**Unchecked power in a university**

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What happens when you put a man in charge of a university, grant him virtually unchecked power over staff and faculty who in turn have unchecked power over students, vest him with signing authority for everything from checks to official leaves, quash all forms of student representation, and then hand him a loosely phrased security policy that empowers him to create a campus force that deploys surveillance cameras willy-nilly?

It creates the perfect preconditions for all manner of exploitation of 18-25-year-old students at the hands of administrators, faculty, staff, and anyone else who wishes to partake. You get blackmail, harassment, sexual exploitation, drug use, and human trafficking in all their permutations. You create the conditions that were necessary for incidents like the one at Balochistan University, Islamia University Bahawalpur (IUB), and who knows how many others.

On occasions when these matters come out in the national limelight, as they did most recently at IUB, the playbook goes something like this: the all-powerful vice-chancellor (VC), the (usually) man without whose permission a bird cannot flap its wings on campus, will clutch his pearls and proclaim his shock and ignorance of all that has transpired under his nose. Then, the public is offered a lollipop: the investigative committee which always (as far as I can remember) comprises all men most, if not all, his own subordinates.

When that does not quell the public’s outrage and it becomes clear that an external investigation can no longer be avoided, the counter-accusations start flying. Once again, the press conference held by the VC of IUB a few days ago was a textbook example. Deny the accusations entirely and demand public circulation of evidence that would identify and further traumatize victims. Claim that an investigation would bring dishonour onto victims (not the perpetrators) while contradicting the initial denial. Claim a conspiracy to defame the VC / the institution is underway. Claim that these accusations are somehow an elaborate attempt to defame institutions. Claim a conspiracy to defame the Islamic tradition of the university. Check, check, check, check, and check!

Once accusations fly from both sides and the water is muddied enough, wait for public anger to abate. What is new this time around is that the VC IUB seems to be going beyond his press conference and is attempting to run a sustained defensive public campaign. On July 27, students held a protest against blackmail and harassment outside Islamabad Press Club and the VC had the gall to sneak a puppet into the speaker list that repeated his talking points.

VCs are still reliant on accreditation and regulatory bodies and – for public universities – various ministries, departments of education, and HEC / provincial HECs for finances and authorizations. However, as I noted at the outset, within the confined world of their universities, they are the masters of their universe. Subsequently, when a long-running scandal of this magnitude gets unearthed, there can really only be two options: either the man at the top was party to it and colluded or he is completely incompetent. Yes, with great power comes great responsibility – claims of ignorance and innocence can no longer be on the menu.

What is wrong with the power structure within our universities that allows these crimes in which students are at the receiving end to recur? Only one group of stakeholders has neither power, influence, nor visibility into the decision-making in universities: students. Is it any wonder then that any time facts emerge about exploitation within universities, students are the victims? Beyond end-of-semester course survey forms that accreditation frameworks require universities to collect, students have virtually no vote, no representation, and no voice (not even observer status) at any level in any university matter.

Put aside the fact that the committees, internal or external, constituted to investigate allegations often prove to be black holes where investigations are sent to be stretched out, delayed until the public’s attention moves on to other things and dies with no tangible outcome. The constitution of these investigative committees still does not include any representation from the victim group (students) but from all quarters that are vested in not rocking the boat and perpetuating the status quo: faculty, administration, and bureaucrats – usually all men.

A few weeks ago, Minister of Defence Khawaja Asif called university VCs dacoits while speaking on the floor of the National Assembly. It took little more than a day for 22 VCs to band together and issue a public letter expressing their righteous outrage at the minister’s inartful choice of words. I would expect that a scandal in which hundreds of students were victimized would elicit at least similar if not more outrage, but all we have heard so far are crickets. Does tribal / fraternal allegiance trump principle?

Who does the typical inaction and sweeping the matter under the proverbial rug serve? Does it serve students? Does it serve the parents of young adults attending universities, particularly those from out-of-town who have to live in university hostel accommodations, and especially parents of young women who think twice as hard before sending off their daughters? It is a setback to the cause of education in communities that are already struggling for access more than those in major cities, but it does save everyone’s hides.

What is obvious is that no one is looking out for the interests of students. Even now the VC of IUB wants to explain away the episode as a politically motivated attack on himself to deny him another tenure as VC. Hundreds of students have been victimized but, in his mind, this is still all about him and should not come in the way of him being rewarded.

In the coming weeks, I will contribute another op-ed that will analyze some written materials that demonstrate what candidates for the position of VC consider their most urgent problems and priorities and the depth (or lack) of their reflections to address them.

For now, I want to note that almost none of the nearly 200 VCs that applied for the open positions at three prominent universities in the capital considered harassment and drug use pressing enough issues to warrant mentions in their proposed ‘institutional plans’ for universities they had applied for. This was even more conspicuous given that one of those universities has a well-known drug problem. Many applicants are presently VCs at campuses that are widely known to be grappling with the same problems. An applicant from the University of Balochistan, where women students also suffered at the hands of hidden cameras, did not find it worth acknowledging as an issue either.

Only three of the nearly 200 applicants acknowledged the drug epidemic as a problem. Only one recognized that there is a need for “full participation in governmental drives like plantation, drug abuse, eliminating gender discrimination and harassment”. However, even this applicant thought these were problems to be addressed by government intervention in which universities would just be passive participants. This is even stranger considering many of the applicants claimed to have served on ‘anti-drug’, ‘anti-harassment’ committees at their present institutions.

Most saw campus discipline as their top priority to be addressed by ‘controlling’ students. Two applicants brought up student unions and student representation as a nuisance that complicates their job. I do wonder though what their views on democracy are. Do they think dictators have the right idea when they discard elected representatives because they make their ‘jobs’ difficult?

What is missing is a check on the unchecked individual powers of the VC and the combined power of the administrative machinery. Student representation, which is being universally opposed tooth and nail by university administrators, is the check that can add that necessary balance. Surely, not all university administrators, staff, and faculty are predators – but enough of them are where we cannot leave young people’s well-being up to blind faith in the goodness of other people.

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