

Apolitical or Depoliticised? Pakistan's Youth and Politics

A Historical Analysis of Youth Participation in Pakistan Politics



A Jinnah Institute
Research Report

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About Jinnah Institute

Jinnah Institute (JI) is a non-profit public policy organisation based in Pakistan. It functions as a think tank, advocacy group and public outreach organisation independent of the government. JI seeks to promote knowledge-based policy making for strengthening democratic institutions and to build public stakes in human and national security discourse. It remains committed to investing in policies that promote fundamental rights, tolerance and pluralism.

Jinnah Institute's Open Democracy Initiative

The lack of sustained democracy in Pakistan has diminished public input in governance. It has also led to a breakdown of institutions, non-responsive governance, and public services that remain dedicated to elite alignments. As such, there is a mistrust of democracy, which has created serious gaps for public participation in governance and isolated state structures even further.

Jinnah Institute's Open Democracy Initiative hopes to bridge this gap and reverse this trend by employing quality research and analytics to the study of public policy problems, creating awareness for and facilitating the implementation of informed recommendations. This programme focuses on democratic ideals such as the right to information, transparency in public contracts, the right to religious freedom, social entitlements and the provision of justice. This programme also builds awareness and capacity for better governance in Pakistan's institutions, and advocates for expanding diminished state writ in areas where parallel, colonial structures restrict access to fundamental entitlements, such as universal suffrage and equal citizenship rights.

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Abstract

Pakistan has a long history of student politics and students have played a major role in shaping the directions taken by the state and the government of Pakistan. However, the sustained involvement of external forces – both state institutions and political parties – has significantly altered student politics, leading to a situation where youth political involvement is marginalised and political engagement is viewed through potential for patronage. The political parties, struggling to engage with the youth, have yet to reform their internal structures and outreach programmes. With 63 per cent of the country's population under the age of 25, Pakistan is experiencing a profound demographic change with wide-ranging socio-political effects. Failure to improve the quality of political engagement with students and the youth in general could have a significant impact on democracy.

Executive Summary

With almost two-thirds of its population currently under the age of 25, Pakistan – already one of the world's most populous countries – is facing a profound demographic change. The consequences of having a majority of young people in a country can be both transformative and disastrous. A young population, provided resources such as health and education, can provide the drive and energy needed to transform living standards within a generation. Bereft of opportunity and reward, a country led by the youth can descend into chaos.

Given the huge turnout in the May 2013 general election and increased political participation of young Pakistanis, the role and potential of the youth promises to be more influential than ever before. This sense of opportunity seems to be resonating with the political parties as well. Almost every party had promised jobs and educational opportunities in the sections of their manifestos dedicated to the youth. Surveys show that most young Pakistanis list jobs, education and access to resources as their top priorities.

However, the current situation obscures the historical reality of the youth's participation in Pakistani politics. Opinion polls show that most young people hold political institutions in an unfavourable light and are generally apathetic towards political participation. However, this state of affairs is not the historical norm. It is a product of socio-political changes that have culminated in the current impasse.

The history of Pakistani politics reveals a long, influential and revolutionary role of student politics in national affairs. Students have often served as ideological vanguards for larger political movements, as well as powerful actors in their own right within the political landscape.

Although many historical accounts describe these movements as battles between Left-Leaning and Religious-Right groups, it is fair to say that as a whole, student unions were powerful shapers, as well as opponents of the state. These students were living in a newly created state where representative institutions were weak or non-existent, and the politics of student unions allowed them to have a powerful voice. Perhaps it was the strength of that voice which led to political parties and the state unwittingly colluding to ensure that this voice was silenced.

This history of dissent by student unions was present in pre-partition politics, and continued after independence. The first government to bear the brunt of student activism was Ayub Khan's

regime, which was dogged by both leftist and rightist student bodies throughout the 50s and 60s. The eventual downfall of this government was precipitated by mass unrest across the country, often led by students.

Similarly, students from the University of Dhaka were at the forefront of Bengali liberation politics in 1970 and students from leftist groups played a central role in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rise.

Bhutto, however, chose to sideline the increasingly fractured and ideologically resolute leftist student bodies during his era. Instead, his regime faced protests led by right-wing student bodies, which were instrumental in the downfall of his government.

Perhaps wary of a repeat, General Zia ul Haq banned student unions altogether in 1984, after a coalition of leftist student unions swept university elections. The ban was repealed in 1988, but by this time campus politics had become weaponised and violent, with a large number of student leaders killed both by the state as well as rivals. In 1992, the Supreme Court passed an order banning university students from political activities. By the time the government lifted the ban on student unions in 2008, student politics had largely withered away from most campuses in Pakistan.

In the interests of both democracy and the political system, it is imperative then that Pakistan's young – the country's current majority – are provided with a greater voice and more substantive involvement in the political system.

The evolution of student politics was largely influenced by two factors – oppression by the state, and co-option by political parties. Both contributed to the increasing violence of student politics, as well as the decreasing impact of student movements on national politics at large.

Currently, surveys of party youth wing members display discontentment with the nepotism prevalent in the system, as well as the various obstacles put in place by older party members limiting the rise of new faces. Moreover, almost none of the parties have any institutional mechanisms in place for providing the youth with political representation, with only one party providing tickets to young candidates, and only two offering any legislative positions for the youth.

While a survey by the British Council showed less than 30 per cent support for democracy among young Pakistanis, the same survey showed that over 60 per cent intended to vote in the May 2013 elections. A CCE survey showed that over 80 per cent of young Pakistanis felt that greater youth involvement in democracy would be beneficial. This suggests that while young people have low enthusiasm for current political options, they are eager for greater participation and representation in the political process.

In this light, the promises made by the parties for providing jobs and education represent a considerable risk. This is because in the absence of mechanisms facilitating greater participation and representation for younger people, failure to provide the patronage promised could have a much larger backlash. In contrast, ensuring greater representation in the political process would mean that parties would not be held ransom to fulfil grandiose promises that may prove unrealistic given the scarcity of resources.

The take-away from this historical perspective is that the evolution of student politics was largely influenced by two factors – oppression by the state, and co-option by political parties. Both factors played crucial roles in the increasing violence of student politics, as well as the decreasing impact student movements had on national politics at large.

Introduction

Pakistan currently stands at a momentous juncture, having just held a general election which marked the first ever democratic transition in the country's history. This sense of occasion is matched, if not surpassed, by the country's demographics, which are also at a unique precipice.

In the next twenty years, the working age population of the country is expected to double, and already over 63 per cent of the population is under the age of 25.¹ The country is experiencing what is called a 'youth bulge'.

The situation can lead to strikingly differing outcomes, depending on how it is handled. A country with a large number of young people can increase living standards within a generation, provided there is access to education and employment. However, a young populace starved of opportunities can be volatile and prone to anarchy.²

According to the figures, Pakistan would need to provide approximately 36 million jobs in the next decade to absorb this newly emerging workforce. Given that around 25 million school-going children do not have access to education, the scale of this challenge is considerable.³

A cursory glance at the manifestos released by most political parties in the run-up to the 2013 election shows that all of them share promises of education and employment for the "youth". Similarly, opinion polls conducted among young people⁴ as well as students involved in political parties show that education, employment and inflation are among the foremost concerns; and ones that the youth expects political parties to address. This would suggest that parties are tailoring their agendas to the demands of the youth.⁵

However, a historical analysis of youth participation in Pakistani politics would suggest otherwise. The first marker would be the semantics themselves, as the focus on "youth" instead of "student" political participation is the product of a series of historical events. Almost all of the current literature on the role of young people in Pakistani politics, from independence in 1947 until the end of the 20th century, would likely focus on student politics. While this classification ignores the large numbers of youth (particularly in the rural areas) who did not have access to education, it was used because of the hugely influential role of student politics. In the words of one author, the journey during these years was one which began with "peaceful dissent, but became violent when constrained by the government—or worse—made illegal."⁶

Student politics was extremely dynamic and volatile. This was partly because of the evolving nature of politics in a newly created state. But another crucial factor was the absence, or weakness, of institutional representation for the populace. Pakistan's first indirect election occurred almost a decade after the formation of the country. The first direct elections happened almost quarter of a century after independence. In the absence of avenues where they could be heard, the student unions offered young people an influential stake in national politics.

By the 21st century however, the direct involvement of students in local and national politics was greatly reduced, as student politics had both become extremely violent and illegal. This meant that the educated young eventually adopted what had been the general attitude of the youth towards politics in Pakistan – a sense of apathy, displayed by the fact that historically, individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 have had the lowest voter turnout historically.

In the past few years, the increasing demographic advantage of the youth, as well as their potential as a political force, has meant that there has been a gradual acknowledgment of their value. The imagination of the media and the attention of the political class, has been particularly piqued during two bouts of youth participation in national level politics. Firstly during the Lawyers Movement, and more decisively, in campaigning for Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). There has been much talk and focus since then on the energy and vigour displayed by young people at these events, particularly as many of them hailed from the traditionally apathetic upper classes.

However, the policies and opportunities currently being offered by the political parties display a lack of imagination and ideas. The pledges made in various party manifestos reflect a sense of responding to opinions, rather than a sense of a cohesive, long term set of policies. Similarly, while several high profile initiatives aimed at the youth have been introduced – including the launch of social media campaigns by several parties and the distribution of free laptops to students by the Punjab government – such efforts have avoided tackling systemic and institutional problems.

The hazards of failing to integrate the youth into the political process are manifold. But in order to understand why the political class has offered such limited solutions and policies towards them, as well as why student politics died out, it is necessary to look at the historical interaction between young people and politics in Pakistan.

A History of Youth Politics in Pakistan

As mentioned previously, the history of young people in Pakistani politics is largely a history of student politics. However, there is little to no discussion on the politics of students anymore, as the focus is now on the 'youth'. This change in terms is not just about semantics, but rather a reflection of how student politics were forcibly defanged over the decades in order to deliver the current status quo.

A review of the history also reinforces just how dynamic and volatile student politics were in Pakistan. Its democratic nature and deep ideological divides were also intriguing counterpoints to the repressive and authoritarian nature of the Pakistani state and governments. As mentioned previously, a large reason for this dynamism can be attributed to the fact that there were very weak institutions for representation in the country. For example, during the Ayub regime, when student politics first made a mark on national affairs, there were indirect elections. Student unions provided the youth with a chance to have a voice and it was one they exercised to devastating effect – both on the Left and the Right. However, the volatility – and later violence – was also because of the influence of the state and political parties. The former attempted to subdue student politics at every turn, while the latter repeatedly used them as proxies, compromising their independence and integrity.

Table 1 | Prominent Student Unions in Pakistan⁷

| Name of Student Union | Ideology | Party Affiliation | Year Formed |
|--|----------|-----------------------------|-------------|
| Muslim Students' Federation | Populist | Pakistan Muslim League | 1937 |
| Jamiat-e-Tulaba | Islamist | Jamaat-e-Islami | 1947 |
| Democratic Students' Federation | Leftist | Communist Party of Pakistan | 1950 |
| National Students' Federation | Leftist | (Various left wing parties) | 1953 |
| Baloch Students' Organisation | Ethnic | Balochistan National Party | 1967 |
| Pakhtun Students' Federation | Ethnic | Awami National Party | 1967 |
| Anjuman-e-Tulaba-e-Islam | Islamist | Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Pakistan | 1969 |
| Imamia Students Organisation | Islamist | Tehreek-e-Jafria Pakistan | 1972 |
| People's Students Federation | Leftist | Pakistan People's Party | 1973 |
| All Pakistan Muttahida Students Organisation | Ethnic | Muttahida Qaumi Movement | 1978 |
| Insaaf Students' Federation | Populist | Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf | 2007 |

The Early Years

Student politics had been vibrant in this part of the world even prior to independence, take the Muslim Students' Federation (MSF) which became an important ally for the Muslim League in its efforts towards the creation of Pakistan. Furthermore, post-independence, the Communist Party of Pakistan-affiliated Democratic Students' Federation (DSF) and the Jamaat-e-Islami-affiliated Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba (IJT or commonly referred to as Jamiat) also came into being.⁸

Within a few years the fortunes of the MSF mirrored those of its mother party, the Muslim League, which had stuttered after 1947 and was increasingly fractured. The rise of the DSF across campuses worried the state and in a move that would serve as a dangerous precedent, it decided to check the DSF by setting up a state-sponsored student union called the National Students' Federation (NSF). The move backfired as the DSF continued to dominate campus politics, and so in 1954, the ruling Muslim League went one step further by banning both the DSF and its mother party, the Communist Party of Pakistan.⁹ But this ploy also failed, as members of the banned DSF took over the NSF – which now became the main vehicle for leftist student politics.

Meanwhile, the right wing Jamiat had also seen a radical change in the 1950s. In 1954, the Jamaat-e-Islami was involved in instigating the anti-Ahmadi riots, and the party came in direct confrontation with the state. As a consequence, its student wing “ceased to view its task as the training of future leaders of Pakistan and instead saw itself as a 'soldiers' brigade', fighting for the cause of Islam against its enemies (secularists and leftists) inside and outside the government.”¹⁰

In 1958, when General Ayub Khan took over power in a military coup, student politics became further radicalised. In most readings of the history of that time, the subsequent twenty or so years of student politics are dominated by a narrative of “a bitter struggle [in campus politics] between the left-leaning National Student Federation and the Islamist Islami Jamiat-e-Tuleba.”¹¹ However what is equally, if not more, significant was that during this time student unions as a whole – regardless of their ideological orientation – became a powerful voice of critique and opposition against the state. The next three governments would all count student unions from either side of the ideological divide as being among the forces that led to their fall while the fourth government would go on to ban student unions altogether.

Ayub's era saw several notable confrontations, including a left-led movement against the West Pakistan University Ordinance of 1962¹² various agitations against educational initiatives by Jamiat from 1962-1967, and a combined left-right outrage at the Tashkent declaration – the declaration had ended the 1965 war with India, where Ayub allegedly lost on the bargaining table what had been won on the battleground.

From Ayub to Bhutto

By 1968, a coalition of trade and labour unions, in conjunction with the increasingly powerful student unions, were at the forefront of the movement which forced Ayub to step down. The movement today is increasingly recounted as a victory for the Left in what is now Pakistan, although the subsequent results of student politics would point to a more complex reality.

The 1970 general elections saw the absolute domination of the left-leaning Awami League in East Pakistan and a comprehensive win for the left-leaning PPP in West Pakistan, while the Jamaat-e-Islami was routed. Yet this wave of leftist uprising was not mirrored in campus elections. The NSF was deeply divided along ideological fault lines, and “[its] fracturing ... mimic[ked] the panoply of the Western Left ... allowing Islamists to dominate student union elections throughout the mid-

1970s,¹³ with wins for the Jamiat at the University of Karachi in 1969 and, then, during the next four years (1970–1974), both at the University of Karachi and at Punjab University in Lahore.¹⁴ The effect of these wins was profound in terms of the political development of the Jamaat-e-Islami, as the mother party now looked to its student wing for inspiration: “Jami'at's victories breathed new life and hope into the dejected Jama'at-i-Islami, whose earlier anguish over the student organisation's politicisation now gave way to admiration and envy.”¹⁵

It would be remiss to continue a discussion on student politics of this era and not mention the role of students in the Bangladesh movement, particularly those belonging to Dhaka University, which was a hotbed of the independence movement in East Pakistan. The brutality with which pro-Pakistan militias and the Pakistani army executed professors and student leaders at Dhaka University reflected the scale of their influence.¹⁶

Following partition in 1971 and the start of Pakistan's first civilian, democratically elected government, it would have been expected to see the status of student politics to continue to rise. After all, the new Premier Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had been very popular among the students, and had used their energy to launch the movement that led to his arrival in power. But perhaps chastened by the power of student unions both in the separation of East Pakistan as well as the fall of the military dictatorship that preceded it, Bhutto began to distance himself from his erstwhile supporters – the very forces he had been using for his political rise.

The leftist student unions were aghast at Bhutto's political manoeuvres, and “ha[d] been angered by the PPP government's apparent divergence from its oft-stated socialist goals. Bhutto [had] lost their respect and the [students appeared] to be searching for a movement and a leader that [did] not give the appearance of crass opportunism.”¹⁷ In response to the growing disillusionment, Bhutto began to cull several ideologues from within the NSF itself, who had been calling him out on his alleged betrayals.¹⁸

Over at the right, the Jamaat began to use the Jamiat for its own purposes as well. In the aftermath of its electoral rout, the Jamaat was “unable to function as a mass-based party against the popular PPP, [so it] increasingly pushed Jami'at into the political limelight. Jami'at thus became the mainstay of anti-PPP agitational campaigns ... and found national recognition as a de facto political party and a new measure of autonomy from Jama'at-i-Islami.”¹⁹ However, this new found power was a double-edged sword, as the Jamiat was now reduced to an instrument of political activity for the Jamaat-e-Islami itself.

The Beginning of the End

In 1977, the Jamiat was one of the principal forces that led to the dismissal of Bhutto's government,²⁰ and it was soon collaborating with the Zia-ul-Haq regime in cracking down on leftist student organisations on campuses across the country. It was around this time that the Jamiat also introduced their 'Thunder Squad', a campus moral-police that doubled as the organisation's militant wing in the increasingly violent student clashes in universities across Pakistan. The Jamaat-e-Islami was left increasingly powerless to rein them in, largely because they had been so dependent on the Jamiat's political clout for almost a decade.²¹

It was around this time that the passionate encounters between rival forces on campus started to become increasingly violent. The influx of weapons into Pakistani campuses during this era is often blamed on the Afghan war and the resulting proliferation of weapons, but a policy of using students as proxies for national-level political battles also played an instrumental part in the descent into violence. The results were horrific, with more than 80 student leaders killed between 1982 and 1988.²²

Apart from the violent clashes, the politics on student campuses once again served as a portent of what the future would hold for national politics. Despite enjoying state patronage, it was the Jamiat's turn to lose electorally, as an alliance of leftist student unions known as the United Students Movement (comprising remnants of the NSF merged with the PPP-affiliated People's Students Federation or PSF, as well the secular-ethnic APMSO, comprised of many former Jamiat and NSF members) won major student elections in 1983. Zia, who was very cognisant of the threat of student opposition towards the governments that had preceded his, decided to ban student unions altogether a year later.²³

The ban was never properly implemented – at least according to its critics – as the Jamiat continued to be allowed a presence on major campuses. This meant that despite the ban on student politics, political violence did not leave university campuses.

A Brief Return

In 1988, after the death of Zia and the election of Bhutto's daughter Benazir to the post of the Prime Minister, the ban on student unions was reversed. Yet almost immediately, the USM's erstwhile partners – the PSF and the APMSO – had violent clashes at the University of Karachi, which were so intense that the paramilitary Rangers were called in to police the campus. Once again, student politics prefigured the national arena, as the killing of APMSO members by the Rangers led the MQM – the APMSO's parent party – to withdraw its support for the PPP government in the centre, which was later dismissed on charges of corruption.²⁴

In 1990, the election of Zia's protégé Nawaz Sharif and his right-wing alliance the IJI repeated the same cycle on the right-wing. Clashes broke out in Lahore's University of the Punjab between the Jamiat and the MSF, (the Muslim Students Federation, recreated as the student wing of Nawaz's resuscitated Pakistan Muslim League) after the former felt that the Prime Minister's Islamisation drive had not gone far enough. Once again, the student politics had national implications, as it was now the Jamaat-e-Islami's turn to withdraw its support for the central government, which was dismissed soon after.²⁵

The continuing cycle of violence on campuses had now reached alarming levels, and thus in 1992 the Supreme Court took matters in its own hands. It passed an interim order which stated that “at the time of admission to an educational institution, the student and his parents / guardian shall give an undertaking that the student shall not “indulge in politics”; failing which, he shall not be allowed admission. And if, after the admission, he violates such undertaking i.e. “indulges in politics”, he shall be expelled from the institution without any further notice.”²⁶

This ruling perhaps significantly marked the end of an entire political paradigm. It was not successful in ending violence on campuses – the Rangers continue to be stationed at the University of Karachi and other large campuses nearly three decades after they first arrived. Tales of torture cells, teacher intimidation and violent protests continue to emanate from Pakistani universities.²⁷

Similarly, the ruling did not end party affiliation with student politics, as the student wings of all main parties continued to exist.

Politics of Disengagement

What it did end was the power of student politics in influencing the politics of the country at large. Student politics had played decisive roles in the formation of the country, as well as the rise and fall of its subsequent governments. However, the 1990s and years beyond saw the end of campus activism prefiguring national level politics.

One seeming exception seemed to occur in 2007, when the dismissal of the Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry by then President (and Army chief) Pervez Musharraf led to student protests at several Pakistani campuses. Yet paradoxically, these universities – such as LUMS, BNU and FAST – were filled with students that fulfilled the stated criteria of Musharraf's political leanings, i.e. wealthy, modern Pakistanis being taught at elite, westernised universities. In contrast, none of the public-sector universities traditionally associated with political unrest were directly involved in the anti-Musharraf uprisings. Perhaps tellingly, the ouster of Musharraf did not lead to any political developments or student unions at any of the universities that had been involved in that process.

The 2007 uprisings were covered quite enthusiastically in western publications, spawning op-eds and articles in newspapers like the Washington Post.²⁸ They were also characterised as representing a new era in student politics, where “contemporary students have ceased to solely depend upon holistic and totalitarian ideologies to motivate their activism; rather a new tendency for issue-based action has emerged.”²⁹

The real effect of this issue-based activism however, was more visible on the right, rather than the centre-left uprisings in 2007. The rise of Islamist, private-sector proselytising groups such as the Hizbul-Tahrir and other post-nationalist Islamist groups across university campuses has meant that many cultural wars – such as riots over alleged insults to the Prophet (PBUH) – have seen the involvement of young people in political action. But the transnational appeal of such groups means that they have little desire in shaping national politics, apart from using them as a means to foster an international 'ummah' of Muslims.³⁰

In contrast, traditional political parties continue to have student wings that are increasingly distant from their own mechanisms.³¹ In 2008, the newly elected PPP government once again overturned the ban on student unions. Yet in the subsequent five years, no political leadership from the students has emerged, or perhaps accommodated, at the national level. The analysis of young Pakistanis and their politics has had no option then but to shift its focus away from 'students' and on towards the 'youth'.

Youth Perceptions and Party Policies

Despite the storied history of students and the youth in national-level politics, the current situation indicates that apathy has been entrenched for a very long time. A 2007 survey by the Centre for Civic Education of 1 130 participants between the ages of 18-30 showed that “the majority of the participants (82 per cent) admitted to not taking an active part in politics.”³² Similarly, a survey by the British Council in 2013 showed that only 14 per cent of the youth viewed the government and national assembly in a favourable light, and only 11 per cent felt the same way about political parties. Similarly, only 29 per cent supported democracy, compared to 32 per cent support for military rule and 38 per cent for Shariah.³³

The popular explanation for this data is that the youth have become apolitical and that student politics had been abandoned due to increasing levels of political violence. The end of the 1980s saw student politics suffer a terminal blow to its perception, as the continuous spate of violence meant that student politics “[were] blamed for diluting [the] primary mandate of campuses – the quality [of] education.”³⁴ The subsequent decade also saw a shift in educational environments, with a rise of private universities having a focus on business and IT related degrees. Such corporate environments are seen to have further driven the youth away from overarching ideologies and into the embrace of ‘issue-based activism’.³⁵

How Apolitical Are They?

But such a view oversimplifies the situation. To begin with, despite their low levels of participation the youth are quite aware of their political potential. The 2007 CCE survey also found that “84 per cent believe that increased youth participation, within a democratic environment, could result in ‘positive political change.’”³⁶ Similarly, while the British Council survey showed that less than 30 per cent of the youth supported democracy, 60 per cent intended to vote in 2013, with another 10 per cent admitting that they could be persuaded to vote on election day itself. This shows that the responses towards democracy represent disillusionment with the current situation rather than a lack of faith in the democratic process itself. The consequences of this insight, coupled with the reality of the demographic shift, are tremendous and could perhaps lead to a decisive swing effect on the final count. According to a report by the Herald, “the latest electoral lists contain 83 million registered voters, of which 47 per cent are under 35 years of age, coming to about 40 million people. Voters falling in the 18-25 age bracket alone are a little more than 16 million — about five million more than the number of votes polled by the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in the 2008 elections.”³⁷

Meddling From Beyond the Campus

More importantly, it would be historical to claim that youth apathy is the fault of the youth itself. Just like the history of violence on campuses cannot ignore the debilitating effects of interference by the state as well as political parties, causes for youth disengagement from politics cannot ignore the role played by political institutions.

On one hand, the state and the establishment have repeatedly sought to stave off the power of student politics by banning their institutions and supporting ideological opponents of prevailing powers.³⁸ But on the other hand, political parties have also played a role in ignoring the youth.

For example, a survey of members of student wings in universities in Islamabad by the Jinnah Institute³⁹ showed that most members complained of the barriers put in place of their political development. As per the survey's findings, "political patronage is readily provided to those who have familial association, which facilitate entrance into the political arena." Similarly, the authors found that "the relationship between the youth wing and its mother party was in several cases seen as tense. This tension revolves around youth wings' predilection for change or reform, while older senior party members may be more inclined to the preservation of the status quo."⁴⁰

To place these findings into perspective, one can take the example of an entire generation of contemporary politicians who arose on the back of student activism. This list includes, but is not limited to, the people in the table below.

Table 2 | Prominent Pakistani Politicians Who Came Into Power Via Student Politics

| Name | Party | Current Position | Student Affiliation |
|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Javed Hashmi | PTI | President PTI | President of Punjab University Students' Union |
| Liaquat Baloch | Jamaat-e-Islami | Secretary General, Jel | President of Punjab University Students' Union |
| Jahangir Badar | PPP | Secretary General, PPP | President of the Hailey College of Commerce |
| Ahsan Iqbal | PML-N | Information Seceratory, PML-N | President of the Engineering University Students Union |
| Altaf Hussain | MQM | Quaid, MQM | Founder of All Pakistan Muttahida Students' Organisation |

(Mis)representing The Youth

Each of the names on the list above began their student careers in the 1970s; the final decade where student politics was still relatively unfettered. Yet this same generation of student-activists-turned politicians, as well as their contemporaries, seem to have snuffed out any hopes of their examples being emulated. The most obvious way of gauging this attitude is by taking a look at the leadership of the youth wings belonging to various political parties.

The head of the ruling PPP's youth wing is Faryal Talpur, the sister of President Asif Ali Zardari and a person with little history of political participation prior to her brother's ascension to power. Similarly, the recent President of the PML-N's youth wing was the middle-aged Captain Safdar, the son-in-law of party head Nawaz Sharif. There are no democratic means for young people to rise to the top of these parties, both of which are already dominated by dynastic rule.

In contrast, both the MQM and the Jamaat-e-Islami, well known for their democratic organisation and reliance on student leadership, continue to elect students as heads of their student unions. Yet the route to top leadership remains elusive, as the old guard in both parties continues to hold on to power.

Finally, the PTI has often been seen by many as the new face of youth engagement in Pakistani politics. Large flocks of young people continue to attend the party's rallies in a way not seen for other parties. The party itself has proclaimed itself as a force of change, and has often made promises to the young. It has also managed to pull off its stated promise of bringing fresher and younger faces to nominations. The election list of 800 nominees submitted by the party included 35 per cent who were under the age of 40. Yet some critics have claimed that many of these 'newer faces' are brokers within the existing political system, and during the run-up to the 2013 elections, the party's youth wings in KPK and Lahore both expressed dissatisfaction at being ignored from seat allocations.⁴¹⁴²⁴³

Barren Agendas

This disengagement of the political parties from the youth is also reflected in their agenda towards the young as articulated in their election manifestos. There is overwhelming support for providing educational and/or employment opportunities, yet almost no mention of routes to political participation.

There are only three parties whose manifestos reflect the desire to build institutions for student politics. These are the PML-Q, the PTI and the PPP, both of which have promised setting up youth parliaments – essentially forums where young people would get an 'internship' like experience of governance, rather than actually holding political power. The PPP's intentions can be gauged by the current state-run youth parliament, which selects rather than elects interested participants. In its 2008 manifesto, the PPP has also promised youth councils at provincial and national level, which would be statutory bodies.

Both the PTI and the PML-N are the only parties to have promised seat allocation for the youth in their programmes. The PML-N has promised special seats for the youth in Union Councils and District Council seats, in order to "prepare them for a bigger role in National and Provincial Assemblies."⁴⁴ Yet the PML-N does not have any particular programmes for youth outreach, implying that those young people allocated seats would probably be recipients of the patronage mentioned in the Jinnah Institute survey.⁴⁵

The PTI went further; its 2012 Youth Policy promised 25 per cent of all parliamentary tickets – at national and provincial level – to the "talented and vibrant youth of Pakistan."⁴⁶ The eventual list included a lot of people who were definitely younger and newer, but would struggle to be classified as 'youth'. The PTI's youth policy sets it apart from all the rest in that it is an expansive plan with a range of proposals. It promises that each of its elected officials would train two young activists for two years at a time, and has also pledged to setting up 'youth council' seats at union and village council level. Furthermore, it has promised to set up a state-funded "Youth Foundation" with the ambiguous ambit of "acting as a pillar of national unity" as well as initiating a database of youth volunteers known as the "Jawan Markaz" which would serve as the focal point for youth-initiatives at the local and district level.⁴⁷ Yet while the proposals are not shy on details, their essential aim is

largely the sort of employment and education initiatives offered by the rest of the parties. Moreover, the process of handing out party tickets to younger nominees is still not an ideal institutional pathway for youth involvement in politics. Student bodies and unions would need to be nationally active in order to ensure that the PTI's youth drive does not fall prey to the pitfalls that have ensnared other parties.

The reading from the rest of the parties is far more disheartening. The MQM's section on the youth in its 2013 manifesto deals largely with providing vocational centres, ensuring admission in educational institutions and setting up sports facilities. The ANP's manifesto also focuses on employment and sporting opportunities, as well as promising to develop a cadre of the youth responsible for disaster management. The Jamaat-e-Islami's agenda is similar, promising meritocracy in admissions and provision of self-employment opportunities. The PML-N also promises greater employment and skill development programme, along with an anti-drug drive. The PPP also promises national scholarships and internships and voluntary social organisations. The PML-Q promises employment and investment in the IT sector, as well as a scheme where children of expatriate Pakistanis would be encouraged to "travel back to Pakistan during their summer holidays for orientation campaigns so that they can be sensitised to their culture and to their country periodically."⁴⁸

None of the parties have committed themselves to any concrete numbers, and the existence of some rather whimsical policies in almost every manifesto suggests a serious shortage of imagination in knowing how to deal with youth issues.

Road to Nowhere

Conspicuous by their absence are commitments by the parties towards allowing the youth to participate in decision making processes. Only the PTI promised seats at every level and, along with the PML-N, also promised councillor-level youth seats. Host of the other parties offered promises of election to advisory bodies. In essence, most of the parties seem to be offering little more than the patronage of jobs and education to the largest demographic in Pakistan.

However, the parties could well counter with the argument that they are responding to the demands of young voters, and the data would seem to support this claim. The 2013 British Council survey showed that 50 per cent of young people felt that "political parties have thought about the needs of young people."⁴⁹ Moreover, the same survey showed that the top concerns for young voters in the 2013 elections were "inflation, employment, education, poverty, and healthcare."⁵⁰ Similarly, the Jinnah Institute survey of members of party youth wings showed that the top issues and concerns for them included corruption and education.⁵¹

Yet this data, taken from Pakistanis born in the 1980s and later, obscures the fact that most of the respondents have never lived during a time where student/youth politics played a pivotal role in society. The experience of campus politics for most of them would be shaped by direct experience, or memories of the violence of the '80s and '90s. Any contemporary interaction could also be shaped by the fact that most political parties continue to employ their youth wings as political muscle. Taken together, what this means is that most young Pakistanis have no conceptualisation of youth being active participants in governance and politics. Very few of them would be aware of the historical reality that young people were once expected and able to demand more than just jobs and schools from their government.

However, the same cannot be true for the political parties – most of whom should have institutional memories of the importance of student politics, and several of whom are currently led by people

with a background in student politics. Similarly, almost all of them would be aware of the 'youth bulge' in Pakistan's demographics. Keeping this in mind, their failure to provide for youth participation in their manifestos appears to be disingenuous at best and malicious at worst.

The only party with the potential to overturn this state of affairs remains the PTI, which seems to have tangible support from young Pakistanis - many of whom are supporting a political party for the first time. Its youth policy includes the promise of overturning the ban on student unions, and its nomination list of 35 per cent candidates under the age of 40⁵² shows that it has largely lived up to its promise of giving the youth a voice. That said, providing tickets to younger candidates is a better election strategy than an institutional path for youth representation. Without the revival and rejuvenation of student unions and student politics, the current approach risks becoming a stop-gap measure rather than a permanent policy.

Moreover, the fact that there remain few institutional options for young Pakistanis to participate in politics means that placing all hope for youth political development at the hands of the PTI would be both risky and unfair.

On a related note, it would also be unwise to expect political parties to solely assume the burden of engaging the youth and reinvigorating student politics. Many campuses and educational institutions operate very differently now, and most elite students are likely to attend private universities which often have strict rules in place banning any form of political activity. The battle for agency in student affairs is one not just between the youth and the political class, but also between students and increasingly authoritarian administration bodies at universities and schools.

Conclusion

One of the perennial problems with researching social phenomena in Pakistan is that seemingly obvious and simple conclusions can become unwieldy behemoths if an attempt is made to deconstruct them.

On the face of it, political parties in Pakistan appear to be responsive towards the country's changing demographics, with the manifestos of each party promising to champion the very issues that surveys show young people care about. The fact that Pakistan is a country where almost two-thirds of the population is under thirty means that this is a welcome move. It is further bolstered by the fact that young Pakistanis have historically been reluctant voters, and hold political institutions in low esteem – which means that the greater effort from parties can go towards making a crucial difference.

Yet a closer look dismisses such rosiness. The current apathy towards politics displayed by Pakistan's young is a situation that has developed over several decades of the country's history. A long period of little to no representation through institutions meant that student unions became a powerful political platform for young people. Unfortunately however, after students from across the country repeatedly displayed their ability to take down governments and institute reforms, they began to be oppressed by the state and co-opted by political parties. The consequence of these competing external influences was a descent into violence and cronyism, until students and campuses chose to become depoliticised and the influence of the youth was largely removed from national politics.

Currently, while young people do not display much affection for political parties and institutions, they are still passionate about the direction and future of their country. Looking at the manifestos of political parties, it appears that most of them are content with offering young people patronage-based policies focused on jobs and education – and remain generally aloof to the possibility of allowing young people to be heard, represented or included in the political process.

Should the parties and future governments be successful in providing the patronage they are currently promising, then they could conceivably avoid any standoff. Yet with the country's economy and social security in a precarious state, it would be a difficult if not impossible task. What this would mean instead is that the largest and historically most politically subversive demographic in Pakistan would not only be without the promises made to it, but also bereft of political representation. Such a situation could spell chaos for the country.

While any move towards reintegrating and re-engaging the youth in mainstream politics would require the initiative and support of actors apart from just political parties, the manifestos for the current elections belie the fact that the parties are yet to appreciate the sensitivity and seriousness of the situation.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of both the historical aspect of youth politics as well as the current state of the manifestos prepared by the political parties, some pertinent recommendations can be made which can prevent a political impasse.

- **Legislation**
All ordinances, amendments and legislation prohibiting the operation of student unions and limiting the participation of students and youth in politics need to be amended and/or repealed. Moreover, the Political Party Act should also be implemented so that there is greater democracy within parties, and therefore greater access for newer and younger faces to come through.
- **Political Party Internal Reform**
The study on youth-wing party members makes it quite clear that parties display nepotism in the awarding of political futures, and lack any substantive mechanisms for facilitating youth participation. It is imperative that parties seek to embrace newer, younger faces by actively employing democratic practices within themselves and canvassing participation from younger people. Without any institutional access points available to the youth, any attempts at participation are likely to be frustrated. Initiating democratic policies such as intra-party elections are essential to changing the currently ossifying status quo.
- **Universities and Educational Institutions**
Changes in Pakistan's socio-economic climate has meant that elite, private universities are the new norm. Political activity of any nature is often strictly prohibited at such places, and students are discouraged from any form of dissent at the threat of expulsion. Such policies are tantamount to denial of political rights and could lead to a potential pressure-cooker situation. It is imperative that educational institutions explore ways of allowing and encouraging student activism, while still looking to provide safeguards from the sort of interference and co-option students have been victim to in the past.
- **Further Research and Impact on Democracy**
The involvement of the youth in politics cannot be taken as an absolute good. Current research through opinion polls and surveys bring up contradictory results – where young people display a poor perception of democracy yet also speak of an eagerness to vote. This implies that young people themselves are not completely aware of their political opportunities and futures, and it would be pertinent to understand how their greater participation in politics can be facilitated in a manner and style in which they can relate to

and aspire towards. It is not necessary to try and repeat the patterns of the past, but rather to look towards greater research in order to shine a light on how the political potential of the youth can be actualised. Such research would have a significant impact on the larger project of democracy in Pakistan. This is because although the youth hold democracy in a poor light, as the country's majority demographic they also stand most to gain from it. Finding ways to ensure youth participation in the democratic process would surely be one of the key factors in cementing the future of the democratic process in Pakistan.

Appendix

Youth political participation in Pakistan is severely restricted due to a culture of indifference and a lack of government policies conducive to youth involvement. Currently Pakistan is experiencing a major 'youth bulge', with the working age population expected to double in the next twenty years.⁵³ Considering these recent developments, the abysmal levels of youth participation in the political process are signs of a weak democracy.

With the current ban on student unions, youth wings have become an important avenue for political participation as they engage with civil society and create awareness through campaigning, membership recruitment drives, public relations and networking, etc. This report aims to develop an understanding around the formation, management, organisation and political activities of youth wings, as well as to highlight the challenges, motivations and concerns of various youth wing members.

The present study aims to evaluate the state of political knowledge and commitment present among members of youth wings of various major political parties. This objective was met by consulting secondary resources in conjunction with focused primary research. This study looks at the federal capital and infers from politically active students, their views on youth wings. Our primary research helped shape conclusions about the perceptions of youth wing members of political parties, and also provided critical information pertaining to operative aspects of the youth wing itself. The following are some of the main findings of this report:

- Most new members join a youth wing after finishing secondary school. Typically, a member of the youth wing remains a member of the party for the duration of his or her studies.
- The most common reason identified for joining political parties is personal interest; 30 per cent cited peer pressure as a factor for their engagement and 12 per cent of the respondents attributed their involvement with parties to familial associations.
- There is a dearth of female participation in youth politics which is reflective of the sidelined role women have in the overall electoral process. Self-exclusion, security concerns, cultural barriers and/or personal preferences are among the most important factors deterring women from political activities.⁵⁴
- One of the most significant barriers faced by members of youth wings revolves around the

issue of nepotism. Political patronage is readily provided to those who have familial association, which facilitate entrance into the political arena. Only six per cent of those interviewed expressed hope in occupying key office positions in the future. This also indicates that most members of youth wings remain passive supporters rather than active decision makers.

- The relationship between the youth wing and its mother party was in several cases seen as tense. This tension revolves around youth wings' predilection for change or reform, while older senior party members may be more inclined to the preservation of the status quo.
- Strengthening democracy and improving the state of education are the top most concerns of the members of the youth wings.
- Most members of youth wings stated that the ban on student unions should be lifted. 50 per cent of the respondents wanted the ban on unions to be lifted with restrictions; 32 per cent said yes without any restrictions and 18 per cent did not want the ban to be lifted.

Methodology

The present study proceeded in two phases. The first phase of research consisted of utilising secondary material on the history of student unions, political clashes between the youth and the state and the current disaffection and apathy of the Pakistani youth toward national politics. This helped establish a context within which to conceive the contents of the report. During the second phase, the researchers of this report surveyed youth wing members from mainstream political parties. The survey, at large, inquired about the structure and operations of the youth wing of which the respondent was a member, its recruitment procedures and the operational role of the wing within the political party it belongs to.

Given the time constraints, this research was only conducted in the federal capital as a first attempt to capture the trends amongst the youth wings of Pakistan's political parties. This report does not claim to create a nationwide snapshot of youth participation in political parties. It is hoped that this report will be a precursor to future research endeavours of this kind.

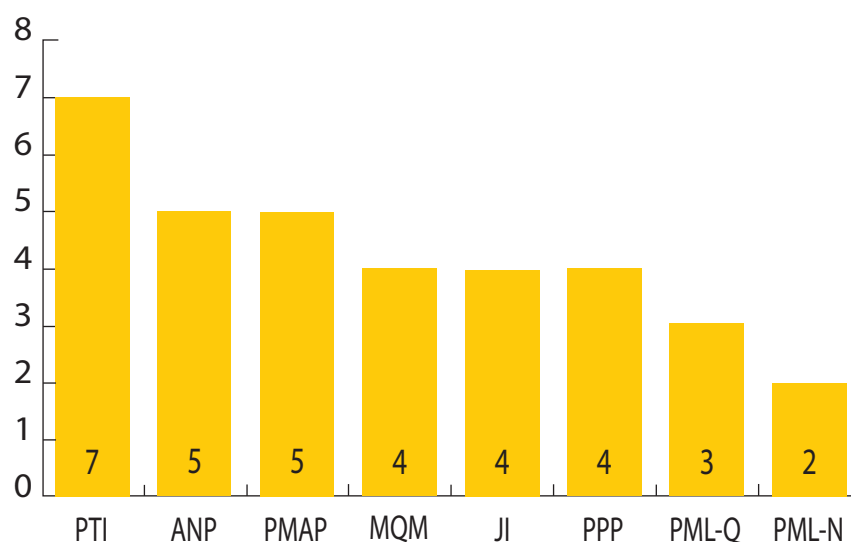
Primary Research

- As explained, this study was conducted in Islamabad and the majority of respondents were students from National University of Modern Languages, Allama Iqbal Open University and International Islamic University.
- The researchers developed a qualitative questionnaire which consisted of 21 questions about basic demographic details and levels of satisfaction of member of youth wings with the structure and training mechanisms of the affiliated party, their reasons for political engagement, and future expectations of the party they favour.
- Members of eight youth wings of mainstream political parties were asked to participate in this research. Ten members of each youth wing were randomly selected and requested to answer the questions. However, out of the 80 respondents approached, 46 respondents chose not to partake in this research.
- Members of the youth wings of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Awami National Party (ANP), Pakistan

Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PMAP), Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Muslim League - Quaid (PML-Q) and Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) were subsequently approached and asked to participate in this research.

- While the research design initially aimed to interview members of youth wings, this had to be changed because respondents were less willing to engage in this research in a forthcoming manner. When members were given a questionnaire to fill in, it became obvious that they more readily agreed to answer questions in writing.

Figure 1 | Youth Wing Survey Respondents By Party



Observations and Shortcomings

While no youth wing of any mainstream political party placed any formal restrictions against interacting with the researchers or their members, there was a general attitude of mistrust towards the subject of the research. In accounting for the change of methodology from carrying out interviews to conducting surveys, it is important to note the role of indifference toward political discussion, as well as a general hesitation among participants to speak on behalf of their affiliated political party. Most of the respondents displayed impatience at having to wait and answer the questions of the researchers and requested that they be given a written questionnaire that they can fill in at their own leisure. The research methodology was tailored to accommodate this approach, and as such, respondents were given surveys rather than having researchers conduct interviews.

This silence and display of apprehension of a politically active population is significant because it indicates the trust deficit and lack of political commitment extant in the society. While democratic politics is the art of building trusted and open institutions the absence of open interaction between researchers and youth wing members indicates that Pakistan still has a long way to go before it will be able to build the trustable and open institutions inherent to democratic politics.

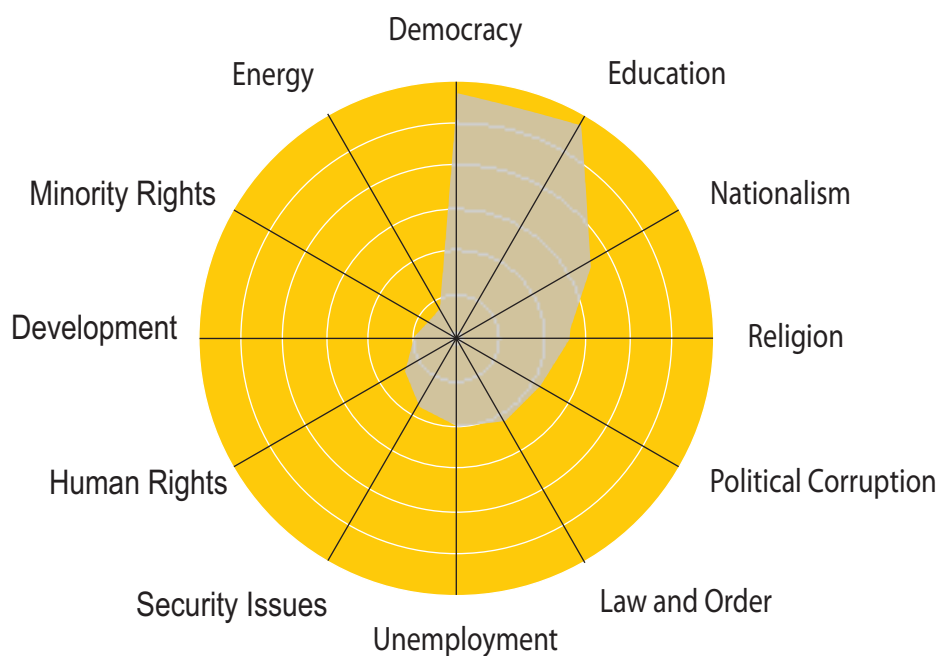
Out of the total responses received, only two were from female respondents. The scarcity of female respondents is representative of a male-dominated youth wings' setup. Furthermore, the absence of female perceptions of youth politics from this report can also be explained through the more general reasons that account for the sidelined role of women in the overall electoral process; these

include self-exclusion, security concerns, cultural barriers and/or personal preferences.⁵⁵ Thus, there is an insufficient level of female youth involvement in politics in Pakistan.

Analysing the Youth's Concerns

Considering the size of Pakistan's youth, special attention needs to be paid by the government to understand their concerns. The respondents of this research indicated that they wish to see policies addressing issues of corruption, education, democracy strengthening, nation-building and protection of Islam implemented urgently.

Figure 2 | Key Concerns of Youth Wing Members



While the questionnaire asked the open-ended question, 'What issues are most important to you?' most respondents cited similar concerns. The clusters of issues and concerns that appear in the responses indicate that strengthening democracy and education are the topmost concerns of the members of the youth wings. In 34 responses, different forms of the word education and democracy appeared 29 times. In addition to this, 18 references to nation and nationalism were made, 12 references to Islam and 10 references to corruption.

Education and Strengthening Democracy

Democracy and education were the most widely mentioned concerns indicated in the responses of all eight parties. While this finding may be the result of selecting all the respondents from educational institutions, this bias cannot be corrected because a large number of members of youth wings are students (although no age restriction seems to be in place for those who associate with

youth wings). However, university and colleges are places where recruitment and activities of youth wings are most prevalent.

Both justice and corruption have become heavily debated issues in Pakistan. Members of five political youth wing parties mentioned the issue of corruption as an avid concern. Respondents from the youth wings of religious parties cited the demand to promote Islam as well.

Nationalism

While nationalism emerged as a salient theme in respondents' answers, it did so to varying degrees, depending on the nature of the political party the respondent was associated with. Respondents belonging to political parties with a firm regional footing most often evoked ideas of nationalism in their responses. However, the concept on nationalism did not resonate as strongly in the responses of youth wing members from religious and populist parties, which elicit Islamic ideals and popular anti-corruption sentiment. Religious parties can always draw upon the idea of Muslim *ummah* (community), whereas populist parties often deploy mass anti-corruption appeal. Given these findings, it may be inferred that although nationalism is a politically legitimising force for regional parties, it is a utility deployed sparingly in populist politics, and more so, it is less potent when placed side by side with religion. Indeed, the varying depths of nationalist rhetoric among respondents are largely representative of the current political landscape of Pakistan.

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