

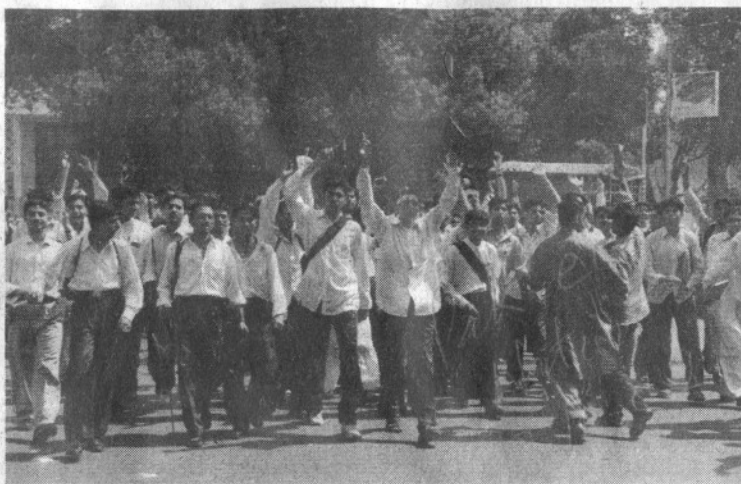
# Unrest at campuses

Education 13.10.02. Nation

M.S. QAZI says that if the government had taken teachers into confidence and consulted them at the preparatory stage of the ordinance on education, it would have earned greater acceptability of teachers and students

**T**eaching community in Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, Rawalpindi and elsewhere in the country during the past few days have been observing black days, wearing black arm bands and demonstrating against what is alleged anti-university education policies of the government. The core issue involves a set of proposals presented in the form of a draft Ordinance. It proposes a new mode of governance for public sector universities in accordance with the recommendations of the Task Force on Higher Education set up in March this year. The university teaching community fears that the Ordinance aims at commercialising university education through public-private partnership controlled by the government. Such an arrangement, will make university education expensive for middle and lower middle classes, restrict independent scholarship and make jobs of teaching community insecure. It is also alleged that these measures are being executed under dictates of IMF / WB and are totally detrimental to the society and higher education. The government negates any such apprehensions and maintains that the Ordinance aims at improving the functioning of the universities. Where lies the truth? This crucial question needs a careful and objective analysis.

Higher education after independence enjoyed the status of a prestigious vocation pursued by selected and talented youth coming from different strata of society. They could do so because university education remained available at a comparatively affordable cost. Today a large number



of officials occupying high positions in government, private organisations and seats of learning inside and outside the country can really be proud about the contribution which university education has made in their service careers and life. It would have been something of greater pride and satisfaction, if the legacy of quality university education had continued. The quality should have been strengthened with the passage of time by independent scholarship focused at socio-economic and political problems faced by the country and the society. The university scholars should have taken the lead to help the nation and society to find a direction. But this has not happened.

On the contrary universities and university education started losing their direction. Lack or shortage of funds provided by the government created environment for a quick decline. Consequently students who

earned university degrees did not possess knowledge compatible with their degrees. Lack of scholarship and research work stagnated the universities and the teaching community alike. Inefficient working of the universities resulted in delay of examinations, delay in declaration of results, corruption to award, fake degrees and so on. Consequently, universities did not measure up to the expectations of the society and ruling elite in the country. During 80s a trend was set in, particularly in the well to do segments of the society to seek higher education for their children from foreign universities. The trend persists till today.

During 80s public sector universities started losing their appeal to the stakeholders in the society, that is, corporate and commercial sector, talented students and their parents. They also faced difficulties to keep pace with growing demands of

admissions particularly in new disciplines to cope with the situation. A trend was set in to establish private institutions of repute in the country. It was a direct challenge to the public sector universities notwithstanding the fact that despite the shortage of funds and absence of a well established working university model to emulate, they kept trying to stay as seats of learning with certain degree of grace. Various measures taken by the universities and UGC to save their grace did not yield the desired results. The decade of 90s saw establishment of private universities and privatisation of public sector enterprises with a view to making them profitable. Public sector universities who till now have been working as ivory and isolated towers producing graduates and post-graduates in disciplines whose efficacy in a society faced with multiple socio-economic problems was doubtful, could have hardly escaped the rising waves of privatisation.

The other important factor is general awareness among various stakeholders i.e. members of corporate and commercial sectors, NGOs about the functioning of universities. They do not want them to work in isolation. Instead, they want them to be seats of learning quite relevant to the needs of society as propounded by them. In order to press their viewpoint they seek representation on the governing bodies that lay policy guidelines and manage the universities. This is in practice in the universities of western countries but certainly it sounds somewhat alien to the staff of our universities who consider involvement of various stakeholders

proposed by the Ordinance, a sort of intrusion into the affairs of the universities. They feel very strongly that such an intrusion will obstruct scholarly pursuit and commercialise university education.

The Ordinance separates the Senate from Syndicate. It makes them altogether independent of each other. The Senate is to comprise 15 to 20 independent distinguished members from the stakeholders, academics from outside the university and two members of the university faculty to be chosen amongst the members proposed by a Nominating Committee. The syndicate will comprise members drawn from the university. In addition, there will be University Academic Council comprising the faculty members. Faculty will be represented on the Senate, Syndicate and Academic Council by the members to be nominated by the Nominating Committee. This provision is irritating the teaching community who are accustomed to electing their nominees.

The Ordinance empowers the stakeholders and dis-empowers the teaching community. The proposed loss of power is certainly one of the factors that is contributing negatively towards acceptance of the Ordinance by the teaching community. It also proposes a 'tenure track system' for the faculty. Under the new system in direct contrast to the existing system, opportunity of lifelong job, new faculty members are to be inducted for a limited period. Subject to proving their ability to teach effectively and to do meaningful research, further extension could be given. The new system envisions higher salary structure for the newly inducted teachers and for those who would opt for it. The government also intends to increase existing allocation of funds for universities by Rs 7 billion during the next three years to make teaching cum research job at the universities attractive and to provide subsidy to talented students. It has, however, not clearly spelled out increase in the cost of education which would certainly be on a higher side. This is yet another

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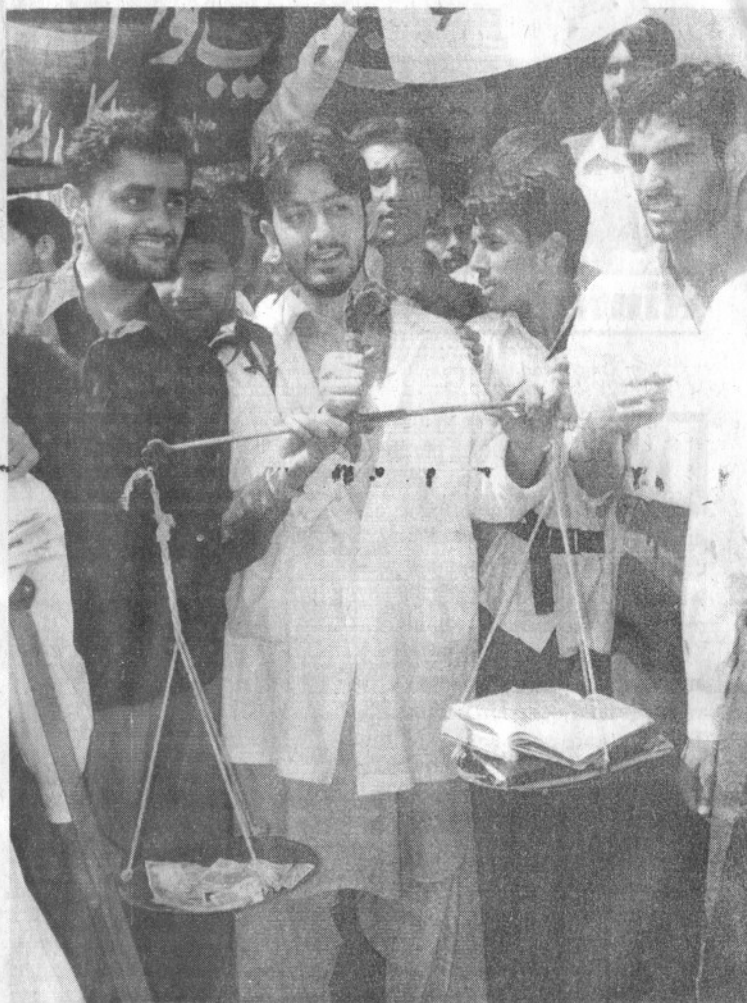
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crucial point that is worrying the student community who have joined hands with the teaching community to air their apprehensions.

The government claims that the draft Ordinance aims at efficient functioning of universities and sets pace for internal and external accountability of those vested with authority over the affairs of the universities. It would also make universities responsive to the growing needs of the society and they won't function inefficiently and in isolation. The government's viewpoint,

however, is not shared by the teachers and students. Had they been taken into confidence and consulted during the preparatory stage of the Ordinance, it would have helped to accommodate their viewpoint. It would have also earned greater acceptability. The government should hold dialogue with teachers instead of thrashing them. It will help in allaying their fears. Unless such a course of action was adopted the unrest at the campuses could gain momentum which is least desirable at this stage and puts at stake the very purpose of the Ordinance. ■