**The case for student unions**

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The Google /Oxford Languages dictionary definition of the adjective ‘liberal’ is: “willing to respect or accept behavior or opinions different from one’s own; open to new ideas”, and “relating to or denoting a political and social philosophy that promotes individual rights, civil liberties, democracy, and free enterprise.”

However, ask many in our country to define the word for you, and you will get an explanation better captured by words like ‘immoral’, ‘elitist’, ‘unpatriotic’, ‘Westernized’, and worse. The same is true of many other words – ‘feminism’ is one that comes to mind immediately. This lack of understanding of nuances of words might be explained by a general lack of higher literacy and/or the fact that they are of a foreign language and there are often no precise and widely understood Urdu translations for them.

Another term that has become a bit of a catch-all and is used rather loosely these days is ‘student unions’. I will not get into the history of student politics on university campuses, because there are other observers more informed than I who have covered that aspect. Like other words, this single term is used in such a broad sense that people using it may often mean very different things. Recent events at Quaid-e-Azam University (QAU) have brought this issue back into the limelight but for that debate to be useful, some disambiguation is sorely needed.

A student union is an organization that represents and advocates for the collective interests of students on campus. They may also engage in activities such as organizing events, providing services and resources, and lobbying the university administration or government on behalf of all students. The focus of student politics is on advocating for political ideologies and goals, and it often involves organizing protests, rallies, and other forms of political activism but are independent of mainstream political parties.

Less common, and of less relevance in the Pakistani context, are student labor unions which are organizations that represent and advocate for the rights and interests of student workers, such as those who work part-time jobs on campus. They differ from student unions that represent and advocate for the rights and interests of all students on campus, including both those who work and those who do not.

Then there are student representatives, individual students who are elected or appointed to represent their peers on specific issues or in specific forums in universities. For example, students may be elected as representatives to a faculty council or a university syndicate, where they can voice the concerns and opinions of their fellow students on matters such as curriculum, policies, and budgets. Student representatives serve as a vital channel for the voice and feedback of the student community up to the highest levels of decision-making.

Student representatives may be elected or appointed students who act as liaison between students and the university administration. Their role is to advocate for the interests and needs of students. They work to ensure that the concerns and opinions of students are taken into account in decision-making processes. Student representation in forums like the syndicate is usually very few in numbers, not enough to significantly impact a decision, but it accomplishes two important things: 1) It gives the student community a voice; and 2) it brings transparency to deliberations and decision-making processes that otherwise remain opaque and moderates any animus towards the student community that may be there.

As a matter of fact, many academic quality assurance frameworks increasingly require that there be student feedback mechanisms that go beyond forcing students to fill out multiple-choice survey forms as a formality at the end of every semester.

While student representatives work within the framework of the university, student politics exist within the broader political landscape of a country (or region). Additionally, while student representatives are typically focused on issues specific to their university, student politics can encompass a wide range of political issues beyond the university context. In essence, student unions are larger organizations that represent the student body as a whole, while student representatives are individual students who serve as a voice for their peers in specific contexts.

In addition to student unions, student labour unions, and student representatives, universities can have college political organizations associated with mainstream political parties. In the United States, those are often the College Republicans and College Democrats of America, representing the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively. These often have the status of student clubs.

In local parlance, the term ‘student unions’ has become a catch-all for student unions, student labour unions, student representatives, and college political parties/clubs, all rolled into one. Anyone who went to a public university in Pakistan in the 80s and 90s probably got to witness firsthand student organizations at the height of their power. Many had access to weapons and were extensions of mainstream political parties. These groups would often pick up rivals to be intimidated, beaten, tortured, and occasionally even killed. The most accurate descriptions that come to my mind are gangs or thugs.

Lifting the current blanket ban on all manner of student organizations will not be permission for outside political parties to bring their gang warfare on campus. The ongoing public debate about student unions rarely distinguishes between these various types of student organizations but at the same time, I cannot see a university be a university if all forms of student expression are muzzled.

Many vice-chancellors (VCs) describe some universities as “fragile”, due to issues arising from violent clashes between ethno-religio-political student groups that exist despite the bans on student unions. These violent outbursts bring regular academic activities to a standstill. Despite bans on unions, VCs of all big public campuses are now spending more time on handling disciplinary and political issues. Therefore, it is worth questioning what the ban has actually achieved.

As a first step towards giving students a voice, universities ought to create positions for student representatives. The purpose and scope of the responsibilities of student representatives is well defined. Of all forms of student expression on campuses, this is the least likely to cause violence. It can also serve as a direct means of reducing friction between academic staff and management on one side and the student community on the other. Nevertheless, many VCs I spoke with oppose even this because of weak governance overall and the lack of trust between administration and the student body.

This ought to be followed by the (re)introduction of student unions of the kind described above. A lot of the violence that student political organizations have historically brought to campuses is a result of the patronage that mostly right-wing organizations have received from influential quarters within and without universities. Student unions are principally legitimate representatives of the students that serve as a forum for expression, an escape valve (and could be again), if university administrations stopped weaponizing them for their own agendas and stopped tipping the scales in favor of one group over another. Something very similar could be said about our national politics.

Lifting the indiscriminate ban on ‘student unions’ (which does not differentiate between student representatives, student unions and armed gangs of student wings of political parties) at Pakistani universities is a necessary step towards ensuring that students have a voice in the decision-making processes that affect their education and future. By allowing student representatives and student unions to exist, universities can empower students to become active and engaged citizens who are capable of participating in a democratic society. This will not only help create a more inclusive and democratic campus environment, but will also serve as a counter force to the power currently held by other ‘outlawed’ councils and bodies driven by other agendas.

Of course, there are concerns about the potential for violence and disruption – students do not have a licence to carry arms and inflict violence – but these can be addressed through proper regulation and oversight. It is time for universities and the government to recognize that the benefits of lifting the ban (while maintaining a zero-tolerance policy on violence) far outweigh the risks, and to take concrete steps towards making student unions a reality once again.

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