Disengagement of Youth with Student Politics in Pakistan: A Study of the Experiences of Politically Engaged Students

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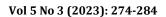
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This paper seeks to understand the reasons behind youth's disinterest and disengagement in student politics in Pakistan through the experiences of politically active students. The methodology employed includes qualitative methods and in-depth interviews of student activists based on purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The findings reveal the complex relationship between the ban on student politics, violence, and disinterest of the students, by calling into question the oversimplified notion of violence. The findings also highlight the issues of relatedness and alienation within student organizations and emphasize the approach of building inclusive and meaningful relationships. The study adds to the body of knowledge by offering insightful analysis and suggestions for governments, academic institutions, and student organizations to re-engage youth in meaningful political engagement. In the end, the study seeks to create a more diverse and active student political climate in Pakistan by bridging the gap between student activism and the disengaged majority.

1. Introduction

Pakistan, already one of the most populated nations in the world, is experiencing a significant demographic shift as a growing number of its population is under 25. A large number of young people in a nation can have both transforming and devastating effects. A young population can supply the energy and enthusiasm required to change the standard of living within a generation if resources like health and education are made available to them—a nation run by youngsters that lacks opportunity and reward risks degenerating into anarchy. (Rehman et al., 2013 ; Baluch, 2019). The democratic forces in Pakistan have benefited greatly from student politics in bringing up public issues, and both major and minor social movements have used it to communicate with the general public. (Butt, 2009; Leveseque, 2020). In 1984, the government under martial law outlawed student unions. It cited violent incidents as a justification for the ban. However, in reality, it was because of the rising importance of progressive student politics, which had been gaining ground via the elections for student unions. Therefore, the government of Zia-Ul-Haq issued a ban on student unions in February 1984. In the late 1980's, the Benazir Bhutto administration rescinded the restriction once Zia's rule fell, but it was contested, and challenged in the court, and the ban on student unions was reinstated in 1993 (Paracha, 2008; Ahmed, 2022).

This research article aims to explore and examine, from the viewpoint of student activists, the causes of the pervasive disengagement and apathy toward student politics. To shed light on the underlying factors that contribute to the lack of popularity and active involvement in student politics, the study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of student activists affiliated with student organizations that they have gained through engaging with non-politically active students. This study aims to gather this information by conducting in-depth interviews with them. Through their accounts, we hope to understand the intricate dynamics—including social, cultural, institutional, and political ones—that drive disengagement and apathy. The objective of this research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, difficulties, and underlying sociocultural processes that influence students' Apathy toward student politics.

By providing a thorough understanding of the underlying issues and prospective approaches, this study ultimately seeks to bridge the gap between student activism and the disengaged majority, fostering a more inclusive, active, and successful student political climate in Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Overview

Students involve themselves in a wide range of political activities, such as study sessions, demonstrations, rallies and campaigns. Such activities inculcate a sense of awareness, and political participation among students and also enable them to work for strengthening the democracy and democratic process in a country (Khan & Zaman, 2020). Pakistan has a long history of student

politics even before the partition of the sub-continent. Some major events can be discussed to outline student politics. In 1905, students boycotted British products and protested against the partition of Bengal. These protests were also joined and participated by the students of King Edward Medical College Lahore against the prejudicial legislation. The political involvement of students before partition can be classified into two phases. The first phase began in 1857 and lasted until 1937. From 1937 until 1947, the second phase was a huge success. They stood at the centre of the Indian Liberation Struggle and the struggle for Pakistan with great zeal (Mushtaq et al, 2019). As Pakistan came into existence, the Muslim Students Federation (MSF), the student offshoot of the ruling Muslim League, existed as the only recognised student body in 1947. MSF was established to support the League in inducting young Muslims from undivided India and helping it to fulfil its mission of creating a separate homeland for the Muslims in the subcontinent. The situation in MSF, however, began to resemble the fragmented structure of its parent organization by 1950, even though the party had largely stayed together as a strong political force until 1948. Soon after becoming Pakistan's first ruling party, the Muslim League started to fall apart (Paracha, 2014). It disintegrated into several self-serving factions, primarily as a result of disputes inside the party on how to allocate ministries. As a result, MSF also broke out into several groups.

After this, the Democratic Students Federation (DSF) was founded in Karachi's Dow Medical College by a group of students in 1950. The Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) was one of the first political organizations to collaborate with DSF. it had transformed into a committed left by 1952. DSF demanded that the government should take a more independent stance in its foreign policy. It is thus not surprising that in the following year (1954) when the government of Pakistan banned the CPP, it also imposed a ban on DSF. (Paracha, 2022). The ban was imposed as a result of the students' consciousness, dissent, and their potential to interfere in mainstream politics.

When the DSF was banned, NSF, or the National Students Federation, was established in 1955. Although the group was founded as a party that supported the government, it was soon "infiltrated" by leftists and former DSF members, who revised its political stance. Simultaneously, the right-wing student union, Islami Jamiat Taleba (IJT), began participating in student politics in 1958. Jamat-e-Islami (JI) first permitted IJT to participate in student politics in 1958. (Paracha, 2014 ; Bajwa, 2019). In 1968, students once more rallied against Ayub Khan. The young students were the catalyst for the massive eruption of 1968–1969, which Tariq Ali described as "the first widespread public expression in the history of the country, going far deeper than the Muslim League agitation of the forties." This led to the fall of 10 years of dictatorial rule of General Ayub Khan. (Kokab, et al, 2020). Student protests catalyzed the 1968 major uprising that ultimately led to the overthrow of Ayub Khan's government. Even Zia ul Haq (the military dictator from 1977 to 1988) was threatened by the student power, and in 1984, after radical and anti-dictatorial groups dominated the union polls, Zia ul Haq decided to ban student unions (Baz, 2019). However, the Regime of General Zia Ul Haq allowed and gave patronage to the right-wing IJT (Islamist Student

Union) to continue to engage in political activity and further incorporate political involvement into its organization's structure. It actively assisted the Zia dictatorship in Undermining Left-wing student activism on Pakistani campuses by taking advantage of state patronage. As opposed to what was anticipated, IJT's political engagement intensified throughout the Zia regime. The radicalization of the IJT turned out to be an uncontrollable process, a goal in and of itself, and a passion that extended beyond the pursuit of an Islamic government. As a result, IJT intensified its political engagement as Zia pushed Pakistan towards Islamization. As a result, IJT became involved in a renewed cycle of violence motivated by conflicts with other student organizations (Nasr, 1992). Student unions were briefly reinstated by Benazir Bhutto in 1989 before being banned under the pretext of the Supreme Court's 1993 ruling, never to be seen again. (Rehman, et al, 2020).

2.2 Contemporary Student Politics

There is a widely held notion about student politics that the ban on student unions enacted in 1984 and 1993 either made it easier for organizations like the IJT to gain power (Nasr, 1993; Nelson, 2011) or created a generation of students who were politically apathetic and uninterested (Lall, 2014). The recent "depoliticization" of mainstream student politics has been a defining feature of this tendency. This implies that in addition to having fewer options for the organizations they may join, Pakistani students are also becoming constrained in terms of the kinds of politics they can participate in and the variety of causes they can mobilise around. Thus, while students can create student organisations for extracurricular activities and occasionally use these for political discourse and debate (a strategy successfully employed by the DSA), they are not permitted to create student "Organizations" and are frequently stopped from organising and even taking part in events with a blatantly political focus (Javaid, 2019). However, it would be historically inaccurate to suggest that the majority of students' disinterest is their fault. The roots of youth alienation from politics cannot overlook the role played by political institutions, just as the history of campus violence cannot ignore the crippling effects of interference by the state and political parties. On the one hand, by outlawing left-wing organizations and assisting ideological rivals of the preeminent, the state and establishment have frequently attempted to quell the influence of student politics. Political parties, on the other hand, have also contributed to the youth being disregarded (Rehman et al, 2019). However, student organizations have maintained their existence as student councils, which operate to engage students in extra-curricular activities, sign an affidavit not to be a part of any political activity, and have kept engaging with one another as well as political parties despite the ban.

In 2019, numerous left-wing student organizations collaborated and held a student solidarity march in 53 cities of Pakistan to demand the restoration of student unions to address issues like fee hikes, harassment, securitization of the campus, and the moral policing of the students (Naqvi, 2019). Hence, there has been a renewed discussion of reviving and re-inventing, especially the progressive and left-wing student politics in Pakistan. A few organizations have

established themselves lately like Progressive Students Collective which was established in 2016 as a left-wing student organization. Female students have also started to participate passionately in feminist student organizations to address their issues. Every year they participate in an event called "Aurat March" on International Women's Day to raise a voice against gender discrimination, harassment, sexual abuse, and misogyny despite the backlash from the media and the majority of the public (Irfan, 2021).
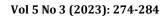
3. Methodology

The current study has chosen to analyze the phenomena under consideration using a qualitative research methodology. Twelve politically engaged students from four student organizations were chosen for the study based on purposive and snowball sampling. The sample included student activists from Punjab University, Government College University, and Lahore University of Management Sciences who ranged in age from 21 to 25 and belonged to mainly the student political organizations of Progressive Youth Alliance, Progressive Students Collective, Women's Collective, and Islami Jamiat e Talaba.

The researchers used an in-depth interview approach to get first-hand information from students at Punjab University, Government College University Lahore, and Lahore University of Management Sciences. Semi-structured interviews were employed in this investigation. The data was transcribed and descriptive coding was done to derive the themes. Thematic analysis, based on the respondents' interviews, has been used by the researchers.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Violence and Disengagement

The complex interrelationship between violent politics, the outlawing of student politics, and the subsequent disengagement of students in Pakistan is one of the main themes of the qualitative analysis of this study. This discussed theme questions the generally accepted notion that the disengagement of students from political activism is mostly due to violence. Instead, it emphasizes the complexity of the problem, taking into account contextual, historical, and dynamics of power within the activism of the students. This theme highlights the understanding that, despite its prevalence in student politics, violence shouldn't be seen as the only or defining cause behind a decrease in student engagement. Respondents stated that violence is a fundamental component of political activism and is pervasive in any large-scale social change movement. They contend that by preventing student politics, the democratic procedures used to regulate student unions were disturbed, which increased violent events. The respondents were of the view that the state is deliberately attempting to curtail their views and restrain student involvement by outlawing student politics. However, they argued that the possibility of violence can be minimized and a true democratic culture can be established by giving student politics the chance to flourish freely, with the support of the state as witnessed during the era of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto.
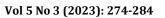
4.2 Disengagement and Relatedness

The problem of relatedness and connection is a critical element of students' alienation and disillusionment with student politics and student political organizations. Students who join these organizations come from a variety of social classes, castes, and gender identities. However, they frequently experience a sense of alienation and find it difficult to form strong relationships with other members who come from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Student organizations profess an inclusive ideology that claims to include all people, therefore this dissonance generates a problematic situation.

The disengagement is exacerbated by the discrepancy between the proclaimed inclusive values and the felt lack of relatedness. Furthermore, the alienation is made worse by the behaviour shown by some members of the organization which undermines the opinion of the members belonging to a lower socio-economic class or a different ethnicity. As a result, one of the main factors contributing to student disengagement and the decline in confidence in student political organization and consequently student politics is their inability to handle the issue of alienation. The students who join these organizations often get alienated and leave the organization. Ironically, the terms "feminist" and "Marxism" have come to be associated with and limited to a particular class, which has hurt their reputation for representation. As a result, few people are drawn to these organizations with strong commitment (Ain, 2016; Hassan et al, 2020). These respondents described how vitally important it is for student organizations to try to address this issue and build an atmosphere that promotes inclusiveness and true social integration among students. To achieve unity, one must accept the diversity of all individuals and all of their issues.

4.3 Rising Extremism and Suppression of Dissent

The problematic rise of religious extremism and the ensuing intolerance-promoting culture in educational institutions is the recurring theme from the data. While there have always been traces of this element, its presence has greatly increased. Student unions with opposing beliefs used to coexist, which allowed for some interaction and discussion. But with time, this culture began to disappear. The vast majority of responders shared extreme anxiety and fear over this pervasive phenomenon. They expressed the fear that the students have when expressing opposing opinions, particularly when doing so on controversial topics like secularism, religion, and atheism. The threat of being accused of treason or blasphemy looms over everyone, creating an atmosphere of terror and raising the possibility of physical violence or mob punishment particularly when the left wing in Pakistan has been accused of being anti-religion and anti-state. As a result, students are restricted by this climate of intolerance and have few possibilities to participate in political activities other than those arranged by the right-wing student organization IJT (Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba), which enjoys the support of the government. (Nasr 1993; Nelson 2011). One of the respondents was of the view:
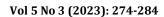
"To exert control and stop students from organizing and participating in political activities, the state has strategically encouraged IJT within institutions. These people are free to use physical action against anyone who has opposing views without repercussions. Students' futures are seriously threatened by this ubiquitous extremism since it hinders their capacity to think critically and participate in alternative student organizations"

The majority of participants, notably women, claimed that the prevalent extremist culture and pervasive religious discourse have put up tremendous obstacles to women's involvement in student politics. In addition to facing intense familial pressure, women who choose to participate in politics also face death threats and harassment on numerous social media sites. Additionally, the idea of feminism itself has encountered opposition, replicating the difficulties previously progressive ideologies had to face. It becomes extremely difficult for students to consider participating in any type of confrontational politics in a learning environment where fear is pervasive.

4.4 Digital Activism VS Physical Activism

The main focus of the highlighted theme is how social media affects student politics, displaying both its benefits and drawbacks as viewed by the respondents. The majority of participants endorsed the role of social media, highlighting its capacity to give different circles a stage on which to revive notions of student politics. Social media activism emerged as an effective means with the capacity to promote and support diverse causes, drawing comparisons to events like the Arab Spring. It enables comprehensive information exchange on a bigger scale, motivating people to act. Technology improvements have also made it possible to engage on a national and international level, transcending geographical barriers. Through social media channels, people who are incapable of actively participating in conventional politics can nevertheless voice their support. Some of the respondents did, however, identify the negative effects of social media on student politics. They showed their concern about its psychological consequences, arguing that the existence of a means of expression and catharsis has discouraged students from participating in physical activism. Their desire to actively engage in practical politics has somehow decreased as a result of their use of social media platforms to express their unhappiness and anger with society's concerns. Additionally, the wealth of information available through social media has diminished the propensity for in-person political activity, taking time and focus away from valuable connections between students. Subsequently, when people spend more time on social media sites, there are fewer ties among students.

The potential and difficulties presented by the rise of social media in the field of student politics are highlighted by this theme. Although technology gives people a way to communicate more, spread knowledge, and support causes, it also presents psychological and engagement-related difficulties. To manage the shift and fully utilize social media's potential for effective student

political engagement, it is essential to understand and navigate these two opposing facets of its influence.

4.5 Market-driven education

The pursuit of outstanding grades and earning a respectable career after graduation have replaced the past as the main objectives of education today. Student political involvement has been eclipsed by this change in emphasis, which has caused students to become disengaged. Participants agreed that participating in political activities could hurt their jobs since they risk serious repercussions including state repression and even the prospect of having their degrees revoked by academic institutions. As a result, educational institutions now place a greater focus on educating students to function as just another cog in the machines in the existing socio-economic system rather than producing enlightened and socially aware citizens. One of the responders described:

> "Our parents and the wider community continuously warn us against being involved in student politics, highlighting the possible harm to our careers. Instead, we are urged to place a higher priority on finding employment once we have earned a degree, demeaning student politics as a pointless and dangerous activity. It appears that educational institutions have changed into factories that produce skilled workers or robotic workers merely to satisfy market demand. A training process oriented at meeting market criteria in a highly competitive environment, where career prospects are uncertain even for degree holders."

Due to their concentration on establishing future work possibilities, most students are prohibited from getting involved in politics as a result of this career-oriented worldview. Their lack of free time makes it difficult for them to consider and weigh in on larger societal issues. Due to the market-driven education system's overriding emphasis on individual success at the expense of group participation and critical thinking, pupils' disinterest is sustained.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

This research paper has examined the causes of youths' disengagement and apathy towards student politics, especially from the viewpoint of politically active students as a result of their interaction and experiences with non-politically active students. The study has clarified the intricate dynamics that contribute to this phenomenon, including social, cultural, historical, institutional, and political factors, through in-depth interviews and analysis. From the perspective of politically engaged students, it is clear that the ban on student politics has significantly contributed to students' disengagement. Students' possibilities to participate in political discussions and activities are constrained by the lack of a formal space for political expression within educational institutions. This restriction hinders the growth of critical thinking and civic involvement while also fostering a climate of political apathy among the larger student body. Additionally, a climate of fear and insecurity has been fostered by the threat of assault, harassment, and pressure by the university administration. Many students are deterred from entering politics by this hostile environment because they see it as a harmful and possibly violent space. A

hindrance to student engagement has been recognized as the absence of relatedness within student organizations. Even though these groups may have solid ideological bases, they frequently struggle to connect with students who come from diverse backgrounds. Student organizations struggle to successfully communicate their views, connect with larger student problems, and promote a sense of openness and belonging because of their exclusivity and insularity.

It is critical to understand that these data represent the viewpoints, experiences, and interactions of politically active students with non-politically active students. This research has provided insightful information, however, it is important to recognize that there are a variety of viewpoints and experiences among students as a whole. The findings emphasize the requirement for an environment of acceptance that is favorable to student politics in Pakistan. The ban on student politics should be reviewed, and forums that promote political dialogue, critical thinking, and civic involvement should be developed within educational institutions to address students' alienation and indifference.

Moreover, measures should be taken to address the issue of violence and intimidation in student politics. A more conducive atmosphere for political involvement can be created by putting in place measures to safeguard the safety and security of students, encouraging accepting discourse and peaceful dialogue, and holding those guilty of violence accountable. The student organizations must also seek to forge connections with students who are not politically engaged. This requires them to actively listen to the issues and ambitions of those around them, form partnerships and alliances, and communicate their ideas clearly in a way that appeals to a larger audience.

Future studies should try extending the sample beyond student activists in Lahore to improve the generalizability of the findings. The experiences and viewpoints of student activists in various circumstances might be better understood if students from other cities or areas were included. Future research should consider including disengaged students. This would make it possible to investigate different types of student activism more thoroughly. A more complete picture of the landscape of student activism can be obtained by comprehending the goals and difficulties that various sorts of student activists encounter.

In conclusion, understanding the causes of the disengagement and apathy towards student politics among Pakistani students, especially from the viewpoint of politically active students, provides important insights into the intricate dynamics that define this phenomenon. Educational institutions and student organizations may play a crucial role in reviving student politics and creating an informed and involved citizenry in Pakistan by addressing the issues raised in this research and putting the suggested solutions into practice.

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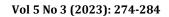
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