country apart from Israel to be founded on the grounds of religion – there appears to be nothing but silence.

Certainly in campuses there is no sign of anything resembling organized protests or action to speak up for the people of Palestine and their suffering. Even though there have been numerous accounts now of the kind of atrocities being inflicted upon them, with hospitals bombed and electricity, water supplies and other essential utilities cut off for weeks. There is no sign of a stir among students, a body which has traditionally led protests around the world since the days of the Vietnam War. Even in countries where leaders have imposed restrictions, students have been able to organize secret meetings and talks to highlight the issue and condemn Israeli action as well as the support from the Western world for them.

In the US – a country of the free, according to its own slogan – students who have come out in support of the Palestinian people have been attacked by leaders. And in some cases, trucks featuring virtual billboards with students’ names and pictures were parked inside campuses to intimidate students. Some companies were even asked not to employ the protesting students.

Yet despite these actions and the threat to their futures – with the possibility of the return of Donald Trump or the entry of others like him in US politics, already damaged by the tenure of a weak Joe Biden and Kamala Harris – these students continue their protests. In Europe, the protests have been larger and more vocal with London taking the lead, and events organized at many major universities seeking some kind of ceasefire in Palestine and an end to the torment inflicted on Palestinians.

The extent to which the mode used by the Israelis resembles those of the Nazis in the Second World War is terrifying to see and shows that history can repeat itself and that we as nations learn little from it.

The reasons for the silence in our country are worth thinking about. In the first place, people have too much on their plate to think about other places and other people. People who have been denied food and fuel because of inflation and who struggle to survive are hardly likely to rise up and launch a movement of any kind. But students, of course, traditionally remain somewhat removed from the agonies of daily life and lead such movements. Our campuses have, however, been rendered places where there is no thought and very little action. Indeed, there is also a lack of knowledge.

After all, history books used in secondary schools and up to the college level teach students little about the realities of the world they live in. Matters such as the shape of the earth where continents lie and how the world is surrounded by oceans are somewhat a mystery to an average fifth grader in government schools and low- and mid-tier private schools. For those who are able to attend elite schools, this is different.

But the elites do not bother about politics or the genocide of people which we now see taking place. The depoliticization of students which began under the late General Ziaul Haq in the 1980s is now hitting us in full view and showing just how easy it is to eliminate thinking and empathy for other people around the world. The fact that student unions were banned during this era and never brought back explains to some degree the lack of action that we see.

It is ironic that we speak up now and then at least in orchestrated actions for Kashmir, but have chosen not to do so for Palestinians. Political parties have also failed in not asking leaders to speak about what is today the world’s biggest cause and biggest issue. We should be ashamed of ourselves. And on campuses, there should be a rethinking of where we are headed.

The silencing of dissent has continued far too long. The issue of Palestine cannot be one that would open up major fault lines with the prevailing government or power quarters. But the air that we live in affects us all. This goes beyond the smog of Lahore and high pollution levels in the city. It means that we simply cannot function in any way to speak up for others. Our students are blocked into a particular way of thinking, focused only on numbers they are able to gain and how to win marks on a test. And while this is entirely justified, a broader look at life should also be a part of education if we are to build a nation of thinking, active people.

Unfortunately, we are not doing that. We are failing at every stage and every step. This begins at primary levels and goes way beyond this. People who have gathered at The Black Hole gatherings, set up by Prof Pervez Hoodbhoy have, in some cases, been turned away. Those who have been refused the right to speak include Afrasiab Khattak and possibly others. Khattak is an active member of the ANP and a highly respected human rights activist. When this kind of action is the norm in the state, it is perhaps not all that surprising that students follow the course put out before them.

We must work to change what we see before us. Universities and colleges have to be made places where people go beyond merely learning by rote and writing essays which they hope will help them secure the marks they need to move further. We need to activate people to think about others and to raise their voice as students are doing around the world. This is in many ways essential to our existence and essential to our future.

The fact is that we are failing in this at the present moment and will continue to fail unless we change the whole system. We need more information delivered to people, about precisely what the background to the war in the Middle East is and what to make of the action of the various sides. The silence of Muslim states does not help either, but that is not the main point. The main point is to develop student leaders who can speak out for both their own country and the world.

Today we have almost no such leaders. The professors who took up such causes have in many cases been driven off campuses. There must be others to take their place and bring about a kind of renewed energy in student life so that students can speak up about global injustices and also injustices in their country.

Student unions are vital to producing the leaders of the future that we all search for. The absence of such leaders is linked to the lack of student unions. And we must consider this as we live in a continued space of silence, even as a terrible outrage continues not all that far away from us.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor. She can be reached at: kamilahyat@hotmail.com