**Student unions**

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| RECENTLY, a young woman led a rally in Hyderabad demanding the restoration of student unions. It is not a new concept, yet a generation of youth has grown up without having witnessed a student welfare campaign steered bystudentunions.  The power of student unions can be gauged from the fact that French president Charles de Gaulle called for new elections due to massive student and teacher protests.  In the US, protests by students against the Vietnam War played a significant role in swaying public opinion.  In Pakistan, unfortunately, student unions have come to be associated with political violence on campuses. This was not so in the past when universities across the country used to have very active and vibrant student unions. The Muslim Students Federation, a student wing of the All India Muslim League, played an important role in the Pakistan Movement. Even after Partition, the country witnessed significant events with regard to the demonstration of students` politics of resistance.  Had the students not protested valiantly against the Ayub Khan regime, it would have been unlikely that he would have resigned.  Acknowledging their power in being able to affect national politics, Gen Ziaul Haq banned student unions. However, Jamaat-iIslami`s student wing, the Islami Jamiat-iTalaba, continued to flourish and was later linlced to violence and lethal weapons on university campuses across Pakistan.  While it is widely believed that the presence of student unions brings violence on campuses, the very fact that violence keeps on erupting in universities, despite a ban on studentunions,negates thatnotion.  Our political parties often thrive on hereditary and feudal politics. The ban on unions during prolonged periods of dictatorships has made students apolitical. It has also left representatives of the middle and the lower-middle class without an avenue to learn the nuances of politics and become a part of the political process. This vacuum is reflected in the current political setup, whereas history is replete with examples of students from middle class families entering national politics through student unions: Jahangir Badar, Liaquat Baloch and Ahsan Iqbal are a few such names.  There is an underlying fear with regard to the restoration of student unions instead of engaging in issue-based politics, unions may toe the line of some political party.  There have been cases in the recent past where students have joined militant outfits or have been lured into committing violence by party bigwigs. However, what should bekept in mind is that, while it is essential for the authorities to maintain a peaceful atmosphere on campuses, banning student unions has not yielded any results to curb violence.  Several harassment cases have also surfaced in universities, with the most significant one stemming from the University of Balochistan where hidden CCTV cameras were being used to record students` private activities. The footage was then used by members of the university administration to blackmail female students. There were widespread protests by students after the incident surfaced.  In harassment cases like these, it is often observed that there is little unity among students themselves. It stems from not having a platform to discuss and decide on the future course of action in cases where students have been wronged by the university administrations. This inability to group together, discuss and resolve their problems has made students across Pakistan vulnera-ble to excesses by university administrations, and also political players.  Pakistan has a predominantly younger nation. The youth bulge and its sizable share in the population calls for their political education and an increased awareness to ensure a better democratic future for Pakistan.The nrstandclosestinteraction oftheyouth and democracy can be within university campuses. Student organisations may help students polish their leadership skills.  In a multicultural societies like Pakis t an`s where diverse religious and ethnic groups live, the democratic principle of equality forms the basis of any progressive political movement. The representation of students from diverse backgrounds in the student organisations will help them in bridging the gaps between the `haves` and the `have-nots` while also encouraging unity across people of different ethnicities and religions. This will allow students, and maybe our future political leaders, to make pragmatic decisions instead of ones based on ethnic and religious lines. It is high time to work towards the restoration of student unions by engaging all stakeholders to work for the larger benefit of students and academic institutions. The writer is an associate professor at the NED University of Engineering and Technology. |  |